

Sitting in a bar on Commercial drive recently Dorothy Trujillo Lusk asked me why we had been asked to read at a launch of Dorothy Livesay's marginal poetry or, My ex-boss's anthology

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1.

In the essay that follows I would like to discuss two Vancouver writers who have had an important role to play and influence upon the local writing scene, and particularly on the loose constellation of writers in and around the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW), a group which has arguably been the most important scene for "language" writing in Canada. Gerald Creede and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's work has some important similarities: notably, a political content refracted through a quickly-changing syntactical and phrasal assemblage where the solidifying of phonemes into word and words into clause/sentence is an analogy for the possibilities of counter-hegemonic politics. That this poetics should have emerged in the highly politicized context of Canadian and British Columbian and Vancouver struggles over the last twenty years will be no surprise to materialists: what might be more of a surprise to some observers will be the lack of importance I will place in the following genealogy on the role of the U.S. language poets, especially the generation that emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s (ie the "first generation": Perelman, Andrews, Howe, Darragh, Mayer, Bernstein). But literary-critical discussions must be leery of what Althusser called "historicism", or the belief in some linear historical causality, as opposed to the overdetermination of the social. That is to say, in this case, that the poetry Lusk and Creede practice, and which has been in dialogue with other local writers like Deanna Ferguson, Jeff Derksen, Kevin Davies, Peter Culley, and Colin Smith, has ensued not merely from some patriarchal influence but from attempts to construct alternative literary communities without lapsing into either the academic demands of post-TISH postmodernism or faux-political expressionism.

2.

Sitting in a bar on Commercial Drive in Vancouver, B.C., recently Dorothy Lusk asked me why we had been asked to read at a launch of Dorothy Livesay's marginal poetry. I said because the publishers thought it was important to have some writers associated with the Kootenay School help a book by - a dead socialist writer. In ways terribly conflicted, and this is one way KSW has some connections with a Canadian past, not only of the experimental avant-garde but also a poetry of the left. Writers like Livesay and Maxine Gadd, Tom Wayman and other exemplars from the past or recent past showed if not the way than a way. More than most Canadian avant-garde poetic formations, KSW has foregrounded a radical politics as part of its aesthetic, a politics the included spaces for more realist-seeming work and community writing. In part this has to do with KSW's origins in the David Thompson University Centre in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the neoconservative Socred government's decision, as a part of "restraint" policies in 1982 and 1983, to close down DTUC, a local theory of base-superstructure elaborated upon by Jeff Derksen. KSW's origins in class struggle - or its dialectical formation as response to a crudely managed resource extraction economy - as well as Canada's postcolonial and imperial relations with the United States, meant that the attraction of foreign and avant-garde poetics - particularly that espoused in various theoretical ways around "Language" writing, could in effect be a form of investing foreign capital. Like earlier avant-gardes - TISH in particular (Black Mountain), but also the McGill School (High Modernism), and Coach House Press (small press postmodernism) - KSW rejected existing Canadian hegemonic models for poetics - the modern anecdote as vehicle for lyric sentimentality - as well as many more alternative forms like the stillborn postmodernism of TISH and the hippies. But this narrative, accurate as it is, ignores a native tradition of oppositional poetics already existing in Vancouver. Like TISH's success in edging out such Vancouver writers as Gerry Gilbert, Bill Bissett, and Maxine Gadd, the importation model of poetics marginalizes the pre-existing.

Gerald Creede and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk were writers already working in Vancouver - since the late 70s - when KSW arrived/formed in the mid 80s. Like Kevin Davies and Peter Culley - from the Vancouver Island mill & mall

town of Nanaimo - Creede and Lusk's own sensibilities are crucial to understanding a genealogy of KSW poetics. For a literary history to be rigorously historical - especially of the recent past - it is essential to understand that history is not merely a matter of what happened in the past, but what happened to what happened, or what happens to our knowledge of the past. History is about those gaps in knowledge, and how they come to exist. Even in such a minor area as the history of radical poetics in Vancouver, social and political and ideological effects warp and distort narratives.

I don't know if this indicates the "success" of the Kootenay School of Writing, or if it can be measured by the Governors-General award in poetry (a prestigious establishment Canadian literary award that sometimes goes to good writers) that Lisa Robertson's book *Debbie: An Epic* was nominated for in the fall of 1998. But perhaps this might help: In the fall of 1995, shortly after I moved to Vancouver from Toronto, Bob Perelman visited KSW to do some workshops and read his poetry. In an interview at Peter and Meredith Quartermain's house in East Vancouver, Perelman said that it KSW was more important to him than was the University of British Columbia. The following fall I began working as a sessional instructor at UBC. I was assigned a poetry class in addition to the two composition classes I was teaching, and I had to use an anthology, a shitty one, edited by my boss. So I brought in other work, books by Steve McCaffery and Lisa Robertson, and some poetry by Perelman and Lusk in the issue of *Boo* magazine that Ferguson and I interviewed Perelman for.

3.

Lusk's caps, her capitals, go a number of things: they instantiate most insistently a kind of textual noise that won't go away: new internet users are warned not to over-use all-caps - it's seen as a form of rude shouting. That's exactly what Lusk is doing in so much of her poetry. They are like the nasty, rude, insistent headlines of a tabloid - the local one, *The Province*, full of bile and vulgar populism. This sense of the excluded permeates Lusk's work - contra the hippie poets' use of lower-case "i's" and such to suggest some modest critique of humanity's hubris.

Not just Lusk's sentences are overbalanced or unbalanced, but actual words are: "an putation." Often Lusk puts "an" before a word that wouldn't take it, playing with her textual Britishisms ("flat," "bugger") and the class connotations thereof. (As I explained to Doug Henwood when he visited Vancouver recently, the way culture still works in Canada is upper classes – anglophilic, and lower classes – americaphilic.) Lusk writes like the colonial subaltern, the white European hauled to the New World to farm the indigene's seized land, transform it to stumps and screamers, trapped in the contradiction that in Canada a generic British accent can be enough to impress the local comprador class. The title of one poem, "Why Do I Speak with a phony British Accent" betrays that anxiety, tweaking it to a technological and post-phonocentric ideology-critique. Lusk's class-inflected colonial voice, adding "an's" where they don't belong, asks why they are used in writing, and why one system of "h" pronunciations – arbitrary as it is - survives. In a recent grant proposal, Lusk writes:

I hope to work through imperial myths that I'd been inoculated with during early education/socialization, largely based on the british model. Dialect fragments and deliberate transgression of "correct" usage perform as interrupts of dominant ideology, sometimes via my Scots Irish accented father, northern English relatives (i.e. "see all and say nowt"; "if we had world enou and bread") and my family in rural Quebec.

In Lusk's model, ideology is made apparent via language and dialect and its transgressions: a combination of Bakhtin and Foucault which is also a rejoinder to some of the more anodyne moments of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities. A good example of Lusk's faux anglophilia in Redactive is the following stanza from "Oral Tragedy":

Too down the tube not garrulous & no tweaking conductors some fast hummers me too. Too broke to impress myself, the turnstile too intimate BY HALF & not ethic either but LACK. Feeling between frames its name is yet another thing yet HERE this is nonsense. (p. 13)

Here, besides the everyday of such tourist signifiers as "the tube", the turnstile is too intimate "BY HALF" to remind us of where & how the turnstile is too intimate - ie by chromely caressing our genitals, "halfway" up or down the body as well as in the ideological phrase "too ... by half". By "literalizing" the metaphor Lusk reminds us of how the phrase contains a common sense notion of excess, restraint:

a commonsense notion that in true Gramscian sense is here made practical by this organic intellectual.

4.

In both Creede and Lusk we see a high level of metonymy: Steinian & Andrews & Bernstein & Ferguson & Beckett & Davies & Farrell & Derksen. Creede writes in the poem "resume" in *Ambit*:

It must have rained
I see
a dorsal
at my window
sill
that chick is shake of ship in placid
so facile the tone of the sheen amazes me
the char lases a shard leans, pleases
cease ill needle mender spent
dentless, dour hourglass
flinch grounder bounces resolute
& hidden, unbidden, unbespoken
bounder from a bent squealer
music flows oddly & otherwi
appeases block in middle
greenloads lob the words
in rim shots, paragraphs on high
hat! the strain of string
the irony in packages
cavalier in unresponsive
dunces! time packages lode passages.

(p. 19)

Evidently "dorsal" comes from the idea or word "doorsill" and "windowsill". Too, "so facile the tone of the sheen amazes me/the char leases a shard leans, pleases" works as composition to move from the "one" of "tone" to the "een" of "sheen" and then from the hard "ch" of "chards" to the soft "sh" of "shard" as "leans" rhymes "sheen" and the mouth read the lines aloud has to voice an unvoiced "uh" between "leans," and "pleases" to get the proper gap there. Indeed, what this writing does when read aloud is to force the mouth to forget its muscle memory. You go to say "shard" like "char" ("char" referring to the Arctic fish [a Canadianism] or cleaning woman or tea [Britishisms] or to being burnt) and your mind, if you're a careful reader, overrides your mouth. This physical act, as with Lusk's pinning of imperial ideology to dialect aphorisms, delivers a rebuke to the ideological laziness of memory as well as the accumulation of meaning/value/capital implicit therein (all the more so in my case, I have to confess, because my sister's name, Charlene, is abbreviated as "Char" with a soft "ch").

Both writers push the obliquity of language: "It wasn't that it was more like that" (Creede). This abrupt collage of minimalism, too, has a relation with the collaborations Vancouver writers and visual arts have accomplished since the 1970s. Lusk and Creede both appear in photographs by Jeff Wall, for instance (Lusk worked for Wall in the late 1970s). In Wall's picture *Mimic*, an Asian man looks warily at a white man next to him, who is pulling his eye back in a "slanted" gesture as he yanks his girlfriend. Lusk couldn't find any woman willing to play the trampy girlfriend, so she did. The picture explores the relation between racism and the modern working class subject, staging what appears to be a spontaneous act so as to critique notions of "natural" racism. When Wall's work was collected in a book published by Phaidon, a local review noted that two men in the picture and who they were played by but not Lusk. This continuing marginalization of Kootenay School writing by the mainstream literary culture of Vancouver and Canada is but one of the ways in which the older postmodern avant-garde of TISH, Coach House, and Talonbooks has ill-served the newer generational group of writers.

Creede appears in a 1983 photograph by Wall called *Milk*, in which he sits against a brick wall and squeezes a carton

till it bursts. Creede comments on this in his poem "the face falls":

Details such as a lack of shoelaces and socks, the lank, uncombed hair, the ugly polyester shirt rolled up one arm but not the other, reveal the character as a low life, a derelict, unwilling or unable to care for his physical appearance and at the mercy of his impulses.

This comment might come from a commentary on the picture: certainly its placement in the poem has that ironic feel to it. It feels "found" - Creede and Lusk both seem to use a lot of found text or overheard conversations - even if their own. This seemed so likely that I phoned Creede to ask him if this was so. I mentioned to Lusk what I was doing and she gave me two variants of Creede's phone number. One was a fax machine and one just rang and rang. Then Lusk phoned me back to give me Creede's actual number, saying she only knew it from dialling it and had to call him and ask him what his number was. In the course of that conversation Lusk told Creede what I was wondering and he told her the text came from an article by Peter Culley that she wasn't sure where it was published, as Lusk then told me phoning me back. I then phoned Creede and fell into one of those "how much do I say I already know" quandries, ending up saying I got his number from Dorothy and asking him the question and him saying he thought Dorothy would have told me, she said she would. Which indicated to me that I'd put the "this is how much I already know" marker not far enough into the conversation.

My point in recounting this is two-fold. First, for the text of Creede's that, it turns out, quotes Culley: the layering gets something wonderful. Creede's text appropriates a text that describes himself in another artwork (Culley does a similar thing in his book *Climax Forest*, where he quotes a Georges Perec novel in which a jigsaw puzzle of a British Columbia milltown is described). What I first read as Creede's voice (I was about to write Creeley's voice, but I don't really know much Creeley, except I was talking to someone today who's writing an essay about dead Vancouver poet and artist Roy Kiyooka and connecting his work to Creeley, Williams, and Stein), what I first read as Creede's voice - hesitatingly, suddenly realizing oh right, it's that Jeff Wall piece he's in - then thought was a critic describing the picture because often bourgeois art critics will discuss Wall's art in terms of liberal and middle-class perceptions such as sockless shoes equals no self-respect in the poor;

now turned out to be Culley describing, with snarky tone, Creede's character in the Jeff Wall piece.

In Creede's "resume", this foundness reaches a sublime moment, when the found industrial text is revealed not only to be as "obscure" as a language poem but also to use similar tropes and spatial rhetoric of lines. Creede's sentences switch words around, trading suffixes and phonemes, not merely revealing the construction of the word – a Saussurean critique - but, like his flaneur persona roaming around East Vancouver, or his homebody transfixed by the city's mountains and visual grandeur and omnipresent poverty, such a circulation is both ethical (of a sexual temper) and political (viz. the circulation of capital and commodities that Marx describes).

5.

This essay is already too long. Anxieties abound: how much to describe Vancouver writers for Americans, to maintain the colonial relationship, a native informant. Other critics attempting to discuss the local scene talked to me about what Americans will or won't get. Do they just want to see themselves mirrored, Vancouver a backdrop as it is for countless TV shows and MOWs (Movies of the week)? Is KSW, as Derksen and Silliman recently opined, a maquiladora with a better health plan. A more insurgent reality might be a bit too much to hope for (as the braindrain of writers to the U.S. – Cabri, Farrell, Davies, Cole, Davies - attests); at any rate, analysis can never substitute for history. I'll leave the last words here to Lusk's last words in her grant proposal: "I am requesting assistance for a living allowance and materials costs".

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<http://www.conspiracy.bc.ca/clint/text/ECW_long_essay.htm>