

Finding Something

Gregory Betts

Finding Nothing: The VanGardes, 1959–1975. U of Toronto P \$89.99

Reviewed by Scott Inniss (University of British Columbia)

With *Finding Nothing: The VanGardes, 1959–1975*, Gregory Betts follows up on the work of his 2013 critical monograph *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations*—a key text on instantiations of literary and cultural radicalism and experiment by Canadian writers in the first half of the twentieth century. Over the past decade, Betts has also left his mark on the field of Canadian avant-garde studies as an organizer and an editor (in addition to his regular work as an academic and a teacher). In 2014, he was the main figure behind Avant Canada: Poets, Prophets, Revolutionaries, a major conference at Brock University that over two days brought together nearly one hundred scholars, critics, and practitioners of avant-garde literary theory and art. In the years following the conference, Betts joined forces with the poet-critic Christian Bök in compiling and editing an anthology of the same name, whose most salient feature is its inclusion of work on both identity poetics and Indigenous writing (two spheres of radical textual-political activity that rarely—arguably by definition—appear under the sign of the avant-garde, plural or singular).

Finding Nothing is a continuation of these antecedent projects in at least three aspects. As a literary history, Betts' new book fills the gap between the radical modernist past and the post-avant present by turning its attention to the key "postmodern" period of the 1960s and 1970s. As a political intervention into this history, it maintains Betts' scholarly commitment to uncovering, foregrounding, and centring hitherto marginal, non-canonical writers, narratives, and histories—with the aim of complicating more foundational narratives rather than of doing away with these narratives altogether. Like his earlier publications, *Finding Nothing* also benefits from Betts' methodological strategy of framing the aesthetic material under investigation in relation to other (often somewhat obscure) Canadian artists, texts, discourses, or situations. In Betts' hands, it is a strategy that evidences less a nationalist prerogative than a means to generate alternate,

defamiliar outcomes. Where the book differs most is in its narrowing of cultural-geographic focus, with the titular portmanteau *vanguardes* signalling Betts' interest in the late postwar cultural "micro-histories" of the West Coast and Vancouver in particular. With its 7.25" by 10.3" dimensions, *Finding Nothing* approaches art-book size, which is apposite given the wealth of archival images and reprints that it contains. Importantly, the book is equally capacious in the range of its knowledge, argumentation, and analysis. Certain of Betts' claims and approaches are less cogent or persuasive than others, and his critical orientation inclines more to the idiosyncratic than the radical. As a whole, however, the book is a major achievement and contribution to the field of Canadian avant-garde studies.

As a locution, *finding nothing* is not only the title of Betts' study but also its central organizational principle and critical trope. Among other means, Betts establishes this trope by way of an amazing anecdote about US Beat poet Allen Ginsberg visiting the artist Brion Gysin's mother while in town for the (now legendary) 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference (VPC). As Betts well knows, the VPC occupies a veritably hegemonic position in critical and popular narratives about how radical poetics came to the ostensible aesthetic backwoods of British Columbia. The value of the anecdote about "Ginsberg's off-program private visit" to Gysin's mother, Stella, thus lies in how its absence from these narratives exemplifies the "finding nothing" that Betts finds at the root of all avant-garde—but also colonial—proclamations of the "new" (15). At the very moment when writers like Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan were bringing the New American poetry to the cultural *terra nullius* of Vancouver, Ginsberg was meeting with a woman whose son was the lone Canadian member of André Breton's pre-WWII Surrealist group and a central figure "of the international avant-garde" (14).

In the context of the VPC, this avant-garde tendency to find nothing rather than something extends in other directions as well. As Betts details, what predicates the foundational narrative through which a group of UBC students and poets—George Bowering, Frank Davey, and other writers involved with the poetry newsletter *TISH*—came to represent the first flowering of a truly modernist poetics on the Canadian West Coast is the necessary erasure of earlier homegrown avant-gardes like "the Autonomists, the Canadian

Vorticists, and the Cosmic Canadians,” all of whom form the subject of Betts’ earlier research and writing (15–16). Such a narrative also relies on an ongoing displacement, forgetting, and disavowal of the manifold connections, continuities, and relations that in fact subsist between the new Vancouver poetries and those of a previous generation of radical Vancouver writers and experimentalists, including figures like Dorothy Livesay, Phyllis Webb, and Earle Birney (9). In its vanguard and (later) countercultural aspirations, the poetry emanating from TISH, the “downtown” art scene, and bill bissett’s *Blewointment* magazine and press finds it incumbent—lest it lose the aura of *sui generis* rupture, non-conformity, and bohemianism—to ignore the decades of work on behalf of earlier artists, academics, and arts organizations in building the institutional supports undergirding Vancouver’s success throughout the 1960s as a locus of cultural ferment and revolution (66). Certainly, critics, scholars, and literary historians are responsible for perpetuating such narratives and forgetting. But the artists and poets are too. According to Betts, however, what is most of note about avant-garde modes of forgetting is how they also operate simultaneously if unevenly as modes of *finding something*. Importantly, this *something* is not only the utopian potential of radical socio-cultural community. It often also entails an emerging critical orientation to the brute facticity of settler-state colonialism, with its historical and ongoing “erasure of Indigenous presence” (369).

After a lengthy introduction, *Finding Nothing* begins with a chapter on the TISH poetry newsletter, in which Betts identifies a central tension operative within 1960s Vancouver avant-garde poetry—that between the phenomenological, place-based poetics of TISH (whose key influences are the New American poetries of Olson, Duncan, and Creeley) and the concrete, collage, and visual writing of the downtown poet-artists (whose key influences are Marshall McLuhan, the historical European avant-gardes, Fluxus co-founder Dick Higgins’ notion of *intermedia*, and magick). Betts then follows these tensions, tendencies, and thematics through the next several chapters of the book. In a chapter on *Blewointment*, he offers a novel and compelling history of collage in Canada, linking it to the work of internationally renowned nineteenth-century Montreal photographer William Notman, the historically contemporary experiments in

photomontage by Victoria resident Hannah Maynard, and the properly modernist gouache and collage of multimedia artist Gordon Webber and groups like the Quebec Autonomists. This chapter also reveals Betts' own critical investments in collage (rather than Olsonian proprioception and polis) as both an aesthetic and social form or logic, connecting it to the less patriarchal, more gender-equitable politics and practices of the downtown scene (at least in relation to the recalcitrant modernist phallicisms characteristic of TISH—up until the period when Daphne Marlatt and other younger writers took over the editorship of its newsletter).

The strengths of the chapter on “Blew Collage” continue into the next two chapters on concrete poetry and Vancouver surrealism, respectively. As with his discussion of the VPC and collage poetics, Betts' purpose in “A Line, A New Line, All One” is in part to proliferate narratives of concrete's emergence in Canada, as well as to extend its lineages beyond those which critical discussions of these matters typically afford. In addition to the groundbreaking concrete and visual poetics of key figures like bpNichol, bill bissett, David UU, and Michael Morris, Betts also attends to less familiar early explorations of asemic textuality like Laurence Hyde's visual novel *Southern Cross: A Novel of the South Seas* (1951), painter Graham Coughtry's “non-signifying language series, begun in 1960 and published in 1963 in the *Tamarack Review*,” and Gysin devotee “Pierre Coupey's visual-textual ‘The Alphabet of Blood,’ which was published in *Delta* in 1964” (182). Even when dealing with canonical figures like Nichol and bissett, Betts takes care to situate their work not only in relation to other practitioners, but also in the context of its social distribution, public circulation, and critical uptake. In a similar vein, the chapter attends to anthologies like Nichol's *The Cosmic Chef* from 1970 as much as individual texts, as well as to larger social forms that similarly insisted “on the contiguity between collage, concrete, and intermedia” (186)—like the *Brazilia 73: An Exhibition of International Concrete Poetry* show at Kitsilano's Mandan Ghetto Gallery in 1967, and the Concrete Poetry Festival at UBC in 1969.

In response and challenge to the notion (critical or otherwise) that concrete poetics are predominantly masculinist in their formal and social logics, Betts also dedicates a significant amount of space in this chapter to a timely discussion “of female writers and visual artists in

Vancouver who found access to concrete especially by exploring handwritten poetry” (193). In these pages, Betts singles out texts like *Word Work* (1966) and *The Log’s Log* (1972) by Carole Itter, as well as the 1972 *Poem Company* anthology and collective, with its fifteen women contributor-members—while naming numerous other Vancouver women writers and artists (like Sandra Cruickshank, Rhoda Rosefeld, and Beth Jankola) for whom concrete poetry also provided a prolific field of textual-political experimentation and expression in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Perhaps of most value, however, is the sustained (and overdue) attention that Betts gives to Judith Copithorne, who was among the most inventive and important poets of the era, but who has yet to receive anything approaching the degree of critical recognition that her more celebrated male contemporaries and peers continue to enjoy. As a first step in rectifying this, Betts not only engages closely with Copithorne’s two most significant books of the era—*Miss Tree’s Pillow Book* (1971) and *Arrangements* (1973)—as well as with a handful of her characteristically untitled, stand-alone visual poems (many of which appear in the text as reprints). He also supplements this engagement with substantial excerpts from an email correspondence with Copithorne from 2013, which (I believe) appears here for the first time in print.

Gender politics and radical women’s poetry are an important thematic in *Finding Nothing*, and Betts takes it up again at even greater length in two later chapters. In “Performing Proprioception,” he examines pregnancy narratives in “four books by Vancouver women from the 1970s”: Audrey Thomas’ novel *Mrs. Blood* (1970), Daphne Marlatt’s generically hybrid *Rings* (1970), Joan Haggerty’s novel *Daughters of the Moon* (1971), and Gladys Maria Hindmarch’s *A Birth Account* (1976) (269). As Betts reads them, these texts make literal the pregnancy metaphor through which male authors often narrate their personal experiences of literary creation, while also reterritorializing various “masculinist” literary forms and techniques (like Olsonian proprioception) so that they become available to female experience, and especially to the maternal body.

Betts attends to the poetics of maternal embodiment adroitly enough. Yet the chapter is not one of the book’s strongest, foundering somewhat against his critical tendency to avoid long-standing feminist

(and other minoritarian) critiques of the avant-garde by means of the mechanism of inclusivity. In both “Performing Proprioception” and his discussion of (recently deceased) Vancouver novelist Helen Potrebenco in “Avant Now and Then,” Betts takes pains to declare that the work of these women writers addresses (gendered, classed) experiences of the body at the level of form and not merely in terms of representation or content. Yet the relatively conventional narrative structure of Haggerty’s *Daughters of the Moon* and Potrebenco’s *Taxi* (1975) also frequently compel him to claim that radical content as much as socio-textual form is what defines a work as avant-garde. These critical quandaries highlight an issue that haunts *Finding Nothing* as a whole—namely, Betts’ overly capacious or conceptually porous notion of avant-gardism. In his introduction, Betts argues that “the avant-garde is always, by name and definition, the productive, liberatory dynamic at work in literature” (45). As Betts recognizes, such a definition implies that the vanguard status of any particular work is also irreducibly dependent on the (social, historical) context of its emergence. Radical work that subverts the oppressive norms of its time is thus necessarily avant-garde, regardless of how particular authors, poets, or artists feel about the applicability of this designation.

Yet neither socio-historical norms nor liberation from them are universal in their political valence or signification. Famously, the Italian Futurists agitated freedom from moribund traditions of the past via aesthetic recourse to the technological, militaristic, and fascistic violences of early twentieth-century European modernity. In line with poststructuralism and various iterations of French theory, Language poetry argued for emancipation from the representational constraints of identity, nationality, and subjective stability, all of which become problematic in a mutual present in which radically nationalist Indigenous authors and activists struggle to recuperate these very terms. Betts explains these difficulties away by means of a paradoxical critical presentism in which socio-political ontologies nevertheless remain effectively discrete. In the immediate context of their emergence, the Italian Futurists were genuinely liberatory, but today they are racist and so retain the name *avant-garde* in a curatorial sense only. By the same token, experimental anti-identitarian poetics of the contemporary moment risk committing themselves to the dustbin of

history *avant la lettre*, since today only the progressive avant-garde is genuine in its radicality.

Where Betts' more capacious notion of avant-garde activity comes under most pressure is in his "thinking about the intersections of Indigenous decolonization and the avant-garde" (209n8). This aspect of *Finding Nothing* is most informative in its discussion of the anti-colonial politics underlying French Surrealism's foundational engagements (in the 1920s and 1930s) with "Indigenous and especially Inuit and Haida art" (229). In Betts' reading, what distinguishes French Surrealism from other Euro-American avant-gardes of the period is its insistence on the ongoing vitality and "contemporary revolutionary relevance" of Pacific Northwest Indigenous cultures. To the extent that Surrealism draws on these cultures as aesthetic, social, and psychic models for "contesting European imperialism from within" (233), Betts' telling of the First Nations cultural and political influence on writers like Breton presents a critical model for engaging the decolonial poetics of contemporary settler avant-gardes, but also for acknowledging the "Indigenous subjective agency . . . of artists like Brian Jungen, Donald Varnell, Paul Yuxweluptun, and Da-ka-xeen Mehner or a mid-century artist like Daphne Odjig, all of whom discuss Surrealism as an active and positive influence on their work" (266).

At the same time, Betts' desire to think avant-garde and Indigenous poetics in relation is as often symptomatic as it is (potentially) productive. At the most basic level, this aspect of *Finding Nothing* becomes problematic when Betts describes as avant-garde the work of Indigenous artists (Marie Clements, Janet Marie Rogers, Jordan Abel) who appear not to identify with the term. Where this "misidentification" is perhaps most telling, however, is in the lead-up to the discussion of Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel with which Betts concludes his chapter on Canadian concrete poetry. Drawing on the work of visual poetics scholar Johanna Drucker and Cree critic Neal McLeod, Betts begins this lead-up with a discussion of Indigenous petroglyphs, whose consideration he views as crucial to any "true" history of concrete and visual poetics (at least in Canada) (207). In addition to its overreliance on settler artists and critics like Edward Varney, bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, and Fred Wah, however, this "pre-colonial" historicization of "concrete Canada" immediately discloses its limits when Betts turns to etymology as a means to ground his

broader claims: “petro’ means rock, such that petroglyphs are a form of rock writing—or, if you return to the root of the word, ‘actual, solid,’ hence concrete” (207). The difficulty here, of course, is that the etymological proposition *petroglyphs* = *concrete writing* is only cogent in relation to the Latinate inheritance of the English language. To my knowledge, it has no correspondence in Cree—or in any other relevant Indigenous language of Turtle Island. Betts forwards a similar claim in a footnote to this section, where he notes how “the earliest use of the term ‘avant-garde’ in Canada . . . dates back to 1704, in reference to the *coureurs de bois* and *des Sauvages*, Natives, Métis, and French Canadians sent to battle *avant* of the French military” (209n8). This is certainly an interesting bit of (diachronic) lexical information. Even as a speculative claim, however, it founders for the same reason as that above. Throughout this section, Betts is attentive to the appropriation, mistranslation, and “casual disregard” of Indigenous voices, icons, and relics that mark the pictographic imaginary of many concrete texts by settler poets in the 1960s and 1970s (208). Yet these qualifications also seem somewhat beside the point in relation to the tenuousness of his attempts to establish a mutually constitutive ground for avant-garde and Indigenous poetics.

In the final analysis, the strengths of *Finding Nothing* are many. This is also the conclusion of the Association for Canadian and Québécois Literatures, who awarded it the prestigious Gabrielle Roy Prize for best book of Canadian literary criticism. Although many of Betts’ claims and arguments are convincing, it is the scope and depth of *Finding Nothing* that most impress. The art-historical framework of the text is invaluable, as are the rich social, institutional, and archival materials and histories. The book is a veritable inventory of otherwise obscure journal titles, publications, venues, dates, and events. It also performs the crucial work of recording the names of dozens of lesser-known writers, artists, organizers, promoters, critics, and other participants in “Vangarde” cultural activity of the era. Of course, none of this is to say that Betts’ evaluations are not up for contention. Likewise, there are non-thetic aspects of the book that are likely to perplex some readers or make others less than happy.

Finding Nothing begins with an overly long introduction of literary modernism, which feels out of place and gives rise to questions of who precisely Betts imagines as his main audience. The ideas and person of

influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan weave prominently throughout the book, although at times his presence feels less articulate, pertinent, or productive than is ideal. Betts' perhaps overly idiosyncratic decision to prioritize Aristotle's *Poetics* in his discussion of Charles Olson and *Blewointment* is indeed unnecessarily "improbable" (as Betts recognizes despite forging ahead anyway) (111). Despite these minor qualms and complaints, however, it is difficult to characterize *Finding Nothing* as anything less than a singularly important critical monograph that likely sets the terms of discussion in the field of Canadian avant-garde studies to come.