

Location and Address in Vancouver's New Poetries of Place

Wayde Compton, Peter Culley,
Meredith Quartermain

To read Vancouver's contemporary poetry is to be located. That is, the poets of the city present place as dialectically poised between a here people live in and a node in a total web of economic, historical, and geopolitical relations—between place as the solid ground of embodied social fact and as the fluid mobility of changing interconnections. The model of this dialectic of here and elsewhere is, as he has been for much British Columbian poetry for half a century, Charles Olson, whose address is Gloucester, Massachusetts, and who addresses *everyone* from that shore: “It is undone business / I speak of, this morning, / with the sea / stretching out / from my feet” (57). Vancouver poetry's home address, however, be it in the Downtown Eastside or Hogan's Alley, does not have a single locus, the certainty of place from which a body might project. Its poetry adapts the universal poise of Olson's globalizing manner (however “wind and water” [57] Olson himself fretted that it was at times). And yet it does not simply cease to seek that poise, but tries tenaciously to speak from, to grasp, a place, moving and pluralized as it may be, as a particularity that can encompass the general, rather than in the abstract nowhere of so much late modernist North American poetry. This tense poetics of the foothold is an original and important articulation of early-twenty-first-century locatedness in general, and is how Vancouver's contemporary poetry, as it were, puts itself on the map.

I will illustrate such originality and importance by reading the work of three poets—Wayde Compton, Peter Culley, and Meredith Quartermain—with close attention, but the richness of Vancouver's contemporary experimentalism clearly offers many more poetries to whose variety and

richness I cannot hope to do justice.¹ Conventionally, Vancouver's poetry has been best known for the magazine *TISH* and its heir, the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW): both remain important for the writing of the city now, but the reputation of their avant-gardism, and the critical attention this avant-gardism receives, may obscure the variety and diversity of new writing of place.² The voices of several writers of colour, for example, are currently decisive: Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars* (2014) speaks the inaudible inaccessibilities of Poplar Island in ways that resonate with the gendered, racialized, and classed exclusions of place; Marie Annharte Baker practices a raucous identity-making and breaking that eyes Vancouver "awry"; Rita Wong ecologically grazes "ground to push against, red earth, / bloody earth, stolen earth" with the ambitious aim "to turn english from a low-context language into a high-context language" (12, 11). All are important practices that are not discussed below. Nor are, quite differently, the many alternative forms of agitational poetry emerging that look beyond avant-garde traditions: the projects of Stephen Collis, Jordan Abel, Christine Leclerc, for example, which all suggest varied ways of approaching the so-called "politics of poetry" quite different to the late modernism of *TISH* and KSW.³

As for how one might describe these writings collectively, we can speak broadly, perhaps too broadly, of a new, fourth stage in Vancouver's changing poetics of place. Warren Tallman describes the more mainstream "personal localism" of the 1950s and 1960s as concerned with "the place where *you* are," whereas more adventurous poetics would be defined by "the *place* where you are" (67, emphasis original). The poetry of the 60s and 70s, coalescing around *TISH*, may be characterized as the adaptation of an Olsonian poetics, in its local-global dialectic mediated by the figure of the coast, to a British Columbian context.⁴ Next, KSW developed the avant-garde orientation of *TISH* poets at the same time as it rejected the supposed localism of Olsonian poetics, and particularly its anchoring in lyric voice: a shift, as Stephen Morton has put it, from location as "a place from which to speak . . . to a shifting relation of political antagonism" (156). I want to suggest that some recent poets are rethinking place as a site of the shifting antagonisms and relations *from which one speaks*. I will claim, finally, that this poetics of place, of locatedness, constitutes an important contribution to more international tendencies towards a post-avant-garde.

Vancouver, in the poetry that follows, is defined by what we might call a moving marginality. The canonical concept for critical accounts of literary Vancouver is already, of course, the periphery. All of the accounts listed in

this essay's first endnote, with the possible exception of Christian Bök's, place marginality at the centre of the potency and distinctiveness of Vancouver's experimental poetry scenes. But this conviction also extends to later poets whose work comes out of such scenes, though Vancouver itself may not be their subject, such as in the work of Culley:

Because Vancouver historically has had no effect on literary establishment, energy that in a more "sophisticated" literary centre would be devoted to defeating rivals for power and maintaining free-masonic levels of exclusion, was able, when it finally emerged, to percolate immediately to various levels within the larger community. . . . Cut off by its eclecticism from the CanLit mainstream, Vancouver writing managed to remain both peripherally active in and centrally important to the life of the city itself. (Culley, "Because" 194)

Other accounts, of course, see "CanLit" itself in terms of marginality.⁵ This is a notion that articulates the historical importance of marginality to British Columbian poets, the distinctive sense of the place as not fully Canadian but certainly not American, as away from cultural centres but also geographically a kind of West beyond the West beyond the West (and in more recent transpacific cultural studies, also a kind of East beyond the East). Marginality has also, however, been a sometimes heroizing, voice-in-the-wilderness gesture, often tied to problematic identifications of experimental poetics with Vancouver as a supposedly empty place.⁶ The poets below, through figures of exile and arrival, boats and roads, walks and trains, refigure marginality as a mobile, historical condition, defined by exclusions from and/or compulsions by modern currents of movement. Movement in these poetries inevitably means, distinct from the self-enclosed narcissism of more influential accounts of Vancouver like Douglas Coupland's, a centrifugal looking outwards. They speak to Vancouver as a port town, a unique place of transit and migration, a place with waves of displacement and rapid development, and a zone of shifting borders. The rapidity of the turn to real estate speculation, from the production of things to the market in space through an unprecedented mobilization of global capital flows, puts Vancouver in a vanguard of urban development globally—one meaning, perhaps, of descriptions of the city as "a model of contemporary city-making" (Berelowitz 1).

Bonds: Wayde Compton

Wayde Compton's two books of poetry, *49th Parallel Psalm* (1999) and *Performance Bond* (2004), explore how a black population came to and lived in Vancouver: in the latter what was once known as Hogan's Alley in Vancouver itself, in the former various places where black migrants from

San Francisco settled or passed through on their way. Compton is the founder of the Hogan's Alley Memorial Project, an organization concerned with the historical reclamation of the now destroyed area of Strathcona that once made up perhaps the most ethnically diverse neighbourhood in all of Canada but now survives only "on the periphery of public memory."⁷ He is, then, preoccupied with place, with how so-called urban renewal is often another term for black removal and with arrivals to particular destinations. He also, however, rejects place as a metaphysics: there is no single placing that will unlock Compton's complex black identity, and so the emphasis in these two collections is consistently on journeying: "when your destination / is the crossing / how do you know / when you've made it?" (49th 146-7).

The concept repeatedly undone in *49th Parallel Psalm*, for example, is home. In one dramatic monologue, an exile thinks on setting out for BC: "I notice / no one uses the word *home*" (41, emphasis original). This homelessness is directly a function of racial oppression, as Compton explains in a poem that is also a set of directions for hide-and-seek: "and remember: if you're It, you have to go out looking, you can't just hang around Home Free. absolutely no Home-Sucking" (63). Place is where black bodies get lost, as on landing at Victoria, but still ungrounded, *on the way* to Vancouver:

gettin lost
in the act of racing,
gettin got
in the act of chasing,
becoming behind
in the act of arriving . . . (75)

Compton refuses, and is refused, a single place-bound identity that would be untrue to this black experience and reinforcing the fragmentation that oppression relies on ("snow white screams of // *back where you came from*" [170, emphasis original]). At the same time, however, he is anxious to locate these oppressions and exploitations in particular places and movements. Speaking oppression as the operation of global but material forces, Compton registers black British Columbian experiences within the wider and changing relations of the African diaspora even as he articulates lostness in its precise locations, communities, and lives. The aim is to mark the place where black subjectivity can be "in // deep" as well as "a circle of out / casts" (59): tenaciously existing where it is, but conscious that this placing only acquires meaning from its centrifugal rippling out into relatedness.

"Bluer Blues" offers such a dialectical sense of place most distinctly. Taking its starting point as "the water in / which you wade" (165), the poem

defines the city by water and flow rather than rootedness (as many earlier poems did, most notably Daphne Marlatt's 1974 *Steveston*). The land does allow for place-based identifications, as Compton connects "the blues" with the blue of Vancouver's mountains, but even here we see the characters "drowning // under // the mountains and their wishful blue" (165). That is, the identification, despite the singularly grounded landscape feature of the mountains, is still with a watery sense of place, a sense Compton soon makes more generally historical:

and if one more some
body asks me where I'm from today
I'm gonna offer,

'out there in that ocean
where you left me
when you drifted away. I got no'

better response. (165)

The question of an originary *where* is rejected through tropes of water: the speaker is "from" the middle passage, "out there in that ocean," where s/he was left by the white interlocutor. A more ambitious sense of location then unfolds, in which place does not merely have a history but is fundamentally historically constituted:

see, as kids we spun
the globe closing
our eyes, going,
'here
gonna be my home.' globe rolling
on a plastic axis . . . (165)

Black exploitation is connected to and indeed animates, as labour, a world network of flows and forces. Spinning and spun, black subjectivity attempts to stop the "here" to pin it down and to turn it into something approximating a home, but the effect of the suspended line is to make the word vulnerable, exposed, before the globe rolls on again. Home here is struggle: tragic, blinding, utopian, dynamic.

Conditions of displacement cause Compton's speakers to guard against feelings of settling. Even after arriving and finding a "place," the exiles of *49th Parallel Psalm* become again the displaced residents of Hogan's Alley, the principal subject of *Performance Bond's* main long poem, "Rune." Place as *locus*, as a meeting point of moving flows and antagonisms, is emphasized at the same time as there is a struggle to find a foothold in that locus, to find a

place to speak from and from which to speak this instability. This is vividly the case in the section “Wild Style” (146-47) and its story of an “old bluesman [who] made his way to Vancouver and settled down,” which unsettles almost immediately by figuring virtuosity as “mak[ing] your *guitar* sound like that *train*” (146). Here the story expands to explore the energies of today’s North American black culture, the “Grandkids of the bluesmen” that spray paint on trains:

making nonblankness, signing, singing, singeing

like they did in NYC in the seventies: script on walls
mimicking the effect on the eye of glimpsing text stationary
from the elevated train, electrifyingly passing, script anticipating
the blur in the still: futurist blues atomized

plain, pseudonymous, acronymous, vertical, writers
unholdable, purposeful, loseable, the audience, pieces,
commuters,
reading a mused lucidity mutable (147)

Black Vancouver’s experiences of transit have become a writerly method here, and graffiti’s predominance on and around trains a metaphor for mobile and responsive black cultural forms, “plain” but “atomized,” “purposeful” but “unholdable.” The necessary dynamism of this culture is inevitably connected to much wider currents, and to a more general articulation of “the blur in the still”: an underlying “new uncanny fluid through the concrete” (147).⁸

Behind this story is the particularity of Hogan’s Alley. Already a marginal thoroughway in its very name, destroyed by a viaduct but also dependent as place on work at the train stations nearby, settling and transit form an uneasy dialectic here. Mobility’s trumping of settling is a function of black displacement, and Hogan’s Alley makes this question specific: what Olson never had happen in Gloucester, nor even Marlatt in Steveston, was the place they memorialized disappearing even as architectural trace. Going to the site of Hogan’s Alley now is frustrating because there is almost nothing left, not just as place but even as space—there is no “alley” to be found at all. Compton searches for a way of articulating this singular removal, of what was there and how it is gone—of making it, as “Rune” puts it, “lost-found” (122). In this, Compton’s work grapples with the dialectic of place as a nexus of moving relation and an actual site of living, articulating the tensions of wanting, as poet, to fight for or “find” the place of settlement, however temporary, and to insist on the manner in which contemporary Vancouver displaces, marginalizes, and allows for changing identifications with place.

Letters: Peter Culley

Peter Culley is interested in very different but related issues of marginality in his trilogy, *Hammertown* (2003-2013). In the immediate, this marginality is twofold: Culley's work emanates from the Vancouver poetry scene, as he characterizes it above, but he more literally speaks from a small city, Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island. From these immediacies, Culley is more generally concerned above all with address: the place from which one speaks, and where one speaks this place to—discovering his address, his being where he is, by speaking to another address, out there. This dialectic is at the centre of Culley's project from the start: Hammertown itself is the Parisian Georges Perec's fantasy of a snowy Vancouver Island fishing port from his 1978 novel, *Life: A User's Manual*, and so the gesture of the title, renaming Nanaimo, alienates what is ostensibly "home" for Culley.⁹ Hammertown is also a real place, however, described by Culley in meticulous detail:

Only the densest
dentist insect overtones
dare drop into the valley

from the Sunday construction
so impatiently at ten begun above
though the rate of such things

varies more than you'd think:
some build as if session men
called out by the union

to short time the undergrowth
for the Xbox simulation
of the Birth of Skiffle, others

as if flown in on Blackhawks
to build an interrogation centre
five days ahead of the army. (*The Age* 76)

The beginning of one of Culley's many "Letters from Hammertown," this is a scenic poem. Far from painting a significant single scene that might form a backdrop to an emotional event, however, Culley articulates a site of simultaneity in which straight talking in the William Carlos Williams tradition gives way to a complex relatedness, opening a landscaped nature up to industrial relations, imperial violence, and popular culture. These elements are not so much united as brought into proximity by Culley, and yet the effect is one of consistency, of one image meaningfully following another because seen, heard, and spoken from the same position in the world. Really the precursor is not Williams or

even Olson but Leopold Bloom, looking from the outside in, moving through and making relations as he goes, at home nowhere but constantly located and self-locating. Even seemingly random movements are seen to cohere as “[o]dd patterns / and congruences / of traffic” (“The Provisions,” *Hammertown*, 6). Hammertown is a particular material spot in a global sphere of relations—a place in the sense that, as Culley puts it in the second poem of the whole series, “matters convene / under the heading / ‘infrastructure’” (6).

Following *The Maximus Poems*, *Hammertown* takes the letter as its main form. Olson’s letter-writing stakes a claim to address, consciously speaking from one place and projecting its voice across a variety of distances, sometimes overbearing, sometimes compelling in its vatic scope. Culley inherits this conscious positionality in which address is the *where* of language, and yet his *where* faces somewhere quite different and therefore addresses itself quite differently. In general, though this address looks predominantly eastwards from a margin out west. Hammertown is much less a single place with a singular history, but an insignificant site of ephemera, economic decay, and rapid so-called development—a place caught between other places—that might nonetheless serve as an emblem for twenty-first-century experiences of location.

Parkway, the final book of *Hammertown*, shows this positionality best. It asks, as its title implies, about the relation of a place to movement. The central question is this: how does one refuse the pastoral idyll of a traffic-less place, but at the same time refuse to abandon place to random traffic and the pure flow of non-place? One poem answering this question is the book’s first, “A Midsummer Cushion,” where we find Culley standing by the eponymous parkway, a part of Highway 19 completed in 2001:

Sam, the patch of woods
where I “found” your
razor scooter is officially no more,
save for this wan mohawk of alderpoking scrub—

walked past today a grader
working over the loamy slash
like a chimp taking notes
. . . a matter of hours.

Trees to landscaping as books
to decorating; ominous clutter, obscene.
Peeps asleep inside or cooking cabbage

in the air where once I’d stood,
looking around for the “real” owner,
a shaven hedgeloafers out of Thomas Bewick

the last cheap real estate mid-Island
 a chain of similarly
 smoking copses, knotted

perpendicular oak meadow
 crime scenes, Pepto-Bismol swamps.
 Mountain Dew—

coloured spring growth
 on the tree tips edible
 according to Tony.

Sam and Tony could be omitted from this poem and many of its observations would still stand, so what difference do they make? Most obviously, addressing his memorial of an “officially no more” place to a friend, Culley refuses the classically romantic inward turn from a disappointing world, rather opening outwards towards a sense of place as a relation between people. From here, Culley’s poem tries to grasp place as at once moving with the world and real in its particularity. At a banal level, the poem is against parkways, seeing in them a “confection” that attempts to remove artifice and direct vision toward a picturesque so-called nature to be smoothly passed through. Like the viaduct in Compton’s work, parkways sacrifice place for mere circulation. Landscape ceases to be a site of encounters, industry, and traces—“crime scenes, Pepto-Bismol swamps. / Mountain Dew”—becoming a non-place that is driven through as a series of “decorations” intentionally unconnected to a wider environment. Culley’s address corrects this negation of place by grasping what is outside but still a part of the parkway, as in the final mention of “Tony” in the context of speaking to Sam. We end up with a rougher, proper mobility of place, something beyond movement as abstract circulation: a razor scooter, after all, is a vehicle, but here it is, as a real relation between friends, something that can be weighted with memory, solidarity, connection.

Earlier British Columbian poetry often has a similar preoccupation with roads, from Brian Fawcett’s *Cottonwood Canyon* (1985) to Gerry Gilbert’s bike poems, but Culley is different, I think, in that the road is not a romanticized venue for free movement, but something one speaks by the side of. The pathos of the lines above comes mainly from their being a marginal conversation: the word “Sam” itself, as address, is sorrowful because it sounds like a compensation for the desolate loneliness inspired by the “grader” killing the scrub. This “wan Mohawk” speaks, as we will also see Quartermain do in a moment, to an Indigenous context of

tenacious persistence otherwise “officially no more.” The identification may be problematic, but it is affirmative rather than tragic; the response to the disappeared and disappearing margin Culley experiences here is “wan,” but it is still “alderpoking,” still *there*, still curious, holding on. For a British reader like me, the adaptation of Olsonian poetics to Culley’s geography is particularly striking, since the inheritors of Olson in the UK have generally been preoccupied with London, a place that remains central even in its post-imperial malaise and decay. Culley’s reference to Thomas Bewick above, a minor Romantic regionalist of Newcastle, is not incidental: Nanaimo represents a regional space on the periphery one can commit to because one *needs* to reach out from it (as Newcastle does in England). It is, in Culley, a locatedness from which to see, and to see locatedness as defined and redefined by its relation to elsewhere.

Walks: Quartermain

Meredith Quartermain’s *Vancouver Walking* (2005), like the work of Compton and Culley, is primarily interested in routes. It is within this interest that we see a striking development of, and argument with, the Poundian poetics Quartermain’s work only seemingly models itself on—a poetics that has typified other would-be comprehensive poetic accounts of the city, such as George Stanley’s superficially similar but much more classically ideogrammatic *Vancouver* (2008). In Quartermain’s routing, that is, we witness both a return to and divergence from the Poundian-Olsonian models of place poetics that have dominated so much Vancouver poetry. My discussion here will centre on one of those routes, from the long poem “Walk for Beans,” which heads from Campbell Avenue up to Powell Street and over to Victoria Drive.

Walking raises questions of duration. Ever since Wordsworth, the walk has moved thought, so to speak, and spaced it in time. Having recreated Quartermain’s walk myself, reading the text as a kind of tour guide, I learned that the duration of my reading of the text roughly coincides with the duration of the walk. Furthermore, each stanza in “Walk for Beans” and the other walks in the book forms a unit of thought lasting for around a block. Clearly, in its mobility, this is not as Poundian as the book’s ideogrammatic style might otherwise suggest: history is not apportioned a meditational hypostasis emanating from a singular consciousness; it is “here on the frontier of where this is going” (24), moving with city life (of which Quartermain is part in walking purposively *for* something, even if only

coffee beans). In this, though, there is a paradox between the etymological stanza (where one stands) and the Quartermain stanza (where one walks):

Victoria and Hastings

gas station, public school, Owl Drugs & Post Office
Sandwich Farm. Lattes.

lunch counter tacked on the back of the building
anything you can sell to keep going

Lowertown 1920s

Rosa Pryor started her Chicken Inn:

I couldn't afford to buy but 2 chickens at a time—

I'd run my husband over there to buy the chicken

he'd just cut them up right quick

I'd wash them

get them on frying

I'd commence talking,

"Oh, yes, yes, so and so and so,"

talk to take up some time

I'd see him come in, then I'd say

"well, I must get those chickens on."

I'd get him to pay

Say to my husband

"Now, you get 2 more" (25-26)

The beginning of this excerpt, marking place-names, is the structuring unit of the poem—such moments of orientation are the text's measure, its punctuation: "outside again, corner of Victoria and Powell / grey brick Hamilton Building and the Princeton Hotel dock side" (28). The text moves as it walks through place, improvising in the manner of the two-chicken anecdote, making do with the city's markings as it goes. And yet, Quartermain has stopped to register this story, to reach back to quite another temporality: in this case, one overlapping with Compton's, referring to Rosa Pryor of Hogan's Alley, the first black woman to own a business in Vancouver. Throughout, the poem is anxious, as it passes and orients itself in the present, to recognize and foreground the histories that have led to its current flow. These are often histories of violence: "khupkhaipay'ay, the Squamish called that place / on the shore of our now Vancouver / Cedar Tree" (26-27). As Zoë Skoulding has said of the poem, "because the emphasis is on movement, names do not denote static entities but are always placed in relationships, often colonial ones" (23). It is this dialectic of presence and archive, of moving through and reaching back, of observing apparent flow with a consciousness of political power—of, say,

Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* and Pound's *Cantos*—that defines the book's durational signature.

The counter-duration of "Walk for Beans," neither stopping nor walking, is that of the road. Mainly on Hastings Street between Campbell and Victoria, Quartermain moves through singularly inhospitable walking territory, on wide roads busy with often fast traffic, flanked with imposing buildings designed for car access. While the poem's walking shows the potential for a faithfulness to history, a durationality and embodiment of place that can remember and feel living history, this other, parallel mobility represents the bypassing of it in both thought and body. Walking "down through the auto repair joints" that dominate the Downtown Eastside, the poem is much less celebratory, far from the "everything suddenly honks" of Frank O'Hara's city:

Colour Photo and the coffee shop landside
Steady roar of traffic rushing toward town
Or the iron workers' bridge
 crazyman—gray hair flying out
screams, points up Victoria Drive

 RIGHT HERE! RIGHT HERE!
points down at the pavement middle of Powell Street
 raging yelling
oblivious to honks and screeches (28)

We are disoriented by traffic here, and the desperation of the madman's "RIGHT HERE!" registers the road as a kind of pure duration, unstoppable and meaningless, merely "raging yelling," and gestures to a pure "here" that, in its inability to register any past, is diffused to a manifold and diffuse elsewhere. Quartermain's walking, indeed, seems to be a corrective response to such mobility-as-transit: the poem's walk is wilfully unpleasant and endured to provide the city with a duration of thought it would not otherwise receive, of which the "steady roar of traffic rushing toward town" is the constant counterpoint.

Quartermain refuses to merely block this traffic out. As much as it bypasses and shouts over the histories of Vancouver, it is also part of the city's fabric and history. Though Quartermain's expansive method is able to encompass suppressed and overwritten existences occluded by official narratives, her poetry is more than a "did-you-know" local history because it also articulates the forces that stymie such memorializing. Down to the poetry's rhythm, history obtrudes rather than explains in *Vancouver Walking*, and the poet does not find composure in it:

Gore Avenue—track of an old skid
 Surveyor General of British Columbia
 ran from a True Lagoon
 to a place between first and second narrows
 the Spanish said people called Sasamat
 —no translation—
 teals, widgeons, shovelers, buffleheads,
 scoters, redheads, golden-eyes
 blue herons and the *Branta canadensis*
 lagooned at Ka wah usks—Two Points Opposite
 sawmills, sewage, shacktown
 till the railways paved it over. (3)

Quartermain's landscape is subject to revelation but not penetration, concerned less with the historical depth typical of conventional psychogeography than with the historically determined but far less defined movements of the city now. We are presented with "an old skid" rather than an orienting route, untranslatable collisions of language rather than linguistic keys to the city, a medley of particulars rather than an architecture of archetypes. History is unmanageable, obliterating of other histories, and finally unstoppable itself, and yet when dynamically placed in relation and placed in dynamic relation by poetry, writing does achieve a status beyond mere impotence—of, in Fred Wah's formulation on the back of the book, "a kind of naming the city answers to."

Conclusion

This brings us finally to the politics of these poetries. Stephen Morton speaks of the ability of *TISH* and KSW poets to "defamiliarize and interrupt the global flows of capital and the dominant rhetoric of the free market" (158). Clint Burnham, seeing a different method but a similar ambition, describes KSW poetics in terms of an imitative formalism that calls "for a revolution arising out of those very conditions," or "a using of the very tendencies in neoliberalism against their progenitors" ("The Remainder" 43). On the one hand, such claims are true to the modernism and political commitments of the poets they discuss by reading them on their own terms. On the other, poetry interrupting or weaponizing global flows of capital is an unlikely proposition at best, and a quixotic fantasy at worst. Even Jeff Derksen's notion of "rearticulation," in which "resistance" from an "exterior" is rejected for an emphasis on "disarticulating and rearticulating linkages within systems, somehow rearrange [*sic*] structures from within," though it partly registers the limitations of language acts, still conflates poems and political action (with a "somehow" that is revealing

enough), and at root repeats the compulsion toward destructive inside-ness typical of the Language School.¹⁰ “To be critical of a world system,” Derksen concludes, “you have to somehow imagine yourself within it, as opposed to barking at it from a local position” (Butling and Rudy 131). The two decisive identifications here—of abstraction with political participation, and of locatedness with outsider fantasy—are bizarre, and show the impossibility of describing contemporary poetics of place within well-rehearsed avant-garde models. I want to suggest that the poetics I have looked at here are post-avant-garde in the sense that they have abandoned a rhetoric of destructive action for a political art of construction, and more precisely the construction of relation. To speak of a politics of post-avant-garde poetry is to speak of connection—rather than an immediate attack on prevailing institutions, we see a constructivist ambition to make what otherwise seem like remote relations alive, available, urgent.¹¹ All three poets I have discussed, along with many other contemporary Vancouverite writers, seek to make what is *there* (as Other, as an apparently external nature, as seemingly unassailable social fact) newly *here*, animated, related, and responsive. This is both exhilarating and an urgent political truth: the interdependence of each to everyone is now total but also more hidden behind disavowals of these connections and declarations of sovereignty. As Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*, the world market is both the highest form of “the connection of the individual with all” and the point at which we see “the independence of this connection from the individual” (161). A poetry expressive of this dissonance is still on the horizon of negation, but as an “affirmative” form, to use Alain Badiou’s term, by which he means the inverse of the negative, destructive negation typical of early-twentieth-century vanguards and avant-gardes: a historical form rather than its universal condition.¹² Through a poetics of shifting locatedness rather than fixed place, and through the organizing metaphor of routes, Compton, Culley, and Quartermain offer an affirmation of Vancouver and coastal BC as a centrifugal node of moving relation and a place where people live, suffer, and resist.

NOTES

- 1 I should also add that my own experience of both Vancouver and its poetry has also been a mobile one, as an Englishman visiting for only three weeks, an invited guest of uninvited guests on unceded territories. This seems worth registering since, firstly, Vancouver’s poetic history, for better or worse, is written by insiders in a way that, say, the New York School never has been; and secondly, because the manner in which non-parochial poetics of place are partly addressed to people who live elsewhere is a fundamental element of their power.

- 2 Notable examples of these critical histories, more often than not written by participants from within each movement, include: Frank Davey's *When Tish Happens*; Warren Tallman's long essay, "Wonder Merchants"; Peter Quartermain's "Romantic Offensive: *Tish*"; Clint Burnham's *The Only Poetry that Matters*; Christian Bök's "TISH and KOOT"; and Stephen Morton's "A Poetics of Place in the World-System."
- 3 I will speak briefly of the fate of the avant-garde later, but clearly the three projects mentioned here each take different relations to political action than the more orthodox late modernism of KSW: Collis, in both the *Barricades* project and his work's increasingly direct connections to actual political movements and events, opens up space for thinking about poetry's instrumentalisms; Jordan Abel's conceptualism, depending on your viewpoint, exaggerates or inverts the traditional avant-gardism typical of Language-centred poetries; whereas Christine Leclerc's extraordinary editorial collaboration, *The Enpipe Line*, constitutes a poetics of place as (communal) organizational as it is aesthetic, and even more interested than Collis' work in poetry as localized direct action.
- 4 The story of Olson's arrival and influence in British Columbia is a subject for another place, but we may here, as shorthand, point to the convergence of a series of events and personalities that laid the ground for it, such as the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, where Olson spoke for around five hours; the arrival of the Olson scholar Ralph Maud, a founding professor of the English Department at Simon Fraser University in 1965, and poet Robin Blaser in 1966; as well as the adhesion to Olson of many energetic poets, like George Bowering, Fred Wah, and perhaps most notably Daphne Marlatt, whose *Steveston* is arguably the greatest Vancouver poem.
- 5 See Chelva Kanaganayakam's *Moveable Margins: The Shifting Spaces in Canadian Literature*.
- 6 Tallman, for example, explains how "Modernism caught on in the Canadian west because it was right for the west, where the environment is so open and undefined" (67). For Davey, meanwhile, Vancouver and other nearby cities were "vast empty cultural spaces for one to fill" in the 1960s (61). George Bowering, in a similar vein, speaks of British Columbian poetry as being at "the margin . . . thousands of miles from history" (103).
- 7 The phrase is that of the artist Laura Marsden, speaking of her "Hogan's Alley Welcomes You" installation of floral text, planted as part of the Hogan's Alley Memorial Project in 2007 (see Marsden).
- 8 This dialectic is echoed in Cecily Nicholson's exploration of the train that runs past Poplar Island, where "place is a while we walk on the bones of all time" (11): that is, where place evinces a tension between passing by and the ambition to present alternative, temporary, "passin" models of ownership.
- 9 Hammertown appears in Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, p. 270.
- 10 I have described this tendency at length in my *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde*, Chapter 5.
- 11 The very rough beginnings of a theory of non-avant-garde experimental Anglophone poetry might be found in my "After the Avant-Garde," a paper given at ASAP/9 (Oakland, 2017).
- 12 In a short lecture on Pasolini, Badiou separates the figure of negation into "affirmative" and "negative" modes. The latter is the "destructive" dimension which seeks the overthrow of existing systems—Badiou's examples are Schönberg's destruction of the tonal system and Marx's dismantling of the bourgeois state. The former, negation that affirms, works in relation with destructive negation, but is distinct from it:

[T]his new coherence is not new because it achieves the process of disintegration of the system. The new coherence is new to the extent that, in the framework that Schönberg's axioms impose, the musical discourse avoids the laws of tonality, or, more precisely, becomes indifferent to these laws. . . . Clearly, this subtraction is in the

horizon of negation; but it exists apart from the purely negative part of negation. It exists apart from destruction. It is the same thing for Marx in the political context. Marx insists on saying that the destruction of the bourgeois State is not in itself an achievement. The goal is communism, that is the end of the State as such. . . . ("Destruction")

Negative and affirmative negation are interdependent, but for Badiou they must be balanced to respond to that which they negate: their historical situation. Destruction, Badiou says, is "the very essence of negation" in the twentieth century, both in political practice (Lenin or Mao) and art (Duchamp or Cage), and what we need now, in the twenty-first century, is an account of negation that can be affirmative and world-building.

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