

Contesting Vancouver

Case Studies in a Cultural Imaginary

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Vancouver, balanced on the tipping point of the continent, has long been aswirl with contestation. The early-twentieth-century poets might have toasted the “Queen of the Coast” with “the bonniest hues” (Johnson 55), but their way of writing the city was breezily dismissed by the modernist poets as mere trifles from “the usual collection of happy-go-lucky housewives” (Davey, “The Present” 1). Though the macho *Tish* poets carved out a space for themselves in CanLit with their magazine, they have since been critiqued for enacting a “violence against other outsider positions” (Butling 56), especially against women, racialized writers, and the spectrum of non-heteronormative subject positions that were kept off *Tish*’s pages. In the years after the first editorial period of *Tish*, Vancouver was suddenly awash in transdisciplinary experimentation, particularly the (con)fusion of the literary and visual arts. As late as 1966, Frank Davey, erstwhile head of the *Tish* brigade, dismissed the intermediated work of the downtown scene *in toto*, “which mode I still find irrelevant to what I know as poetry. For me poetry is of language, and language is still of sound with rhythm in stress and pitch, and is not just visual shape” (“Dear Fred” 3). On the other side of that transformative era, George Bowering, another *Tisher*, grabbed the mic after a 1983 reading by Kevin Davies (of what would become the Kootenay School of Writing) threw Davies’ poems onto the ground, and declared it all “a lot of dumb shit.” Aesthetic fiefdoms—occupied by the likes of the Black Mountain school, the lyric poets, the West Coast Hermeticists, the Spoken Word poets, et al.—have emerged and grown into small, moated empires, only to crash and spill into other lines, other allegiances.

Meanwhile, and in tandem, the city's visual arts communities have been similarly blessed by the excitement of discovery of new, globally acknowledged aesthetic pathways, and the joys of building and inventing new kinds of art institutions. Visual artists, however, have also been afflicted by exclusionary politics and the particular divisiveness of a general spirit of contestation. These realities persist in spite of the overarching ethos of the broad, experimental, and "revolutionary ambitions" of the countercultural moment on the North American West Coast (Watson 8). The transformative waves of (so-called) change that tried to reimagine Vancouver's cultural identity have proved to be susceptible to issues of gender, class, race, or affective economics, importing the "political effects of [a] hierarchy between open and closed cultures" (Ahmed 134). The evolution of artist-run culture, particularly in the interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary realms fashioned by the likes of the Intermedia Society, the Western Front, Image Bank, and the VIVO Media Arts Centre (formerly the Satellite Video Exchange Society), amongst an abundance of others, provides many examples of increasing attention to the marginalized, and ongoing turns in the contest of Vancouver. But even these coming-to-agency moments are not without complications explicitly connected to Vancouver's social geographies and cultural imaginaries.

The unsettled history of the place, with habitual reminders of being on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, inflects the way that art is made, circulated, and interpreted in the city, and the way that artist communities form in a stance of defiance, honed by awareness of overlapping oppressions and histories of violence. Throw in the anxiety caused by the permeation of international capitalism and the displacing fact of overpriced real estate, add in fentanyl, the open street use of opioids, and the longue durée of colonialism, and suddenly the fact that this gem in the English crown on the farthest coast erupts into riots and running street battles seems altogether less random. Malcolm Lowry once wrote of Vancouver as a "place where chancres [venereal ulcers] blossom like the rose / For in each face is such a hard despair / That nothing like a grief finds entrance there" (159). The notion that art and aesthetics are ideologically inflected—still pooh-pooed in other centres—is presumed as a baseline for aesthetic production in the Vancouver context, where artists either play with the ideological implications/potentials or else wage open war against them. Thus, Hock E Aye VI Edgar Heap of Birds' *Native Hosts* (1991/2007) reversed the name "British Columbia" in his twelve-sign installation on the UBC campus and pointedly reminded his audience

of twelve First Nations “hosts” in British Columbia (Chilcotin, Cree, Haida, Gitksan, Kwagwiltz, Lillooet, Lil’wat, Musqueam, Nuu’chah’nulth, St’at’yemc, Squamish, and Wet’suwet’en). Thus, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun launched his campaign to “Rename BC” (“#renamebc”) in 2016 in order to denaturalize the lingering colonial heritage that still conditions artmaking in the province, even including its name.

It is important to register the fact that this special issue is part of a broader “Concept of Vancouver” project that has, at present, two distinctive parts all attuned to an unfolding mapping of the Vancouver urban imaginary: it was a conference at Brock University in 2016 organized by Julia Polyck-O’Neill, Andrew McEwan, and Gregory Betts, with fifty scholarly and creative presentations, two art exhibitions, and plenary addresses by George Bowering, Richard Cavell, Dana Claxton, Christos Dikeakos, Deanna Fong, Larissa Lai, Roy Miki, Lisa Robertson, Michael Turner, and Rita Wong; and it is this issue of *Canadian Literature*. Furthermore, both of the guest editors are presently working on book-length studies of experimental arts and writing communities in the city, and are part of a far-flung network of scholars and writers doing similar work in Vancouver Studies. This special issue continues such work by reading the bifurcations and contradictions of the city as both stifling and generative.

Many of the authors in this collection pick up on this theme of contested space, uncertain and malleable borders, and generative tensions. Dani Spinoza, for instance, seeks a form of literary scholarship that attends to the problem of such competing forces. She troubles the spirit of taxonomy that informs so much of literary and cultural studies by documenting the transnational, transgenre drift of digital and electronic literature. Felicity Tayler uncovers the conflagration of localism, regionalism, and cosmopolitanism in the International Image Exchange Directory, which established dense, cross-border social networks through the mail. Mathieu Aubin seeks to unsettle the dominant, patriarchal narrative of one of the city’s ur-texts, documenting subcurrents of queerness in the later issues of *Tish*. This issue does not touch all of the bases of contestation in Vancouver, inevitably leaving out much more than it includes. Instead of trying to take on all of the social and cultural complexity of the city, this issue gestures towards various aesthetic and socio-political scenes as reflections of a unique, transdisciplinary modality of artmaking.

The creative contributions in this issue, selected by Phinder Dulai in dialogue with the guest editors, sustain this transdisciplinary contestation,

and individualize the affect of bearing witness to the struggle of Vancouver, and the complexity of Vancouver's oxymoronic narratives. As Chelene Knight writes, "there's a thirst here too clenched." Projective images of the city "ripped down" echo across the poems, as in Joseph Dandurand's portrait of communal violence and addiction on the "insane streets of the pathetic / city," or Ajmer Rode's reflections on the difference between the spectral concept of the city and its harsher, grittier reality, documenting the disintegrating hopes of the "Silly girl" who still "Believes the city will keep its word." Dana Claxton's poem, an extended address to the spirit of the city, pairs a desire to maintain connection to the geography and Indigenous heritage of the place with a frustration at the inequalities and systemic oppressions that structure daily life in the city: "Vancouver. . . who are we?" While Bill Bissett imagines the perfect freedom of an "astral realm . . . wher we reelee let go uv our // obsessing narrativs," Jeff Derksen cautions about the manufacturing of optimism and the compression of the possibility for autonomy. If the present is "[a] feeling that goes past its possible experience," as Derksen writes, then we must beware of art and cultural products that justify "not love" but "some form / of cruelty we have become accustomed to."

The consequences of this ongoing spirit of contest, this spirit of necessary caution, are manifold, entrenched by oscillating waves of leftist utopianism, centrist compromise, and rightist austerity. In her contribution to Stan Douglas' *Vancouver Anthology*, the late Nancy Shaw notes, "Interdisciplinary and collaborative practices were instituted as pedagogical *doxa*" in the new mid-century BC schools Simon Fraser University and the David Thompson University Centre (91). These are foundational, inviting, and open cultural modes, but Shaw explains that this *doxa* facilitated structural challenges to individual geniuses (making people perennially suspicious of careerism) and institutional participation (making people perennially suspicious of bureaucratic compromise). Shaw witnessed the morphing of artist-run cultures whose "utopian models of social integration were gradually replaced by alienated, hierarchical systems of organization" (91). Ingrid and Iain Baxter's N. E. Thing Company parodied such a professionalization of the arts in the city by incorporating, even taking out TV, newspaper, and radio ads to satirize the entrepreneurial side of the art world. For a moment in the city's history, artists sponsored junior hockey teams (Baxter 77); Baudrillard and Burroughs were equally amused. In this issue, Jamie Hilder writes of the transition of loose art collectives into closed and private networks as the city shifted away from intermedial and anarchic models into increased

specialization and bureaucratic/hierarchical modes. Still, while the rise of neoliberalism ushered a wave of conservatism into the arts community in Vancouver, Jason Wiens points out how pockets of resistance, like the Kootenay School of Writing, emerged in the brine. He highlights how the collective functioned as a kind of malleable archive, a kind of repertoire centred on the politics of the group (the commons, etc.) against the strategic isolation of the individual.

We thus arrive at the lush plurality of a city with both ocean and mountains, tankers and pipelines, with links to Asia and Europe (yet insistently North American), colony and driver of the nation's decolonial agenda. A city shaped by the expansion of neoliberal and imperial discourses met by generations of aesthetic communities increasingly attuned to the necessity (and seeming impossibility) of resistance. Christopher Gutierrez attends to the tensions of a space shaped by such viscerally felt contradictions. The presence of instability within idealized representations of Vancouver emerges from its violent, episodic counter-histories and its general affect as the site of contradictory tensions. If, in the mid-twentieth century, Northrop Frye led a significant sector of Canadian authors and scholars to pursue the taxonomical cleanliness of archetypes, national symbols, and regional essences, Vancouver art and writing during the same period followed a different path that was more attuned to the messier collage modality of Marshall McLuhan's theories of mediation. Indeed, Vancouver's cultural imaginary is remarkably attentive to medium, the material of production, and the conflict of bodies trained by capital to perform intersecting oppressions. These legacies persist as Vancouver artists operate within the anxiety of material speculation, the necessity of decolonization, and the concept of a city permeated by broader worlds of conflict.

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