**Sam Weselowski**

# Jeff Derksen's Citational Poetics

By what methodological shift might poets and critics rephrase that pesky question of revolutionary action, the one Marxism posed at the onset of the last century: "What is to be done [about neoliberalism]?"[1] How has this question since survived decades of ideology critique that duelled with neoliberalism's becoming-economic of everyday life in the first place? The problem, Adam Tooze notes, is that most critiques of neoliberalism chastise its "intellectual logic and history of ideologies and modes of government, rather than investigating processes of accumulation, production, and distribution" (135). Marxist literary and cultural critic Annie McClanahan sketches the urgent shift in method as a materialist one, proposing that "if we attend to material conditions . . . we might find that the change in consciousness or subjectivity described by theorists of neoliberalism is more imputed than real" ("Serious" 111). By giving attention to material conditions—the mechanisms of dispossession, the lived experiences of the economic regime—McClanahan contends that *actually-existing neoliberalism* becomes not purely an object of scrutiny but a site of struggle that takes its horizon of critique to be the historical end of capital. So how does poetry, that greeny flower, that marginalia of political economy, conjugate the material conditions of neoliberalism? How does this methodological shift bring into focus poetry's comportment toward capital?

To pursue these questions of real politics, I argue that Vancouver poet Jeff Derksen's *The Vestiges* (2013) adopts a range of citational practices and modes to critically examine the material conditions of *neoliberalization*. With citational poetics, I see Derksen's writing undertake a creative practice that cites multiple textual forms—statistics, unattributed quotations,

pop songs, Marxist theory—to recalibrate the poem's capacity for social observation alongside its ability to mobilize these textual forms against large-scale economic structures that far exceed the structure of the poem itself. In *The Vestiges*, citational poetics enables the poem to be grounded in specific encounters between material conditions and historical moments, textual feelings and lived experiences. By making the terminological shift toward neoliberalization, I move away from the classic reading of Derksen's poetics that sees it partake in the drama of exposure surrounding the ideology of neoliberalism, a reading which tends to overemphasize "ideology" and "neoliberalism" as philosophical monuments at the centre of contemporary social life. Writing on Derksen's *Transnational Muscle Cars*, Herb Wyile argues that the critical thrust of this work "prompts us to question the ubiquitous verities of neoliberal globalization and to make space for 'other rationalities'" (71). Peter Jaeger similarly states that "[t]he practice of conjoining economic relationships with ideology is key to Derksen's cultural poetics" ("'But Could I" 35). These appraisals of Derksen's poetics provide invaluable waypoints for understanding the political terrain of his writing, yet they nonetheless privilege the critique of neoliberal ideation over material conditions. I instead focus on how Derksen's citational poetics dilates the *processes* of neoliberalization—shining a harsh light on the linkages between subjectivity and financialization, gentrification, and labour relations—as they constitute the lived experiences of the economic regime.

The critique of neoliberalization documented by Derksen's citational poetics draws together the dual and often contradictory cohabitations of neoliberal practices and principles—its utopian visions of liberatory individualism laced with lethal programs of austerity, for example—thereby depicting how the poetic text rearticulates these cohabitations across spatial scales. As Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore argue: "[R]ecognizing neoliberalization as tendentially processual, always partial, and adaptively protean means confronting the complex and often contradictory intermixing of the practices and principles of market rule," and that in particular the *variegation* of these practices "refers not to some pretext for cartographic distractions but to what are always variable and contingent states of cohabitation" (255-56). Derksen's citational poetics similarly interprets the economic regime not so much as a monolithic force but as a complex network composed of small- and large-scale processes saturating the social world. Thus, the work of citation in Derksen's writing doesn't solely mount into a litany of systemic injustices pertaining to actually-existing neoliberalism so much as it stages the

dialectical unease between lived experience and economic structure at the heart of neoliberal realism. In this way, citation captures the scale-sensitivity inherent to Derksen's description of poetry writing against capital. For Derksen, poetry's ability to enjamb the spatial and social separations of late capitalism across its variegated terrain constitutes

> a political and aesthetic discourse, one capable of both turning inward and outward . . . and a discourse that does not fall into narrowed movements of inward *or* outward, but can tie the scales of subjectivity and agency to geopolitics and the production of a transnational public sphere that questions 'who' constitutes this sphere, and reverse the scales back down through the urban territory to new political claims made in globalized cities. (*Annihilated Time* 84, emphasis original)

Examining the paratactic orchestrations of writers like Louis Cabri, Carol Mirakove, and Kevin Davies, Derksen asserts that poetry can "tie" the political constructions of local, regional, national, and global space together in ways that reflect how individual and collective agencies are formed by *and against* the multi-scalar structure of global capital. Derksen suggests that poetry offers not so much another hermeneutic to cognitively map the social totality, but instead provides a fine-grained medium that toggles between detail and system, subject and structure. This poetics of scale similarly underwrites Derksen's own aesthetic project, where citationality, with its capacity to juxtapose multiple discourses at once, entails a very specific method with which to conceive questions of geopolitics and subjectivity across the topos and temporalities of neoliberalization.

Over the course of this article, I define Derksen's citational poetics as a practice that is not adequately represented by his practice of quotation alone but encompasses a whole critical project. Foremost, I argue that Derksen's citational poetics examines how the disparate materials of neoliberalization—depictions of gentrification, quotations of critical theory, recollections of chart-topping hits, references to overthrown governments—bear witness to the present conjuncture. At the same time, Derksen's sense of citationality makes legible the ways in which poetry, as a textual practice necessarily comprising many voices and social relations, aesthetically theorizes integrative modes of Marxist critique arrayed against the material conditions of actually-existing neoliberalism.

### Rearticulating Citational Poetics

If intertextuality involves the relationship between texts (often literary texts), then citational poetics primarily underscores the pre-existing status of textual matter, and does so by assembling the literary and non-literary

alike. Citing means copying while retaining the frame of reference, thereby probing how textual matters cohabitate. By employing typographical cues that embolden the alterity of sources—quotation marks, italics, brackets—citational poetics places authorial commentary and pre-existing textual matter in dialectical unease.

"*[C]itationality*, with its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, its interpenetration of origin and destruction," Marjorie Perloff writes, "is central to twenty-first-century poetics" (17, emphasis original). For Perloff, citational poetics designates the interplay of source and authorial commentary that reflects the deep pleasure of chance discovery found throughout modern and contemporary poetry. Here, citation implies a synchrony of texts that is otherwise thwarted by the large-scale passage of space and time, ultimately pursuing modes of aesthetic mediation able to shuttle across multiple scales of historical and cultural activity. But in Derksen's writing, attending to the cohesive relations of citational practice also demands attending to its tensions. Like Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia that represents "a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships" (263), Derksen's citational poetics traffics in an array of discursive registers to locate the social conflicts of language in the material conditions of neoliberalism. For Derksen, citing and commenting on numerous textual forms is to be understood as a method that critically explores cohesion and contradiction.

*The Vestiges* builds on a sustained critique of neoliberalism that Derksen's poetics has undertaken since the early 1990s—a critique that has been largely elaborated citationally. The (curiously unnamed) serial poem spanning his books *Dwell* (1993) and *Transnational Muscle Cars* (2003), that "Oil for Food" in *The Vestiges* (2013) completes, exemplifies the citational methods used in Derksen's attack. In the midst of "But Could I Make a Living From It" from *Transnational Muscle Cars* we encounter:

> Good morning little graduate schoolboy.
> If only we could elevate poetry to pop culture—smells like corporate spirit.
> To give this a context, I'm writing below sea level, but I don't know what time it is and I don't speak the language.
> 1982: 1.2341.
> Any mood-altering substance please. (*Transnational* 30)

Composed of grammatically complete sentences appearing to bear no syntagmatic relation to the next, these "modular units" (as Jaeger terms them) jump from ironic observations of late capitalist ennui, to the annual spot rate between US and Canadian dollars, to unattributed quotations

cribbed from critical theory and advertising as well as spoonerisms of pop lyrics. This produces a disjunctive canvas which twists far more than maps the relations (social, economic, spatial) between neoliberal subjectivity and globalization at hyper speed.

Likewise consisting of grammatically complete sentences organized into discrete modular units, and considering its equal parts whimsical and ironic tone, Bob Perelman's "China" is an important precursor for Derksen's citational arrangements:

> We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do.
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> If it rains, you either have your umbrella or you don't.
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> The landscape is motorized.
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> *Hey guess what?* What? *I've learned how to talk*. Great. (60-61)

Fredric Jameson relates the backstory to Perelman's modular text: "[S]trolling through Chinatown, [Perelman] came across a book of photographs whose idiogrammatic captions remained a dead letter to him. . . . The sentences of the poem in question are then Perelman's own captions to those pictures, their referents another image, another absent text" (*Postmodernism* 30). Perelman's paratactic lines can be read as prototypical to Derksen's modular poems, where the former's captions correspond to a lost photographic object akin to the latter's financial citations that offer spatiotemporal indices in place of a representation of global-scale economic relations. The citations and captions of "China" toggle between writing that both is and is not Perelman's, in that they refer not simply to an unattributed source but to the disappearance of that source from the text as such. At the same time, "China" explores (however subtly) the spatial relations and global structure of capitalist postmodernity: "We live on the third world from the sun. . . . Nobody tells us what to do." Jameson states that "insofar as this is in some curious and secret way a political poem, it does seem to capture something of the excitement of the immense unfinished social experiment of the New China . . . the unexpected emergence, between the two superpowers, of 'number three'" (29). But even as Jameson notes that "China" registers a turbulent shift in the world-system's geopolitical makeup, he suggests that "such meaning floats over the text or behind it" ("Postmodernism" 122). The sentence-by-sentence disjunction of "China" ratifies, for Jameson, a benign acceptance regarding the disappearance of

history in late capitalism, that is, "the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present" (125). But as Jaeger counters, Jameson's criticism "omits the collaborative effort that Language writing assumes for its reader," such that particled words and indeterminacy of meaning in fact stages a momentary encounter between reader and the very cultural logic Jameson diagnoses (*ABC* 92, 93). "China" demands that readers reckon with late capitalism's dissolution of historical time by engaging with a series of syntagmatically ambiguous sentences that have for their background the modern world-system's historical transformation. At the same time, and scaling back down to the individual, the speaker appears torn between autonomy and resignation when confronted with this new geopolitical excitement as it is tempered by an emergent representational dilemma, shifting from the assertion that "Nobody tells us what to do" to observing that when it rains "you either have your umbrella or you don't."

Derksen's modular form is grammatically similar to Perelman's play of sentences, yet the content of his serial poem is overloaded with reference. Jaeger states that Derksen's practice of the modular unit "uses disjunction to dialogically foreground the links among subjectivity, economic relations, and social desire" ("'But Could I" 36), while Clint Burnham sees Derksen's text organized by what he terms "social collage": "The collage is social because of the putative political content here, *and* because the disjunction means the reader must construct meaning. The social is a collage because that formal structure is held to bear a relation . . . with the social world" (114, emphasis original). More specifically, the formal structure of Derksen's poem bears a relation with the social world by citing the processes that govern how social relations under capitalism are forged by forces and vectors that appear tenuous to the individual. Writing on the ways Derksen's poetics attempts resisting neoliberal ideology, Herb Wyile states that "one of the distinctive and insidious things about neoliberalism is the way in which its values [entrepreneurial freedom, faith in the market, etc.] have pervaded all walks of life and have come to enjoy the status of an unquestioned common sense," and that "a key part of the texture of *Transnational Muscle Cars* is an incisive grappling with the economic, political, cultural, and existential dimensions of the neoliberal order" (71). Wyile sees Derksen's poetics questioning the neoliberal order through his work's referential (or citational, I would argue) relationship to critical theory, as he argues this strategy "highlights his objective of denaturalizing and defamiliarizing neoliberal discourse,

especially with respect to relations between labour and capital" (77). But more than sighting (and citing) the shift from neoliberal values to general common sense, Derksen's citational poetics in "But Could I Make a Living From It" points toward the textual matter of neoliberalization. Serving as the coordinates of neoliberalism's economic *and* spatial relations, the annual spot rate figures intercalate the mock-cosmopolitan speaker that wanders flâneur-like across neoliberalism's globalized cities and surfaces.

Antagonistically, Derksen's use of economic figures first appears without context. "Oil for Food" in *The Vestiges* exhibits lines consisting of country names followed by percentages alongside other late capitalist slogans, word-play, and ironic commentary:

> "Unhappy workers."
> Canada 84.6%, Chile 11.9%, China 31.7%.
> I loved your novel, it's you I can't stand (and that's where the marketing campaign stops).
> Trickle-down architecture.
> "Is it really necessary to say something about the individual here?" (114)

Sianne Ngai describes a similar feature in Derksen's earlier writing, what she terms the "maimed statistic" ("West Germany 5.4%") that appears in his poem "Interface" from *Dwell*: "[T]he reader cannot fix it metaphorically, assign a concept to it, or send it on a metonymic voyage along a chain of other terms. . . . The reader can act on it only by not acting on it, by turning away—just as the maimed statistic itself turns away from its implicit referent" (181). What Ngai identifies is the kind of productive reading Derksen's poetics generates. That the text fails to offer a pre-booked metonymic voyage demands not so much that one turn away from these statistics but that they attempt to conceive of their situation in the poem's modular form. The text emerges as a site to produce rather than consume meaning, and this production is enacted by determining the relations between modular units across the wider (and dialogic) canvas of the poem. The contents of these modular units in turn locate the world-historical moment in which the text avowedly responds. As well, these percentages often come with a clue. Near the end of "Oil for Food" an unattributed quotation appears: ""It could just as credibly be said that 'the world owes this money to itself,' and so owes nothing"" (123). Reading this any time after the most recent of neoliberalism's financial crashes, where "money" and "owe" sound the alarm of financialization, these percentages isolate each nation's debt-to-GDP ratio, comparing the country's public debt to its gross domestic product.

Financialization, that decisive determination of social and economic life in the present, stands as one of neoliberalism's most reliable sources for extracting surplus value. Debt in particular expresses one of the clearest lived experiences of the global economy in ways that have been intensified by the cyclical financial crashes following 2008. Insofar as taking on consumer debt previously provided a means to "enhance 'discretionary' spending," McClanahan argues, the steady decline of worker wages and the devastation of the social safety net since at least the 1980s has transformed it into a primary form of economic subsistence, offering the sole means through which "many working- and middle-class families, as well as households experiencing persistent unemployment or underemployment, were able to continue to survive" (*Dead Pledges* 11). At a world-historical moment of rampant economic crisis where countries take on exorbitant amounts of debt eerily similar to the ways people are often forced to, Derksen's citational poetics articulates the bizarre homologies between citizens and nation-states both thrust into financialization's processes of capital accumulation, albeit at different socio-economic poles. At the same time, Derksen's citations of global financial relations and market jargon alongside ironic comments on the erosion of social welfarist programs as in "Oil for Food"—"A pension plan sinking like a ship's anchor offshored to Foxconn's supply chain" (110)—draw the individual into close contact with all manner of ideological abstraction as well as material conditions far beyond their immediate comprehension. Derksen's juxtapositions of individual pension, offshore finance, and supply chains elicit a kind of synesthesia for interpreting the material conditions of neoliberalism, where the socio-economic sensory organs have all been upended.

Reminiscent of Perelman, the maimed statistic of national debt in "Oil for Food" becomes a caption for the lost image of global economic relations, another absent text in the politics of everyday life. "Oil for Food" does not so much resolve the representational dilemmas of financialization as much as it reasserts the urgency of its problems in the present. In "Oil for Food," Derksen's citations enjamb rather than destroy the relations of space, finance, and lived experience, thus setting in motion both the open-endedness of the poem's modular form and the imperative to critique neoliberalization in relational, or dialectical, terms. "Oil for Food" resists the desire to perform a wholesale transformation of disjunction into conjunction, as though this transformation would offer some final clue to the inner workings of neoliberalism. Derksen's text instead confronts these problematics by

addressing the scalar that links individual pensioners to offshore finance, or that links the social to the economic in ways that are rarely visible when stretched across spatial scales. In short, Derksen's citational poetics suggests how these cohabitations can be rearticulated in ways that make their effects on multiple scales (scales that one might not readily sense) legible.

Cohering global flows of finance, Russian formalism, and anti-capitalist snark, Derksen's citational poetics in "But Could I Make A Living From It" and "Oil for Food" foremost puts the actual figures of neoliberalism's social, economic, and political projects into the text as important objects of study. Relatedly, other critics have commented not so much on Derksen's citational poetics as his use of quotation. Jason Wiens observes that "one of Derksen's recurring devices is the decontextualized quotation . . . as a sort of 'found poetry' whose assumptions are laid bare when placed under the sign of irony" (104). Writing on "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically" from *Transnational Muscle Cars*, Jennifer Blair notes that "[the poem is] chock-full of several quotations, as if borrowed from the ether of culture in which they circulate as freely available. Some read like bumper-sticker slogans . . . while some read like sound-bites from the news media" (87). Yet the pressure that citational poetics puts on the act of quotation ultimately conceives of a whole aesthetic practice, one that doesn't merely hoard the linguistic junk of neoliberalism but enjambs the signifiers of contemporary culture to the inscriptions of finance. That is, Derksen's citational poetics copies slogan and national debt percentage alike to address the abstractions of neoliberalism's world economy. If Derksen's quotations ironically lay bare the textual matter of neoliberalism, his citational poetics produces a geopolitical geometry in which the relations of structure and subject convulse. More specifically, Derksen's citations of debt stage how these figures interpenetrate everyday life—hence neoliberalism proceeds not as an ideological abstraction "elsewhere" but as a force which materially throttles the individual subject and their complex relationship to the political construction of local, national, and global space.

### Citations as/in Vestiges

In comparison to the scattered citations of "Oil for Food" and the other poems from this modular series, *The Vestiges* is composed almost exclusively by citational means. The poem "'I welcome every opinion based on scientific criticism'" copies each instance that Marx uses the first-person pronoun in *Capital*, Volume 1; "But What of the City Itself?" reads like a cognitive map

of globalized cities the world over, though cities that are anthropomorphized to the extent that they are susceptible to capitalism's contradictions and overdeterminations—a line like "Before the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s, New York was possibly the most egalitarian of any American city" is lifted from Susan Fainstein's *The Just City* (69)—and the text is appended by a works cited noting where each sentence is sourced. Meanwhile, "The Parenthetical" reproduces every single parenthetical remark from a specific chapter or essay from an individual author's work, all of whom are Marxist theorists of various stripes: Silvia Federici, Herbert Marcuse, Louis Althusser, and, eponymously, Karl Marx.

Yet the most vivid of these citations is in the design of the book itself. The front cover, with its stark contrasts of black and white dramatized by the hurtling of a water current (a detail from Alfredo Jaar's series *Searching for Gramsci*), would appear to dispute Jack Spicer's claim that "A drop / Or crash of water. It means / Nothing" (217). "*The Vestiges*," Derksen describes, "takes mid-sixties New Directions Paperback poetry books as its design model. . . . Accordingly, we chose Sabon, a typeface designed in 1966 by Jan Tschichold, to set the interior. The back cover copy is derived from an amalgam of New Directions Paperback Originals" (128). In his notes at the book's conclusion, Derksen discusses how the design choices of *The Vestiges*, serving as a kind of objective correlative to the poetics of works like George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous*, explore "what it would be like to do a *remake* of this type of poem" (125). Derksen's reproduction of mid-sixties, mainly Objectivist poetics is palpable in the materiality of *The Vestiges*; a citation that travels from cover design right down to the text's typeface. The front cover of *The Vestiges*, with its pairing of clarity and collision shot in black and white, bears a familial resemblance to the designs of Oppen's *The Materials* and *Of Being Numerous*, while the choice of Tschichold's late modernist typeface offers a further textual cue for the historical remake Derksen's work performs.

With its aleatory lyric units depicting Vancouver's Pacific Rim orientation set in and against the global flows of capital, the titular poem of *The Vestiges* performs multiple citations of Oppen's late modernist poetics:

> Linear tankers lie
> on the harbour's horizon.
>
> The speed of globalization.
>
> "Community-based
> crystal-meth focus groups."
> Jog by. (1)

That the poem opens epigraphically from Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* ("Not to reduce the thing to nothing—"), and makes more explicit reference to that text where it quotes his famous "'the shipwreck / of the singular'" (2), signals the Objectivist terrain upon which Derksen's poem moves. Indeed, Derksen's imperative to cite throughout "The Vestiges" draws on Oppen's poetics of quotation, a poetics which, as Peter Nicholls writes, "does not point outside the poem, but functions rather to disrupt any sense of unified poetic 'voice' even though sources are often obscured" (25). Similarly, "The Vestiges" features unattributed quotations of, among others, statements from news reports, as well as unattributed though fairly easy to parse quotations from Marx, "'The machine is a means / for producing surplus value'" (4). Included also are sections that quote critical theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu at length, serving as a clear nod to Oppen's citation of Walt Whitman in the last stanza of "Of Being Numerous" (51). Here, Derksen quoting Bourdieu becomes a citation of the very citationality underpinning Oppen's work. There are other poets present in "The Vestiges" too, such as Lyn Hejinian in one of the book's epigraphs, and the epistolary figure of Charles Olson, who receives a "Message mistakenly sent to Maximus and undisclosed recipients" (48). Like Oppen, Derksen's citationality disrupts a unifying poetic voice while probing how sourced texts both clarify and counteract social observation.

It is as though the spaces between the modular units of Derksen's multi-book serial poem have been ballasted in "The Vestiges" with Objectivist meditation, that pores over the fragments of real estate speculation, social struggles for property rights, and gentrification in globalized cities:

> Is mixed use
> sleeping in doorways
>
> the grey economy
> CDs cellphones tools cassettes batteries bikes lights shoes
> watches clothes
>
> spread on blankets
> on the sidewalks
>
> under the overhang
> of a pawnshop awning
>
> [consistently ranked number one
> in the world]. (19)

Here, the implied social function of multi-use buildings experiences a détournement by people who are experiencing homelessness or have precarious access to housing—people who actually use and live in and

around these spaces, often on the street, in spite of the real estate developers and municipal policy-makers trying to push them out. "The Vestiges" offers a realist depiction of a very specific moment in the grey market economy of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, observing how the sidewalk sale of *things*—electronics, clothing, tools—ironizes the meaning of "mixed use" as it relates to the activities of everyday life, the architecture of gentrification, and the collection of items the poem enumerates. "Mixed use" juxtaposes Vancouver's speculative and grey market economies and thus the determinations of wealth and subsistence they entail. Further, Derksen reconstructs the social contradiction between absolute poverty and the city's liveability ranking on the global stage by way of a broken citation—one that is not clearly attributed but is annually circulated. For "The Vestiges," Vancouver's contradictory economic cohabitations nevertheless designate (as the poem cites) one of the most liveable cities on the planet (a strange scalar indeed).

Unifying these poetic practices—citation and authorial commentary concentrating on the city and the spatial relations of speculative finance—is the concept of sincerity. As a compositional and political ethos held by the Objectivists, sincerity asserts the poem's capacity for social observation and ability to produce social meaning. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain write, the Objectivist's notion of sincerity suggests how the poem acts as "a mode of social observation, connecting a variety of basic, essential phenomena," and more explicitly how "Objectivists, with their decided sense of the line and their inventive serial organization, use the basic nature of poetry . . . to articulate social meaning" (3, 4). For the essential phenomena emphasized in "The Vestiges," sincerity registers how modes of economic subsistence (the grey economy spread onto a blanket) exist in spite of Vancouver's sloganized utopianism ("[consistently ranked number one / in the world]"). Objectivist social observation, and its rearticulation in "The Vestiges" (and throughout *The Vestiges*!), does not single out the contradictions of capital, because the contradictions are not a glitch but a feature of the lived experience of capital. Thus, a poetics of sincerity attempts, in Derksen's words, "To portray a thing or a place concretely and complexly through attention to the social relations both *in* and *around* the thing" ("Meaning It" 109). In Derksen's own poetics, sincerity demands giving attention to the social relations of actually-existing neoliberalism as they compose *and contest* its processes of dispossession.

Objectivist sincerity, as Charles Altieri stresses, "involves insistence on the surface of the poem as concerned primarily with direct acts of naming as signs of the poet's immediate engagement in the areas of experience made present

by conceiving the act of writing as a mode of attention" (33). Derksen's citational poetics similarly perform this act of naming, which is to say naming that does not solely describe the material conditions of capitalism but offers a space whereby it can be exposed and related more rigorously to the processes of gentrification, financialization, and property relations as they impinge on and impede everyday life. By positioning national debt, the grey economy, and the port city uncomfortably together, Derksen's citational poetics brings into focus the overlapping scales of the individual in the everyday and the economic system of capital. To tarry with this understanding of citationality in the expanded field, "The Vestiges" does not simply cite passages from other texts, or words that must appear in quotation marks, but cites what we might call actually-existing social processes: world-historical events, popular culture, and a whole host of economic and social facts that do not present themselves in easily reproducible terms. Derksen's citational poetics, while not able to capture the totality of these social processes in the camera flash of the citation, instead rearticulates them in ways that enunciate their relations, contradictions, and disjunctions at multiple scales. The sincerity of "The Vestiges" does not point out instances of the city's uneven development as local tragedies but contrasts them with the structure of capitalism and neoliberalism in the present, enjoining the choreographies of the city, the citizenry, and the spatial relations of finance.

Citational poetics untethered from quotation marks also offers ways of perceiving national, popular, and mass cultural production in the swirl of geopolitics that can then be scaled back down to the individual consuming that culture, even as they bear witness to global events: "[Marvin Gaye's 'Let's Get It On' / was top of the charts / the day the tanks were in Santiago's streets]" (23). Even without the injunction of the first-person pronoun, we sense that the speaker's individual experience of "Let's Get It On" maps onto a vast grid of culture and politics in world space amid a specific moment of social upheaval. Alternatively, "The Vestiges" registers spatial relations *through* the cultural, where a chart-topping hit connects American cultural production to Pinochet's regime. Here, "Let's Get It On" suddenly clips onto the Chilean coup d'état of 1973, while the title becomes a sardonic metonym for the devastation of the socialist option in the second half of the twentieth century. (One imagines they can hear the opening bars of "Let's Get It On" drift from an open window to the tanks below, where one libidinal economy steps into another.) That David Harvey pinpoints Pinochet's coup as "the first experiment with neoliberal state formation" (*A Brief History* 7) adds

another historical dimension to Derksen's citation of Gaye and this moment in the history of neoliberalism.

Proceeding from the Marvin Gaye citation, the poem rephrases Richard Nixon's order to destabilize Chile, where the speaker of Derksen's poem states that "The economy is still screaming," before closing with an unattributed quotation, "'We had a small victory / at city hall yesterday'" (24). Repressed so deeply within Nixon's command yet restored by Derksen is Marx. Surveying the 1851 French coup d'état, Marx argues that proletarian revolutions "criticise themselves constantly" while allowing the ruling class to "draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them . . . until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, *and the conditions themselves cry out*" (Marx 14, emphasis mine). These three types of citation—the pop culture reference, the rearticulation (and dialectical reversal) of Nixon, the unattributed quote—register the struggle for social and economic alternatives to capitalism across the long neoliberal moment, and specifically the persistence of that struggle where small claims and small victories apparently define the only viable tactic for Marxist praxis. Derksen's citational poetics doesn't aspire to simply depict the structural problems of capitalism and neoliberalism (poverty in one of the world's most liveable cities, the cultural encounter with a CIA-backed coup) such that, under their intolerable weight, class consciousness springs forth and revolutionary social change obtains. Rather, by articulating those processes of neoliberalization visible in the disjunctures and contradictions of capital in the present, Derksen's poem urges that these systemic injustices not appear as naturalized conditions but as a series of active relations which are always materially felt and exerted. "The Vestiges" interrogates the different proximities to these relations in the city, for different communities confront gentrification with varying speeds, stabilities, and solidarities. At the same time, Derksen's citational poetics scales up to the national and global, serving as the theatre where culture and geopolitics do not so much clash as trade symptoms with each other. Then, scaled back down to the individual, "The Vestiges" renders palpable the relations between popular culture and social upheaval, and how the practice of poetic citation indexes the history of crisis under neoliberalism alongside the history of struggle arrayed against it.

### Parenthetical Citations

If capitalism and neoliberalism cannot be comprehended in their totality but instead only detected in their variegated cohabitations, "The Parenthetical"

groups together Marxist theorists differentially investigating particular though interlinked social conflicts. Transcribing the parenthetical remarks of theorists Federici, Marx, Althusser, and Marcuse, Derksen enunciates how theory addresses capital not from the battleground of abstraction but in relation to its material conditions. Derksen's copying of these authors in turn observes the ways in which they attempt working out the structural problems of the mode of production and its clutch on social life. The citational effect of "The Parenthetical," then, illustrates Marxist theory as a collective, processual effort that is shaped by specific contestations.

Beginning with Silvia Federici's classic Marxist-Feminist essay "Wages Against Housework," the first serial unit of "The Parenthetical" opens:

> (The magic words:
> "Yes, darling, you are a real woman")
>
> (which are relations of loneliness)
> (but to work in a factory is already a defeat)
>
> (Until recently airline stewardesses in the United States
> were periodically weighed
>
> and had to be constantly on a diet
> — a torture that all women know —
>
> for fear of being laid off) (62)

Cordoned off by lunulae, these parenthetical remarks appear modular-like, though these units are not the grammatically complete sentences found in "Oil for Food." Derksen's copying of Federici's parenthetical remarks offers not so much a précis of the original but a parallax view of it. The first parenthetical condescendingly interpellates the subject as "a real woman." The following line "(which are relations of loneliness)" suggests that this social act of interpellation is, paradoxically, an isolating one. However, because the parenthesis also serves as a kind of textual shield, "(which are relations of loneliness)" appears as its own autonomous, or referentless, statement, thereby torquing the poem's forward momentum such that the syntagmatic connections across the text become far more indeterminate. In this way, the performance of interpellation and factory work both become lonely relations among subjects. Yet loneliness itself is revealed to be the realism of capitalist social relations: "(capital has disciplined them through us / and us through them — / each other, against each other)" (62). Thus the gendered division of labour indexes but one powerful process in the broader program of social atomization fundamental to labour conditions, or how capital seeks to

decimate the organization of solidarities through the multiple kinds of social fragmentation and stratification it exerts inside and outside the workplace. By transcribing Federici's parenthetical remarks, Derksen proposes an alternative reading practice for critical theory, one that constructs the text as a dialogic site between modular units and key Marxist-Feminist arguments.

The serial form of "The Parenthetical" further interrogates the ways in which citational poetics rearticulates Marxism's different analytic modes and the sites of struggle in which they intervene. Foremost, Derksen uses multiple lyrical units to restage each individual theorist. The order of these poems suggests a recursive narrative, or a trajectory that travels back and forth temporally. The series begins with Federici in 1974, followed by Marx in 1867, then punctuated by the poem "But What of the City Itself?" succeeded by Althusser in 1971 and Marcuse in 1969, with Marcuse then leading into the final poem of *The Vestiges*, "Oil for Food." Besides Marx, all of Derksen's citations in "The Parenthetical" comprise a six-year period—they're all lodged between May 1968 and, *mutatis mutandis*, Pinochet's coup in 1973. The individual critiques of these theorists can also be read as responding to the broader citational structure of *The Vestiges*. The citation of Federici follows up Derksen copying every sentence in *Capital* where Marx uses the first-person pronoun in the poem "I welcome every opinion based on scientific criticism," a poem that tests, in Derksen's words, "if these first-person sentences could stand as a synopsis, or a personalized lecture, of the whole book" (*Vestiges* 126). Thus moving from a wholesale rearticulation of *Capital*, the first section of "The Parenthetical" hones in on a Marxist critique of feminized labour's denied access to the wage. Subsequently, Marx's incredulous parenthetical remarks from "The Working Day" are set beside the recitation of crisis-prone urban spaces in "But What of the City Itself?" whereas Althusser and Marcuse, who seem to stand at opposite ends of the Marxist spectrum, come to be placed side by side before the book turns to the closure of Derksen's long serial poem first begun in *Dwell*. The serial form of "The Parenthetical" thus explores how these parenthetical remarks can be read beside not just the other poems of the book, but more specifically the other kinds of citations Derksen deploys.

### Mobilizing Citational Poetics

By interleaving its lyrical units with the various citational poems of *The Vestiges*, "The Parenthetical" mobilizes multiple kinds of aesthetic and political subject matter in Marxist theory, a mobilization that in turn

animates the politics of Derksen's poetics more broadly. With mobilization, I am referring to the ways in which citational poetics marshals texts, textualities, proposals, and processes, and particularly how citational poetics mobilizes these kinds of matter to be collectively arrayed against capitalism's and neoliberalism's material conditions. I borrow this sense of textual mobilization from Christopher Nealon, where he describes the ways in which "English-language poets since the 1980s have deployed figures of literacy and reading, not as 'postmodern' or self-referential tropes, but as indices to the history of poetry and to how its assembly of textual 'matter' competes with the massive organization of matter under capital" (45). For Nealon, the poetry emerging after and responding to Language writing (as Derksen's certainly is) riffs on "figures and concepts of the acquisition of literacy in order to investigate what kind of 'matter' poetry might be—and, often explicitly, set that matter against other 'matters' that seem to operate on a much larger scale" (46).

For Derksen, citationality offers one such figure of literacy used both to investigate the kinds of matter poetry is and to mobilize against the materiality of neoliberalism. Derksen's citational poetics, with its pairing of polysemy and social observation, locates the political stakes of Marxist critique in the exigencies of the present. That is, citational poetics in *The Vestiges* reasserts the poem as a fine-grained site of social observation that can rearticulate the complex linkages between individuals and the spatial relations of finance, and particularly how these linkages stretch across spatial scales. I'm arguing that Derksen's citational poetics aesthetically mobilizes Marxist critique as a political project in ways that resignify the poem's opposition to the large-scale structure of the neoliberal regime. This is not to say that Derksen's citational poetics marks the poem as anti-capitalist by sole virtue of the sources it draws from, nor does his poetics simply prop up the snide comment against the world-scale of capital. Rather, by assembling and mobilizing critical texts differentially engaged in the critique of capital, *The Vestiges* conceives an aesthetic practice of Marxist theory better situated to antagonize the structure of neoliberalism by collective means. In its citations of Federici, Marx, Althusser, and Marcuse, "The Parenthetical" serves as an emphatic collaboration between poetry and criticism, and Derksen's poetic citations of Objectivism more broadly affirm a critical lineage with which the historical continuity of poetry and politics is preserved. At the precipice of actually-existing neoliberalism's no-longer-certain future, *The Vestiges* proposes an urgent set of aesthetic tactics and coordinates with which poetry and its comrades can mobilize.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the editors at *Canadian Literature* and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive feedback on this article, and to Jonathan Skinner and Tom Crompton for their encouraging comments on an earlier draft.

NOTES

1 See Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), the title of which cites Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel of the same name.

WORKS CITED

Altieri, Charles. "The Objectivist Tradition." *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, U of Alabama P, 1999, pp. 25-36.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P, 1981.

Blair, Jennifer. "Ambling in the Streets of Affect: Jeff Derksen's 'Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically.'" *Open Letter*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2010, pp. 74-91.

Burnham, Clint. *The Only Poetry That Matters: Reading the Kootenay School of Writing*. Arsenal Pulp, 2011.

Derksen, Jeff. *Annihilated Time: Poetry and Other Politics*. Talonbooks, 2009.

—. *Dwell*. Talonbooks, 1993.

—. "Meaning It: The Affective Poetics of Social Sincerity." *Poetics and Praxis 'After' Objectivism*, edited by W. Scott Howard and Broc Rossell, U of Iowa P, 2018, pp. 99-113.

—. *Transnational Muscle Cars*. Talonbooks, 2003.

—. *The Vestiges*. Talonbooks, 2013.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Peter Quartermain. Introduction. *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, edited by DuPlessis and Quartermain, U of Alabama P, 1999.

Fainstein, Susan. *The Just City*. Cornell UP, 2010, p. 69.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford UP, 2007.

Jaeger, Peter. *ABC of Reading TRG*. Talonbooks, 1999.

—. "'But Could I Make A Living From It': Jeff Derksen's Modular Form." *Canadian Literature*, no. 203, 2009, pp. 30-39.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, Pluto, 1985, pp. 111-25.

—. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991.

Lenin, Vladimir I. *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*. 1902. Foreign Languages Press, 1973.

Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1852. Lawrence & Wishart, 1984.

McClanahan, Annie. *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture*. Stanford UP, 2017.

—. "Serious Crises: Rethinking the Neoliberal Subject." *boundary 2*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2019, pp. 103-32.

Nealon, Christopher. "Reading on the Left." *Representations*, vol. 108, no. 1, 2009, pp. 22-50.

Ngai, Sianne. "Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust." *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, edited by Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, U of Alabama P, 2002, pp. 161-90.

Nicholls, Peter. "George Oppen and the Poetics of Quotation." *Revue française d'études américaines*, vol. 103, no. 1, 2005, pp. 23-37.
Peck, Jamie, and Nik Theodore. "Still Neoliberalism?" *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 118, no. 2, 2019, pp. 245-65.
Perelman, Bob. *Primer*. This Press, 1981.
Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. U of Chicago P, 2010.
Spicer, Jack. *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, edited by Robin Blaser, Black Sparrow, 1975.
Tooze, Adam. "Neoliberalism's World Order." *Dissent*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2018, pp. 132-36.
Wiens, Jason. "'Something like postcolonial packaging taken personally in a resource-based economy': Landscapes in the Poetry of Jeff Derksen and Peter Culley." *Canadian Poetry*, no. 55, 2004, pp. 98-110.
Wyile, Herb. "'I questioned authority and the question won': *Transnational Muscle Cars* and the Neoliberal Order." *Canadian Literature*, no. 216, 2013, pp. 67-83.