

“I questioned authority and the question won”

Transnational Muscle Cars and the Neoliberal Order

In our present late-capitalist milieu, critics and cultural producers have increasingly become wary of positing a kind of exterior and resistance space, citing the pervasive power and influence of our present “dogmatic condition whereby the principles of privatization—individualism, financialization, free markets, and commodification—encompass every aspect of life” (Curtis 11). This wariness is not necessarily a kind of defeatist capitulation to this latest manifestation of capitalist hegemony and the neoliberal ideology that has underpinned its consolidation, but results from an increasing sense that any resistance will have to come from within that hegemonic order. Such an awareness is palpable in the poetry of Jeff Derksen, a poet and critic from the West Coast whose work routinely engages with neoliberalism. One of the founders of the Kootenay School of Writing, Derksen shares that collective’s concern with the materiality of language, with writing as a form of work, and with resisting a traditional mimetic and individualist model of cultural production. Heavily influenced by poststructuralist theory and by the formalist preoccupations of the Language poets,¹ Derksen’s collections such as *Dwell* (1993) and *Transnational Muscle Cars* (2003) are ludic, polysemous, and self-referential, but they also wryly speak to the ways in which personal and public space has been reconfigured according to the largely unwritten dictates of neoliberalism. Donato Mancini contends that Derksen’s work as of the early 1990s, in response to the intensified neoliberal conditions of that decade, has moved “away from the semantically shifty terrain of earlier formalism” and “towards a quicker, more communicative, didactic mode of writing” (60). The relative terms of

Mancini's characterization ("quicker, more communicative") are significant here, as Derksen's poetry is still, in the main, fragmentary, discontinuous, enigmatic, semantically disjunctive, and widely allusive; it at once invites a semantic reading and eludes it. Nonetheless, in all its ambivalence and hyper-referentiality, Derksen's poetry still operates towards what we might see as political and activist ends, as Derksen makes clear in his reflections on his own creative practice. In his essay "Poetry and Other Politics," Derksen describes neoliberalism as "the larger category of social relations, and one that has emerged as a powerful determinant socially, culturally, economically, and politically, and yet one that remains abstracted to the greatest degree" and points to it "as the politics that I am trying to grapple with, understand, debunk, ridicule, and shine a harsh light on through my poetics" (*Annihilated Time* 252). While it is important to be conscious of the discontinuities between Derksen's engagement with neoliberalism as a critic and his engagement with neoliberalism in his creative practice—especially in terms of voice and form—there are important continuities as well. Just as Derksen stands out as a prominent Canadian critic of neoliberal ideology, *Transnational Muscle Cars* arguably stands out as the most sustained engagement with neoliberalism in Canadian literature, and my aim here is to take stock of some of the ways in which, and fronts on which, Derksen contends with neoliberalism in the collection.

The nature of that "contention," however, is complex. Writing of the Language poets, George Hartley argues that poetry "which functions according to the notion of the poet/speaker as an independent subject who, having 'found his voice,' presents a situation seen from a single point of view, fosters the key ideological concept of bourgeois society: the self-sufficient, self-determined individual free to participate in the marketplace" (37). The poems in *Transnational Muscle Cars* to varying degrees resist this traditional model of poetry as individual expression. The collection consists of a series of long poems and a cluster of short pieces, which vary in style as well as length. Some of the poems, such as "Forced Thoughts" and "Jobber," are (to use Mancini's terms) "semantically shifty," reflecting Derksen's continuing interest in the materiality of language, and are characterized by formalistic play and less amenable to semantic interpretation. The rest of the collection, however, is (relatively speaking) "more communicative" and "didactic," offering more accessible glimpses of Derksen's take on neoliberal capitalism. A cluster of poems in the collection, for instance, is characterized by series of distinctive, often ironic declarations; poems like "But Could I Make a Living

From It,” “Social Facts Are Vertical,” and “Compression” are filled with short, usually one-line ironic mottos and logos, unattributed quotations, and what might be best described as anti/aphorisms—witty *aperçus* that make telling points while, in various ways, resisting being recuperated as late-capitalist *bon mots*. However, while the range of topics and tones of these zingers—what Brian Kim Stefans calls “socialist one liners” (qtd. in Jaeger 31)—has a somewhat dispersive effect, Peter Jaeger helpfully points to the scaffolding that gives shape to these poems. Jaeger contends that “[o]ne of the key features of Derksen’s poetics is its use of the modular unit as a means to present research on Canada in relation to globalization, ideology, language and the socially-grounded subjectivities which language enunciates” (31). Focusing on “But Could I Make a Living From It,” Jaeger argues that

Derksen’s long poem as research is generated through the relationship between large social structures and textual structure. At the micro level, the modular fragment appears as a highly condensed sentence, which ironically and sometimes aphoristically criticizes ideology. At the macro level, on the other hand, the modules conjoin to accumulate meaning, thereby building up a powerful array of integrated social critique. (38)

Jaeger points to how “But Could I Make a Living From It” “repeatedly cites the ‘spot rate,’ or average noon exchange rate of US to Canadian dollars” from 1976 to 1994 and argues that “Derksen’s text uses the history of shifting exchange rates as a leitmotif to further conjoin global economic relations with the personal and social spheres of globalization’s subjects” (32). Jaeger notes that Derksen also provides an alphabetical list of developing countries (33), likewise dispersed throughout the text, with the explanatory line coming at the end of the poem, “The 48 least” (*Transnational Muscle Cars* 39)—presumably meaning the forty-eight most impoverished countries. This kind of scaffolding is evident in counterpart poems such as “Social Facts Are Vertical,” “Compression,” and “Nobody Likes You.” In the latter, for instance, scaffolding of a sort is provided by the repeated use of bracketed phrases in which Derksen (in a characteristic move evident elsewhere in the collection) uncouples and denaturalizes cherished and unquestioned conjunctions of the neoliberal era, such as “[Ethical. Investment.]” (42), “[International. Community.]” (44), “[Sustainable. Development.]” (48), and “[Performance. Benchmarks.]” (52), ending the poem with the telling summary phrase, “[Heightened. Uncertainties.]” (52). As Jaeger suggests, this “modular form” gives both shape and purpose to what otherwise to some might seem like a randomly organized *Late Capitalist Book of Jokes*.

In another extended reading of a single poem from *Transnational Muscle Cars*, Jennifer Blair characterizes the speaker of Derksen's "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically" as a kind of emotionally conflicted, ironic *flâneur* of the neoliberal era (77), and this description nicely captures the tenor of another significant cluster of the longer poems in the collection. While poems like "Jerk," "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically," and "What to Do About Globalism" are still discontinuous and disjunctive, and filled with characteristic pithy and ironic zingers, there is a more sustained sense of tone and perspective that is captured in a sequence at the start of "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically":

But here I merely
talk to myself as if all
is textual, as if I am a lyricist
of late capitalism
.....
ambling in the streets
of a fin-de-siècle city
fixed in the fingers of inevitability
and the gloomy vision
of the centre right. (11)

Similar disjunctive musings are evident in "Jerk" and "What to Do About Globalism." By taking up this motif of the late capitalist *flâneur*, I aim not to impose a spurious homogeneity between or even within these poems, but to suggest that they both invoke and disrupt a lyric subjectivity, reflecting what Hartley describes as a general suspicion among the Language poets of a poetic model in which "the poet (a self-present subject) transmits a particular message ('experience,' 'emotion') to a reader (another self-present subject) through a language which is neutral, transparent, 'natural'" (xii). A similar resistance is evident throughout *Transnational Muscle Cars*, but perhaps less so in these poems, which operate in a formally different way from poems like "Social Facts Are Vertical" and "But Could I Make a Living From It" and offer a relatively more sustained position for Derksen's engagement with the political, social, economic, and cultural impact of neoliberalism.

While this brief inventory points to the formal variety of the poems in *Transnational Muscle Cars*, however, it should be stressed that across this range Derksen's writing is consistently disjunctive, elliptical, associative, and polysemous, and all of these forms share to varying degrees the different hallmarks of Derksen's style: the formalist play with language; the penchant for quirky one-liners; the disaffected, alienated, critical sensibility; and the

immersion in the politically and culturally claustrophobic and commodified milieu of late capitalism. Whereas Blair's and Jaeger's focus on individual poems demonstrates the value of extended analyses of particular pieces of *Transnational Muscle Cars*—essentially taking a sustained, integrated approach to individual texts—what I want to engage in here is a kind of critical cherry-picking in order to highlight the different dimensions of the long neoliberal moment with which Derksen's collection contends. As Nick Couldry observes in *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*, one of the distinctive and insidious things about neoliberalism is the way in which its values have pervaded all walks of life and have come to enjoy the status of an unquestioned common sense:

Neoliberal rationality is reinforced not just by explicit discourse but through the multiple ways in which that discourse and its workings get *embedded* in daily life and social organization. Neoliberal rationality provides principles for organizing action (in workplaces, public services, fields of competition, public discussion) which are internalized as norms and values (for example, the value of entrepreneurial 'freedom') by individuals, groups and institutions: in short, they become 'culture'. Through this process neoliberalism, over time, crowds out other rationalities, other ways of organizing. (12)

Derksen's poetry, in contrast, prompts us to question the ubiquitous verities of neoliberal globalization and to make space for "other rationalities." While Jaeger and Blair explore how this questioning operates in specific poems, what I want to do here is to highlight particularly resonant critical moments across the range of the collection. Stressing politics over form, I read *Transnational Muscle Cars* in relation to critiques of neoliberalism and globalization, including Derksen's own, through selective rather than sustained textual analysis, in order to offer a broader view of Derksen's contention with the neoliberal order and the place of culture in it. Given the increasing transformation of creative practice into creative capital and the increasing commodification of both the figure of the artist and the figure of the cultural critic, my aim here is not to characterize Derksen as the autonomous poet-critic, sagely diagnosing neoliberalism from some Archimedean position outside of it, but nonetheless to stress how—for all its hyper-referential elusiveness, ambivalence, and ambiguity—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.

"Today the climate is . . . 'favourable for business'" (105). This ideological weather report from the poem "Compression" concisely conveys a central motif in *Transnational Muscle Cars*: the privileging of economic and financial

considerations above all else under neoliberalism. An era defined by not just the acceptability of capital accumulation but by the widespread surrender to the allure of profit is captured in a deft one-liner from “But Could I Make a Living From It”: “*Investment banking* as a sexual term” (28). This witty turn offers a good example of Derksen’s “rearticulatory poetics” in operation, as Derksen’s poetry functions, Pauline Butling argues, by “rearticulating, or making politically overt through startling juxtaposition, the meanings of apparently ideologically neutral terms” (Butling and Rudy 196). A recurring strategy Derksen employs is the insertion of unattributed quotes that, in isolation, lay bare the problems or contradictions of neoliberal imperatives. In the same poem, for instance, the quoted phrases “Money traders and ordinary people” (29) and “As a banker or a citizen” (37) at once point to and wryly question the privileging of the financial sector in the neoliberal order. Another quote, presumably gleaned from a media report, highlights the naive presumption of the beneficence of finance capital (an observation that resonates with even more irony now, in the wake of the financial sector’s pivotal contribution to the global economic meltdown): “It’s odd that their quest for justice has led the various regulators and prosecutors to big Wall Street firms” (39). At various points of the collection, the apotheosis of finance under neoliberalism is part of the hegemonic regime to which Derksen’s conflicted, alienated subjects react. In “Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically,” for instance, the speaker points to the obsessive calculus and celebration of profit of the neoliberal era, lamenting that “It’s an aching slow burn / why ‘deficits are unethical’ / and surplus is celebrated / not celibate” (14). The disaffected speaker of “Jerk” asserts that

now I’m wanting transformation
rather than ‘structural adjustment’
to go with the primitive accumulation
and worn contradictions. Not more
of these natural facts (‘globalization is’). (10)

As Blair contends, through his “rearticulatory poetics,” Derksen “seeks to express various aspects of neoliberalism as contradictory (rather than as a unified, smoothly flowing apparatus that keeps all of the world’s populations on a consistent path of social and economic improvement). . . . In general, his aim is to give voice to that which is denied by neoliberal ideology” (86). In these and other ways, Derksen highlights how economic imperatives have “crowded out” other measurements of value and significance, implicitly (if ambivalently) pointing to the “unimaginable conversation outside of commerce” (*Transnational Muscle Cars* 38).

A central charge against neoliberalism—of which the purported principal accomplishment is the generation of wealth—is that it routinely intensifies economic and social inequality. Susan George, among others, argues that contrary to the mantra that neoliberalism promotes ultimately beneficial outcomes, “the evidence shows that the most unequal societies are also unequivocally the most neoliberal and the most dysfunctional from myriad points of view” (96). Or, as Derksen (updating a phrase from *The Communist Manifesto*) puts it in “On,” “the exploitation / of the many / by the few’ / just / got / bigger” (125). Pointing to one of the most spatially visible measures of social stratification and inequality in the neoliberal era, the speaker in “Nobody Likes You” confides that

Days like this
I ask myself, why can't it be all
snowboarding all the time
with stylish oversized hi-tech clothing
instead of minor misery
on the outskirts of gated communities
with their own flags. (49)

Perhaps gesturing to the way in which neoliberal ideology often works to downplay or justify economic and social inequality by contending that the wealthy are automatically the deserving beneficiaries of their own hard work and initiative, “Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically” opens with this sardonically democratic observation: “The misery of millionaires / shows it is a classless society” (11). Another key measure of success in our globalized economy is mobility, which has climbed, Zygmunt Bauman argues, “to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values” (2). However, that mobility in reality is highly unevenly apportioned (Bauman 2), an insight that is echoed in a sequence in “What to Do About Globalism” that refers to “these times when we are told / that movement is what we all share / it's just that some have more legroom” (98). As Bauman puts it, globalization has involved “the concentration of capital, finance and all other resources of choice and effective action” but it also has involved, “perhaps above all . . . *the concentration of freedom* to move and to act (two freedoms which for all practical purposes have become synonymous)” (70).

One of the most significant and insidious aspects of neoliberal thinking is the way in which it has worked to reshape notions of subjectivity and individual identity. As Helga Leitner et al. maintain,

Under neoliberalism, individual freedom is redefined as the capacity for self-realization and freedom from bureaucracy rather than freedom from want,

with human behavior reconceptualized along economic lines. Individuals are empowered to actively make self-interested choices and are made responsible for acting in this way to advance both their own well-being and that of society. Employees are redefined as entrepreneurs with an obligation to work, to better themselves and society, rather than having a right to work. They are responsible for their own education and retraining, to build human capital, and for their own well-being and risk management by behaving prudently, instead of relying on the state. Personal and social responsibility are equated with self-esteem. (4)

One of the key features of *Transnational Muscle Cars* is Derksen's awareness of, and contention with, this ideological reprogramming of individual subjectivity and identity. Neoliberalism, Derksen observes in his introduction to *Annihilated Time*, cultivates "the citizen-subject as an individualized entrepreneurial actor," self-interested and resistant to collective action (30), an insight that is manifested in various ironic or sardonic formulations in the collection. The speaker of "Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically," for instance, concisely conveys this imperative of competitive narcissism:

To vote, think
only of yourself
in relation to
yourself, others
are fucked
so fuck them (also helpful
for the workplace). (21-22)

Here, Derksen echoes David Harvey's insight that "[n]eoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities" (176). An injunction from "Social Facts Are Vertical," "You are value waiting to happen" (72), can be taken as a wry reference to how neoliberalism reformulates the individual in terms of his or her potential to create wealth and "tends to judge . . . all social activities in terms of their contribution to capital accumulation" (Jessop 176). Central to this reconfiguration of the individual is the impact of commodity culture, in which individual subjectivity is increasingly bound up with patterns of consumption, a tension deftly conveyed in a line from "Compression": "I'd like to engage in some collectivity, but I'm busy accumulating particularities" (106). Here, Derksen's quip brings to mind Fredric Jameson's musing about whether, under late capitalism, "the practice of consumption has not replaced the resolute taking of a stand and the full-throated endorsement of a political opinion" (398). In various places in the collection, Derksen parodies the obsession of consumers with commodities and draws attention to the interplay between commodity

fetishism and individual identity in an era in which we “have come to understand life as a consumerist adventure in which we scroll through various lifestyle options to find the one that best expresses the inner truth of our individuality” (Curtis 6). Here again, a characteristic strategy is to leave unattributed quotations to speak for themselves: “At some point in my life I became obsessed with having just the right wristwatch” (Derksen 29). Deft descriptions likewise point to the ways in which both public space and private space are inscribed by consumer culture and the values of corporate capitalism. In “Nobody Likes You,” “the sun / bounces off the ground’s / property” (43), while in “But Could I Make a Living From It,” “[t]he sun reflects off the triangular glass tower downtown and into my bed – I sprawl on this corporate light” (24). In these and other passages, Derksen points to the necessity, and perhaps the impossibility, of thinking beyond consumption and the pervasive values of neoliberalism. This ambivalence is nicely evoked by the speaker of “When the Bubble Pops, Inflate a Utopia Dome,” whose articulation of this hope is entangled with a riff from the Supremes’ “Get Out My Life”: “Trusting in art to help me (why wontcha babe) / get over the blank stare of the commodity / (keep me hanging on)” (116).

A key part of this broader preoccupation with the reconfiguration of identity and subjectivity within the intensified commodity culture of neoliberal globalization is Derksen’s foregrounding of the reconfigured relationship between capital and labour. Gregory Betts and Robert David Stacey note in their introduction to a special issue of *Open Letter* on the Kootenay School of Writing that “a great deal of KSW writing deals with or discusses labour processes, their organization, and role within the broader structuration of capital” (8), and the poems in *Transnational Muscle Cars* turn again and again to the beleaguered worker of late capitalism and the problems of identifying with one’s work under such a regime. In an era in which gainful, secure, and especially unionized employment is under siege, a number of passages in the collection highlight the troubled conjunction between work, identity, and self-esteem, such as the lines “Can one holiday without employment?” (35) and “I aspire to a dental plan – to make myself human” (31) from “Could I Make a Living From It”; here the suggestion is that one’s sense of self is bound up with secure employment replete with substantive benefits. In “Nobody Likes You,” Derksen conveys this inversion of priorities in a clever riff on the opening lines of the Beatles’ “Norwegian Wood”: “I once had a job / or should I say / it once had me” (47). Under this regime, capital holds most of the cards and workers are expected to

accede to the imperatives of mobility, growth, and flexibility. This entails, as Bauman notes, a euphemistic double standard in which the flexibility of the labour market “means more pliant and compliant, easy to knead and mould, to slice and roll, and putting up no resistance whatever is being done to it” (104). The ensuing downgrading of the value of labour is nicely summarized in a sardonic declaration from “Nobody Likes You”: “A proud yet flexible and disposable worker” (27). Elsewhere in the poem, Derksen points to the assault on unionism that many commentators see as a central objective of neoliberal globalization as well as the displacement of tangible employment benefits by superficial facsimiles of the valuing of labour: “Workers cross their own picket line / surely a lifetime supply / of employee of the month / photos there” (43). In these ways, *Transnational Muscle Cars* highlights just what the vaunted “flexibility” of our neoliberal era means for labour: “more part-time and temporary jobs, less full-time secure ones; lower pension rights, limited collective bargaining and the segmentation of salaries and wages” (Hall 715).

Given the self-referential and often almost anti-representational texture of *Transnational Muscle Cars*, it would be misleading to describe Derksen’s critique of the treatment of labour as sustained or systematic. Nonetheless, over the course of *Transnational Muscle Cars*, there is certainly a repeated “disarticulation” of a neoliberal ideological framework that privileges capital and accelerates the alienation and disempowerment of labour. Critics routinely point to the intensified suppression of relations of production and the alienation of labour under neoliberal globalization, a concern wryly conveyed in “Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically”: “Work is done / as if by itself and returns / as something alien: imagine saying ‘I / made that toilet paper!’” (16). A line from “But Could I Make a Living From It” deftly weaves a Marxist characterization of the working class with a famous slogan for Timex wristwatches to ironically address the historical conditions of labour under neoliberalism: “If ‘workers are those who are not allowed to transform the space/time allotted them,’² then ‘takes a licking and keeps on ticking’ is a class prospect” (33). Indeed, “Could I Make a Living From It” is occasionally punctuated by quotes from Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s influential essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”: “Mr. X, a capitalist who produces woolen yarn in his spinning mill, has to ‘reproduce’ his raw material,” “Mr. Y, a heavy engineer producing machine tools . . .” (Derksen, *Transnational Muscle Cars* 25, 28).³ This reflection of the significance of critical theory in Derksen’s work—in this case his evocation

of Althusser's influential concept of interpellation, or ideological "hailing" into particular social positions—highlights his objective of denaturalizing and defamiliarizing neoliberal discourse, especially with respect to relations between labour and capital. This strategy recurs in a reported observation from "Compression" that frames labour not just as an impediment to capital but effectively as a mortal enemy: "A shredded corporation 'fights for its life' by laying off 25% of its workers" (104). In this fashion, *Transnational Muscle Cars* points to a cultural imperialism that, as Derksen characterizes it in *Annihilated Time*,

helps push, at the level of a social imaginary, the project of neoliberal global capital as the only viable and only existing form of life. . . . By limiting the discussion and imagination of other shapes of the world and of other forms of social order, universal cultural imperialism tries to enact Althusser's call of interpellation at a global level; public cultures and state structures are to turn to neoliberalism's call of "hey you" and further embed themselves into its systems and logic. (98)

If *Transnational Muscle Cars* is geared towards disarticulating neoliberalism's reconfiguring of the individual—whether consumer or worker—its signature poem may well be "Sly Consumption Side Sentence," a short poem near the end of the collection that more trenchantly and less ambivalently evokes Derksen's concern with the impact of neoliberalism on individual subjectivity. Apostrophizing neoliberalism, Derksen's speaker juxtaposes the ostensibly empowered, commodified post-Fordist subject with his exploited Fordist predecessor:

Dear neoliberalism, I
just want to thank you
for letting me
be a mobile
self-reflexive
commodity with agency
putting no pressure
on former state structures
anew, again
till you use me up
consumption side
just like you did
production side with Dad
add an *e*, dead. (121)

In this poem, Derksen largely sets aside his characteristic wryness and draws a compelling parallel between industrial capitalism's exploitation of labour and the exploitation and disenfranchisement of the subject-as-consumer under

late capitalism. His speaker points to the seductive allure of freedom and choice in a commodity culture that is, ultimately, similarly taxing and exploitative.

Given this picture of the redrawing of power under neoliberalism, a key consideration in looking at *Transnational Muscle Cars* is the place of politics in the collection. Like many critics of neoliberal globalization, Derksen in his critical essays points to the interconnectedness of neoliberal ideology, consumer culture, and a new kind of free-market, transnational imperialism, and *Transnational Muscle Cars* draws similar connections, though more wryly and, at times, ambivalently. For example, a line from “Compression”—“Suddenly a city saturated with police, globally guarding Starbucks” (104)—refers, presumably, to the policing of anti-globalization protests, highlighting how the state “has been retooled in neoliberalism to both an engine of reterritorialization, reregulation, and in forms of repression of social movements, and indeed, even of democracy,” clearly aligning itself with the interests of transnational capital (Derksen, *Annihilated Time* 219). In a similar vein, the speaker of “Happy Locally, Sad Geopolitically” archly notes that “[g]etting beaten / with a long rubber hose / is an innovation of flexi post- / Fordism” (21). However, despite the traction of such ripostes, a recurrent motif throughout the collection is the problem of political activism in a regime dominated by consumption and commodification. In “Compression,” for instance, lines such as “I personally have not noticed any new forms of imperialism where I do my shopping” (104) and “I’d like to join the boycott, but I’ve internalized everything” (105) convey a sense that a culture of consumption short-circuits productive political engagement; as Jameson puts it, “the inner dynamic of the culture of consumption is an infernal machine from which one does not escape by the taking of thought (or moralizing positions), an infinite propagation and replication of ‘desire’ that feeds on itself and has no outside and no fulfillment” (206). In “Social Facts Are Vertical,” Derksen’s speaker wittily underlines the primacy of economic considerations in political participation under neoliberalism by posing the question, “So, in order to vote you have to ask yourself are you any better off since you began reading this poem or has your economic situation remained the same?” (72), drawing attention to “an ideology that installs neoliberal *economics* as the dominant frame for politics” (Couldry 14). However, other observations have a slightly more resistant edge, such as a line satirizing highly profitable corporations’ dubious evocation of global harmony to peddle further product: “I’d like to ‘buy the world a coke’ but I’m more into critical regionalism than universal civilization” (106). While one

must be wary of drawing an overarching conclusion about the politics of the collection, *Transnational Muscle Cars* to a considerable degree cultivates a somewhat enigmatic and ambivalent stance towards political engagement, an ambivalence succinctly exemplified by a line from “Social Facts Are Vertical,” a witty reworking of the song “I Fought the Law”: “I questioned authority and the question won” (73). On the one hand, the line seems to assert the value of resisting the prevailing political order, while on the other hand, its ambiguity—how does a question “win”?—seems to undercut or at least substantially qualify the impact of such resistance.

Essentially, various lines and passages in *Transnational Muscle Cars* question the role and even the possibility of politics in the “infernal machine” of neoliberal globalization. Derksen’s poems also, in turn, routinely question the nature, value, and even possibility of cultural production and artistic practice in the long neoliberal moment, reflecting what Betts and Stacey see as a recurring impulse in KSW writing, “an aesthetic that critiques the status quo from within its given frameworks—speaking its own language against it, parodying and making (almost) unrecognizable its various meaning-making systems. The work of art, in other words, can no longer claim to be an unalienated or otherwise ‘free’ space outside the domain of capital” (9). In this respect, the poem “Jerk,” which is designated as the preface to the collection, is particularly significant. The poem opens with the speaker looking at gondolas ascending a mountain and questions the relationship between commodification and the purposes of art: “The mountain is named after a commodity. Art has made this / a nonalienated view. Is that what / we asked it to do?” (9). Instead, the speaker muses, implicitly announcing one of the imperatives of the collection to follow, “should art not / reveal ideology / rather than naturalize it?” (9). Evoking Jameson’s notion of “cognitive mapping,”⁴ a sequence at the end of “Jerk” succinctly captures the ambivalence of the answer to that question:

My idealistic belief
is that historical consciousness may come.
My sad cognitive mapping
is that overdetermined contradictions
don’t lead to new social relations.
I want an art
more complicated than that. (10)

Derksen elaborates on this tension in an interview with Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy, describing his interest in “overdetermination and contradiction. You get a build-up of overdetermined contradictions within capitalism and

that leads to change. But I think we're at a moment when the overdetermined contradictions can just exist, and it doesn't lead to any change" ("A Conversation" 126). In such a milieu, a mimetic model of writing is less than adequate; "Writing / can no longer be daily mind mapping," the speaker declares later on in "Jerk," "as it once was so easy / to please with point by point / hits (power point)" (14). Elsewhere in the collection, this tension resurfaces, such as in "What to Do About Globalism," in which the speaker ironically undercuts the activist stance of the title itself: "The title is a cynical / maneuver to show up on / topic searches and not a manual / for action, so I will not be responsible / for any injuries incurred" (101). Derksen also winks at his own poetic practice in the parodic ad line, "An oil strong enough for today's hyper-referential poetry" (75).

In light of these tensions, the tempting response to Derksen's work is to see it as a reflection of the neoliberal milieu with which he contends—in a sense to read him as "a lyricist of late capitalism." If the long neoliberal moment is characterized by unresolved, overdetermined contradictions, in other words, it is tempting to see those unresolved contradictions reflected in Derksen's poetry itself, which is at once amenable to semantic interpretation and resistant to it; at once politically charged and politically ambiguous; consistent and cohesive in some respects but fragmented, discontinuous, and centrifugal in most others. Jaeger's comments on "But Could I Make a Living From It" point to this fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, Jaeger highlights the dispersive effect of Derksen's open-ended style and suggests that it is symptomatic of our times, pointing to how the poem "uses disjunction to dialogically foreground the links among subjectivity, economic relations, and social desire. The messy complexities and contradictions of our current social situation are paralleled by the centrifugal form of the text" (36-37). On the other hand, Jaeger sees Derksen's use of modular form as having an integrating, unifying effect: "The poem's accretion of critical material is further reinforced, and given a sense of unified direction, through its repetitive, refrain-like structure" (38). The physicist in me (a very diminutive figure indeed) wants to quibble here; if the text is centrifugal, then the "unified direction" Jaeger ascribes to the poem can only be "outwards." But the apparent contradiction or tension actually seems quite apropos, suggesting an interplay between dispersion and integration that runs through the whole collection. Although to my mind Derksen's work comes across as less unified than suggested by Jaeger's description here, the dialogic quality of "But Can I Make a Living From It," as Jaeger rightly argues, "calls for the active work of a reader to

produce meanings”—an observation that can be extended to all of *Transnational Muscle Cars*—“and those meanings may vary from reader to reader according to their position in the ‘world’” (37). In this sense, *Transnational Muscle Cars* is an “open text,” one in which, according to Hartley (citing Lyn Hejinian), “[m]eaning exists within an active inter-agential process rather than as an object or product existing outside of language, just as value results from a social process rather than from some inherent quality of the object” (38). My reading of *Transnational Muscle Cars* here, in that light, is clearly animated by my interest in the dynamics and effects of neoliberalism, but I realize that its scope comes at the cost of downplaying the fabric and texture of Derksen’s poetry and its general resistance to reference. A fuller appreciation of Derksen’s work requires a solid grounding in structuralist and poststructuralist theory, a broad range of popular and indie music, modernist and postmodernist architecture, globalization, neoliberalism, and the work of the Language poets. And that’s just for starters. A reader more immersed in all of the above than I am would likely appreciate more fully the richness of Derksen’s poetics and, in turn, the ways in which Derksen contends with the cultural, social, political, and economic impact of our neoliberal milieu. To some readers, in short, Derksen’s work will appear more integrated than it will to others.

In that respect, at the heart of Derksen’s engagement with neoliberal globalization is the perennial issue of the equilibrium between coherence and accessibility, because Derksen’s work—as a result of its considerable resistance to referentiality—is likely to appeal to a relatively restricted audience. As Derksen’s critical and creative writings suggest, though, “accessibility” is no neutral matter but is itself bound up with the complicated politics of neoliberalism and commodity culture. In order to engage in his “disarticulation” of neoliberalism, Derksen must work from within neoliberalism and “contend with neoliberalism’s hijacking of language and its basic referential functioning, and with the fact that language is inevitably susceptible to mobilization by the corporate-domination of affect” (Blair 86). What might be seen as incoherence or inaccessibility, in other words, from another perspective can be seen as the strategy of a writer aware of his immersion in a neoliberal milieu in which the commodification of culture is accelerated. As Derksen writes in *Annihilated Time*, “the shift to culture as an accumulation strategy, pushing aside notions of a semi-autonomous position for culture . . . is intensified within neoliberalism, and intensified in the capital expansion of globalization: culture becomes a frontier where financialization is intensified as an accumulation strategy” (33). If resistance

to the neoliberal order through cultural production is possible, in other words, that resistance must necessarily come from within, because, as Neal Curtis laments, the “imbrication of financial capital into the very tissue of everyday practices has affected who we think we are in the sense that . . . it has become part of our very being” and, consequently, “thinking about alternatives is more of an ontological problem than an epistemological one” (5). Derksen contends with this conflicted position through a poetics that challenges readers, certainly, but also challenges the myriad ways in which neoliberal thinking has come to impinge upon practically all dimensions of contemporary life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to the two anonymous readers of the earlier version of this article for their insightful, supportive, and constructive criticism.

NOTES

- 1 See Derksen’s chapter on Language writing in both the United States and Canada, “Inside/ Outside the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Site,” in *Annihilated Time* (123-71). Touching on the work of writers such as Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, and Steve McCaffery, as well as the Kootenay School of Writing, Derksen resists reductive formulations of Language writing as a distinctive, succinctly describable school or poetics. Nonetheless, many of his appraisals of the work of other poets in the chapter throw light on his own poetic practice.
- 2 The phrase appears in Kristin Ross’ *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (41).
- 3 See Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (127-86).
- 4 In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson defines cognitive mapping as “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (54).

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