

# T'ang's Bathtub

## Innovative Work by Four Canadian Poets

In the fall of 2010, I received an invitation to contribute to a discussion of the political effectiveness of innovative literary form. In particular, the call for papers posed the question “If the experimental is so easily plugged into the agendas of late capitalism (from i to iPod), might it be better, as Alan Badiou claims, ‘to do nothing . . . [rather than] contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which the Empire already recognizes as existent?’” As a writer of innovative texts, I found this question irritating. It suggests I could and perhaps even should choose to be mute rather than write a text that doesn’t have an appropriately anti-capitalist effect in a world pretty much beyond my control.

I don’t think artistic production works along the lines suggested by this question. While they may and often do powerfully inform their work with political and other theoretical concerns, artists and writers are primarily concerned with a felt response to their universe (not whether it will be politically effective) and with extending the formal properties of their medium to convey that response in freshly meaningful ways. Often one finds that crucial meanings of a contemporary work are not visible even to the artist until the work is seen in larger contexts, particularly the rhythm of cultural pressures in the epoch.

Feeling this way and still irritated by the question, I began to wonder why I write innovative texts. What follows is my own idiosyncratic exploration of the literary geography this question opened for me, beginning with William Wordsworth and Ezra Pound who immediately came to mind as

innovators and then focusing on four of my contemporaries, most of whom seem to agree that political effectiveness is not an appropriate measure of their artistic work.

Two hundred years ago, in times not unlike our own, of intense escalation of plunder, exploitation, dispossession, and a deluge of cheap meaningless entertainment, Wordsworth lamented the “multitude of causes . . . acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor” (104). In the face of this he set out to renovate poetic language. In 1798 he announced his *Lyrical Ballads* were mainly “to be considered as experiments” to show “how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes . . . is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (100 n1). He argued that “a selection of language really used by men, . . . arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets” (102).

He eliminated the notion of a poetic language distinct from that of prose and proposed to rid poetry of regimented metre, hackneyed figures of speech, and abstract generalizations. The poet must convey lived thought and experience, not substitute for them contrived poetic minuets. Innovation was necessary because what was at stake was intelligence itself—the collective ability to sense and inquire in the widest and most intricate way into the actual conditions of human life: “Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge” (Wordsworth 108).

More than a hundred years later Pound published a book entitled *Make It New*. The “it” is something more permanent, however, than passing fashions or fashionability. In “A Retrospect” (first published in 1913), he comments:

My pawing over the ancients and semi-ancients has been one struggle to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again, and to find out what remains for us to do, and plenty does remain, for if we still feel the same emotions as those which launched the thousand ships, it is quite certain that we come on these feelings differently, through different nuances, by different intellectual gradations. (*Literary* 11)

Pound echoes Wordsworth on the need for fresh language: “No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old, for to write in such a manner shows conclusively that the writer thinks from books, convention and cliché, and not from life” (*Literary* 11). His list of Credos and Don'ts is legion, covering everything from images to rhythm to enjambment (*Literary*



Wordsworth and Pound were undoubtedly political activists in the realm of literary form; they were not particularly political reformers of government. Strongly affected by the French Revolution, the young Wordsworth expressed his passionate support of equality and liberty in “A Letter to the Bishop Llandoff” (Duemer 316); however, later writings, such as “The Convention at Cintra,” abandon these democratic politics in favour of conservative patriotic nationalism (Duemer 320). Pound (described by Leon Surette as beginning with economic radicalism and ending with anti-Semitism) was more steadfast and extremist in his beliefs and more willing to broadcast these and publicly campaign for them, much to his detriment. However they are both remembered mainly for their outstanding literary vision and not for having helped lead the way to political reforms.

Although it is hard to say how revolutionary some contemporary writers will look when history considers them from the same distance, we seem at first glance to find a stronger spirit of political activism in writers today (another hundred years later) such as Jeff Derksen and Roger Farr. Both of them adopt an explicitly revolutionary stance and readily cite texts like Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with its famous description of revolutionary progress: “proletarian revolutions, . . . constantly interrupt themselves . . . to begin anew . . . until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*” (qtd. in Farr 1; referred to in Derksen, “A Conversation” 126). Farr explains that the Latin phrase “is often read as illustrative of the revolutionary moment itself: that point where the proletariat is compelled to leap” (1). Both argue that Marx’s revolutionary process is no longer likely because neoliberal capitalism has so permeated our vision and our culture that although conditions still cry out for change, they are simply tolerated (Derksen 126; Farr 3). Change has become merely another market option, rather than a necessity.

To achieve actual change of social conditions, both also argue that writers must engage in countertactics in language. Derksen calls for an “anti-systemic” writing (*Annihilated* 230) that will rearticulate the world system. In the past he says, “opposition and resistance has imagined itself as being outside of the debilitating structures of power, . . . whereas rearticulation is about disarticulating and rearticulating linkages within systems, somehow rearranging structures from within. To be critical of a world system, you have to somehow imagine yourself within it, as opposed to barking at it from a local position” (“A Conversation” 131). Poetry, Derksen argues, is a prime

location in which to conduct such rearticulation: "In my more recent poetry I'm trying to heighten the contradictions of global capital. . . . Poetry is an effective form for that heightening because of the rapid semantic shifts that first started around ideas of voice" ("A Conversation" 132). He sees himself as an agent for making the "conditions" of his time visible: "I'd say that I'm determined by them [the conditions, as they cry out]. But then I would also give myself some performative role as an agent. Or indicate agency by revealing the contradictions. That's the first step towards rearticulation" ("A Conversation" 136). Poetry enables him to put the contradictions of global capital (e.g. requiring people to give to charities in order to deal with massive poverty while at the same time requiring they buy cheap goods which keep others impoverished) into rapidly shifting polyvalent contrasts: "I see extra textual rearticulations as a method to move texts or moments into a related problematic or field in order to read the effects of a text or formation, a methodological 'making it new' perhaps" ("A Conversation" 142).

Calling for the formation of a "cultural front" of resistance to neoliberalism, Derksen says that "poetry today can begin with the possibilities of language as such, but can also be nonconformist productions of knowledge based on research methods drawn from contemporary art, alternative scholarship and collective forms of knowledge" (*Annihilated* 255). He sees poetry "as a production of knowledge . . . that is more process based than generative of 'outcomes'" (*Annihilated* 255). Intervention in the toxic neoliberalist system, Derksen suggests, comes from adopting a procedural approach to writing (creation through predetermined procedures), rather than an expressionist approach. Such procedures would not feed into the production of consumer objects, they would not be aimed at outcomes, but rather at revised linkages between elements in the system, so that the system's toxicity might become more visible.

Farr likewise calls for a re-presentation of the world system, arguing that "Language, which we always knew was 'saturated with ideology,' is more precisely at this moment 'permeated by money.' The language of the news, entertainment, sports, weather, statistics, culture: here is the muted call of 'the conditions.' Here is 'the material'" ("Postscript" 3). Citing Vladimir Mayakovsky's proposition that poetic work begins in the "presence of a problem in society, the solution of which is conceivable only in poetical terms. A social command" (qtd. in Cabri 75), Farr calls for writers to form a

poetic front—or perhaps a *blot*— . . . charged not with the fatigued political work of "consciousness raising" or "altering perception" . . . but with weakening the

command of the capitalist information field through the re-presentation of the empty volume of its own social facts. . . . A *dis-utopian* un-writing—one that avoids the old traps of “moral commitment, beautiful soul, ideological militancy, etc.,” in favour of a “new realism . . . constructive punk realism, expressive violence shaking the techniques of mystification of communication.” (“Postscript” 3-4)

Pound’s “new eyes” and second-wave feminism’s standby—consciousness raising—are characterized as worn-out tactics which amount to little more than “distribution of epiphanies and sensibilities” or “prepping a fresh citizenry in time for the next Federal election” (“Postscript” 4), little more than masking and legitimizing the holes in ourselves delivered by capital. Instead, Farr argues, poetry’s role should be “*to joyfully render the present even more intolerable than it already is* while gesturing toward new forms of affinity, agency, and association. To provide accounts without tallies. Events without examples. Means without ends, by whatever means necessary” (“Postscript” 4).

Farr’s poem “Hic Rhodus, Hic salta!” from a work called *MEANS* enacts this principle. I quote at length from the beginning of the poem in order that the reader may appreciate the relentless barrage which Farr has created somewhat in the manner of the relentless bombardment of advertising and profiteering so endemic to current times:

If a large telecommunications  
Company fires several employees  
After a larger company takes control  
And the managers of private  
Unregulated pools of capital  
Back a certain candidate in  
The next Federal Election, then  
Canadians who are addicted to  
Technology will feel they need new  
Phones. If a national sports franchise  
Loses more games than it wins  
Despite the media’s repetition  
Of its effective marketing strategy  
While a popular resort tries to shed  
Its out-dated image, then a television  
Show about men in a small town  
Who become full-time care-givers  
After their wives leave for a week  
Will be renewed. If a number of  
Officers are killed near the border  
And hunting whales is a tradition  
That links generations, then the

State's attempt to make a large  
 Military purchase will be thwarted  
 By concerns about espionage. (n. pag.)

The poem continues with the series of "If . . . Then" sentences in two sections, each more than five pages long, and each one ending "*Hic Rhodus, Hic salta!*" It quite literally gives us a series of generalized events in neoliberalist culture that contain no specificity, no examples, and thus it recreates the monotony and emptiness of the logic (via its logical *ifs* and *thens*) of global capital perpetrated on humans. In this respect it is reminiscent of conceptual writings like those of Kenneth Goldsmith, noted for his accumulations of ready-written texts such his transcription of a year of weather reports or his transcription of all texts in the *New York Times* of September 1, 2000. Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place argue that with conceptual writing "one does not need to 'read' the work as much as think about the idea of the work" (25). With Farr's poem we are invited to think about the forces of global capital, its relentless logic, acting on various disempowered groups of people. We are not particularly invited to enjoy pleasures in the language or structural textures of the poem. Nor are we invited to examine the terms of this discourse, which proceeds in the third person devoid of any connection to a speaking subject, in a manner suggestive of the faceless machine of global capital.

Derksen's recent poetry offers more structural variety, engaging readers with plays in the text through line clusters, line breaks, ironic cross currents. I quote the opening of section one of "The Vestiges (Or, Creative Destruction)":

Linear tankers lie  
 on the harbour's horizon.

The speed  
 of globalization.

"Community-based  
 crystal meth focus groups."  
 Jog by.

"China Shipping Lines."  
 Rusty. Nature  
 metabolized in the city. More or less  
 separate under capital

then laboured or louvered  
 together.

At sunset  
black crows crack mussels  
on the concrete, murder

on referential architecture  
in this speculative

part of the world.

"Above all" 10.8 million  
on the edge of  
the public park.

Excludes low-level boredom  
as capital exhausts  
options, spiraling  
up, then

"who is not  
for 'sustainability?'"

Outfitted. "Urban." Machine  
in the garden (punks in the  
park). Admirable

really.

"View corridors"  
are public and imaginary. (33-34)

The terminology is specifically pressured by ironic enjambment of overused newsroom and public policy phrases like "community-based" and "focus groups" with underclass drug users who are ironically associated with the blissful unawareness of joggers. Flabby pastoralism is given a kick by associating "Nature" with something that has decayed, i.e., rust, suggesting the uselessness of such overworked terms, and inviting us to examine why and how. Sound patterns snap in a line like "black crows crack" with its series of hard edges, these then are merged with the semantic shift implied by the term "murder," recalling "a murder of crows" and also the more violent homicidal denotation of the word. What is murdered, however, is "referential architecture." This polyvalent phrase suggests on the one hand that our references, our meanings, are subject to an overreaching architecture, which may after all be murdered. On the other hand it suggests that building forms, say the aesthetics of high-rises, refer to something else: neoliberal economics. A few lines later, using phrases with similar rhythms, Derksen links "Machine / in the garden" with "punks in the park." Thus the work rejigs the discursive units of neoliberal logic, making its workings



visible through jarring connections. In Derksen's words, it "points to the gap between the language and promises of neoliberalism and the conditions that actual existing neoliberalism brews up" ("Poetry" 9).

These innovative writings of Farr and Derksen offer us a poetics of intervention and resistance. They set themselves against a projected neoliberal world system, attempting to undermine it from inside. In contrast, the highly innovative writings of Erin Moure and Lisa Robertson open a visionary field of playful experimental form in the locus of a gendered, embodied subject. Female subjectivity expands to take in all. A crossroads of clashing discourses, it is simultaneously a battlefield and pleasure field of experiences, languages, resistances, and excesses. Here neoliberal logic and other toxic ideologies such as patriarchy are not the total focus of resistance, but rather are threads within a fabric of linguistic pleasure where they are critiqued, played with, and subsumed. For example, Robertson writes in "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," "We walked through the soft arcade. We became an architect" (*Occasional Work* 13). She plays here with the "we" that pretends to speak for all, ironically alerting us to its presumptuousness but at the same time presuming joyfully to become her own architect—not subject to an architecture, but designer par excellence. The architecture is not that of the hard-edged high-rise but the architecture that runs, like software, the soft parts (desires, bugbears) in our beings. Later in the same piece she states,

The truly utopian act is to manifest current conditions and dialects. Practice description. Description is mystical. It is afterlife because it is life's reflection or reverse. Place is accident posing as politics. And vice versa. Therefore it's tragic and big. (*Occasional Work* 16)

Dare to reflect the myriad crosscurrents operating each moment of your existence, she suggests, throwing out the yo-yo of utopian projects and then spinning it back with a discussion of description. Why is it mystical? You see what discourses make you see. Intervene in the working of discourse and you will intervene in what you thought was your place, your accident of politics.

While Farr and Derksen in their discussion of poetics easily slide into the impersonal third-person voice—that masquerade of scientific neutral and objective truth which will be equally "true" for all—Moire and Robertson keep statements of poetics grounded in first-person subjectivity in the playful language of poetic acts, inventions, and pleasurable investigations. They construct woman-centred voices that challenge the man-centred rationalism through which neoliberalism is delivered to us. Robertson notes, "Descartes's new world, in which the 'annoying' and unproductive contingencies of history

are systematically forgotten, leaving the western male thinker in a primary confrontation with his own thought, is emphatically not a world I wish to share" (*PhillyTalks* 24).

"There is no politics of language without the subject," Robertson states, and by extension she suggests there is no politics of any kind without the subject: "To be interested in subjectivity as experimental form is also to be interested in politics" ("Interview with Kate Eichhorn" 379). Moreover, the subject as terrain of inventive and experimental writing is highly mobile and fluid:

once you separate the subject from identity, it opens the subject to collective dynamics. I think many of the institutions that have shaped our current conceptions of the subject—the family, understood as an institution; the Church; the education system; the banking system—what all those institutions shape is the subject as identity, as seamless, as a fixed point that can be maintained on a taxonomic grid. Our institutions are interested in insisting that the subject is in need of identity, but if you look at the subject from the point of view of mobility, and the point of view of discourse, and the point of view of ethics, the subject opens as being one of the most exciting political terrains. ("Interview with Kate Eichhorn" 380)

Within the terrain of specific embodied experience criss-crossed by cultural demands, Robertson addresses both the micro-level of the text and the macro-level of globalized capital. Commenting on her "Soft Architecture Manifesto," she says, "I had this flash of insight about how I wanted to represent what globalism was doing to urban politics. . . . For me, a manifesto is a rhythmic propulsion, a direct agent"; she contrasts the manifesto as form with that of the poem, which she says "recursively investigates kinds of shapeliness and duration of thinking" ("Interview with Kate Eichhorn" 379). For Robertson, politics is "the construction of relationships between people . . . We make relations with language that we are giving to and taking from one another. . . . All of those relationships with language as a material rhythmic among people is what writing works with" ("Interview with Kate Eichhorn" 376). Materiality here invokes the tactile side of language—its full range of sound textures from the voiced and unvoiced fricatives, sibilants, dentals, velars, stops, plosives, etc., to the lilting rise and fall of phrasal and sentence intonations, and the bursts of conversation, stitched into pauses and silences, an idiosyncratic knitting of sense-making welded in flesh. This is a sense-making apart from referentiality, an intelligence not concerned with signification. It involves the shapes and the emotional undercurrents of the signifying act itself—how these reveal the character of utterers and how these shapes link speakers together rhizomatically.

Robertson's writing is dystopic and resistant to neoliberal ideology but nevertheless rich with playful cross-connections and insurgencies:

within the capitalist narrative, the Utopia of the new asserts itself as the only productive teleology. Therefore I find it preferable to choose the dystopia of the obsolete. . . . When capital marks women as the abject and monstrous ciphers of both reproduction and consumption, our choice can only be to choke out the project of renovation. We must become history's dystopic ghosts, inserting our inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narratives: We shall refuse to be useful. (*PhillyTalks* 23)

This innovative practice, which specifically examines gender, uses what's old and out of date to "make it new"—to reinvent a language she can think in. An examination of male subjectivity, however, seems not to form a part of Derksen's and Farr's innovative practice. Whereas Farr and Derksen talk disembodiedly and disaffectedly, pointing to gaps between promises and delivery, or gesturing toward new forms of association or agency, Robertson embarks on the visionary task of imagining as part of her critique of global neoliberalism a place where her female body, thoughts, and investigations are welcome:

My own nostalgia reaches for an impossibly beautiful and abundant language. Rather than diagnosing this nostalgia as a symptom of loss (which would only buttress the capitalist fiction of possession) I deploy it as an almanac, planning a tentative landscape in which my inappropriate and disgraceful thought may circulate. (*PhillyTalks* 23)

Much of her research has involved unearthing the voices of other women (such as Lucy Hutchinson or Mary Wortley Montagu) who together form a landscape where "history's dystopic ghosts" can, like prints in a darkroom, take shape and be heard—a legitimizing place where erased voices can converse, even play, as agents in their own right.

For Moure, too, subjectivity is the crucial terrain of innovative poetry: there must be a "subject enacting, or through whom something is enacted" (*My Beloved* 23). Poetry must neither "privilege . . . the author's voice, without self-questioning," nor "make the subject vanish" but rather include all the "edges, folds, and contradictions that feminism, radical feminism, blacks, lesbians, the working class, and the poor are talking about" (*My Beloved* 33). While Derksen styles his practice as anti-systemic, Moure inaugurates an "anti-anaesthetic" (we can read this as an anti-an-aesthetic, a corrective to that which denies her aesthetic) (*My Beloved* 21, 29). She says the poem, which she calls a "jewel," "is an enactment of linguistic sounds in which the relational (a folding?) pushes at order (the gaze?)" (23).

Following Kristeva, Moure argues that poetic language is “a return to the mother, to that unspeakable, non-extensible hole from where we are descended,” but also a language that must act by disturbing “the Law of the Father (the social order, the republic, the polis)” (24). Poetic language creates “a leak out of meaning and a folding back on meaning” (25), an undoing of or escape from signification or denotative meaning; a “poetic structure” occurs rhythmically through cadences of sound—that other crucial form of meaning beyond dictionary definition (26-27). “If we are not perceiving the audible, . . . the sound of the womb, we are anaesthetized,” Moure argues, “we become citizens of the Republic” (29). The comfortable certainties of the Law of the Father constantly woo the poet away from language’s rhythmic memories outside signification and pull her into entropy and anaesthesia (the root word linking to non-hearing) (32-33). To avoid being erased by the discourse of the Republic, the poet must “take risks, and engage what coalesces, refracts, folds, enfolds, multiplies and digresses” (31). This involves a struggle but not a “battle or destruction”; instead Moure sees it as “a cherishing” that “entails ‘the expression of longing / in & among / the collapse of social systems.’” We must, she says “take up the wager offered us by this longing, and refuse to *restrain ourselves*” (34).

Her poetic innovation involves searching out (hearing at the edges of sense) “connections between seemingly parallel things that haven’t been enunciated yet because of flaws or ‘closed sets’ (flaws is a value judgement) in our ways of speech.” Her innovative practice is specifically aimed at “break[ing] down the logical connections / structure of ‘meaning’ (referentiality),” and “break[ing] down the noun/verb opposition wherein the present so-called ‘power’ of the language resides” (*Furious* 93). She seeks to

Make a fissure through which we can leak out from the “real” that is sewn into us, to utter what could not be uttered in the previous structure. Where we have not been represented, except through Dominant (in this case, patriarchal) speaking, which even we speak, even we women. (*Furious* 95)

She wants to “alter Naming (meaning). Because it is the force of language that maintains the power of its naming. In this way, the patriarchal structure (way-of-naming) of language, masculine language, is maintained by the noun/verb force” (*Furious* 95). She counters this structure with out-of-order prepositions, invoking a pre-positional stance which eludes both patriarchal naming and its force-field (*Furious* 95-96). Her investigations thus take her both literally and figuratively along the boundary or threshold of what is noise / what is sense:

Sounds attract feelings and aches, and vice versa. Sounds and words attract each other, and ideas, and worries. And dreams. And the thread of remembrance knitting the self over again, it's preposterous, it's hard to keep up with, do justice to, keep track of. The world is imbued with language and linguistic possibility, with bad and good expression, with hopefulness, with manipulation and trickery as well, with rationalizations and silence and gaps that alter, slowly, the structures of thought in the head. And poetry laughs at all of this at the same time as it confronts it, because poetry is entirely useless and owes no debts. It's a weightless possession, at the same time bearing the weight of responsibility and forgiveness. It's an object that is first a noise, that is still and ever a noise, a resonance of words that alters its noise over and over in the head, breaking through the pale corpse of "the image" and "the self." ("Erin Moure: Writing Philosophy")

The reader must listen carefully and repeatedly to hear beyond the safe bounds of cultural "sense"—the safe bounds of received knowledge. The vocabularies of poems like those of *Pillage Laud*, which were created from computer-generated sentences, appear at first to make no sense, Moure notes, but "through successive, repetitive contextualizations" the poems build "tension and emotional valencies" ("Note" 43). Here's the opening page of "Burnaby" from *Pillage Laud*:

What should memory write?  
"They were the balls."

When a device was leather's insect,  
what were my beauties seizing for their archive?

Girls were dramas between a regime and  
a couch, and the girl was their bath.  
May the doctrine distinguish the intention?

The vitamin inside a radio has burned.  
In the orbit between a routine and the library,  
you are her reports.

May a beach do?  
A sun (chance) assigned your musk between the *boy* and  
a little painter.

The hand: your vixen. Rhythm demands her glance.  
To burn is cheek, can't the skin balance?  
This cell dances

within the land's ventricle, where you wouldn't wipe  
my prince. Since a size grips pressure, their friend  
is owning the message. Could vengeance begin?

*doctrine girl bath library essay discipline extend hotels.* (38)

Thus making it new, for Moure, as with Robertson, means making new places to be, empowering places that are less toxic to women's subjectivities. They are dystopic but at the same time visionary.

As I write this essay, I'm only too aware of how much of its style presents the stage neutral of "objective" man-centred discourse, the hallmark of Western science and philosophy. Aware too that I long to have a chunk of the power that circulates through that discourse, even though I know that that voice disempowers my gender. How refreshing Robertson's "Forget the journals, conferences, salons, textbooks, and media of dissemination. We say thought's object is not knowledge but living" (*Occasional* 16).

One thing is clear from this discussion of innovative poetics: these innovations are not lightly undertaken. The works of these poets are not tossed off in an afternoon but informed by specific and rigorous investigations and wide-ranging explorations of philosophy and politics. They represent a small sample of contemporary poetic innovative practice. But how effective are these innovative writings as political activism for social change, given that no matter what the innovation, neoliberal capitalism will turn it to its own ends—it will, in Moure's words, turn innovation back into anaesthesia: "The discourse of privilege is infinitely absorptive" (*My Beloved* 34). Indeed, perhaps this kind of shift from living to dead language is part of the reason each generation must make a language it can think in.

For Derksen, an effectively interventionist poetics (and presumably what he is attempting in his own work), is one that moves "from the micro-aesthetics of the text to the macro-ideology of nation states" (*Annihilated* 162). This is the kind of poetry he finds in Bruce Andrews whom he notes "builds four functions, one for each level of his conceptual horizons." Andrews' poetry, Derksen states, first moves "toward a 'total grasp' of the articulations and contradictions of globalization"; second, "critiques domestic policies of the nation-state"; third, "hammer[s] away . . . at the subject as the site where these articulated domestic/foreign (nation-state/globalization) policies and desires are internalized"; and fourth, examines "language as a signifying system" and "as the vehicle of the state aggression and containment" (*Annihilated* 157). However, Derksen is concerned that writing such as Andrews' is quickly refigured by the cultural (neoliberal endorsed) mainstream as "difficult" or "experimental," which seals it off in the category of the purely aesthetic and depoliticizes it (*Annihilated* 160). It makes the political effect "unintelligible" (*Annihilated* 160).

Similarly, the risk of Moure's wager is of course that poetic innovation will not be heard, or that arts venues like Olympic festivals will make it "too serious,"

not entertaining enough (*My Beloved* 35). Moure notes that the “difficulty” of her work causes people to complain that it requires “theory,” to which she says,

I always tell people that theory is just thinking. . . . If you don't think about thinking, the monoculture functions. If we could get a critical mass then we could do it, we could think ourselves somewhere else entirely, but forget it. You'd have a better chance of taking off in a spaceship. (“Why not be excessive?": A Conversation with Erin Moure" 60-61)

Derksen too admits that as poetry enters the social sphere its critiques lack critical mass, with the result that “poetry's cultural capital has not been bullish” (*Annihilated* 162).

Since the inventions of innovative poetics are quickly usurped by the world-economic system and labelled as quaintly artistic, or used to sell us everything from cars to Viagra, we are driven to ponder whether poetic rearticulation or anti-anaesthesia are anything more than methods of tolerating the horrifying disempowerments and inequalities meted out by neoliberal ideology. If we really wanted to change the world, one might argue, it is exactly the least innovative language that is more likely to be effective since it will reach a wider segment of the population. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a melodramatic and sentimental story about a black family, sold 300,000 copies in the US in its first year (Kaufman 19), and another 165,000 copies in Britain the following year (Fisch 33). It was the best-selling novel in the nineteenth century (Robbins 76); the second best-selling book of the nineteenth century after the Bible (“*Uncle*”); and the bestseller of all time in proportion to the population (Kaufman 19). It was politically effective as a significant force in the anti-slavery movement, and some argue it “helped lay the groundwork for the Civil War” (Kaufman 18).

However, it also might be that if innovative poetry constituted any sort of actual threat to neoliberal world order, writers would be silenced as quickly as Julian Assange has been, or as quickly as Osip Mandelstam was for his formally innovative writing that dared to criticize Stalin's oppressive bureaucracy. But must we expect the language-forgers of our time to adopt an aesthetics of political effectiveness, with all its dangers of dogma and sloganeering? Moure believes that effecting social change is not the job of poetry: “Poetry should bug people,” she says, “then *they* can change” (qtd. in Butling and Rudy 213). Poetry's job, she believes, is not to be “accessible”: “The accessible, as I have always argued, as others have argued, is what we already know. And poetry operates beyond that. . . . So does life! All poetry whether it engages traditional forms or dictions or open forms, or conceptualizations, has to

press us just past the limit where our knowing ends” (“Interview” 223). What she offers us is an outside to neoliberalism and even the protest against neoliberalism. We find it at the limits of our senses, the limits of what we can hear, and in language’s rhythmic memories that exceed the grid of signification. Similarly, Robertson refuses to produce a poetry that is useful to any cause but her own angry yet playful revamping of subjectivity, which trusts that changing the reader’s relation to language is enough.

In each epoch, social conditions cry out. They wrench from all those living at the time not a message but a fabric of voices that often isn’t fully understood for decades. By courting the quixotic half-formed rhymes and half-heard echoes in phrasing, expostulation, and intonation of vernacular utterance or public discourses, Robertson, Moure, Farr, and Derksen both invoke the heart that drives them to speak and begin to undo social controls binding them to injustice. They are making language new for some of the same reasons Wordsworth did two hundred years ago.

#### NOTES

- 1 In Pound’s translation of *Confucius*, we find the following:

In letters of gold on T’ang’s bathtub:

AS THE SUN MAKES IT NEW  
DAY BY DAY MAKE IT NEW  
YET AGAIN MAKE IT NEW. (36)

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