

'Something like postcolonial packaging taken personally in a resource-based economy': Landscapes in the Poetry of Jeff Derksen and Peter Culley

by Jason Wiens

If the representation of landscape has been a dominant concern of Canadian poetry since the pre-Confederation period, and if the ongoing contemporary fascination with the poetic representation of rural landscapes might be read as contradictory, given the intense urbanization of the country during the post-war period, then this contradiction appears all the more striking on the west coast of British Columbia. Marketing campaigns inviting tourists to visit "super, natural British Columbia" find themselves juxtaposed on our television screens with advertisements inviting urban professionals to relocate to Nanaimo, not necessarily for the "super nature" but for the relative proximity to Vancouver and more affordable cost of living. This intense collision of urban settlement with coastal mountain rainforest and ocean has been noted, described, and celebrated by a host of poets. Take, for instance, Daphne Marlatt's proprioceptive observations in her 1972 book *Vancouver Poems*:

up a long eye-line Sunday sprays
interior city ground. Aqueous cut of the
sea's
a bottomless lagoon. Logs lash on. The
grey
stretch of sand I walk, footsteps suckt.
jumpt.

Changes air now wet as the sea, The city
(n. p.)

Similar observations have been made by poets visiting the city. In 1965

Jack Spicer travelled to Vancouver from San Francisco to deliver several of what would become known as his "Vancouver Lectures." During this period he composed "Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival," in which he describes Vancouver as "blocked everywhere by stubborn lumber. [Page 98] Where even the ocean cannot reach its coastline for the lumber of islands or the river its mouth" (Spicer 259). Spicer constructs Vancouver as a place in which the inhabitants are "all in the same game. Trapped / by mountains and ocean. Only / Awash in themselves" (262); he also 'queers' the city in his typically vulgar fashion: "Can / A place in the wilderness become utterly buggered up with logs? / A question / Of love" (262). George Bowering points out that in the late 1950s, when the poets who would begin the *Tish* newsletter arrived on the scene in Vancouver, "Downtown, among the tallest buildings, they could still smell the sea's salt and creosote. From West Point Grey, where the university was, they could see more forest than city, mountains with oceans at their feet" (Bowering 122). The facts of living in a resource-based economy, one in which the primary industries are extractive, remain part of lived experience for urban dwellers in the lower mainland, materialized as log jams on the Fraser River or protests directed at salmon farms.

Mark S. Madoff has argued in his essay "Hewers of Wood: Politics and Poetical Landscape in British Columbia" that in B.C. "nature is an especially urgent reality," and "[p]oets in British Columbia have the most compelling reason to choose carefully their sentences about nature; the reason is, paradoxically, the very immediacy of nature which sustains the province's tourism industry" (Madoff 486). Madoff goes on to describe "three grammars, each generating a characteristic batch of sentences, poetical or political: the grammar of engineering, the grammar of kinship, and the grammar of stewardship" (487). The grammar of engineering is one which looks at the land as exploitable and transformable at the hands of human beings, and necessarily so. According to Madoff, modern B.C. poets have tended to parody this grammar "in order to show its self-contradictions and limits" (487). The grammar of kinship he associates with what he calls a "white aboriginal" approach to the land, an approach which he finds problematic because it presumes an integrated "blood relation" to the land and all the privileges such a relationship entails (Clint Burnham calls this the "sensitive-is-as-sensitive-does grade of late modern West Coast wiccan & warlock poetry" [31]). Madoff seems more satisfied with a grammar of stewardship, whose pattern he describes thus: "Man is responsible for his effects upon the natural world, from which he comes, which is created with him, yet to which he does not fully belong" (489). He does qualify his position on the stewardship model, however, pointing out that it still involves a "species-egotism which

might make the politics generated by this model less humble" (489).
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I want to argue that in the work of many poets associated with Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing (KSW), and specifically two that I wish to discuss here, Jeff Derksen and Peter Culley, we see elements of all of Madoff's "grammars" as well as tactics, parodic or otherwise, used to undermine them, but with this difference: their approach to the landscape of nature de-naturalizes it. That is, whereas other poets in B.C. and indeed across Canada have looked at the landscape and seen, variously, threats to survival, indifferent sublimity, exploitable resource, imagist beauty, spiritual salvation, and any number of metaphors, these poets look out and see ideology and history. The ideologies of landscape and 'nature' become objectified in their work, in the sense in which Terry Eagleton, following Pierre Macherey, understands the potential critical capacity of art: "It is by giving ideology a determinate form, fixing it within certain fictional limits, that art is able to distance itself from it, thus revealing to us the limits of that ideology" (Eagleton 535). This is not to say that the various other approaches to nature I have just enumerated are non-ideological or ahistorical—such a position would be impossible. Nor is it to say that these other approaches do not advance a critique of prevailing ideologies. It is to say that Derksen and Culley's work engages with and attempts to rearticulate the dominant or prevailing ideology of nature and landscape in their historical moment—which would mean, to my mind, the ideology of development.

Given the strong associations of KSW with the so-called Language Writers in the United States, it might be tempting to read the school, as Russell Smith and others have done, as the beachhead for the extension of that particular avant-garde poetics in Canada.¹ To do so would be to understand KSW as continuous with a trajectory of Canadian poetry described by D.M.R. Bentley in 1980 in terms of a "major characteristic of the Canadian poetic continuity from [J. Mackay's] day to the present":

...that its history as regards form and technique is a history of importation and adaptation, that where formalistic and technical innovations have occurred they have been, in global terms, relatively minor. They have been, in truth, mutations of forms and techniques developed elsewhere, usually in Britain, France, and the United States....[T]he practice from the first to the last has been to import forms and techniques—the heroic couplet, the sonnet, the eclogue, Keats's ode stanza, *terza rima*, free verse, concrete, projective verse (there is no

need at this point to expand the list)—and to fit them to Canadian content, often transmuting one, or the other, or both in the adaptive process. (2) [Page 100]

We can identify similarities in poetics, influences, and social and political concerns between the American Language poets and the poets associated with KSW, the significant differences among and between poets associated with the respective 'schools' in each country notwithstanding. Moreover, KSW was an important site for the American writers in the 1980s, especially in the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium which the school sponsored and which was attended by poets such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Susan Howe, each of whom also returned to Vancouver as writer in residence over the following years, and who undoubtedly had an influence on a younger generation through talks and workshops. Finally, the generational difference (most of the writers associated with the Language School were publishing in the early 1970s while the KSW writers emerged in the 1980s) would further imply an importation model of influence. And yet I do not regard the work of the poets associated with KSW as belated Language Poetry in the way we might regard, say, some of the work of F.R. Scott or W.W.E. Ross as belated imagism; rather, I see the work of writers such as Derksen, Culley and Lisa Robertson as developing simultaneously with that of their older colleagues in the U.S. Furthermore, I regard their practice as the postmodern continuity of the modernist poetic line established in Vancouver in the 1960s, just as the work of the U.S. Language Writers developed out of an engagement with the New American Poetics: Black Mountain, New York School, Beat, and so on.

I do not wish here to trace a trajectory of landscape poetry over the course of Canadian or even British Columbian literary history; Derksen has to some extent done it for me in his essay "Sites Taken as Signs: Place, Enigma and the Open Text in New Vancouver Writing," an essay I read as an articulation of his own poetics and as something of a manifesto on behalf of the poets associated with KSW. Derksen argues there that over the past twenty-five years a concern with place in Canadian writing has resulted in poems which represent "a static landscape as a self-contained naturalness or as a bleak metaphor for the thematics of terror" ("Sights Taken" 148), and that "[i]n this ideological grid, the landscape safely stands as a façade for larger themes, or exists as 'pure' image—condensed and docile but unable to enter a sociohistorical dialogue" (149). For Derksen this is part of a larger "conservative agenda for writing in Canada" (148) that endorses a poetics which, in the interests of constructing a national literature, "drops the specifics of history in favor of a tenet of imagism in which

images are static" (149). Derksen contrasts Margaret Atwood's much-anthologized poem "The Islands" with Pat Lowther's poem "Private Ownership," arguing that in Atwood's poem "the objectified [Page 101] islands are a metaphor for *our...own* separateness," while Lowther's poem "locates the islands within a social and economic sphere that points to the irony of 'private ownership'" (149). Derksen's work follows Lowther's stance towards the landscape, although his work is far more disjunctive and non-linear when compared with her typically monologic, narratively-oriented style.

In Derksen's 1993 book *Dwell*, place and our relations to it are, as the title implies, central concerns. In "Phatic Weather," we have a reflective speaker who observes the landscape from a detached perspective—nothing radical there—but Derksen's disjunctive use of spacing, line breaks, and enjambment disrupts the unity of the lyric voice and, by extension, the observer's subjectivity. Here is the poem in its entirety:

I just want
the connection to be
inked in or intruded
on. So I can enter

an individual history
of my group.

The truck driving
beside the bus
appears not to move, mimicking
a model of one culture
viewing another.

Here the light
to heavy industry
doesn't mar the river
as much as it now
makes it.

New. Compensation's body
is a green image, arms
filled with lumber. But production's
miracle is its occurrence, oiling
a century. Our role
is the crisis. Sliding

so I can clarify

in this continuous present
of product, "excess," resource.

A company's head office
puts down roots: "Caring Hands
Extended Out to Our Multicultural
Community." The question

of "also" is contextual.
(23-24)

The tactics which here disrupt the unified lyric voice, along with Derksen's use of enigmatic references and decontextualized quotations, run in opposition to the "direct treatment of the thing," as well as the need for precision and economy, demanded by an imagist approach. Derksen instead re-articulates various discourses surrounding the landscape and resource extraction, noting that development does not just invade a passive nature but is an active agent in constructing it: "Here the light / to heavy industry / doesn't mar the river / as much as it now / makes it" (23). The enjambment between the fourth and fifth stanzas invokes Pound's demand to "make it new," perhaps a self-reflexive comment on Derksen's innovative practice which might at the same time, ironically enough, remind us of the uneasy conjunctions between avant-garde demands for the "new" and a broader capitalist / consumerist emphasis on innovation. Derksen also appears to make reference to another modernist writer—Gertrude Stein—with the lines "in this continuous present / of product, 'excess,' resource," "continuous present" being Stein's own phrase describing temporality in her work. Of course "continuous present" could also refer to the verb tense, applying to a capitalist emphasis on immediate development and profit rather than on the future (or perfect) tenses; its proximity to the Pound reference seems in any case further to support a critical reading of modernist poetics in relation to capitalist innovation. This collision of the language of modernist poetics and the discourses of resource extraction draws a homology between poetic practice and the material landscape, reminding us of language's and hence ideology's implication in the world it seeks to describe. W.H. New has pointed out that "[t]he English-language vocabulary for characterizing landscape (and people's relationship with land) interconnects with the vocabulary for characterizing language and the use and function of language" (New 164). Derksen takes things one step further here and exploits the interconnections between the specific discourse—[**Page 103**] what Bakhtin describes as a "socio-ideological" language (Bakhtin 272)—of corporations and the discourses used to describe landscape. Indeed, by

the end of the poem the "roots" of a company—here articulated as the discourses of corporate public relations—have replaced the "roots" of what has been taken from the soil.

We can note a similar blurring of the boundaries between corporate ideology and the natural world in another poem in *Dwell*, "Carried Over Parallel," from the syllogistic comparison of people with the weather—"The people / on the sidewalk / are proof / of a context // As is the weather"—to a similar equation of the forest with a city—"the moss / a microcosm of the forest / or a city" (25). Derksen invokes the representation of the west coast as a chaotic collision of people and nature in the lines "We are known / to inhabit this land / as tenaciously as roe / to kelp, as a barnacle / to a hull" (27). The lines "What this building once sat on / does not give it / its 'heritage status'" (25) are paradoxical: usually, buildings enjoying heritage status are not removed from their location, although that seems implied by "once sat on." But I think Derksen here is pointing out that the space which the building "once sat on" has effectively disappeared from consciousness. This position seems to contrast with Marlatt's articulation of the city as a site in which "nature" and "culture" occupy the space simultaneously, and instead offers a reading of urban space as palimpsest, as an overlapping of ongoing spatial practices.² Other tactics for foregrounding the conjunctions of ideology with the land include puns ("I'm humming / a little softwood accord") and Derksen's collision, in the closing lines of the poem, of the lexicons of pastoral beauty and real estate development: "The late fall beauty / of an 'Outstanding / Development Opportunity'" (28). The 'speaker' here may have his impressions of the land mediated by a developer's billboard, from which these lines may have been quoted, but the critique made here is that, billboard or no, the landscape and its 'beauty' have been always already mediated by the discourses of commercial development. The nostalgia of a pastoral approach, Derksen seems to be demonstrating, is not only a disabling illusion but no longer remains a possibility.

Throughout *Dwell*, one of Derksen's recurring devices is the decontextualized quotation, already seen in a couple of the examples I cite above. Other examples include "*Our forests, our trees, our / moss, our lichen, our site- / specific species. They need management*" (30), from "Host Nation, Host Society," which could be read as a parody of Madoff's grammar of "stewardship." I understand Derksen's quotations here as a sort of "found poetry" whose assumptions are laid bare when placed under the sign of irony. The first poem in *Dwell*, "Interface," is one of Derksen's most recognized [Page 104] poems, given its inclusion in Sharon Thesen's *The New Long Poem Anthology* as well as in Michael Barnholden and Andrew Klobucar's *Writing Class: The*

Kootenay School of Writing Anthology. It establishes the template for a signature style which Derksen would employ again in *Dwell*, as well as in his more recent texts such as *Transnational Muscle Cars* (2003). This style employs a series of isolated prose units over a number of pages, some of which link up with one another rhetorically or narratively as the poem proceeds. For instance, in "Interface" we have a series of countries named throughout the poem, followed by a percentage: "Soviet Union 24.9%" (2); "United States 18.3%" (2); "Great Britain 17.1%" (4), and so on, without any direct information providing a context for the statistics. It is not until the following poem that such a context is provided: "The statistics of arms / sales in the 'world market' / are very distant / now" (21). Derksen also includes a number of decontextualized quotations which sound as if they have been lifted from the discourses of journalism or corporate advertising, and render the language of hegemony all the more clearly when removed from context: "It's only with plain talking, and a give and take on both sides, that will ensure there are forests in the future" (4); "Jeanine is a living example of Noranda's attitude to employees" (8). And so it is not simply reckless capitalist development which is the object of Derksen's critique, but also the ostensibly ecologically responsible efforts of those who would seek to "manage" the forests. But the fundamental target of his critique, at least with respect to representations of nature and landscape, is the idea that "nature" somehow lies outside of ideology.

In contrast to Derksen's primarily ironic stance in *Dwell*, Peter Culley's 1995 book *The Climax Forest* eschews irony in favour of a more earnest tone, although we can identify similar tactics in his work. Lisa Robertson has remarked that in Culley's work, "landscape is equally a product of cultural memory, real estate development, individual perception, and geology" (Robertson 136). Culley's text appears more immediately conventional in its representations of landscape than Derksen's, although there is an opacity and an enigmatic quality to his work which he shares with other writers associated with KSW (and by extension the language poets in the U.S.). Many of the poems collected in *The Climax Forest* focus upon a rather romanticized landscape through a voice which moves fluidly from a pastoral to a scientific lexicon:

in May. As it unfolds
spores are discharged.
Tufts of rust wool [**Page 105**]
above the fruiting pinae,
shallow vase formed, flood
the woods with golden light.

Culley's work to date has demonstrated an intense concern with his locale—Nanaimo B.C., which he constructs as a fictionalized "Hammertown"³—and most recently with the unfettered development he observed there over the 1990s. Culley points out in a catalogue essay on the photographic work of Vancouver artist Roy Arden that "the landscapes Arden records are destabilized, unfixed, without codified status" ("Note" 15), and that Arden's practice straddles a line between "the aestheticization of 'fine art' photography and the epistemological fictions of the 'documentary' tradition" (14). We could apply Culley's observations as art critic to his own practice. His work represents a nature 'destabilized' and in flux, a condition he renders by the disjunctive (or conjunctive, depending on one's perspective) movement between rhetorics I just mentioned, as well as by his disruptions of voice, although in Culley's work the lyric subject appears more stable, and the voice disrupted more by quick shifts in attention and perspective than through any active attempts to undermine its unity. Clint Burnham suggests that the "admixture of such rhetoric" in the work of Culley and some of his contemporaries "indicates a commonality of working through various registers because no one of them can be trusted anymore: a carnivalism of voice in opposition to the older early postmodern stress on some proprioceptive or tree-trunk voice" (32). This is part of what Culley is up to here, I think, but more specifically the jarring collision of various registers mirrors the impact on the landscape of industrial development, resource extraction and urban sprawl.

Culley's "A Letter from Hammertown to East Vancouver and the East Village" reminds us of the transnational network that this poet writes from and for. It is addressed to "K.", Culley's good friend and fellow poet Kevin Davies, who left Vancouver in the early 1990s for New York City as part of a small Canadian poetic diaspora which formed there during that period (I am thinking of poets such as Dan Farrell and Adeena Karasick, as well as Canadians who had moved there earlier such as Alan Davies). Here Culley observes a landscape that "will be from the ether / managed" (101), a sentiment which seems to run counter to the grammar both of engineering and of stewardship, articulating instead a self-regulating natural world. But [Page 106] almost immediately afterwards Culley alludes to Macmillan Bloedel's "administration" of the land as well: "the width of an Austin / from the administration of Macmillan" (101). Bathos results from such a jarring shift from the bucolic to the industrial, and indeed the overwhelming

tone of *The Climax Forest* is bathetic. This could be read as a lament for a sublime landscape corrupted by the quotidian march of development, though I read it more as Culley's attempt to demystify a landscape conventionally rendered in sublime terms.

Later in the same poem Culley reminds us of a gap between "the real image of spring" and the "mental image of spring," suggesting the mediation of the world by discourse. For Culley it seems that the role of the poet is "somehow" to reconcile these things: "I'm lining things up / all in a little row / so that the real image of spring / and the mental image of spring / can be made to somehow agree" (104). Unlike Derksen, Culley here seems at least to hold out hope for the possibility of such an agreement, but like Derksen his work also offers a contemporary example of the urban pastoral:

The winter twilight's pall of
woodsmoke
drifts and softens

even as it sears and conceals —
just as the low millennial fog of
Hammertown
cloaks the shuttered factories,
dog-ridden lots and

oil dappled pavements
in the wispy rainments
of authenticity...

(103)

The sentiment here could be read as romantic, with the fog lending the urban landscape a sort of natural authenticity; at the same time we could read the lines as ironically self-reflexive. As W.H. New has pointed out,

To substitute 'wilderness' as the 'true' value *in place of* the received forms of custom, attitude, or 'civilization'... intrinsically sets up another form of received truth, which in turn invites questioning. Celebrating wilderness—that is, celebrating all that was 'opposite' to the old recipe for civilization—does not fundamentally alter the distinction on which the old definition was based.

(174)

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Urban pastoral, a genre within which we might place Culley's work, could be read as both refusing this distinction and reinforcing it,

especially in poems in which the use of pastoral rhetoric to describe the urban space foregrounds the disjunctions between the two (for instance, in A.M. Klein's "Pastoral of the City Streets"). But in Culley's poem we have at once, I would argue, a bathetic collision of the urban and the pastoral and a self-conscious awareness of the mediating role of language.

1998 witnessed the publication of a special "Disgust and Overdetermination" issue of *Open Letter*, edited by Jeff Derksen. The issue appeared then, and seems even more now, to be a collection of work by emerging writers in Canada and abroad of a particular generation—those born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and featuring the work of many writers associated with the Kootenay School, including Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Nancy Shaw, and Catriona Strang. In his "Introduction," Derksen asserts that in the work of the poets included in the issue there is a "magnification of existing social relations" and an "insistence on pointing at the material sites of ideology and not an imagining of an island outside of ideology" (8). He further argues for a reading of such poetry as an "*aesthetic rearticulatory practice*" (9, emphasis in original); if literature materializes or objectifies ideology and its contradictions, following Macheray, then these poets push this materialization to its limits. Rather than deploy a grammar of engineering, kinship, or stewardship, these poets investigate the grammars of ideology. As Derksen puts it in "Interface," "Something like postcolonial packaging taken personally in a resource-based economy; I look out my window and see history *versus* I look out my window and see a window" (*Dwell* 5). Their work represents a step beyond the supposed epistemological black hole of postmodern aestheticism in an attempt to read, re-articulate, and work towards transforming history and ideology.

Notes

1. In a 2000 *Globe and Mail* column Smith describes the Kootenay School as "the Canadian bastion of the movement" (Smith R5). While he goes on to provide a decent explanation of Language Writing's emphasis on the materiality of the signifier over the exchange-value of meaning, he neglects (perhaps understandably) to attend to the idea of re-articulation in the work of the KSW writers. In an online *Philly Talk* between Jeff Derksen and Ron Silliman, Derksen explains to Silliman that "[t]he KSW was talked about as a language-writing branch plant" to which Silliman replies

"so KSW is basically a language poetry maquilladora?" (Derksen and Silliman 14). [\[back\]](#) **[Page 108]**

2. I first encountered this description of urban space as palimpsest in an article on Hugh Hood's *Around the Mountain* by Douglas Ivison. Ivison writes: "One of the remarkable aspects of *Around the Mountain* is its emphasis upon the palimpsestic nature of urban space. Scattered throughout the book are traces of past spatial practices, some that have been written over a number of times and some that have yet to be written over" (Ivison 239). [\[back\]](#)
3. Culley actually derives the title from a passage in Georges Perec's *Life, A User's Manual*, which he quotes at the beginning of the "Hammertown" section: "Once—and this is something he has never done for anyone and would never do again—he showed her the puzzle he was reassembling that fortnight: it was a fishing port on Vancouver Island, a place called Hammertown, all white with snow, with a few low houses and some fishermen in fur-lined jackets hauling a long, pale hull along the shore" (Culley 86). Clint Burnham has observed that with the reference to Perec, "Culley's 'Hammertown' poems are located in terms of a commodity in an avant-garde text" (Burnham 31), which suggests a degree of self-reflexive irony on Culley's part, though not to the same extent as we see in Derksen's work. [\[back\]](#)

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