

Urban Landscapes and Dirty Lyrics: Peter Culley and Lisa Robertson

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It is time to paw the
landscape once more as radically
as hard green berries
replace the red and once more

It is too late to be simple.
- Lisa Robertson, from “porchverse”¹

A born-in-New-Yorker once remarked to me that the only *polis* one was likely to find on the west coast would be a national park. While I would not care to defend the east versus west distinction beyond cocktail parlance, it is probably fair to say that nature is never far from the end of one’s nose in British Columbia. The big mountains, big forests, big ocean, and resource-based economy get in people’s poems, artworks, and politics as the coastal rain gets into their bones nine months out of the twelve. Always dressed in quotation marks of course, “nature” is a perennial locus of cultural expression. In *The Climax Forest* (1995), Peter Culley weaves scenes of the town and country around his home near Nanaimo on Vancouver Island into dense landscapes that include personal, cultural, and historical components.² Lisa Robertson, in *XEclogue* (1993), *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), and *The Weather* (2001), plays off the conventions of various literary constructions of place to articulate deterritorialized environments that blend the linguistic, horticultural, gendered, and political with naughty sex. For both poets, landscape is much more than local scenery: it is an intense performance of lyrical sensibility riven by historical events and cultural complexity.³

Peter Culley began to publish chapbooks with small local presses in the early 1980s; Lisa Robertson emerged a little later, toward the end of the decade. At this time, Language writing was *au courant* in the U.S. and Canada, poststructuralism reigned in the academies, and the Kootenay School of Writing (1985) had just been established in Vancouver as a local venue for the new avant-garde poetics. Culley and Robertson inherited from their elders the reflexivity which marked this second phase of the postmodern—acute awareness of linguistic, social, political, and cultural determinants of experience—and an attention to the “politics of poetic form” as Charles Bernstein was to phrase it famously.⁴ For these younger poets, epistemological skepticism and a distrust of the *merely* aesthetic was not a discovery or focus of their work, but a point of departure. In addition, the big commercial media

to which early Language poets⁵ had responded became for the succeeding generation an even more intense source of determination. Not only were their immediate predecessors focused on the inescapability of social interpellation, but new, denser forms of mediation were on the horizon in the shape of computer technology and the globalization of economics. Under such circumstances, lyric and landscape, person and place seemed to become simulacra. What appeared to be lost to the avant-garde as well as the mainstream of the 1980s and 90s was a way to publish the experiences of its constituents, and in fact even the concept of experience had been discredited in the poststructuralist critique of phenomenology.

Nonetheless, it is to the experience of person and place that Culley and Robertson return us, not as perceptual immediacy but rather description of the sensations and feelings of being-here. Lyn Hejinian's comments on personhood are relevant. She writes that if we consider person and place as inseparable, "the epistemological nightmare of the solipsistic self breaks down, and the essentialist yearning after truth and origin can be discarded in favor of the experience of experience".⁶ To this I would add that the nightmare of the over-determined, interpellated self might begin to break down too with presentations of "the experience of experience." To recognize one's embeddedness in a place that has been importantly shaped by impersonal historical events, and to acknowledge the epistemological impossibility of direct experience or authentic selves does not mean that person and place cannot be articulated, but rather that their status changes. Re-enter the lyric—a poetic voice more closely associated with personal feeling than with public stance. To turn to lyric is to let the poetic voice become small and personal, rather than large and public. But the twist in Culley and Robertson, as with contemporary others, is that this little voice sounds in a "landscape" that is really the whole of the writer's time-space milieu. This is what it means to render person and place inseparable: the contemporary lyric voice drags its historicity along with it. On one hand, the poems simply record the "experience of experience"; on the other, they give us a local and personalized view of a public geo-historical site.

In *Land Sliding*, a survey of Canadian landscape writing, William New remarks that, "The particular and local... do not exist in a cultural and historical vacuum; they derive from conventions—and while they can and do often re-record these conventions, whether for good or ill, they also counter and contend with them, *reclaiming continuously the power of reality from the presumptions of knowledge*".⁷ The significance of the poetic gesture we find in Culley and Robertson is that it points to another moment in this on-going contention for "the power of reality": it is not original, in the sense of announcing a new formal or cultural paradigm, but singular in its insistence on the specificities of person and place. If, in a commercial culture, a meaningful voice is denied to most people, if reality is not publicly negotiable even in the limited way of representative democracies, if it is instead the provenance of corporate boardrooms, government caucuses, or private research facilities, both the citizen and artist are effectively silenced. The publication of those small "r"

excluded realities becomes a measure of what the mainstream denies, destroys, forgets, or is simply not structured to acknowledge. Hence, when Culley walks us through the damaged landscapes around Nanaimo we get a distinctive and intimate, small “r” view of a place that has been roughly handled by the corporate and civil agents of global economics—all filtered through the poet’s eclectic tastes in opera, pop music, and German Romanticism. By a different method, Robertson also pulls the public and institutional into relationship with the personal and lyrical. Like a squatter, she inhabits and redecorates abandoned literary genres that have shaped our imagination of place. In the rank utopia of pastoral, she plants the “renovated flower” of a sexualized rhetoric; over the Roman ruins of epic, she tosses “Debbie’s stiff shirt”;⁸ in the meteorologically-inspired *Weather*, person and place blend as breath to wind. This is to do otherwise than expose the ideological façades of dominant social paradigms or perform the indeterminacy of language: it is to talk a lived-in reality back to the Big One. As nearly a century of radical art has shown us, cognitive liberation does not translate easily into public policy and art that relies on it for radical *caché* is beginning to wear thin. Robertson is blunter than I on this point: in “porchverse,” she writes that “the socius / of ‘le texte’ / is bullshit”.⁹ Certainly her purpose and Culley’s is to show us the social frames that shape lives and to attend to the endless possibilities for combining things that language provides, but it is also to sing the poet’s being-here—to insist on that specificity—and thus, defiantly, to reach again for the power of the real.

Notes

1 Lisa Robertson, “porchverse,” *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star, 2001), 69-78.

2 See Peter Culley, *The Climax Forest* (Vancouver: Leech Books, 1995).

3 See Lisa Robertson, *XEclogue* (Vancouver: Tsunami Editions, 1993); *Debbie: An Epic* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1997); and *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star, 2001).

4 See *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990), for a collection of essays from (mostly) American Language writers on politics and aesthetics.

5 For a survey of Language writing in its inaugural moments see the essays in Bob Perelman, *Writing/Talks* (Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985); *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale; Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984); *In The American Tree*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono, ME.: National Poetry Foundation, 1986); or Barrett Watten, *Total Syntax* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985). These collections, all from the 1980s, include much discussion of the poet’s relationship to mainstream culture and politics, and this is the kind of work that *precedes* that of Culley and Robertson. In 1985, for instance, a large conference at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design brought many American language writers to Vancouver for a lively few days of readings, discussions, and occasional battles with local poets. At this point, Culley was just emerging and Robertson not yet publishing.

6 Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 203.

7 W.H. New, *Land Sliding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 11. Emphasis mine.

8 Lisa Robertson, *Debbie: An Epic*, 1. 17.

9 Lisa Robertson, “porchverse,” *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star, 2001), 75.