



West Coast
WEST • COAST • LINE

THE SITELINES ISSUE

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West Coast

WEST • COAST • LINE

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Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic

Out of the lyric comes that sense of limit and boundary (enclosure) Wordsworth passed as transitory, Coleridge wasn't so sure. The subjected boundary seems to be voice, "right" voice, accessible voice, lowest-common-denominator voice. Racing that subjected site of voice means to use it or rough it up.

This split option, political for sure, materialized throughout my writing life, came up strong for me in an early 80s panel on "Writing in Revolution" with Margaret Randall, fresh from Nicaragua with collections of Sandanista women's stories told straight so the people would understand, and Nicole Brossard, fresh from Québécois lesbian-feminist wars with the *paterfamilias linguistica*—Randall saying the revolution will succeed on the common tongue of the people and Brossard saying there will be no revolution until that (male-based) common tongue is troubled into change. Since then the range of political possibility in poetic language has pretty much dwelled between those two poles. I know which one I opt for but I'm always a little bothered by those race writers who go for the other, that seemingly solid lyric subject ground I can't trust. I can't trust it since, for my generation, racing the lyric entailed racing against it; erasing it in order to subvert the restrictions of a dominating and centralizing aesthetic. Yet, I'm interested in how the colouring of the negotiations, with whatever thread of the inherited lyric, has consequence for a socially informed poetic (not a politics of identity but a praxis in language). Many of a younger generation of writers have had, it seems, a not entirely comfortable choice. The polarization of a poetics of resistance and poetics of accommodation that I have been familiar with, isn't a delineation necessarily attractive, it seems, for some younger writers. Social and cultural production has, in recent years, appropriated the figure of the racialized writer as a measure of containment and control. Thus, the praxis of a lyric poetic within the polarization I'm accustomed to has become

somewhat reconfigured as "cultural" practice has been discoursed into notions of production and consumption.

For example, Evelyn Lau, an outspoken opponent of politicizing race, has been fashioned as a "runaway" adolescent (ironically running from an "old world" Asian family into the arms of a new-world "multicultural" family), erotic and rebellious Chinese-Canadian. Even though the writing of Lau's that Walter Lew selected for his anthology of Asian-North American writing, *Premonitions*, uses the prose-poem stanza-graph (which is why I suspect he chose these pieces over other, more formally standardized poems), there is little of the advantage of syntactic disruption and unpredictability that the genre offers. Rather, we are firmly encoded in our reading into the unquestioned substance of a lyric subject paradoxically talking about "breaking through" but contained in a language that guarantees the walls of a familiar prose syntax (in this case the paragraph) will hold.

Hurt me, I say. The room washes somewhere between darkness and light, on the verge of breaking through. I want to break through, live on the side of light, the gathering voices, father, mother, home. As your fingers wring out oxygen I think I hear the voices calling, the walls bang together as if in a storm and the dark closes in. (in Lew 138)

Lau's use of such a recognizable specular "voice" is certainly not unique. She does, according to the dust-jackets of her books, speak with some rage against social hypocrisy. Yet the degree to which such rage becomes totalized by the codes it is written in can be witnessed in the production and use of her "Asian" voice (for example by the *Globe and Mail*) then, to diffuse and divide the race debate. That is, the subsumed lyric "I" continues, in Lau's case, to function, as it's supposed to, within a symbolic that demands subjection.

Such an assumed and inherited lyric poetic is practised by other writers in Lew's anthology, but this is also a collection that seeks consciously to drive a wedge into lyric's monism. Lew speaks of "diversity" in his editorial comments.¹ In another prose poem, one that by chance resonates with the content of Lau's piece, Brian Kim

Stefans registers an intrusion into that syntactically-privileged and spoken "I" of the paragraph by using the run-on/run-over sentence to resist the sureness of such a centre:

I can't get you out of my mind though you are so near my heart my spotted elfin an academy of tears stands before you though we have not yet begun to incite the shimmering of your visage when you disappear down an uncharted corridor and become enamel. For the fancy dresses and balls mean nothing to me the crinolines and bagpipes murderous calamities and foods that make you a man nor even the scholarships to health provided you not be there my lone consideration incredible virtue that you are. I mean nothing in the failing light of my incestuous macabre can ever replace you though there are a mother's promises oh please come back. (539)

This text both pushes against the centralizing magnetism of a controlling speaker as well as complicates the spoken in a fragmentary collage of objects and voice. The apostrophic "oh" at the end seems ironic alongside Lau's formulaic "I say." Different poetics and different politics? Stefans is the editor of *Arras*, a journal of experimental poetry and fiction. He is also mixed-blood, if that makes any difference.

Yet, the question of choice within these different poetics and different politics begs some consideration. An argument in defence of Lau's poetics is along the lines of a necessary mimesis of the other. A racialized poetics might for some writers necessitate the adoption of the dominant form of poetic "speaking" as a way of securing some platform of stability and complicity with power. (Or, as the case may be, as a critical ironizing. Dionne Brand, a black Caribbean-Canadian poet of identifiable innovative compositional technique has, for example, recently teamed up with the formally-conventional Adrienne Rich to collaborate on a movie about poetry and politics). Race, and its whiteness, as Michael Taussig reminds us, is as susceptible to "the mischief of reality's sensate skin to both actualize and break down, to say nothing of superseding universals"(144). To

what extent Lau's and Brand's use of the mimetic is mischievous perhaps needs to be scrutinized.

A more interesting and obviously self-conscious location of mischief and the lyric is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*. Again, Walter Lew has been instrumental in foregrounding this important text in both the anthology *Premonitions* and his own critical collage, *Dikte*. Cha's *Dictée* is a panoramic biotext of nation, race, and identity that explores a wide range of compositional possibilities as a way of confronting precisely who or what does speak from behind History's and Language's constructions. This book quite clearly takes on the containment of inherited form and knowledge through a mimetic portrayal of, as Taussig colours it, *The Golden Bough*. Cha organizes her text through a contestatory use of the classical western muses. All the muses are there except, as Shelley Wong points out in her very perceptive essay on *Dictée*, Euterpe, the muse of Music. Cha substitutes a muse she names "Elitere," the muse of Lyric Poetry. Wong's argument is that Cha does this as a means to critique the place of epic:

From the profane ground of the personal writing self, Cha proceeds to call down that which is deemed sacred and sacrosanct; the patriarchal cast of the Western epic tradition; the religious colonization of Korea; the male-centered narrative of Korean nationalism; monumentalist historiography....In using the lyric moment to critique the epic, Cha is not, however, looking to install the lyric as the preeminent mode of an oppositional poetics. To the contrary, *Dictée's* insistence on multiple subjectivities would seem to contradict any effort to enshrine a mode of literary production traditionally premised on a single, unified, autonomous consciousness or identity—that of the lyric "I." (117)

Thus in a section of a book camouflaged as "lyric poetry," we are hard put to find a pronoun. A few "you's" and "vu's" (French is used as a *punctum* in several ways in the book) but no transparent voiceness speaking its curtain of control over the language of the poem. Instead, Cha weaves rhythmically through the resonance of

"*aller*" and "*retour*": "She mimicks (sic) the speaking," as she says at the start of her book. Mischievous and unfaithful dictation and translation (see Wong 118-119). The words are dead from disuse, Cha chides, as she puns through her female speaker "*disease*."

If words are to be uttered, they would be from behind the partition. Unaccountable is distance, time to transport from this present minute.

If words are to be sounded, impress through the partition in ever slight measure to the other side the other signature the other hearing the other speech the other grasp.

...

If within its white shadow-shroud, all stain should vanish, all past all memory of having been cast, left, through the absolution and power of these words.

Covering. Draping. Clothing. Sheathe. Shroud.
Superimpose. Overlay. Screen.

Conceal. Ambush.

Disguise. Cache. Mask. Veil.

Obscure. Cloud. Shade. Eclipse. Covert. (132)

The form pulses before the mirror of composition, an echo of familiar poetic form, trying itself on, turning this way and that, unsettling the sureness of the poem's habit to situate itself with authority, authenticity.

Throughout *Dictée* we are treated to a continual shifting between prose and lineated poem. The changeup is quite constructive, since the prose-poem has become the device-of-choice for writers who wish to complicate the authority marginalizing voice. Even writers, like Lau, who avowedly avoid oppositional poetics, now utilize the substance of the prose poem as a kind avant-garde makeup. It seems to be, currently, one of the most popular methods of signaling a disquieting intent and content. Yet even within the variety and range of an innovative "prose" style, that lyric subject can only be troubled so much.

One of the most inventive and playful writers I know of in the prose poem is Jam Ismail. Jam's a mix—Chinese, Muslim, Indian, somewhat of a Pound scholar, half the year in Vancouver, half in Hong Kong, and so forth. One of her singular self-publications is *from the Diction Air*, a fascinating lyric and narrative text playing on dictionary entries that she qualifies, in her afterword, with some similar sense to Cha's confrontation with the cultural bosses:

i like to sweep the flat before i settle down to work. the lines of a page of dictionary often remind me of the lines of dust that never get into the pan, they stay on the floor. there are times i feel small dense print (especially the 13 volume *oxford dictionary*) as an arrangement of dust.

She is, of course, dexterous in that use of the shifted autobiographical pronoun to the third person and, in a piece titled "from kid inglish," featured in a recent issue of *West Coast Line* on Hong Kong art and writing, further uses the prose poem's penchant for self-parody to rif on the diasporic nature of identity:

: "didi" meant big sister (bengali), little brother (cantonese), DDT (english). to begin with, inglish had been at home, with cantonese & hindustani. one of the indian languages, the kid felt in bombay. which british hongkong tried to colonize. descended on all sides from the Idiosyncrasy, the kid disdained grammar class, refused to parse, opted to be remote parsee.

: at school wrote her first poem, *DAMON NOMAD* (damon nomad). & what mean while was writing her, what *nom de womb?* reverb with '47 (indian, pakistan), '48 (koreas), '49 (chinas, germainies), '54 (vietnams).

: "hey," he bellowed, pants down in quebec, "bring in some english mags, i can't shit in french!" claude nearly kicked him in the anglo. macaulay's minute & roosevelt's second unearthed in canadian library digs. chattel feared english had him in its grip. spooked for, pun-ish. (46)

The lyric subject in such writing doesn't disappear. In fact, the conditioning of the writing depends on its "poetic" presence (and distance). The proximity of that romantic autobiographical realism is still only deflected momentarily by a reading of syntactic and punctuative gesture, what my colleague Jeff Derksen has mentioned to me as the thematizing of language. Yet what is achievable here, I think, and surely not only momentarily for the racialized writer who holds onto the inherited lyric bag, like Lau, or punches it, like Ismail, is something of the characterization that Paul Smith makes of Barthes' sense of writing as

the process of language's constructing a momentary subjectivity *for* the human agent who always, by contestatory and resistant use and reception of language, emerges as the place where contradictory discourses are marked. (110-111)

The contradictory and confluent discourses of Harryette Mullen's poetry vis-à-vis lyric are both intense and exciting. What Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls the "stunningly lyrical voice" (back cover) of *Muse and Drudge*, Mullen's punning and witty takeoff on "mules and drugs" (74) is a hipply hyperbolic (back cover) intrusion into both lyric accessories and the fragility of his master's voice. The accoutrements of lyric are placed up front and in our face as Mullen riffs around the predictable/unpredictable materiality of the poem:

Sapphire's lyre styles
plucked eyebrows
bow lips and legs
whose lives are lonely too

my last nerve's lucid music
sure chewed up the juicy fruit
you must don't like my peaches
there's some left on the tree

you've had my thrills
a reefer a tub of gin
don't mess with me I'm evil
I'm in your sin (1)

The poem shadow-boxes both the lyric "I" and what it's dressed in, unrelenting in its confrontation with form and expectation, with the seemingly absolute presence of "a" poem:

handful of gimme
myself when I am real
how would you know
if you've never tasted (3)

...

just as I am I come
knee bent and body bowed
this here's sorrow's home
my body's song (80)

...

proceed with abandon
finding yourself where you are
and who you're playing for
what stray companion (80)

Parody, indeterminate logic, extreme playfulness—features that have come to be associated with the prose-poem—are here reshuffled back into the lined poem with incisive effect.

Yet some race writers work in the realization that the lyric poetic is as negotiable as the social. We might consider, for example, Mullen's acute attention to the social in all of her writing (the streets, the supermarkets, the homeless) as a conscious insertion of class and community into disjunctive poetics in order to wring from it a truer political vantage. Roy Miki's poem "history is we," written in the midst of his activism during the Japanese-Canadian redress negotiations, demonstrates the hesitant and "fear of trust" handshake with the culturally inherited "i" of the lyric, the forced complicity with the vocabulary:

fear of trust
& the tongue slides
over the dial

stations of the way
memorabilia to tuck away
where the line gets drawn

single purpose?

the whirlwind tour
the horizon looks
clear up here—

diffidence in the doorway
syllables in the drainage

fine night to be
standing in rain mist

crowds on yonge street
willing over celluloid

instant of what
am I saying
seeing etc etc

re
cognition

& the talk turns on
group vs individual

the cross of burden
i heard said

we is i
in the vocab
we is one

excuse me
i'm patient

the sky again
(blue) sky

& the inching
back home
(84-85)

This "inching" homeward through the artefacts of democracy, tongue sliding over the "diffident...syllables...[and] vocab" structured around an historically constituted "we," the "i" must be "patient" and bearing, aware of "where the line gets drawn." But can Miki's "re/cognition," even under a blue sky, become the "ignition" such a conscious poetic seeks to enact?

In *Colour. An Issue* we published a very quick and pushy prose-poem by Metis writer Marilyn Dumont. As an editor, I was encouraged by what appeared to be an unusual exploratory compositional stance. Many of the native writers and writers of colour I've been reading seem caught and contained, like Lau, in the more accessible conventions of the lyric. When Dumont's first book, *A Really Good Brown Girl*, came out, however, I was a little disappointed at even the moderate room given to the confessional or representational. Poems with lines like

'When I was five
the yard I played in
had a sky this colour,' I say 'what colour?' he says. (31)

seem to undercut the stylistic advantages Dumont is capable of in, say, a poem like "Leather and Naughahyde":

So, I'm having coffee with this treaty guy from up north and we're laughing at how crazy "the mooniyaw" are in the city and the conversation comes around to where I'm from, as it does in underground languages, in the oblique way it does to find out someone's status without actually asking, and knowing this, I say I'm Metis like it's an apology and he says, "mmh," like he forgives me, like he's got a big heart and mine's pumping diluted blood and his voice has sounded well-fed up till this point, but now it goes thin like he's across the room taking another look and when he returns he's got "this look," that says he's leather and I'm naughahyde. (58)

And, stylistically, the book covers a fairly wide range of composition. She uses the page, the line, the anecdote, lots of image, and, so, generally covers a number of possibilities. So why am I bothered that a young "race" writer should seem so "dilettantish" in her use of the poem, so "un"-intentionally aestheticized and politicized? Could it be, for Dumont, that even the recent avant garde poetics are as complicit in the hegemonic designs of form as are the more conventional? Could her lack of commitment to a singular poetic project, unlike the mimetic enactments of Lau and Brand, indicate some mistrust? She is, after all, a careful and intelligent writer. We might consider, here, Elaine Chang's notion of a "Politics of Equivocation." Judith Butler's observation that such ambivalence is a site of agency might be a useful position to consider:

Thus, there is an ambiguity of agency at the site of this decision...One decides on the condition of an already decided field of language, but this repetition does not constitute the decision of the speaking subject as a redundancy. The gap between redundancy and repetition is the space of agency. (129)

If this is the situation, Dumont, and others like her, would seem to participate in the use of a derivative formal innovation, not to trouble a dominant and inherited structure (social or poetic) but to

locate an "ordering intervention" (Clark 25) within a poetic that is intrinsically informative. That is, a racialized lyric, caught in the hinges of inherited poetic forms, might adopt an ambiguous regard to both lyric interference and lyric convention in order to recuperate, even, the agency of linguistic choice.

The question that seems to be surfacing here is whether the lyrically constituted speaking and spoken subject that is troublesome for some racialized writers is at all similar to the trouble it is for, say, Ron Silliman or Daphne Marlatt. Just as political? Do we need to examine, in this context, Hiromi Goto's observation that "choice is a position of privilege" (220)? What censorships are constructed in the "turbulences of an omnivorous fiction"?

Roy Kiyooka writes:

BELITTLED BY THE TURBULENCES OF AN OMNIVOROUS FICTION—

the harassed 'lyric' falters in a world of genetic-engineering and multi-national take-overs. an unremittingly, desacralized, human/bio/sphere trembles within its transparent skin. australian aborigine painter/shaman those with x-ray vision will tell you that all living creatures have that kind of see-through-skin and that's why they're depicted with their entrails hanging out. long before i said a single intelligible thing that could be quoted a lullabye cradled a delinquent fear sequestered in the coil of my pillowed ear.—i couldn't imagine 'anybody' in the world but mother and i. some of us move from place to place in search of that person with whom we can re-enact that first intimacy and as often as not never find her equivalent. others more fortunate never seem to have misplaced that initial covenant.—if i cup my ear i can almost hear my grandson murmuring at his mother's breast. she is singing him to sleep with a lullabye she enbibed with her own mother's milk: language begins with a suckling child. the first time i really hollered my lungs out—i wanted 'her' and 'anybody' else within earshot to know, how utterly bereft i felt penned-up in my crib without a tit to suck. now that i know how her bitten-words came to crease my own vernacular...

the small voice, some would call 'pipsqueak', lifts itself up by an act of incomparable lightness. let its 'etudes' season us with a pinch of salt. let even a flawed lyric speak out, against all that seems, furiously-fated. let a bountiful harvest of sea-weed apparel our naked genitalia. henceforth: the Gods on high will have to save their own faces from our conceits and indiscretion/s... un-diminished; the fine thread of an ancient lullabye weaves its way through, my own small thronging/s (295-6)

Note

1. "Previous anthologies have been either too small or conservative to convey the astonishing diversity and eloquence of new poetries spread out among numerous networks and poetics—both esoteric and activist, imagist and deconstructive, pidgin and purist, diasporic and Americanist, high literary and pop cultural" (Lew 575).

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On the long weekend of October 11-14, 1996, a group of some 25 writers got together for "Sitelines," an informal colloquium sponsored by *West Coast Line*. The event, loosely organized around the theme, "writing as a social practice," was facilitated by Erin Mouré, Ashok Mathur, and Fred Wah. It was designed as a "retreat" that would provide the locality and time for writers to reflect critically on their writing concerns and to share in direct personal ways the current questions informing their work. Our evolving talks covered a spectrum of issues, among them the social and political consequences of formal innovation, the place of critical work outside the academy, strategies for resisting oppressive cultural histories, and the uses (and the abuses) of subject formations. For our journal, this occasion functioned as a means of receiving feedback on our publications and suggestions for future directions. Just before we parted, we agreed to send—one year later—some work that had spun off "Sitelines." This issue offers our readers a version of what we received.

■

MARIE ANNHARTE BAKER is the author of two books of poems, *Being on the Moon* (Polestar) and *Columbus Coyote Café* (Moonprint) and currently an instructor at Langara College in Vancouver ... JODEY CASTRICANO recently completed her PhD at UBC and is working on a book-length poetry manuscript, "House of Sorrows" ... SUSAN CLARK lives in Vancouver where she edits *Raddle Moon* and co-edits *Giantess*. Her recent book is *Believing in the World: A Reference Work* (Tsunami). Her work in this issue comes from a work-in-process, "Bad Infinity" ... HEATHER FITZGERALD is managing editor of *filling Station* magazine in Calgary ... Peter Hudson guest-edited *North: New African Canadian Writing*, a special issue of *West Coast Line* (Spring 1997). He has just moved to Toronto to work on the editorial board of *Mix* ... KARLYN KOH is completing her PhD at SFU. An earlier version of "Yours Truly" was written for the forthcoming catalogue of "(Be)longing," a group show held at Gallerie Optica, Montréal, Spring 1997 ... Calgary-based writer ASHOK MATHUR is on the editorial collective of *Absinthe* magazine and co-editor of

disOrientation chapbooks. His contribution is excerpted from his forthcoming novel, *Once Upon an Elephant* (Arsenal Pulp). His work, creative and critical, focuses on issues of race theory and literature ... Photographer KAREN MOE, who provided the cover image, is a student at SFU. This is her first publication ... ERIN MOURÉ lives and works in Montréal. She recently published *Search Procedures* (Anansi 1996) and has just completed *A Frame of the Book* or *The Frame of a Book* to appear (with luck) in 1999 ... The texts by Vancouver-based poet MARK NAKADA are taken from a manuscript in process, "Dreaming Okinawa" ... SONIA SMEE's poems are part of a work in process, "Foraged Letters." She is now travelling in India ... JULIA STEELE has published work in a number of journals. She currently sojourns in Nelson BC ... JACQUELINE TURNER is a founding member of *filling Station* magazine in Calgary and has published a chapbook (*pArts of a wHole*) ... The essays by JEFF DERKSEN, FRED WAH, and ROY MIKI were presented together on a "Canadian Multiculturalism" panel at the Cross-Cultural Poetics Conference, University of Minnesota, October 18, 1997. DERKSEN is completing his PhD at the University of Calgary. His most recent book of poems is *Dwell* (Talonbooks); he also edited "Disgust and Overdetermination: a Poetics Issue" (*Open Letter*, winter 1998) ... WAH's latest book is *Diamond Grill* (NeWest). He teaches at the University of Calgary.