

The Texture of Moving in a Day: Dog Walks, Shit and Accessibility
An Interview with Lisa Robertson and Christine Stewart
Bronwyn Haslam and Mike Roberson

BH: I was interested in how you became interested in Virgil because it seems that however formative he is for the English canon, I never encountered Virgil in my five years of English courses.

LR: Through two different texts, and I can't remember which I encountered first. It was through the genre of eclogue. Frank O'Hara wrote some eclogues and Lady Mary Wortley Montague, the 18th-Century writer wrote these satirical poems called "City Eclogues". I was reading her letters and a biography and I was just tracking down as much as I could. I was fascinated and I'd never heard of an eclogue before. So I tried to find out what an eclogue was and that took me pretty immediately to Virgil's *Eclogues*. I was just reading Virgil's *Eclogues* as a back-up for my other reading, as a little side research. The *Eclogues* are pretty quick to read actually and they're also really pleasurable. I can't remember what edition I had; over the years I've collected a lot of different translations and editions but I just continued reading and next started in on the *Aeneid*. I had no plan on doing anything in particular with it, but it ended up that I fell into Virgil via the 18th century.

BH: That's where I encountered Virgil in school too mostly—in Restoration and 18th-Century literature. He was used to introduce the georgics, to introduce the eclogues.

LR: Exactly, because he's framed as being the father of these various genres. When I was writing *The Weather* I was reading the *Georgics*.

MR: I've been working with *The Men*. What prompted that text is a kind of marginalia around reading—is it not? Or if not marginalia it's sort of symptomatic of a reading process. This seems like what you're describing.

LR: Well I guess all of my work is the marginalia of reading and I don't think *The Men* is any more so.

MR: I just want to get at that process that you're working from. In other words, what prompts you to go to Virgil for example, or what prompted you to go to the 18th-Century?

LR: Pleasure!

MR: So are you prompted by a reading for pleasure and out of that your own concerns come and constellate around that in a particular way?

LR: That sounds like a pretty good description. We all read in different ways for different reasons, you know, even on any given day. So some stuff I'll be reading just because I want to find out what's behind something else I've read. Just out of some sense of historical, or generic, genre-based, curiosity. Some things I read just because I think I ought to, like how can you not

have read Rousseau? It became apparent to me at a certain point—I just had to read it or else how continue to write and behave and think as if I were a writer? I undertake some reading just to cover bases, and then it often turns into something else. But I very seldom begin reading with a sense that this reading is already for a certain project. The reading is just always going on, of course, and then, projects kind of...

MR: Coalesce?

LR: Yes, except at first it's not even a project. It's some scrawlings in a notebook or some little minor phrase or something that sticks in your head and only retrospectively becomes a project. Or it doesn't. I mean when I was writing *The Men* it was never framed in my mind as a project at any point. It was just these weird poems I was writing in my notebook. And I didn't talk about them or discuss them and I never gave any talks on that work. And then only after having written, I don't know, fifty pages of this I started thinking 'Maybe, this is something,' and then started trying to shape it into something.

BH: [To Christine] How about yourself? The same question could be applied to you.

CS: [From] *Taxonomy* emerged out of me loving those etchings in the 1926 *Webster* [Dictionary] and playing around with ideas of definition and a diction—reworking a dictionary project—very much in terms of pleasure. Then *Pessoa* [‘s *July*] was reading him and then locating other voices and pulling them in. What I'm working on right now is different because it's reading a place. I'm interested in this place that I have to encounter everyday. And so this new project is quite different for me. It's reading but it's not the page per se. It's an actual physical location that just started things off, that just scared the shit out of me and I had to encounter it everyday. It's this bridge I had to get under. So this is a different process but usually you're dialoguing with a text, you're speaking and it's speaking to you.

LR: When you say a particular place you're engaging with do you mean Edmonton or do you mean being a professor now so you're on a campus?

CS: I mean the actual space that I'm dealing with is a section under a bridge that I ride under. It's in the ravine and I'm thinking about strangeness and estrangement. I think something happens to you when you move into a new space, where you become something really other than what you thought. I'm interested in even what happens to your body in these spaces that are utterly alien to you and you kind of become this hysterical perceiver. It's really tiring.

LR: You're describing the past 5 years of my life.

CS: It's a kind of madness. Because you're so attuned to everything nothing coats you and I'm interested in that. It just happened to be focusing on underneath this bridge and being female and being new in a city. I have no idea what's there and I have to engage with it. It was like a mode of survival. It was like 'Okay, I have to turn this into something else' so I started dialoguing with this bridge.

MR: Is this the “Trees of Periphery”? And does this come out of your reading of Vico?

CS: I was reading Vico. I was reading Lisa. I was reading Meredith Quartermain, Catriona Strang, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Lissa Wolsak, and I started doing my thesis on all these women and it ended up being Vico, Spinoza, and Lisa and Catriona and I just couldn't add three hundred more pages. I could have but it would have killed me and so I focused it. But the "Trees of Periphery" comes out of me reading Vico, reading them, the experience of writing the thesis.

MR: Okay, so that's something other than this experience of the bridge in Edmonton...

CS: Yes, but it's interesting because the trees are so different in Edmonton...

LR: Last weekend I finally got a tree identification handbook for California because it had been bugging me for awhile that I couldn't name any of these trees.

CS: Or like Rosa [Lisa's dog] doesn't know...

LR: . . . I just brought my dog from France to Oakland. She's afraid of certain foliage; she jumps backwards, cringes and yelps in fear at the sight of certain foliage. Some foliage makes different sounds you start to realize. A dog's got no cognitive capacity to know that this is a different continent, a different climate. All she knows is that she's loaded into this weird plastic kennel and ended up somewhere where trees are scary.

CS: It's interesting you talking about sounds because in Edmonton you hear the grass rattle. Like Vancouver, or the coast, sure, you know the sounds of grass but it's wet, sliding, moist—I guess, a damp acoustic—and then you're in the ravine on a dry dry, cold day, you can hear these little tiny seed pods rattling against each other and you're like 'what is that'? It's just everything shifts just by virtue of the temperature or the humidity and there's this kind of cellular response to your environment...

LR: It's affecting your body. One thing that happened when I moved from Vancouver to Paris with another dog-- and you walk your dog everyday, sometimes for hours-- I realized in moving to Paris that a lot of Vancouver is not paved. After I moved to Paris I destroyed my feet. My feet were not used to walking for hours a day on urban paving stone. It's not even asphalt: It's stone. You know, some damage happened to my feet and I started having to get special things to put into my shoes. So you move somewhere else and your body's responding to it in this immediate way and you also learn something retroactively: Vancouver isn't paved, necessarily. You're not thinking about that. You're just walking your dog or whatever. And then, of course the dog is also experiencing the pavement; my dog wouldn't take a shit for days because he wouldn't take a shit on pavement. For him that was filthy. And so I had to find little patches of grass. There'd be a little courtyard with a little bit of weeds in the corner where I could take him so he could defecate because he would not do it on pavement. You're kind of experiencing this...change—environmental or just change in place—in such weird ways that you would never have anticipated.

CS: I've been reading Merleau-Ponty. And I'm just trying to find a way to read that.

LR: Yeah we're all theorizing *change* and reading interesting texts about *change*. So much of what I've been doing in the past twenty years of my life is actually trying to reach descriptions and ways of annotating change and then it becomes almost an aesthetic project. But then you reach points in your life where change is breaking your heart...

CS: Or could kill you! You know, the ravine! Like if you got lost in the ravine--that's the urgency of the environment.

LR: You get thrown back on your discourse: what is my theorizing and my aestheticizing? After a word like *change* has become a topic aesthetically and intellectually, you have your bibliography of change and you can perhaps speak with a smidgen of erudition in certain situations and cite this or that, then, suddenly your fucking feet are broken and that's *change*.

BH: In your essay on "*The Weather: A Report on Sincerity*" when you brought up Luke Howard's descriptions of naming clouds or his system of taxonomy of clouds, what really solidified that was that his system could account for change whereas the other ones couldn't.

LR: Yes, he was talking about kinds of change and modification taxonomically.

MR: This sense of how a different landscape, a different space, affects your aesthetics—you have to account for it in your writing—it makes me think of De Certeau in the sense of the way you navigate a place and it has a sort of rhetorical bent to it, and so we get into our ruts of movement. Or we get into a new place and that *says* something—the way we maneuver in a place says something—in terms of your practice, your writing, or as he would say, the practice of everyday life.

LR: It's a survival and it enters writing, thinking about writing, in that sense.

BH: In some ways I feel like that's the approach I've been having towards your [Lisa's] work, with *XEclogue*. It was one of the first times I had to read one of your books for an academic course—I mean, everybody told me—Christian [Bök], Robert [Majzels]—told me, you have to read Lisa Robertson, like this is a *must*...

LR: What a drag!

BH: It wasn't at all! I went out and I got the books and I thought they were gorgeous, as intellectually sophisticated as they are—there's an *immediate* compelling quality to them, but I didn't know what to do with them. I didn't know how to read them, and I think that's a lot of what you [Christine] talk about in your "Welcome" [to her dissertation], that "Even a willing reader may need a way in." And I guess the point where I came to a sort of breakthrough, where I finally felt like I was getting somewhere—because you've got those wonderful notes at the back of *The Weather* that give your sources—was when I went back to Virgil and to his *Eclogues*.

LR: It was pretty straightforward once you went back to those sources?

BH: I was able to account for change that way—to be able to read your process, to read what was being said from the changes that had been made. In some sense I’m reading *Debbie* in a similar way. I’m reading it alongside the *Aeneid*, and I had a moment of panic, I guess, when I read your “Welcome” [to Christine] because you say, *Debbie* is not meant to be spliced and documented, and in a way that’s very much what I’m doing, and then I went to Robert and he said, “No, no, what you’re referring to there is the typical close reading”...

CS: ...within an academic environment—and for me that was agony. You know, we grew up within a really anti-academic environment, a lot of writers in Vancouver did—and you know that’s changing—but there I was, bringing these writers into this academic situation, making people talk about them, which you probably experienced on some level as well. I’m not necessarily saying that close reading is wrong— what I wanted to say with my “Welcome” is that this is just one way of reading them, and there are so many others. So the fact that you’re doing mapping, I think that’s great.

BH: I was a little curious about how you [to Lisa], feel about it too, for somebody to go back and map your process. In your essay on *The Weather*, in some ways, you exposed that. I can’t imagine how I would feel as a writer if somebody went back and mapped my process.

LR: In my imagination there’s no particular way that I wish or intend for people to read. Simply that people are reading it at all, in any way, seems somewhat miraculous, so my sense is , go to it. But more specifically the part of your question about methods and uncovering, that’s something I have a huge curiosity about in terms of other people’s work—I mean, how did she do that? So I identify with the desire to do that and I can understand that you see something and it’s an interesting object that you know is pleasurable, in whatever way, so you want to see how it’s made. That seems like a really normal reflex to me. And at the same time, whatever the meaning—of the methods and process and the stolen and invented and patched together parts and so forth I use to write my various books—the meaning of them for me, of undertaking those processes, was quite emotional really. You could replicate my process but it would become immediately your own process. So I don’t feel like there’s some sort of intimacy of writing, or secretiveness, or occulted aspect of writing that needs to be kept occult whatsoever, because it’s all just radically available and each person experiences and makes shifts and tinkering as they will.

BH: Because you don’t make it secret; there are those notes.

LR: I don’t really know why I put those notes in. Probably just because I thought those texts were so interesting. But at the same time you asked a little earlier about the relation of *The Weather* to Virgil, and even though I wrote this big long thing about texts at the back, I don’t think I mentioned Virgil’s *Georgics* in the notes. It wasn’t because I was trying to hide that, but maybe I was, in a way. At the time I was writing *The Weather* people were reading my work and it was starting to be discussed and represented in various other discourses. So I come into the consciousness of being perceived as a writer in a wider public, way outside of my intimate network of friendships—like with Christine, Catriona. At that point I was a little bit self-conscious about being perceived and I thought ‘well, I don’t have to show all the cards.’ I’m not into occulting anything but at the same time I felt why reveal everything ...

MR: I find it interesting that you use that word, that your work is very *available*, because in a certain way, the additional source texts you add—some of those accompanying texts that might be claimed as the “poetics” versus the “poetry” of the book—there isn’t a change in voice that you’ll often see between text and paratext. But given that, as a reader, in one way you have to contend with that in very intellectual ways and, dare I say, even highly academic ways. This is one of the things I’m curious about with so much contemporary work, particularly work that gets read in this department or in the academy itself, that there is a sense in which it isn’t necessarily “available”...

CS: In the sense that it’s not accessible to the readership?

MR: Accessible, right, and this is an argument that has been going on a long time, so I’m curious about how both of you negotiate that, how you see that you’re working with or against that. I think it’s a really big question, particularly when, as you say, you were coming from a place as young writers who weren’t academics but, now that’s where so many writers are going, that’s where the jobs are and the time allowances to do your own writing.

CS: And pay your rent...

MR: Very important things, but at the same time, that’s where the readership is also for a big part. I mean do you see that, Lisa, for example, is there a sense in which poetry’s readership is becoming more insular, that it’s becoming highly academic?

LR: No, I feel the opposite. I’ve had the opportunity, since around the time *XEcolgue* came out, since around 1993, to travel a lot, and to read and present my work in many different contexts: in rural public libraries in central England, at Cambridge University, at queer bookstores in minor cities, on anarchist radio shows in London—a lot of different contexts. I don’t go from English department to English department. I’ve had the luck to be circulating now between four countries, because my work is now being read and translated and published in France. So who reads it, and how, is constantly changing. A lot of young queer women like my work and they are *not* in academic settings. I can look at that as a readership. And here I am, an aging straight woman. It’s not an identification thing. They’re finding something *in the text*. The term “accessibility” gets used as a disciplinary, almost judicial criteria, I feel, and I think that—well, there are a couple of different ways I address this because I do constantly get asked about questions of accessibility-- and it’s only ever academics who ask me about this—because they’re super guilty, or something? Young queer girls from Williamsburgh, New York are not asking me why my work is not accessible. My work is complex, but so is all of culture, so is quotidian life. Every single person has a whole range of skills, of how to read and intersect and deal with complexity. Life is not simple, in any setting, and so I’m interested in appealing to readers who love complexity. And I think that’s what people see in my work. It’s not coded for a certain readership and I take it as a given that this reading is happening at all levels. Within the quotidian, there are complex sets of skills just for reading, negotiating daily life, that go unrepresented. I think that the question of accessibility, as it’s used as an aesthetic judgmental criteria, is related to the framing of markets, and that it has to do with trying to contain aesthetic and culture-making activity within certain market definitions of exchangeability. I think that,

within this system of the expansion and globalization of markets, the products that move within these global markets are more and more delimited, more and more defined, more and more categorized. There are kinds of things we're supposed to want and those things are accessible, right? But, who is profiting from their accessibility? Fewer and fewer people, I think, and I feel this false socio-political ethical stance within some academic cultural reading and work. I feel like it's very misguided, because it's absorbing market imperatives. It's absorbing the structure of global capital, basically, and it's more about limiting the shapes of appearance, of appearing, in terms of practices, objects, conversations. And just about everything happens outside of those delimitations, but the political economy behaves as if that is not so, as if life occurs only within the official systems of exchange which benefit certain classes and populations and races and so forth. But I really don't give a shit about accessibility, and for those reasons. I've had the good luck to meet readers of my work in lots of different settings. They're not concerned about accessibility either. They're relating to reading on the level of micro-pleasures and micro-rejections. That's what interests me. But, if I were ever going to write a doctorate (which I don't intend to do because it's just too hard for me) I think that I would try to analyze this notion of accessibility and how it's masquerading as a socially conscientious ethics. But, I don't feel that everybody that's *using* this accessibility language is evil, not by any means.

MR: The notion of ethical, or the danger of being kind of unethical, on either side of it, is interesting personally: the ethos of poetry or really what Joan Retallack calls a "poethics," that poetry remain in the world and it remain active and be active and in hands and be doing something, right? There's the danger, there's always that lurking notion of oddness, that poetry makes nothing *happen*. I'm curious if you see your work, Lisa, working against something that's reifying or something that's trying to be very microscopic and keep things accessible. Do you think of your work in terms of ethics in that way? Or you, Christine?

CS: Yes, ethical—maybe in the Spinozan sense that you're working or attempting to work along some kind of horizontal plane, interested in the affects and affections of the relations that one creates and needs and constitutes and configures so that, in simply being, one would want to be ethical. And if you view your writing as everyday practice, as a way of existing in the world, as a way of reading, that that be ethical. Not in the sense that it's out there affecting great social change, no, that's not something that I think is realistic or even particularly honest. But, in the sense that we are constituted—and this is to go back to Spinoza—that we are ontologically democratic and that our writing practices might reflect that, I really like that notion, that there are ways (ready to take place) that one can move towards, making more positive connections than not. Teaching, writing, breathing, whatever. Walking your dog. And to take it to the extent where it's this radical act—maybe it could be—maybe it's a radical act by not being a radical act, by being constitutive, daily.

LR: By not claiming a superior stance for its procedures and outcomes...

CS: Absolutely...

LR: There's a difference between claiming some sort of politically transformational outcome for fragmented, asyntactic writing habits and framing what you're doing in terms of daily being, how you're interacting with your neighbours, your dog, your books...

CS: The morning air, whatever...

LR: The texture of moving in a day. A site where whatever could be construed as an ethics is various and real.

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Coach House Books has just published **Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip**; previous books include *The Men* and *The Weather*. She lives in Oakland California.

Christine Stewart is from Vancouver and currently writes, teaches and researches poetry and poetics in the English and Film Department at the University of Alberta. Her books include *The Trees of Periphery* (above/ground 2007), *Pessoa's July: or the months of astonishments* (Nomados 2006), and *Taxonomy* (West House Press 2003).