

NEOLIBERALISM AND LITERARY DISCOURSE: COLLECTIVITY, AGENCY AND THE KOOTENAY SCHOOL OF WRITING

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Founded in 1984, the Kootenay School of Writing collective formed as a response to the BC Social Credit (Socred) government's Restraint Program and the closure of David Thompson University Centre (DTUC). While this act appears to be, and was, a clear political response to the Socred's austerity budget and oppressive policies, the school's political mandate or agenda—if one ever existed—is much harder to identify or define, as it was never really articulated. Collective members, current board members, and former collective members have varying opinions concerning what was going on at the KSW over the years beyond the workshops, readings and discussions of poetry and poetics. This dialogue is readily found in interviews with former collective members, including Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy's interview with Jeff Derksen in *Poets Talk*, Kate Eichhorn's interview with Lisa Robertson in *Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics*, and Donato Mancini's interview with Colin Smith in *Open Letter's* recent "Kootenay School of Writing" edition. The question on class politics and the KSW is also directly tackled in Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden's anthology *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*, though some of the information in the book's introduction is later contested by Butling in an article "Writing as Social Practice: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology," published in *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*. Derksen also approaches this question in his essay "KSW in the Expanded Field: Retrofitting and Insider Knowledge," recently made available in *Annihilated Time: Poetry and Other Politics*. If there is a common ground in all of these articles, it is an agreement that, yes, there was a politics, but not really, or they were not necessarily overt. Thus, whether or not the school had a political mandate in its early years, an unspoken agenda, or a vision at all, and, whether or not this agenda had anything to do with a class-based politics, is a difficult issue to approach, but

one that requires revisiting, particularly because the KSW currently finds itself amid social, political and economic circumstances which mimic the conditions that gave rise to the collective in the first place. In both instances, funding to postsecondary education and the arts were/are subject to major cutbacks. The Socred and current BC Liberals' neoliberal agendas both redirected funds to assist corporate interests in the facilitation of spectacle—first Expo 86, and recently the 2010 Olympics. In 1983/84, the sudden closure of DTUC put students and faculty in a precarious position where they were forced to disperse, where the students were to complete their degree under the University of Victoria or not at all, while the faculty had to find or create new jobs. Likewise, the current cutbacks to postsecondary institutions in BC coupled with the major funding cuts in the arts have forced KSW members into new material circumstances that result in a shifting, relocating, restructuring,¹ and a reconsideration of the school's budget, in order to keep the collective active. Furthermore, similar to the Socred restraint budget of the early 80s, the current funding cuts are an attack on leftist ideology: DTUC was a liberal arts school known for socialist advocacy;²

- 1 The January 2009 intention of maintaining cell-style groups that would "individually" work on projects, but "collectively" make up the KSW, has undergone mutations that have returned the collective to a more typical (actual) collective structure. The inclination to pull together as a group of people who have similar interests and face similar material circumstances, fostered by our growing relationship as a collective, was difficult to resist. The funding cuts did, however, encourage us to think about the ways in which we can collaborate with other organizations to continue activity—i.e. most recently, the People's Co-op Bookstore, and W2 Community Media Arts.
- 2 Barnholden and Klobucar write that the university's "progressive agenda and reputation for radical politics and art, ... must have seemed ... doubly threatening as both a hotbed of leftist thought and an important source of the decadent 'liberal' accesses that had permeated education throughout the 1960s and 1970s" (6-7).

likewise, the arts and humanities in BC universities have taken the brunt of the cuts, and the schools known for their leftist sympathies, namely Simon Fraser University and University of Victoria, have had to make the largest accommodations. This trend in cuts to postsecondary funding pervades Canada and is coupled with national funding cuts to arts—such as Harper’s new rules for journal and magazine funding which makes all publications with an annual circulation of under 5000 (that is, the ones that need it) ineligible for funding through the Department of Canadian Heritage. Thus, this has generated a situation for the KSW, and other arts organizations, that reinvigorates attention to politics (and possibly class), and requires responsive action in order to address this neoliberal attack on the arts.

This means—if only from a subjective angle, though this sentiment is shared among some other members—that the KSW’s existence in Vancouver, and in BC at large, necessitates a politics if it desires to address this oppression. My intention, here, is to examine the often unidentified politically subversive activity of the early KSW, despite that some members propose that there was not an explicit political agenda or deliberations of political intent. I seek to identify a class (albeit also a non-class) based political agenda amid a terrain of dialogue by veteran and former collective members, often founders, who resist this definition. In order to achieve this, this paper uses a theory that accounts for collective resistance despite that KSW members were not necessarily articulating one. Thus, I seek to show how the KSW inadvertently participated in a larger cultural phenomenon, one which Antonio Negri cites as the development of the socialized worker,³ in order to resist neoliberalism

3 The socialized worker is a social subject whose production and productive value is inherent in communication, and who recognizes that communication empowers the subject, providing agency and ownership of production.

and re-appropriate agency that was expropriated by the biopolitical⁴ mechanisms of neoliberalism in the 1980s.

The concept of biopolitics, as discussed by Hardt and Negri, is here used to compliment Negri’s discussion of the socialized worker, where the socialized worker—the worker whose means of production depends upon communication and collectivity—finds him/herself without agency and alienated from being; this occurs as communicative capitalism constructs the illusion that the subject is an autonomous being who produces capital for him/herself, rather than surplus value for the biopolitical economy. The communicative capitalist sphere—as recently discussed by Jodi Dean in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*—is the particular aspect of the biopolitical that merges the two illusions of democracy and free market capitalism: where modes of communication produce and confine the social subject into the cycle of the reproduction of these very conditions. Dean notes that “values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies. Ideals

If communication is controlled by the state or by capitalist entities, then the subject lacks agency and is alienated from its means of production. When the socialized worker recognizes that language and communication constitute its being, it seeks to reappropriate its agency that has been expropriated by the state and capitalism, by reconstituting its production in collective communities and thereby empowering itself and other subjects.

4 “The great industrial financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities. They produce agentic social relations, bodies, and minds—which is to say, they produce producers. In the biopolitical sphere, life is made to work for production and production is made to work for life. It is a great hive in which the queen bee continuously oversees production and reproduction. The deeper the analysis goes, the more it finds at increasing levels of intensity the interlinking assemblages of interactive relationships” (Hardt and Negri 32).

of access, inclusion, discussion, and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications” (22-3); however, this also means that the social subject is subjected to a capitalist system that functions through the subject’s necessary need to communicate. Hardt and Negri outline the inevitability of our participation in this system:

The fact is that we participate in a productive world made up of communication and social networks, interactive services, and common languages. Our economic and social reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by co-produced services and relationships. Producing increasingly means constructing cooperation and communicative commonalities.” (302)

Nonetheless, in *The Politics of Subversion* Negri outlines the development of the social subject who resists the expropriation of his/her communicative networks when s/he becomes aware that autonomous, but also collective, communicative existence is threatened by capitalist subsumption. This social subject may be unaware that s/he participates in this resistance, and often refuses any form of imposed identification or classification that attributes his/her actions to external class based analogies.⁵ This resistance becomes subversive.

For Negri, subversion arises with reappropriated communicative intelligence in collectivity. His theory proposes that when the

social—intellectual—subject recognizes that his/her communication is subject to capitalist dogma, and, furthermore, that capitalist enterprises control the modes and content of communication in order to generate capital and surplus value (for the capitalist state rather than the subject), the subject resists this subjugation and seeks for spaces of agency outside of this system. When the intellectual subject—rather than the intelligent subject, or, the subject possessing intellect who, as Gramsci identifies, merely reiterates information in pedantry—realizes the formation of communicative and collective networks outside of the capitalist determination, then subversive power emerges. According to Negri “[t]his subversion is a subversion of all existing structures, or rather, of all those that are aimed at exploitation ... directly or indirectly. Subversion is the destruction of the violence that is inherent in exploitation and which runs through society, indistinctly, massively and terribly: subversion is countervailing power” (59).

In this model, collectivity is necessary for subversion. The KSW, as a collective that emerged out of resistance to the Socred’s agenda, is this theory in praxis. The school’s formation responded to the state’s attempt at dismantling the discourse at the university, while it also formed around a shared—literary—discourse of its own. According to Klobucar and Barnholden, the KSW was equally a response to a neoliberal agenda as it was to oppressive institutionalized form of academic literary discourse:

Where traditional art institutions promoted ideas of cultural standards, KSW writers saw only cultural elitism. What motivated the school’s formation was not a specific aesthetic vision, but rather one that specifically linked cultural orthodoxy with a ruling class’s hegemonic influence over a society’s art and literary production. To writers of KSW, most institutions of education and culture

5 Laclau and Mouffe also discuss this in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where they suggest that the externally articulated identity inevitably alienates the social subject from that identity (which accounts for the difficulty in mobilizing populations of workers under class-based identifications in late capitalism) because the subject’s identity is always exterior to it and, moreover, the identity always differs from that produced by the social subject through his/her own use of language.

demonstrated little save the ruling class's privilege to determine aesthetic and moral principles within society. By contrast, the poetics of KSW emerged from the ruins of privilege, from a marginalized position in society originating in language itself. (2)

Pauline Butling reaffirms this in “Writing as Social Practice” where she notes that “the restraint program provoked an articulate class politics; many KSW writers began to explore the links between the social/economic marginalization of the artist and class oppression” (86). Yet, in “KSW in the Expanded Field” Derksen qualifies this development as a “coincidence”—for example the development of class based writing in Derksen’s work, in particular, arose from the influence of Tom Wayman at DTUC, on the other hand, the restraint budget functioned as a catalyst in an already politically conscious environment—thus he hesitates to “attach an agency to the past when one was not articulated at that time” (290), despite that class based writing is an articulation of agency. Derksen’s qualification is an important one when trying to understand the politics of the early KSW, as he marks the difference between the political actions of the KSW versus politically motivated strategizing and the formation of a mandate: “With optimistic hindsight, I would say that KSW was not a step toward the organization of a political action, but that it was a political action, no matter how limited by a constitutive outside” (290), that is to say the KSW embodied a politics by virtue of its organization.

These embodied politics, which were largely class based, partly developed because the survival of the KSW depended upon the ability for members to collect welfare—in shifts—in order to maintain administration for the collective at crucial times (which can be seen as a subversive act in and of itself, as it relocates tax dollars to replenish a discourse that the government attempts to dismantle). In this way, the KSW was able to sustain itself.

Without the collective effort of “welfare-shifting,” which was possible because of shared identity and ideology, the KSW would have never articulated its role as an experimental, innovative (de)centre for poetry, and a living example of the potentiality of collective will in the Canadian literary community. Butling notes that the attitude toward collectivity in the KSW was indicative of a shift in the identity from monad poet to a collectively constituted being who is engaged in art practice: “[g]one is the romantic notion that outsider status is a necessary prerequisite for creative activity” (86). Not only is “outsider status” not necessary, but the romantic isolated poet (whose efforts are not in the service of capital but in the service of an artistic ideal, which would be subsequently expropriated by capital) cannot withstand neoliberal effort to rid the social sphere of artistic activity—this subject will submit to expropriation or be nullified.⁶ Therefore, this poet must work within a larger community for an implicit purpose that is not individualistic. The monad poet cannot sustain himself, he cannot reappropriate his/her productive power alone. Hence, it was necessary for the KSW to possess a collective structure; and, furthermore, as a collective outside of the function of monetary capital accumulation, the early collective engaged in a redistribution of power and thereby reappropriated the agency that was expropriated by state-capitalism while producing artifacts and knowledge—through language—opposed to the neoliberal agenda. Thus, because this reappropriation is dependent on collectivity, the

6 A poignant example of expropriated poetic practice was recently witnessed by the entire world at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics Opening Ceremony; where slam poet Shane Koyzane—upholding romantic notions of nationalism—delivered one of the most sickening displays of cliché reproduction and commodity-advertisement-reiteration when he took on the persona of “Joe Canada” and called for a Canadian pride that could be identified through the proclamation (once uttered in the Molson Canadian commercial) that we “say Zed, not Zee,” among other trivialities.

members of the early KSW had to have recognized, on some level, that their collective autonomy rested in the command over communication and language in general, via poetry. Robertson addresses this through two angles in her interview with Eichhorn. Early in the interview she remarks that there is a unique quality to the Canadian poetry community, particularly Vancouver, because its development is a reflection of the political environment and the subject's relationship to that environment: In Canada "experimental practice has been a much more contested terrain—there are people coming at it from an extremely Marxist perspective or from a feminist perspective or combination of those. Other people come at it from a postcolonial perspective. They're inventing ways to innovate in language that reflects and analyses their own political experience" (368). Robertson also suggests that the KSW, as a non-institutionalized writing collective that formed around a shared interest in language and literature, produced a reassessment of the subject's relationship to language—that is, the way language is used and the purpose thereof: "the difference between coming into writing within that fundamentally hierarchical structure and entering at the level of collective labour has got to be doing something to your attitude toward language" (375).

Still, for the KSW it had less to do with using language as an overt political tool—for example, much of Negri's ethnographic evaluation comes from his experience in the revolutionary efforts of the *Autonomia*, a collectivist group of collectives who used the manipulation of language to mislead, distract and disorient repressive state power—instead, the KSW understood language as their unifying cause:

What held KSW writers together has less to do with specific social ideals or shared notions of the communitarian good, than a critical sense of language itself as a prime constituent of community in general. In

other words, community operates here as an effect of language, rather than the other way around, as more traditional writing and art scenes might assess. To define or even imagine a sense of community without proper consideration of the language used within it risked confusing shared social values with ideology. (Klobucar and Barnholden 5-6)

Yet, even for Barnholden and Klobucar the line between what was active class politics and what was a product of their shared desire to teach, distribute, and disseminate language/literature is a blurry one. For example, in one instance the editors note that the KSW "never claimed to be a visionary organization in the leftist, or any other ideological tradition" (33), moreover, the "school's primary political concerns focused instead on whether language, in art or writing, could effectively displace a system that works for the few at the expense of so many," an activity which is, on the other hand, inherently left. Further on, the editors bring attention to the KSW's recognition of the effective power inherent in language structures and communication: "Language as a form of symbolic power has always been central to the ideological structures within modern capitalism, a relation that few KSW writers take for granted; for them, class struggle begins at a linguistic level before other, more material strategies can even be contemplated" (40). Barnholden and Klobucar's introduction thus conveys the impossibility of making claims regarding any overarching political intent of the KSW.

An inability or reluctance to identify one's collective action as subversive or antagonistic to capitalist hegemony is a symptom of capital. In capital's attempt to "break up productive society" (Negri 136), it must consistently seek out "singularities" (autonomous movements of collectivity, as the subject necessarily sustains him/herself through collective communication) in

order to stop and/or expropriate them. Capitalism's dependence on these expropriative acts makes it predisposed to resistance, as the socialized worker necessitates agency⁷ for his/her existence: "these singular moments, although detached from the unity of the socialized labour process and from communicative cooperation (sometimes ghettoized), manage to produce an effective resistance. [Socialized workers] do not know a reconstructive project, but neither do they know—far less accept—the capitalist project" (137, my emphasis). Ergo, the communicative intelligence in the school's collectivity was inherently subversive, regardless of whether or not the early KSW articulated a class politics or an explicit political agenda (pre- or post- language poetry affiliated).

Yet, a class politics was, actually, often articulated and also actively pursued. For example, when asked how Wayman influenced his writing, Derksen notes that there was an objective to "get workers to write about their working class experience using this short [i.e. poetry], handy form, which didn't cost money" (Poets Talk 127). He further indicates that this form can be used as a "literary tool" since it "doesn't require a high degree of literacy," and that the school even "had a workshop on that at the Split Shift conference." Much of this was aimed at recreating the relationship between the working class and working class intellectuals, which

7 If, and when, biopolitical capitalism subsumes all spaces of agency and successfully prevents the articulation of new spaces of agency, capitalism falls into crisis. In times of economic crisis, socialized workers relocate spaces of agency in order to release themselves from capitalist oppression, thereby recreating productive forces from which they are not alienated in order to sustain themselves while engaging in leisure activities. Capitalism accordingly sets out to re-expropriate these spaces of agency—this is what we call a growing economy. Therefore, capitalism expropriates communication not only to control and commodify the objects produced by the socialized worker, but because capital has found communication to be commodifiable.

Derksen remarks was "broken at the time, very consciously smashed, by [the Sacred] government" (141). Butling, however, notes that although there has always been some connection between the school's Marxist philosophy and its poetics, the relationship became less apparent after *The New Poetics Colloquium: A Celebration of New Writing* (1985) and *Split Shift: A Colloquium on New Work Writing* (1986), when language poetry and poetics began to take precedence over politics. On the other hand, Colin Smith reaffirms this relationship between the KSW's approach to language and its incorporation of political ideology in an earlier, unpublished, draft of his interview with Donato Mancini: "We were reacting to both literary culture and social issues, and there was a strong sense that you couldn't separate one from the other nor should you try, both in terms of our relations with each other or Canadian culture. Why separate them? For us, there was very little separation between the social and the literary, because we encouraged ourselves to think of it that way." Thus, contrary to what was suggested earlier, Smith's remark gestures to a deliberate attempt to use language as a subversive tool.

On these grounds, one can propose that there existed a politics in the KSW's early years, regardless of whether it was an articulated class politics, or simply leftist politics, or a non-articulated but still apparent leftist leaning politics. As the discourse suggests, there have been varying intensities and focuses of this engagement. These "politics" have not been lost in the new collective; class based and non-class based, but still left, politics feature in the work of collective members. Still, the programming reflects these interests by coincidence (similar to the early KSW).⁸ The decision to resist

8 Extra-collectively, however, KSW members openly engage in activities that discredit the line between art and politics. For example, KSW collective and board members participated in the anti-Olympic protests, joined pirate radio efforts,

the articulation of a mandate that speaks to this activity may or may not be deliberate, but, also, to do so would be restrictive.

This is not to say that politics are never discussed. Maintaining a presence in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside remains a priority. Rethinking the collective's role in the downtown community, as well as the larger art and literary community, is, likewise, on the table. For this to happen around class identification, however, is potentially out of the question—and, for the sake of argument, possibly irrelevant.

According to Negri, class-consciousness is not a symptom of the socialized worker, but it is a condition of the mass-worker “as a result of wages and the struggles over their relative value” (115). The socialized worker often exhibits an indifference to class-politics. Yet, because the socialized worker's (method of) production relies on communication, an illusion of autonomous communication networks (the internet) keep the socialized worker in check—where actual (autonomous) communicative networks (people based collectives) are antagonistic and counter-hegemonic to the capitalist system. The crux of it is that the socialized worker fuels capitalism because capital has found methods of expropriating language and communication, where language, already a prosthetic of reality, becomes a prosthetic for capital. The socialized worker is not positioned in the capitalist system in relation to his/her class, but instead through communicative networks determined by capital. Thus this social subject often cannot articulate a class politics because there is not one readily available within this paradigm. This is not to say that KSW members do not recognize class inequalities—in fact, socioeconomic conditions in Vancouver are so

and presented work that deployed a class politics (in response to the games), though these actions were not through KSW events. Currently, other members work in various capacities in activist or art/writing/activist projects.

severe that it is difficult not to—but recognizing class (injustices) does not necessitate identifying with a class, particularly because so many of us cross the boundaries between the working and academic classes. Yet, understanding this development and relationship to class based identifications is still important, not only because many of us are, by all rights, still working-class (with credit cards), but because becoming aware of class stratification is something that many socialized workers achieve through advanced education. Meanwhile, the consumption of commodities enables this subject to resist identification with the working class, and working class politics, as consumption obfuscates class structure posing as an attainment of agency, thus fueling an aesthetic of classlessness.

In a postmodern late-capitalist setting, we are instructed to exhibit “individuality” and “freedom,” to “be our own bosses” and “work from home,” under the sign of capital—which further fuels this fantasy—communication technology and new media has made this obfuscation all the more possible. This location, this space/setting is therefore part of the point of departure from which we move away; but, it is also what we are up against: a social imaginary of middle-class(less)ness—for even working-class intellectuals are enslaved to capital if they cannot find a way to produce spaces of agency.

In Vancouver, however, divisions between classes are ever more apparent as neoliberalism runs rampant, and, in this second blow to public money (the 2010 Olympics), along with the imposition of a police state (also at the expense of the public) that was required in order to sustain that spectacle, the class divide in the city has been further accentuated. In fact, I would argue the conditions in Vancouver allow, beyond any city in Canada, the potential for the rearticulation of class identification and the recognition of class based issues—and if not class based issues, most definitely politically left ones.

So what now? It is not my intention to use this medium to suggest what the KSW might do to respond to the socioeconomic conditions of the city—that sort of conversation should remain within the collective. However, I am suggesting that, given the increasing economic disparity in Vancouver, socialized workers who make-up any organization—be it a union, a collective, a group of artists, or workers in any industry who have the potential to recognize their collective agency—might consider admitting that there exists a knowledge of our development as social subjects, and, consequently, explore the subversive potentialities of our activities. These activities do not need to revolve around class-based identification, nor must the activities engage a utopian discourse. Much more is at stake than ideology and identification—what is at stake is visible, psychological, and material. For example, any given literary collective might be interested in protecting the dissemination of innovative and critical literary practice, and the potential for knowledge through (and about) poetry and literature at large. That is to say, a literary collective that is “keen” on language and its implications in, and on, the social sphere, might also believe—for lack of a better term—in a larger cultural function for language that involves the dissemination of literature and its relationship to the production of knowledge. Knowledge produces agency. The neoliberal government, however, actively threatens this agency—these acts/attacks are not covert, they are not surprising, not to mention that they are currently discussed in just about every humanities and arts journal one can find. From the way we teach in the academy to what we teach, to the number of teaching positions available (cutting tenured positions and enslaving pedagogues into unstable and exploitative contracts), to slashing funding in the arts (then reintroducing it with more restrictions at half the size⁹), what we are

9 In February 2009, the BC provincial government

experiencing is observable and material, but not insurmountable. Socialized workers know that it is unacceptable to let the state use tax dollars for oppressive and sociopathic programs against the populace—as we witnessed during the Olympic games, and the G20 in Toronto—while protecting corporate interests. Since both the provincial and federal governments in the last decade have dismantled and disempowered many of the working cultural institutions that our predecessors created, we are compelled to create new spaces of resistance. This is Vancouver, 2010.

When I first concluded this paper in late 2009, and revised it in early 2010 (during the Olympics), I wrote: “There is a pressing need for collectives to come forward and actively resist and rearticulate this current trajectory—not only for the sake of discussing things outside of the academy, but because we face the threat of not being able to sustain these kind of organizations and operations at all.” The sentence fell somewhere in the middle of the second-last paragraph, and was followed by an enthusiastic attempt to explain just what that meant. A year later, however, I am thankful that I was “bestowed” the opportunity to wait on, and forget about, the paper, so that I could (1) reevaluate my position, and, more importantly, (2) witness what appears to be a shift in Vancouver’s cultural landscape concerning the collaboration of art and community groups on projects, community

introduced a twenty-million-dollar funding-cut to the art and cultural sector. Despite widespread uproar and protests across the province, the cuts were made just in time for Olympic spending. In the summer of 2010, the BCAC and the provincial government have announced—due to the “success” of art funding that was intended to glamorize the city for the Olympic games—a *new* sports and arts legacy fund, at ten-million dollars. The BCAC has sought out art organizations that fit some criteria, in order to distribute these “new” funds at the BCAC’s discretion—provided that the organizations are interested in receiving these funds.

programming, and protest. Perhaps this shift began before the Olympics with the Woodward's Squat in 2002, or even before that; or, one might argue that the 2010 Olympic games acted as the catalyst for large and multiple community-focused collective-initiatives in the arts—which is how I perceived it. Whenever, and wherever, one wants to site the germination of this shift, grassroots organizations across the board—from literature, visual and

media art, dance, theatre, music, and underground culture, to social justice organizations and student groups—are coming together in various capacities to create spaces of agency. Tent City, during the 2010 games is one example of this activity; the more recent effort against Goldcorp's sponsorship of SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts, is another.

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