"How Do I Live in a World that Hates Me?": The Emotional Ecology of Neoliberalism in Nikki Reimer's *Downverse*

Heather Milne

Nikki Reimer's *Downverse* begins with an epigraph attributed to an inebriated audience member at a poetry reading: "I hated your poem. Your poem was so boring" (v). This epigraph sets the tone for the book by anticipating Reimer's deployment of a performative poetics of failure, manifested throughout the collection as a low-grade anxiety that stems from feelings of personal inadequacy. Reimer's poetics of failure becomes an important dimension of her critique of neoliberal environments. Reimer describes *Downverse* as an attempt to make sense of both the city and the internet and to explore what she calls the "emotional ecology" of the precarious subject trying to survive in the context of neoliberal techno-capitalism in these spaces (mclennan).[1] *Downverse* charts the years 2008-2011, exploring, among other things, the 2008 economic crash, the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, the G20 protests, the Occupy Wall Street protests, the Alberta oil industry, the death of Robert Dziekański in Vancouver at the hands of the RCMP, and ongoing urban gentrification. Specifically, the poems chart how these issues are discussed in online forums. The time span of the book coincides with the introduction of smart phones, the growing popularity of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and the polarization of political discussions in these domains.

Reimer works extensively with found materials, including online comments, which she incorporates directly into her poems. Prominent among the voices included in her poetry are those of internet "trolls" hostile to the Occupy protestors, millennials, Indigenous people, feminists, poor people, the mentally ill, and anyone else who struggles to survive in the culture of precarity created by neoliberal free-market economies. She includes these voices not to amplify or legitimize them, but rather to critically recontextualize them as she reflects on the hostility of neoliberal

environments. While using the internet as fodder for the composition of poetry has become relatively commonplace over the past decade, and is a practice popularized by poets working in the contexts of both Flarf and conceptualism, Reimer's use of the internet is distinct from these traditions because of her interest in exploring and representing the affective interiority of the precarious subject and in linking her poetry to ethical and political questions.[2] In this regard, her writing shares conceptual poetry's methods but not its apolitical framing.[3] Reimer explains that her poetry "first and foremost is an attempt to process a bewildering array of 'content,' and second, it attempts to uncover value systems that are embedded in discourse" (mclennan). Jonathan Ball describes Reimer's compositional technique in this book as "crash[ing] different registers into one another to show how they function, on some level, as the same register." As Ball suggests, Reimer's strategy in *Downverse* is to build poems out of diverse strands of found texts, many of which represent polarized points of view; the effect is not only radically disjunctive but also somewhat numbing as the voices incorporated into the poems begin to blur together to form a kind of poetic assemblage. The poems offer a critical commentary on the toxic state of public discourse on the internet and suggest that much of this toxicity stems from the misogyny, racism, and lack of compassion displayed by many commenters in online forums. In this essay, I build on Jeff Derksen's assertion that "poetry and art have driven a critique of neoliberalism" (14) to consider what *Downverse* might contribute to an understanding of the political present and the emotional precarity of the neoliberal subject in the age of social media. Through a detailed analysis of *Downverse* that draws on theories of negative affect and critiques of neoliberalism, and concludes by linking Reimer's engagement with the internet to Jodi Dean's theory of "communicative capitalism," I suggest that poetry and poetic form can be especially useful for illuminating the political and technological concerns of the present because, as Myung Mi Kim and Christanne Miller argue in *Poetics and Precarity*:

> poetry can create a proliferative mode of communicating. An intensive engagement with what language is and does can move language away from coercive expectations of meaning. Poetics is a way of reorienting, of listening, of recalibrating conceptions or acts of belonging and kinships. It pluralizes paradigms for meaning-making, contributing to new configurations of affiliation, both local and global. (xvii)

Reimer reorients and recalibrates the language of neoliberal environ-
ments as she develops an affective and documentary poetics of neoliberal
precarity.

　　Downverse begins with a "prorogue" rather than a "prologue." "Pro-
rogue" refers to the rarely invoked practice of discontinuing a session of
parliament without dissolving it. The term gained popular currency in
Canada at the end of 2008, when then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper
prorogued Parliament rather than facing a non-confidence vote in the
House of Commons. Harper prorogued Parliament again in 2009, a
move that attracted widespread criticism and accusations that proro-
gation was being used by the government as a way to avoid political
accountability (LeBlanc). Harper's prorogation of parliament can be
understood as an example of what Wendy Brown identifies as neoliberal-
ism's quiet "undoing" of the basic elements of democracy (*Undoing* 17).
Reimer's "prorogue" does not reference Harper directly, but the poems
in this collection were written while he was prime minister and are
informed by the sense of hopelessness and malaise that many felt during
his tenure in Ottawa.[4] Reimer's "prorogue" consists of a series of "not"
statements that seem to cancel each other out to suggest a subject who is
immobilized by the conditions of her life:

> Not coffee not alcohol
> Not exercise not inertia
> Not sorrow not action
> Not breathe not dream
> Not hit not yell
> Not shop not fuck
> Not medicate not cry
> Not deny not distract
> Not keep it in not let it out
> Not be a better person
> Not give in to base impulses
> Not silence
> Not screaming (1)

Framed as a series of negatives, the poem establishes a tone of defeat at the
outset. Through its title, the poem also suggests that this defeat is linked
to the larger political situation of the country at the time the poems were
written, and in particular, to a sense of disillusionment, hopelessness, and
cynicism regarding the state of politics and public discourse in Canada.

This poem anticipates the ways in which, throughout this collection, Reimer explores how the political landscape shapes the affective dimensions of the subject.

Anyone who has spent any time in online discussion forums well knows that these spaces are often rife with nasty comments written in large part by anonymous posters and internet trolls, many of whom expound racist and misogynist views. *Downverse* implicitly considers the cumulative emotional and psychological impact of reading these comments on an ongoing basis. By turning this hateful commentary — along with commentary by those active in movements like Occupy, statistics on the lack of affordability in Vancouver's housing market, and found language from media reports — into poetry, Reimer reflects on the increasingly polarized state of contemporary politics and public discourse and explores the themes of emotional and material precarity in neoliberal environments. The poem titled "artists decline as percentage of workforce" includes the dedication "for and from the comments stream" and is comprised largely of comments praising the free market and decrying government subsidies for the arts. "For and from" suggests a kind of back and forth, a speaking back to the comments stream through recontexualization. The comments stream, like the drunk heckler from the epigraph who called her poems boring, functions not as an implied audience — Reimer is not writing to these people — but as source material for a documentary poetics that maps the decline of public discourse in the digital age:

> Oh, and BTW,
> I forgot to mention that I've
> also found
> in my experience
> that all government-funded
> artists
> are
> vain
> conceited
> narcissistic
> arrogant
> selfish
> egotistical
> exhibitionists
> trite
> petty

smug
lazy
and self-indulgent snobs (76)

The composite, collective speaker of this poem, gleaned from the comments stream, argues that the number of artists in Canada should be reduced to one-third of present levels so that supply does not exceed demand (68), suggests that artists could support themselves by working in the oil fields, and counsels "if you aren't making enough / money / from your artistic endeavours get a different / job / Michelangelo wasn't / supported by taxpayers / and neither was Da Vinci" (73-74). The barrage of commentary, most of it adversarial, becomes a constant noise that contributes to a sense of emotional exhaustion. The voices of the internet commentators that comprise this poem are utilitarian, market driven, and critical of the arts in general. When Reimer notes that the poems in this book stem in part from the question, "How do I live in a world that hates me?" this is largely what she is talking about. Many of the poems in *Downverse* are depressing and somewhat defeatist — the book is called *Downverse* because it offers a poetics of the downtrodden and exhausted rather than the upbeat or uplifting. *Downverse* draws attention to the "general attrition of life" (Ruti 29) that characterizes our current neoliberal environments.

Killing Joy in Neoliberal Environments

In an interview, Reimer describes the process behind the composition of the poems in *Downverse*, and while she does not offer a straightforward answer to the question, "How do I live in a world that hates me?" she does mobilize two terms coined by Sara Ahmed that are useful for the person who finds herself at odds with the world: the killjoy or "feminist killjoy" and the "affect alien." Reimer explains:

> I initially had the idea of duelling binaries as an organizing concept for the manuscript — an early working title was "us vs. them." I wanted to explore, initially, online discourse, which to my reading seemed to morph into rigid subject positions and acrimony as often as lead to productive conversation. "Don't read the comments." Everyone knows this. But for a period of time in 2009-10, I was reading all of the comments on all of the stories and message boards, and I was fascinated by how people could use, misuse, and abuse language. This gradually formed a collection-process that structures many of the poems. The underlying tensions are the same as for any artist: What is integrity?

> How do I live in a world that hates me? . . . Me as affect-alien c.f. Sara
> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. The artist as killjoy. (mclennan)

For Ahmed, the feminist killjoy is the revolutionary figure who has rejected
the happiness scripts of heteropatriarchal capitalism that link fantasies of
the "good life" to consumerism, gender norms, heterosexuality, and neolib-
eral models of success premised on individualism and the accumulation of
wealth. The figure of the killjoy "might kill joy simply by not finding the
objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. . . . The feminist
killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses
to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (65). Ahmed argues
that "happiness is used as a technology or instrument, which allows the
reorientation of individual desire toward a common good" aligned with
heteropatriarchal interests (59). The feminist killjoy rejects these scripts
and becomes an "affect alien," at odds with the world:

> You become estranged from the world as it has been given: the world
> of good habits and manners, which promises your comfort in return
> for obedience and good will. . . . You are no longer well adjusted: you
> cannot adjust to the world. The revolutionary is an affect alien in this
> specific sense. You do not flow; you are stressed; you experience the
> world as a form of resistance in coming to resist a world. (168-69)

The feminist killjoy or affect alien threatens the status quo not because she
is unhappy, but rather because she does not particularly *want* to be happy,
at least not in the way that happiness is defined in the context of capitalist
and heteropatriarchal frameworks (192). Ahmed suggests that once we
divest from happiness as it has been defined for us, then other possibilities
for community emerge. The poems in *Downverse* explore how one might
live in the world as an affect alien, out of step and out of attunement with
the goals and priorities of neoliberal capitalism.

However, Reimer articulates her critique of neoliberal environments in
part by exploring her *investment* in and *attachment* to such environments
rather than presenting a straightforward divestment from happiness scripts.
As a left-leaning poet and a feminist, Reimer values modes of being in the
world that are not reducible to market logic, yet she is also a subject of
and a product of neoliberalism, internalizing its pressures to be productive
and cheerful even as she articulates her own state as one largely character-
ized by stasis, precarity, and malaise. While, cumulatively, these poems
are critical of the values of neoliberal capitalism, the speaker manifests an

anxiety linked to her own failure to fulfill happiness scripts or to be fulfilled by them. In some of the poems, she displays what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism" in her attachment to neoliberalism.[5] As I argue below, ultimately, Reimer embraces a poetics of failure as a rejection of neoliberal models of success.

Mari Ruti has recently drawn important connections between negative affect, neoliberalism, and the specific pressures placed on the creative class when she writes:

> our neoliberal moment is characterized by a general attrition of life that impacts especially those who are barely scraping by — not the least because neoliberal competitiveness augments social inequalities — but also those of the creative, intellectual, or professional middle class who can fracture under the pressures of our society's performance principle and its related utilitarian demands. From this point of view, bad feelings such as depression, anxiety, sluggishness, weariness, apathy, and loss of meaning are less a personal pathology than affects that seem to cling to the very air we breathe and that consequently besiege people from all walks of life. (29)

Inderpal Grewal, drawing on the work of Niklas Rose, notes that neoliberalism is not simply about markets, privatization, and the economy; rather, one of the key dimensions of neoliberalism is the way in which it alters the subject, producing a "self-making, self-marketing, and self-improving subject" (Grewal 3). Brown refers to this process as the "responsibilization" of the subject under neoliberalism. She argues that neoliberalism "tasks the worker, student, consumer, or indigent person with discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving: it is in this regard a manifestation of human capitalization" (*Undoing* 132-33). Neoliberalism "solicits the individual as the only relevant and wholly accountable actor. . . . [R]esponsibilized individuals are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so. But devolution and responsibilization also make individuals expendable and unprotected" (*Undoing* 133-34). Many of the poems in *Downverse* demonstrate the mechanisms of "responsibilization." For example, the poem "internet," which draws from online discussions about the death of Robert Dziekański, begins with the line "how to avoid being tasered" (84).[6] The poem explores and reflects upon the lack of compassion in public discourses surrounding the case and the ways in which responsibilization

tends to place the blame on the victim, who must assume the impossible responsibility of avoiding the police taser, rather than on the social systems that failed the victim of this tragedy. Reimer's poems powerfully mirror the mechanisms of neoliberal responsibilization in order to document and expose their functioning.

As noted above, Ruti identifies the ways in which neoliberalism colludes with biopolitics to extract work from individuals and the ways in which neoliberal subjects tend to internalize these pressures and experience them as personal and individual rather than systemic. Reimer's poetry identifies a similar dynamic, which is perhaps most evident in "the big other," a poem that riffs on the Lacanian notion of the big Other as representing an authoritative power conflated with language and the law. The poem begins with the lines "I was always waiting for The Big Other / to tell me what to do, to give me a sign" (31) before proceeding to offer a jumbled assortment of lines gleaned from unidentified sources, many of which consist of disparaging remarks made against Occupy protesters. Although the poem is multivocal, disjunctive, and difficult to pin down to a single meaning, as the fragments of text accumulate and accrue meaning, the poem becomes readable as a display of the spite and derision that underscore dismissals of anti-capitalist political activism in online forums, a derision that is linked to structures of power represented by the big Other. The voices in these poems insist that the protesters "go back to occupying your parents [sic] basement" (31) and refer to Occupy protesters as "foul, vile, smelly slackers" and "mental midgets" who "should be / occupying jail cells" (32). The poem contains other threads, including one about "Nick" who at the age of thirty owns a house and a fancy car but cannot shake his anxiety, so he copes by getting Botox injections (32-33). Here, Reimer's emotional ecology explores the ubiquity of negative affects; suggests that even the most privileged are not immune to the anxiety induced by the "big Other" of neoliberal capitalism; and critiques the ways in which, under neoliberal capitalism, procedures like Botox injections are offered as an individualized, market-driven solution to feelings of anxiety and precarity that fail to address systemic issues. The poem, like many in the book, is vaguely humourous in the way that it brings together these absurdly diverse and inconsistent registers, yet it also powerfully articulates the insecurity of the subject in the face of the "big Other," an entity that in this book is conflated with elusive neoliberal models of economic and social success.

The poem also includes threads of speech that seem to come directly from those involved in the Occupy movement. Ball reads this poem as a reaction

> to the oft-rehearsed but banal complaint that so-called "experimental" writing flaunts its theoretical basis, by boldly titling itself after a concept from Lacanian theory, then humorously displaying how the related processes of self-construction and self-alienation play out in the social world. . . . Reimer crashes, here and throughout *Downverse*, the complaints of the Occupy Wall Street protesters against complaints *about* the Occupy Wall Street protesters, and the language of art, commerce, and frustration, to explore their interconnections and the way that they support one another even as they try to refuse, refute, or retreat from one another.

While I'm not convinced these voices *support* one another since they reveal deeply incommensurable ideological positions, they do come together in the text as a kind of polarized and polarizing cacophony that contributes to a sense of numbness and attrition. The voices of the Occupy protesters are incorporated into the same poetic landscape as the other conflicting voices and become part of the constant chatter of the politically polarized domain of the internet.

"The big Other" is part of a section of the book titled "vancouverlament," and throughout the poems in this section, Reimer explores her inability to afford to live in Vancouver and the larger social and structural currents of gentrification and displacement that are tied to neoliberalism and global capital. One poem in this section bears the unwieldy yet caustic title: "I suppose the ideal basement tenant would be a quiet retiree in good health, partially deaf, with reclusive but not unpleasant habits. Maybe tenants like that are already taken" (41). This poem is constructed from found text that disparages the Occupy protesters as entitled, spoiled "snowflakes"; Reimer fades out most of the words to a pale grey and leaves only a handful of words easily legible:

> Occupy Wall Street, Portland **Living** on the sidewalk
> dependent **is not anything to be proud of,** it should be a
> source of scorn and public humiliation (unless you are a
> victim of Obamanomics or serious mental health issues, as
> most of the current protesters seem to be. However,
> recent news **a source of smelly porn and public urination.** (41)

Reimer's erasure poem writes back to and against the original text, retrieving an alternate meaning that, while not running completely counter to the original text, at least offers an alternative voice. In Reimer's rewriting, "living" becomes a "source of smelly porn and public urination," while the anti-Occupy commentary in the original is placed under partial erasure. "Towers of basement suites" is a procedural poem that deploys an Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) compositional method, N+7 (a mode of writing a poem in which the author takes a found text and replaces each noun with the noun found seven entries after the original word in the dictionary), to Vancouver rental apartment ads:

> Recently renovated
> One-beef aphorisms
> In walkable nestles
> Repartee for about $1200 a moonbeam (34)

The resulting poem is silly but arguably no less absurd than the actual rental market in the city, which is among the most expensive in the world. The reader can easily discern the gist of the original text while also appreciating the polysemic absurdity of the altered text as it works to defamiliarize and displace the original. Transforming the rental ad into an N+7 poem is perhaps the only viable way for Reimer to engage with this ad since affording the apartment listed for rent is out of the question. "Materiality," another poem in the "vancouverlament" section, draws on Reimer's own actual household budget, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's *Housing Market Outlook — Vancouver and Abbotsford* for Spring 2011, and the city of Vancouver's public-sector salaries, juxtaposing the realities of her monthly income with statistics on the cost of housing in the city to illustrate the impossibility of making ends meet. Reimer left Vancouver for the more affordable city of Calgary prior to the publication of this book. The "vancouverlament" poems foreground a love for the city alongside an awareness of the fact that living a "good life" in the city is untenable. They also demonstrate that the inability to live in Vancouver in a way that does not feel precarious is not a personal failure even though it might feel like one, but rather a failure resulting from free-market capitalism and the global currents of gentrification. In this regard, the poems push back against the currents of responsibilization that are central to neoliberalism.

Reimer enacts a poetics and politics of failure in *Downverse* as a politicized statement against neoliberalism, although her poems do not actually *fail*, but rather succeed quite powerfully in their critique. As Foucault has suggested, under Western capitalism, the subject has been reduced to *homo economicus* (Foucault 147). Drawing on this notion, Mari Ruti notes that human life has become a process of "perfecting the effectiveness of this enterprise through various projects of self development . . . we've learned to think of our lives in terms of input and profit, of smart investments and optimum functioning" (Ruti 1). To question the reduction of the self to a logic of input, profit, and productivity challenges a core goal of the neoliberal agenda as it works at and on the level of the individual citizen-subject. This is how Reimer actualizes her role as an affect alien and feminist killjoy — by ultimately rejecting the happiness scripts and their attendant ideologies of consumerism and self-improvement. In so doing, she articulates her critique of neoliberalism and her attempt to develop a poetics premised on compassion and community rather than market logic.

Under neoliberalism, Brown argues, the individual is made fully responsible for her- or himself (*Edgework* 42), the social safety net is eroded through austerity measures and income inequality, and

> all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of market rationality. While this entails submitting every action and policy to considerations of probability, equally important is the production of all human and institutional action as rational, entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a macroeconomic grid of security, supply and demand, and moral value neutrality. (*Edgework* 40)

Reimer's poem "insurance outcomes," which is comprised entirely from an insurance table that outlines the financial compensation offered for various bodily injuries, can be read as a commentary on the monetization of life (and injury):

> Entire Sight of One Eye
> Two Two-Thirds of the Principal Sum
> Speech or Hearing in Both Ears
> One-Half of the Principal Sum
> Thumb and Index Finger of Either Hand
> One-Third of the Principal Sum. (13)

By turning an insurance table into a found poem, Reimer invites readers to reflect on the absurdity of the calculations by which injury, dismemberment, and death are financially compensated, and by extension, how neoliberalism reduces all dimensions of life to market logic.

Reimer extends her poetics of the precarious subject beyond online spaces to consider the broadly intersecting themes of poverty, mental health, pharmacology, and police brutality:

> homelessness / larger syndrome / leave
> pill irritable writer / better man pill
> improve / change taken pill syndrome /
> better pill man pill rejection / guaranteed
> homelessness / be larger performance
> syndrome / pill performance, pill numb
> better performance / larger not simple
> rejection / make morning / regardless
> warn pill / numb pill our bowel make pill
> / help better regardless / not this pang (64)

While the poem is too disjunctive and fragmented to support a coherent close reading, the fragments of text accrue to convey a powerful sense of malaise. Words like "improve," "better," and "larger" draw attention to the promises offered by the pharmaceutical industry, promises that are compatible with capitalist understandings of productivity and success. However, the prominence of words associated with precarity and depression — "homelessness," "rejection," "pang," "irritability," and "numb" — works to negate these promises and show the subject of neoliberalism as one who is perennially left wanting, unfulfilled, and insecure. Through the collision and accumulation of textual fragments, these poems illustrate the ultimate failure of the neoliberal state and the market to care for the precarious subject.

Communicative Capitalism and Its Poetic Discontents

Downverse documents the failures of neoliberalism and pays homage to those whom neoliberalism has failed — the homeless, the mentally ill, the precariously employed, millennials, cultural workers, Indigenous people, and others. Reimer does not propose a solution to the problem of the precarity caused by neoliberalism; rather, she offers a space of reflection and recognition. Reimer's killjoy poetics insists on dwelling in, and on, the

comments section, on reworking and reframing hateful voices and setting them in dialogue with the musings of precarious subjects. She gleans and reframes found fragments to reflect back to the reader not only the bleakness of neoliberal environments, but also their absurdity and even their hilarity. She does not shy away from her own complicity and from thinking about the ways in which we are all neoliberal subjects of capitalism, yet she is also critical of the happiness scripts upon which neoliberal capitalism relies. Rather than suggesting a way to escape or combat neoliberal precarity and malaise, the poems in *Downverse* offer a documentary poetics of the affective circuits of neoliberalism. Through her extensive engagement with online culture and commentary, Reimer's poems resonate with, and manifest, what Dean has called "communicative capitalism" (*Blog* 4). I conclude this essay with a brief discussion of this concept because it clarifies how Reimer addresses her own complex relationship with, and complicity in, the very structures she critiques.

Communicative capitalism refers to the ways in which networked communications and entertainment environments like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram "capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance" (Dean, *Blog* 3-4). While industrial capitalism "relied on the exploitation of labor," communicative capitalism relies on the "exploitation of communication" (4). Communicative capitalism is sustained by unpaid affective labour and produces and circulates affect as a binding technique (95), creating forms of "community without community" that are inflected by *jouissance* and its undercurrents of anxiety and alienation. Dean notes that the creative class (of which Reimer is a member) has been "proletarianized" under communicative capitalism and that it is precisely this group (relatively young, well-educated, but economically precarious) that has driven protest movements such as the Occupy movement. Dean argues that although these groups are adept at using digital platforms to foment protest and that these platforms have been instrumental for political organizing in anti-precarity movements that range from Occupy to Gezi Park, their political efficacy is neutralized by their tendency to reject collective struggle in favour of an individualism, upheld through the curation and maintenance of an online presence, that ultimately "binds left politics to the dominant capitalist imaginary" (*Crowds* 72) and neutralizes its political potential. Participants in communicative capitalism are critical of neoliberal capitalism but also complicit in upholding its structures,

which results in a kind of stasis and a tendency for protest movements like Occupy to fizzle out without living up to their potential for enacting concrete and long-lasting revolutionary change. *Downverse* can be read as a kind of documentary poetics of communicative capitalism in which Reimer demonstrates her own, and perhaps also our collective, complicity in these structures.

Because Reimer's poetry engages online commentary to such a significant degree, her poetry self-consciously enacts the ways in which communicative capitalism tends to bind left politics to the capitalist imaginary. In the poem titled "the declarative, the dialogic, the decade goes pop," Reimer declares that "we are late-stage capitalist aspirational marketing machines" (98), suggesting that as the subject internalizes the market logic of neoliberalism, the self becomes one more commodity to be branded and marketed through Twitter and Instragram. The poem is riddled with hashtags that function as a form of ironic self-branding that distances the subject from the politics in which they are implicated:

> we are for Old Media but we'd thank you not to mention
> that to New Media & for god's sake don't blog it
> #guiltydeadtreefetish

> we're against the legalization of prostitution
> #&sextrafficking

> we are against "Meet Ups" #cheezy

> . . . we are for Craigslist as a neo-liberal marketplace
> we understand voter apathy #lesserevilfatigue

> we are for guilt as an emotion, a practice & a negotiating
> tactic, except when/our mothers do it #jeezusmom!

> we're against "make it new"
> #postpostpostneopostmodernism
> against "working for a living" #lazy

> for "how to become an expert in ten easy steps"
> #getmonetized (99-100)

The poem implies that hashtags function as a form of self-branding that both promotes the circulation of identities and ideas within a digital

marketplace but also reduces them to that marketplace, which results in a kind of political stasis or immobilization. Reimer herself is part of what Dean calls the "academic and typing left" (*Democracy* 9) who are vocal and visible on platforms like Twitter and Instragram where they ambivalently participate in a combination of political engagement and self-marketing.

Dean argues that Occupy had revolutionary potential but ultimately failed as a movement because "collective strength devolved into the problem of individuals aggregating by choices and interests that may or may not converge" and was thus subsumed by a kind of individualism that is ultimately compatible with neoliberalism (*Crowds* 218). Dean sees communicative capitalism as a significant challenge for left politics. She asks: "How can acts remain intelligible as acts of a collective subject? How do the people prevent their acts from being absorbed back into communicative capitalism?" (218). Reimer's poetics displays a canny self-awareness of this conundrum. She writes:

> we are all "accustomed to the concept that within the
>   neo-liberal globalized sphere, there is no we."
> we are all "striving towards individual self-improvement
>   Every day in every way"
> #insertdinosaurcolouringbookhere (102)

Reimer's poetry is self-reflexive and enacts a performative self-commodification which suggests that imagining a radical alternative to communicative capitalism and neoliberalism is not just a challenge, but perhaps impossible. This insight contributes to the book's poetics of failure mentioned at the outset of this essay; although she embraces a poetics of failure as a rejection of neoliberal narratives of success, she remains entangled in the networks of communicative capitalism. Jonathan Ball argues that *Downverse* "reads as if Reimer has lost faith in the power of poetry to express any emotion without commodifying it." Indeed, Reimer does not seem to believe in the potential of poetry to stage any kind of political revolution and she makes no revolutionary claims. Rather, her poetry documents and reflects back to the reader the emotional ecology of the precarious subject under neoliberal techno-capitalism. However, the kind of documentation provided in these poems has tangible political value precisely because, through documenting, she renders this subject visible and tangible in powerful ways. We recognize the precarious subject of these poems because this subject lives inside many

of us. The internet is not represented as a liberatory space in these poems, but neither is it represented as some kind of great evil that must be avoided at all costs; it is simply the space in which much of our public discourse and community formation now takes place, for better or for worse, and it is a space that we have to learn to exist with and in to some degree.

Downverse is Reimer's response to the question, "How do I live in a world that hates me?" This hatred is embodied in the response of the drunk heckler from the book's epigraph, in the countless hostile comments incorporated throughout the collection, and in the repeated references to the indifference and even the cruelty of the forces of gentrification and displacement in Vancouver. Reimer lives in, and at odds with, neoliberal environments by incorporating this hatred into poetry and, in the process, reframing it as part of a reflection on alienation and precarity. I stated near the beginning of this paper that Reimer understands her poetry as offering an "emotional ecology." Ecologies are complex systems with interlinked and interdependent components. As an emotional ecology, Reimer's poetry focuses on the lives of precarious subjects in both the digital realm and the physical space of the gentrified city. Through fragmented form and collage-like poems that incorporate found fragments from online and print sources alongside the poet's own attempts to articulate her emotional, physical, and financial exhaustion, these poems document the politics and poetics of living with — while also living at odds with — neoliberal and communicative capitalism. *Downverse* does not offer a solution to the grip of neoliberalism and the cultures of precarity that it creates, but it can keep us company, it can make us feel less alone as affect aliens and killjoys, as we figure out our own ways to live at odds with and to push against neoliberal environments.

Notes

[1] *Downverse* is Reimer's second collection of poems and it builds on some of the themes explored in her earlier book *[sic]* (Frontenac House, 2010); it also anticipates aspects of her more recent collection, *My Heart Is a Rose in Manhattan* (Talonbooks, 2019). She wrote *[sic]* and *Downverse* while living in Vancouver, a city that has undergone rapid and substantial gentrification in recent years and that now has one of the most expensive real estate and rental markets in the world. Reimer was affiliated with the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW) while she lived in Vancouver; the KSW is known for its interest in exploring the connections between poetry, theory, and political critique from an anti-capitalist perspective. All three of her collections also show her interest in working within vernacular registers; deploying found material; developing a poetics that engages with, and intervenes into, the contemporary mo-

ment; and foregrounding precarious voices — the young, the underemployed, the depressed, the anxious, the downtrodden — in ways that are at once compelling and shocking but also sometimes surprisingly funny. In *Downverse*, however, Reimer engages more directly with the internet as she appropriates voices and commentary from a wide array of (mostly online) sources.

²In the introduction to their anthology of conceptual poetry, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith declared conceptual writing to be against "ideologies of expression" and "sentiment" (xiiii). As Christopher Schmidt points out, this "loathing of the sentimental" contains an implicit "gender bias and locates conceptual writing in a realm that claims to be outside of politics but that in fact tends to be strongly aligned with white, masculinist, and heteronormative perspectives" (125). Reimer, along with poets like Rachel Zolf, M. NourbeSe Philip, Jordan Abel, and Margaret Christakos, employs conceptual methods of appropriation, proceduralism, and redirected language, but she does so with strong political and ethical intent.

³*Downverse* shares much in common with what Kate Siklosi refers to as "Poetic Terrorism," a term she borrows from Hakim Bey to refer to poets who use "found poetic material to combat dominant scripts of his-tory." Poetic Terrorism "combines conceptualism's interrogations of language and symbolic representation with a persistent concern for equity and social justice."

⁴In many regards, *Downverse* is a distinctly Canadian account of the effects and affects of neoliberalism.

⁵"Cruel Optimism" is the act of desiring, and maintaining an attachment to, the very thing that is an "obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 1).

⁶Dziekański died at the Vancouver International Airport after being tasered by four RCMP officers in 2007. A witness took a video of the incident on his phone. The police seized the video and the man who recorded it went to court to get the video back, which he then released to the media.

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