The Vernacular Muse by Dennis Cooley

Not long ago I attended a panel discussion on the relationship between writing and feminist criticism. The panelists were writers rather than academics, so they tended to approach the question of theory from the standpoint of being involved in a game as players, not as sideline strategists. I should make it clear that the participants were respectful of theory and what it could offer in terms of understanding how language operates. No one denied the necessity of rigorously examining texts. But there also seemed an unstated consensus that each writer's creative process couldn't be, and shouldn't be, dictated by theory. So the relation to feminist literary criticism was a particular forum, a simply sharing space

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A considerable change with the analysis of Michael Ondaatje, Naomi Duncan and Sinclair

(i.e., an threats to white workers' jobs) and social ills (i.e., as public menace because of their "inferior" culture). Such scapegoating subsequently led to large numbers of racist laws which denied their political and civil rights. Even in the present time, with the absence of discriminatory laws, Li claims, there is still a cost for being Chinese in the Canadian labour market. The Census of Canada 1981 indicates that the average schooling for all Canadians was 11.55 years; for Chinese-Canadians it was 12.12. Yet, the census indicates, on average they had an income level of $1,295 below the national average. Furthermore, being a racial minority still places a limit on their choice of professions. The early Chinese immigrants avoided competitions and hostilities of white Canadians by limiting themselves to restaurant or laundry work. Chinese-Canadians today are still in professions away from public influence. Statistics show that many have occupations in the scientific and engineering field which require technical expertise rather than social skills or interactions with the public. The conditions of Chinese-Canadians in recent years have no doubt improved. Yet these changes, Li claims, are brought about mainly by changes in the economic structure rather than by social equality or greater acceptance in the larger society. They are mainly determined by the new immigration policies in the post-war period which reflect the need for new types of workers in the contemporary capitalist economy. The make-up of the Chinese community with its large number of professionals, skilled workers and people of higher education level is the result of such need. Peter Li's The Chinese in Canada is no doubt an invaluable, insightful sociological study. My only problem with it is his over-reliance on statistics. Being a good empirical sociologist, statistics are, of course, important to him. But their quantity can make his book rather dry and dull for readers who are not statisticians. At times, they can even divert from the diverse aspect of the social condition of Chinese-Canadians. In the midst of charts, graphs, numbers, decimals and percentages, his illustration of the experience of being Chinese in Canada tends, at times, to be obscured. This is more so with regard to this analysis of contemporary Chinese-Canadian. There is a noticeable difference in his analysis of Chinese-Canadians before the Second World War and those who came after the war. With respect to the former, Li conveys the experiential aspect of their condition through the use of historical documents, eyewitness reports and a style of writing that relies less on statistics and more on sensory metaphors. The reader gets a sense of the emotional involvement between the writer and the people he writes about. However, in his analysis of the latter, such involvement is totally lacking as the pages become filled with statistic after statistic. Perhaps there is a bias on Li's part (being a sociologist who stresses class analysis) to place greater focus on the experiential aspect of Chinese-Canadians in the pre-war era, who were poor, uneducated, unskilled labourers of rural background as opposed to contemporary Chinese-Canadians who are affluent, educated professionals who dwell in large urban centres. In spite of such problems, one must still give Li credit for presenting an original, in-depth study of Chinese-Canadians. By focusing on the structural context of Canadian society in his understanding of Chinese-Canadians, his book in essence is about Canada and how Canada has treated a minority group. So far, the picture of such treatment does not contain much to be proud of. Perhaps a better picture may emerge if we begin with the view, as Li has done, that Chinese-Canadians are not foreigners but people who do belong here. Marion Lo is a graduate student in Social and Political Thought at York University.
theory. So the relationship between writing and feminist literary criticism, at least according to this particular forum, appeared to come down to simply sharing space in the house of literature. And to keeping the connecting doors open.

As a writer myself, I’ve always felt ambiva-
lent toward literary criticism. But I’d never taken a close look at why I felt this uneasiness until reading The Vernacular Muse, a collection of eight critical essays by Dennis Cooley. Here is this Manitoba critic championing poetry that challenges the standards of “literary Mountains” and insisting upon the examination of the politics of a text. Talking about the voices of the margi-
nalized, and a new economy of poetry that has nothing to do with succulence of style. Those of us whose work has sometimes been judged po-
tentially meaning, as American poet Carolyn Forche points out, that it doesn’t celebrate politi-
cally acceptable, and therefore invisible, values

should be clearing, right? Finally we have an ally in the sober dwelling of Canadian scholarly criti-
cism, a renegade declaring that:

This is a common and a continuing right—to be able to see your voice as your own world. To get out from under the snare of an official culture that is imp-
orted and high.” To be at home in the world. To name and reclaim an American part of ourselves, spoken but never written because the writing avail-
able to us would not accommodate our worlds.

Part of me did cheer, not only because Cooley writes with (unscholarly) political conviction laid bare but because he does so clearly and inventively. Part of me wanted to argue, too—not a bad thing, of course, since it proves that The Vernacular Muse is engaging enough to make me pay attention. But I realized that my quarrel was often with the name of criticism itself rather than with Cooley as a practitioner of the art. And I think that comes down to writers and critics having different relationships to language.

In an essay called “The Critical Word,” John Berger wrote that authenticity in literature “comes from a single faithfulness: that to the ambiguity of experience.” Within this frame-
work, language is about possibility. But criti-
cism, by the nature of its discourse, sets up standards, an organization of understanding that can’t be ambiguous or it loses its authority as theory. Loss, in other words, its legitimation, which is based on narrowing possibilities. And this is true even of the most anti-conservative criticism, such as that contained in The Vernacular Muse.

A considerable chunk of the book is taken up with the analysis of work by Dorothy Livesay, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Laurence, Robert Dunbar, and Sinclair Ross. These essays were a critic’s criticisms—insightful, but not as interest-
ing to me (as a writer) as Cooley’s work on the vernacular in poetry. So most of my remarks will concentrate on two essays on this topic, as well as a complementary piece on line breaks.

Cooley points out that “literary value resides...not as is often supposed, independently and inside the poem, but in how we decide to read the poem, and our thinking will vary tremen-
dously depending on a whole series of assump-
tions, strategies and claims we bring, however unreflectingly, to bear.” And he goes on to speak for “refusing the presented terms” and “bringing unassuming voices into the poem.” I’m with him all the way on this (ideological) stand. How we differ is in strategies.

In the opening essay, Cooley compares “eye” poetry and “ear” poetry. He is careful to say that he finds merit in both forms, though he also makes evident, in his delineation of their charac-
teristics, where his greater allegiance lies. No presence of disinterested scholarship. He regards
eye poetry as more individualistic, setting up a particular hermeneutic: “the poet’s eye—a differ-
cent eye, a higher understanding—provides...over a spatialized, silenced, and therefore severely populatated landscape” with the poet as “originator of meaning.”

Ear poetry, on the other hand, doesn’t depend on dazzling metaphors or expressive language so much as colloquial patterns of speech, the quality of a “found” text. In contrasting the two modes, Cooley argues “how important the matter is: for one poet, in self-love, unenaged in a dialogic way, sings her sensitive impressions to herself—monologic; the other poet enters dialogue, ac-
knowledges a social setting. —diological.” (Coo-
ley describes vernacular, or ear, poetry as more often written by males and eye poetry by females, but unfortunately he doesn’t pursue the social/ cultural factors that might account for this differ-
ence.) He admits that the two forms aren’t mutu-
ally exclusive but because criticism is based on

opposition, he ends up not considering ambigu-
ties, “scrupulously fair on the surface, he is quick to say “we can cultivate both of them, enjoy each for what it is.”

But look at the political implications of the two forms as Cooley has characterized them! He suggests that “we witness the migration of au-
thority from author to reader” in poetry that abandons metaphor and nuanced language; that vernacular poetry subverts the dominant order through its resistance to formal structure and conventional interpretation. Essentially, that meaning resides in form.

I realize that content is a dirty word nowadays and that meaning is ambiguous anyway (like experience itself). My concern with language-
based theory (what we’ve been talking about here and finally naming) is exactly the same objec-
tions that Cooley raises to contemplative poe,

ma in being merely “objects of interpretation whose primary interest is semantic.” Like him I’m often impatient/disillusioned with the inwardsness of multi formal poetry. But the apparent outward-
ness of the vernacular doesn’t necessarily mean that the form is less central in the poet. The organizing sensibility of the author is always situated in the text, even though it may be dis-
guised, the problem is how to open up the author/ ity of the poem, whether using colloquial lan-
gage and/or metaphor.

I think Dennis Cooley and I would be in agreement about this, since all of the essays in The Vernacular Muse refuse to be cloistered, isolated from the social context. They challenge the unthinking use of language—as does good poetry. Proving, I guess, that however problem-
atic the relationship between writing and critical theory remains, because of their respective forms, there is a common bond.

Barbara Corey is a poet and reviewer who was recently appointed managing editor of Books in Canada.

The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe by Russell Jacoby


The gist of The Last Intellectuals is the argument that a dramatic attitudinal and behavioral shift took place between the past two generations of American—and Canadians—intellectuals, and that the recent predominance of academic institu-
tions is largely responsible for this phenomenon. According to Jacoby, many intellectuals of the older generation—those born in the first dec-
daes of this century—were able to convey their ideas to the educated public in plain English; they stimulated many discussions across the nation and were instrumental in enriching the intellec-
tual life of all Americans. As a result, a number