In conversation: A Corner Is Never a Firm Divide

Deanna Fong, Erín Moure, Karis Shearer, & Al Filreis

On January 15, 2019, PoemTalk released episode #132 featuring host Al Filreis in conversation with Deanna Fong, Erín Moure, and Karis Shearer at Erín's apartment in Montréal. They talked about Vancouver writer G. Maria Hindmarch and her poem "Kitsilano (1963-1969)." Here's an excerpt from the conversation.

Al Filreis: Let's start by talking about the pronouns. It's an "I" poem but it's also an "us" poem, right? "Below us," "our kitchen," and so forth. Karis, why is that important, if it is.

Karis Shearer: It is important for Maria, I think, because she has been very much a community builder, an artist produced through community. One of the things I love about this poem is the way that it catalogues community by naming people—person after person—and the shifting relationships among them. Deanna you've talked about this too.

Deanna Fong: Yeah, often when we use the first-person plural pronoun in poetry it can become very fraught because we don't know who we're talking about when we talk about "we." But here we have a very concrete sense of who we're talking about. Maria creates this community assemblage.

AF: Often when an "I" poem that's a documentary poem starts to switch to "we," we feel somehow that a presumption is being made. How could this one "I" talk about everyone? But in this poem, I don't feel that concern somehow. How does she pull that off?

Erín Moure: I think it's partly through what Deanna just said about the naming. There is this sense of the bringing together and of this effervescence of community during the process, in and through this process of creation. That "we" is inhabited by a lot of people and not just the author being presumptuous.

AF: Karis, do you want to say more about that documentary poetics that makes "we" a natural thing rather than a "how dare you talk for the rest of us" thing?

KS: Maria is highlighting the community connections, and we're seeing the proximity of those bodies in the community. For example, you have a person who's smelling the burning pork roast on the stove, and they have to be living close enough to actually smell that. Those connections come alive through that proximity, through the catalogue of names, the senses, the gifts that are exchanged — the painting, the furniture. You have a real sense of proximity.

AF: Deanna, I know you've thought a lot about community, about aesthetic communitarianism with its socio-political dimensions. "The corner" has become an important word. It was an important word in sociology and ethnography, maybe before we and people in our field realized its importance. [laughs] But it's established right away in this poem, "I lived on the corner of Yew & York," "above a corner store." Can you riff on "corner" and the importance to the issues that are of interest to you here?

DF: Well I think that the corner becomes a stand-in, it's like an interface between these domestic spheres and the wider public, the community public. It's a place where those two things meet in a kind of messy way. There are always people in flux, coming in and out of that personal space, so it's never a firm divide but something very porous. A sense of being home but where home is surrounded by a community that the speaker is very deeply attached to and a part of.

AF: I was so moved by the ending. I mean, so much of this poem is this: here was where we lived and this is how we looked outward from where we live — the community got created by a lot of people sharing food and partying and being together. And in the end, she's outside looking back up at the windows which she used to see out of. There's this fabulous…it's not an inversion, it's an expansion of the space.

EM: And she just leaves it with us.

AF: Yeah, she does. And it becomes more — pardon the word — more conventional in the lyric at the end, but it doesn't have the *effect* of a move toward something more conventional in another poem. It really sort of seals the deal.

KS: Kitsilano is a neighbourhood, you know, there's a corner, and the neighbourhood, the community is built out from that. Erín, you used to live in this neighbourhood so you have a different connection to it from us. Slightly after the time Maria was living there…

EM: Oh yeah, very much so. I mean, these people were from a generation older than me, but I had started hearing that this was going on in poetry, and this was what brought me to Vancouver. I went to Vancouver in 1974, so these people had mostly moved by then. But I can see the corner, I can see that building, I know what it's like to live in one of those...they're like San Francisco apartment buildings where you can see the light under your neighbour's door and everything. Every time anyone clears their throat you can hear it in three apartments, you know, so, there is no private life in that kind of surrounding.

AF: Which is very positive in this poem.

EM: Yeah! I think people absorb that and it leaves us with this sense of poiesis, like of the actual structure behind the scenes of a finished poem, the actual structure of making. And I think that's what Deanna and Karis mean when they talk about affective labour and about things that go on behind the poem—it's not disconnected from the poem; it's absolutely connected with the process of making the poem.

KS: Mm-hmm. Despite that it's not a nostalgic poem. It takes great pleasure in community but it's aware that those communities are shifting, the relations between people, among people are shifting. And even at the time, it's not a utopia: we have the oppressive presence of police, the awareness of the building being cold, the threat of gentrification, and other things that start to shift that community away.

DF: Yeah, watching the high-rises grow on the skyline.

EM: Yeah, in the West End across the way.

AF: Food, kitchens, domestic spaces, and art. I loved the thing about the pork hocks that it turns out are being cleaned for an art project. Rather than feeling like, oh, too bad she's domesticizing the memories here, you feel somehow she's reminding us that art *had to happen* in that kind of… Can the three of you talk about that please? It's so important.

DF: Yeah, well I love the way that this puts artistic production and domestic reproduction in really close proximity. For example, she's talking about hard-edged painting, which is the style that Roy Kiyooka used in the 60s and eventually gave up in the early 70s because he felt it didn't allow him to express himself subjectively. This sort of impersonal mode of painting is right up against talkedy talk talk talk. We can't think of artistic production as happening elsewhere, outside of the domestic sphere.

KS: Similarly, with the Vancouver Poetry Conference, you have the public panels and the readings and the talks, but so much of what the participants migrate towards when they're reflecting on that conference is the parties and the sociality of it. And those conversations were really meaningful moments of connection where they got to exchange ideas and make friendships that would last long-term.

AF: Erín, this must resonate with you, not necessarily about the Vancouver group but the way you got into this world of artists in the first place and what attracted you to the sociality of experimenting in art.

EM: Well I wanted to have great conversations with people and it just seemed, because I had read the first issues of *The Capilano Review*, and there were always interviews in *The Capilano Review*, and I mean...there are interviews where Maria Hindmarch is present, Daphne Marlatt, different people talking, and they'd always be in somebody's house chatting about things to do with poetry, and to me it just seemed so rich and dynamic and full. I knew they were another generation—they weren't going to invite me over to their house—but on the other hand I wanted to be in the place where that was happening.

AF: Deanna, you went to record this poem with Maria, and let's think about what she did when she reread this poem. What did she do?

DF: Well, we were going to make the recording and she said, "oh, I just want to take a second because I want to make sure that this relationship is clear, that this person is related to this person" ... so she sort of started editing on the fly, I think because she just wanted to represent the community in a faithful way. We did a lot of takes and the reading process also became something of an editing process.

AF: Erín—while we were, in the PoemTalk way of things, listening to the recording, we had a conversation which listeners won't hear—and Erín said, I noticed that the excerpt from her journal about the Trudeau stuff, Pierre...

EM: Yeah it was Pierre Elliott, yeah.

AF: …in a kind of fealty to documentary-ism, she really wanted to keep a quote from a journal intact.

EM: But I think that's interesting, these two kinds of documentary formats: the documentary poem and then this insertion of a journal, which is a documentary kind of prose project not meant for public consumption. But, as with documentary theatre, the pieces are composed out of bits of

journals, bits of interviews you did with people, bits of things people remember, and this and that, so the poem unfolds like that along its length but it also has these depths that resonate out: that journal, the thing about the police, the whole history of the police and the counterculture in Vancouver, and various other things.

AF: She's telling us at the end about how she means to be a witness to her own communality, as an aesthetic matter.

EM: Well also, if I can just say one other thing about the end of the poem, she ends with the curtain, and, of course, in theatre the curtain comes down at the end. Maria's curtain at the end of the piece opens out to us.

KS: I think that same instability of the text is reflected in the instability of relationships amongst the people. The community is always slightly shifting, people's names are changing, someone is soon to be husband then… not un-husband—

DF: The line is: "my boyfriend soon to be (later to unbe) husband." It's got four different temporal relations just in that single sentence trying to represent something that's spanning across years and very, very dynamic.

AF: Especially in the US, in post-New American Poetry circles and scholars interested in that turn, there's been a fetishization of the Vancouver Conference. I invite you, if you want, to say something critical about how that all worked out.

KS: I'd be happy to. Often talk about the Vancouver Poetry Conference refers to Creeley, Olson, and Duncan. Levertov is occasionally mentioned, Avison is almost never mentioned because she's an inconvenient name in terms of the dominant narrative…

AF: And she's also Canadian.

KS: And she's Canadian, so she doesn't fit the "New American poets" narrative… although she's affiliated with Creeley's poetics to some extent at the time and was published by Cid Corman in *Origin*, she moves away from that in 1963. We know that there were many women who participated in that conference who are almost never mentioned: Helen Sonthoff, Jane Rule, Angela Bowering, Ellen Tallman... And there's a kind of conviviality and sociality *behind* the events that are talked about which women facilitated, participated in, etc., and I think here you get Hindmarch pointing to that.

AF: So, final thoughts: everyone gets a chance to say something you meant to say but haven't had a chance to yet. Deanna, are you ready for that?

DF: Sure. I just wanted to point to one of my favorite moments in the poem which is this scenario of "dancing in my bedroom to music on a tape recorder / dancing in the other to records / two bongo drummers in the kitchen / talking in the room with the blue-tile fireplace / so many bodies." It gives us a kind of auditory landscape of all these things happening simultaneously, almost like a Dadaist simultaneous poem. It's a very unornamented description, and it just lets the noise of that space filter in without doing too much to it. Just pointing to the experience of having been there and being a part of something that's indescribable in a way because it has so many facets to it.

AF: Thank you. Erin, final thought?

EM: Well, I'm still into the—you know, being a cook and everything—into the big red pot (*laughs*). And also into—which makes me think of what Deanna was saying in the dancing—people in a small space. The poem at the end points to us in the future in the way that it ends, but I want to point to the *midden* that's there in Kitsilano, and that Khatsahlano was a member of—what we would call a chief, but a member—a head, a man of a very important family in one of the Indigenous nations that inhabited that exact area. And it was the CPR, the Canadian Pacific Railway, which fraudulently bought that land from the Indigenous people to create a suburb for rich people outside of the West End of Vancouver. So, when I read Kitsilano I always remember Khatsahlano and the ethos of giving, of sharing, of community.

AF: Thank you. Karis, do you have a final thought?

KS: Yeah, I find the "dropping by" especially compelling. The idea of spontaneity and the unscriptedness, inflected with the serial or routine nature of dropping by. One of the things I love about this poem is the way that it establishes the conditions for community in proximity but a lot of how it happens is spontaneous. It's opening the window and saying, hey, do you want to drop by?

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