

Referentially Speaking: Generating Meaning(s)
in Contemporary North American Poetry

BY

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A Thesis
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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**REFERENTIALLY SPEAKING: GENERATING MEANING(S)
IN CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN POETRY**

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RUSSELL P. RICKEY

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
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Abstract:

Traditional critics of current North American poetic writing often accuse it of having no meaning. The project of this essay is to provide a basis for showing that meaning not only can be located in such poetry, but permeates the open and diverse texts. Through an exploration of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on the 'novel' and the 'polyphonic,' of various critics' conceptions of the long poem's narrative strategies, and of Michel Foucault's application of 'archaeology' as a method for discerning meaning, this essay traces three possible structures for generating meaning in contemporary poems as well as applying the theories to three book-long poems: Robert Kroetsch's The Ledger, Harryette Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T, and Roberta Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons.

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Introduction: What do you mean?

It is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina goes offstage, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its principle character and its principal audience, and all the other stories are variations on her own story and meet with her life as in a mirror.

It is a novel about laughter and forgetting, about forgetting and about Prague, about Prague and about the angels.

Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.

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UMI

Traditional critics, it seems, often appear to hold very rigid determinations of what entails “great” poetry.

Quite easily, we can find traditional critics' attacks on contemporary poetry. Respected literary minds can effortlessly pronounce contemporary writing as a waste of time, as Harold Bloom does in his essay “The Dialectics of Poetic Tradition”:

Yet this is already dogma grown antique: Post-Modernism also has its canons and its canonizers; and I find myself surrounded by living classics, in recently dead poets of strong ambition and hysterical intensity, and in hyperactive novelist non-novelists, who are I suppose the proper seers for their armies of student non-students. (106)

Apparently, in Bloom's words, those interested in anything contemporary are “non-students.” Not only that, they are “hysterical” and “hyperactive.”

Energy, inventiveness, and passion make Bloom uneasy, at least as they appear in contemporary writing. He can go so far as to claim, as he does in his essay “Yeats and the Romantics,” that nothing new is worth studying:

Modern poetry in English begins with the difficult greatness of Blake and Wordsworth, and the different modes each invented have been the only significant kinds of poetry written during the past one hundred and fifty years. (63)

Bloom, like a great number of traditional critics, seemingly appreciates poetry finely aged, and canonized; no other writing is worth his time. His conception of “significant” does not allow for contemporary poems; he does

not appear to appreciate anything that might challenge long held traditions of poetic greatness.

As I further delved into studying contemporary poetics, I started to appreciate one of the reasons traditional critics were so opposed to this 'new' writing. Primarily, the 'rules' for constructing meaning from contemporary poems changed, and in turn, this change led many critics to accuse contemporary poetics of being unable to convey any meaning at all. Susan Ioannou, in her essay "Against Postmodernism: Tradition's Dead End," reflects a common rear-guard position in her attack against contemporary writing:

[T]he poet—nay, the poem—need only express itself, without concern for the reader. Indeed, with Postmodernism, the responsibility for making a poem comprehensible has shifted from writer to reader. While the writer indulges in language "play," the reader must work to "decode" the poem's meaning.

Ultimately, however, such Postmodernist poems deteriorate into autism. Every poem becomes "self-reflexive," locked beyond criticism within its own words, no longer linked to the world, mankind, or the poet as fellow human being. A suspended web of words, the poem is indifferent to significant public content, and devoid of emotion. (8)

Ioannou, regrettably, ignores that traditional poems involve as much "decoding" as do contemporary poems. She disregards the fact that any poem amounts to a "suspended web of words" if the reader of those words remains unable to produce meaning from them. Certainly, if we are to stay

true to traditional poetics, contemporary poems remain incomprehensible; however, Ioannou, like many other traditional critics, fails to recognize that meaning still exists in contemporary poems. She overlooks that how contemporary writers create that meaning requires a different set of rules, or, a new way of reading.

Contemporary poems often cause great discomfort amongst traditional critics in requiring a different approach. Understandably, the attack on contemporary works, as is Ioannou's, is often hostile. Paul Fussell, in his book Poetic Meter & Poetic Form, reveals, unconsciously, what underlies such concerns:²

[T]he modern reader of poetry in English, despite his vast difference in extrinsic and learned attitudes from, say, his Elizabethan counterpart, has still the same kind of physique and personal physiological rhythms as his forebears. These will still seem to seek satisfaction and delight in ways which accord with the experienced rhythmic traditions of Modern English. If these traditions should ever become totally irrecoverable, it would not be pleasant to calculate what will be lost forever. (75)

Fussell clings to a naive humanistic opinion; he forgets that poetry is not merely a visceral, but is also a cerebral activity. In effect, contemporary poetics often reflects an attempt to create work that identifies with the twentieth century. Contrary to the thoughts of critics such as Ioannou and Fussell, I would argue that contemporary poets seek not to replace traditional

poetry, but to find a poetry that communicates to a contemporary public, in a contemporary way, about their contemporary life. As a result, traditions will not be “irrevocably lost.” Contemporary poetry merely contemplates, and reflects, the ever-changing society in which we live.

Nonetheless, contemporary poetry requires a different conception of how meaning is made. Even critics, such as Kate Taylor, who appreciate contemporary writing, still note the difficulty of these texts. In a recent review in The Globe and Mail of contemporary writer Nicole Brossard’s Baroque at Dawn, she notes:

Brossard rejects traditional plot and character as false consolations, continually breaking down the single authorial voice or consistent fictional settings. . . . This, of course, can make Baroque at Dawn difficult to read. . . . Among her post-modern fellows, Brossard offers neither the delightful humour of an Italo Calvino, nor the romantic diversions of an A.S. Byatt. Her characters are skeletal and her plot ghostlike. We glimpse the novel’s story as if through a veil. . . . (D10)

Taylor remarks how Brossard, similar to other contemporary writers, rejects a number of traditional methods for making meaning out of a text; nonetheless, she still finds significance in this book. As she later emphatically points out, “if Brossard refuses us most of fiction’s traditional comforts, she does console us with beautiful language—Baroque at Dawn is full of lush description and surprising metaphors—and, most of all, ideas” (D10).

Contemporary writing, then, does not, contrary to its opponents' convictions, lack meaning, nor does it lack passion, emotion, or thought. In reality, contemporary poetry, though it requires a different reading, still remains a construct in language, and, therefore, inevitably evokes meaning.

Jonathan Culler, in his book Structuralist Poetics, provides an eloquent defense of contemporary ways of making meaning in poetry:

[S]tructuralism's reversal of perspective can lead to a mode of interpretation based on poetics itself, where the work is read against the conventions of discourse and where one's interpretation is an account of the ways in which the work complies with or undermines our procedures for making sense of things. Though it does not, of course, replace ordinary thematic interpretations, it does avoid premature foreclosure—the unseemly rush from word to world—and stays within the literary system for as long as possible. (130)

Contemporary poetry requires that we rethink our assumptions of how we interpret poetry. The attempt is not to replace traditional notions of poetry, but possibly to reconsider how meaning is made in a text. In the process, contemporary poets often write a poetry that reveals their awareness of how new ideas impinge on meaning's production. In order to gain meaning from contemporary poems, we, in turn, must be aware of new ideas relevant to the creation of meaning.

In this essay I will explore three possible structures that contemporary poets employ to make meaning. Though there are countless structures

available, my goal will be to provide an introduction into how meaning might be made in a text, and then provide examples as to how that structure has been put to use in contemporary poetry. By no means could I possibly explore every structure possible in generating meaning; therefore, I have restricted myself to three that I have found useful in regarding contemporary North American poetry.

Investigating contemporary means of devising meaning in poems requires that we consider the polyphonic text. In an attempt to move away from traditional conceptions of the solitary, unilingual voice of a poet conveying a static, or at least total, meaning to the reader, contemporary poets often create poems consisting of many voiced layers that make up the meaning. With the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on the "novel" and the "heteroglossic," I will show how meaning can be constructed in these multivoiced poems and how such a style better represents contemporary society.

From the polyphonic nature of contemporary texts, I will move into an explanation of narrative. A criticism of contemporary poems often arises out of their supposed lack of cohesiveness. The complaint is not surprising, for contemporary poetry often questions both narrative structures and narration.

Yet an exploration of the long poem, and its relevance to contemporary poetry, will reveal how, in fact, these texts, though discursive on the surface, do relay meaning, but do so in a far more open-ended, less restrictive, and progressive manner than traditional poetry normally does. As a result, contemporary poets do not abandon narrative cohesion, but instead, reconsider how stories are expressed.

Finally, as a result of the interrogation of narrative, contemporary poetry often reveals a rethinking of how history is structured. With reference to the theories of Michel Foucault, I will consider how meaning is fashioned from the contemporary text using “archaeology” as a metaphor for the process. Quite often, contemporary critics have referred to the documentary nature of contemporary long poems. While not disagreeing with this approach, I believe that Foucault provides, in his work on reevaluating how histories are constructed, a better model for determining how meaning is constructed within contemporary poetry. I believe that “archaeology” serves as an effective model for making sense of these poems.

For each chapter, I will also clarify theories of how meaning is made by providing a reading of three books of poetry as they relate to the three theories of meaning. I have selected these texts—Robert Kroetsch’s The

Ledger, Harryette Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T, and Roberta Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons—for several reasons. In terms of style, not one of the three books follows a particularly traditional poetic. As well, the writers are from either Canada or the United States, and all three books were published in North America. As this paper will eventually show, the three poems are not necessarily related, at least not thematically, but instead provide varied examples of poetic style and strategy. Finally, I have chosen these three poems because they have not garnered much academic attention, which I believe a grave error. In my opinion, each of these excellent books deserves close and careful consideration.

Linda Hutcheon, in her essay “Seeing Double: Concluding with Kroetsch,” affectionately calls Robert Kroetsch, “Mr. Canadian Postmodern” (160). I could have easily chosen, for my purposes, any one of Kroetsch's long poems from his oeuvre. However, The Ledger offers a good opening since it represents a shift in Kroetsch's poetry. One of his first long poems, the book starts a series of long poems that would later see more academically acknowledged works Seed Catalogue, and The Sad Phoenician. But The Ledger does serve as an excellent example of the difficulty Kroetsch's writing presents in producing meaning. As Robert Lecker illustrates in his book

Robert Kroetsch, The Ledger marks the start of a radically unorthodox

poetics:

Kroetsch finds room for serious narrative play: he pursues contradiction; he breaks, renews, destroys. By repeatedly calling up phrases or fragments of speech in different contexts, Kroetsch allows the texts to resonate itself into a union of echoes. He establishes a field of vision in which the interweaving voices are at once symbolic of identity being formed by being unformed. To really hear we have to question all connotations, sounding all the connections our private language can produce. Kroetsch is not concerned with describing his past, but with making it. He does not want primarily to listen, but to voice. . . . Here the open-ended process celebrates the prairie poet's ability to put 'space all over the place.' Equally, it asserts Kroetsch's resistance to closure; it confirms all his attraction to language as an erotic, intoxicating force; it allows him to throw open the poem's focus out to echoing places of reference; once colloquial, anecdotal, and formally complex, Kroetsch's long poems articulate a radical theory of writing . . . (133)

The Ledger allows us to see an excellent example of Kroetsch's long poem poetics. In noting the "interweaving voices," the "serious narrative play," and "the making" of past, Lecker also defines the very areas where many readers have trouble deciphering meaning out of Kroetsch's poems. Though I too, like Lecker and many other readers, take great pleasure in Kroetsch's "attraction to language as an erotic, intoxicating force," this paper will focus on techniques that generate meaning in his "colloquial, anecdotal, and formally complex" poetry.

Kroetsch's The Ledger, first published in 1975, represents one of the early works of contemporary poetics. Published more than a decade before either of the other books I will be exploring, The Ledger represents a text that many traditional critics would attack because of its poetics.

Harryette Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T, published 1992, would receive even a worse treatment if viewed solely in terms of traditional poetics.

Mullen, an African American born in Alabama and raised in Texas, writes a poetry that, at first, appears impossibly dense and difficult. A prose-poem series that runs thirty-two pages, S*PeRM**K*T is Mullen's third book of poetry (with a fourth about to be released). Mullen's poetry, as Elisabeth Frost notes in her essay "Signifyin(g) on Stein: The Revisionist Poetics of Harryette Mullen and Leslie Scalapino," reveals a lot about contemporary American society:

Mullen encodes cultural and racial specificity into her word games . . . Allusions to contemporary life are everywhere, mixed in with more lyrical "poetic" language. Commercials, for example, are not shut out, precisely because such references are, all by themselves, a commentary on American culture.

Mullen writes, in a refreshingly distinctive mode, poetry about race and gender issues in American life. The poems appear as a variance of references upon references with no apparent narrator or plot. Meaning in Mullen's work

does not immediately surface, and, with only a knowledge of traditional poetics, many critics would ignore Mullen's complex and acute commentaries on American culture. Her mixture of voices and non-narrative technique could easily confuse, even offend, some readers. I include this text because of its difficulty, and would hope my examination of it will help readers make sense out of Mullen's wonderfully intricate poetry.

On the surface, it would appear that Roberta Rees's poetry would provide more, though definitely not complete, comfort to a traditional critic than would Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T. And yet, her 1992 text also provides a challenge to producing meaning because of its multivoiced, non-linear narrative. Even though Eyes Like Pigeons has won the Writers' Guild of Alberta Poetry Award and shared the League of Canadian Poets Gerald Lampert Award, Rees's long poem has basically been ignored by the academic community. Her first book, Eyes Like Pigeons reveals a profound text that investigates family histories, gender politics, immigrant experiences, urban lives, and western Canadian adventures. The book, filled with vivid and physical imagery, strikes with emotion and passion, while depending upon contemporary poetics. As Mark Walton quotes in an article-interview

in City Scope, Rees shares a contemporary or postmodern aesthetic when speaking about her own process of writing:

Writing is an exploration of things. I want to interrogate language and use language not just to sew things up and make things discreet, but to let language open things out. (56)

Unless readers have an understanding of contemporary theory, I believe that this book would lose its impact, since Rees's "opening things out" revels in a contemporary poetics that works against traditional conceptions of poetry.

As Walton correctly notices, for "Rees the process of writing is a matter of probing below the surface" (56). As readers, we too must probe below the surface in order to comprehend this text.

This paper, in an attempt to answer traditional critics of contemporary writing, will focus on generating meaning in contemporary poems. My intention remains not only to explore three of the theories behind devising meaning of contemporary texts but to also elucidate how those theories may be applied. In other words, I will make meaning of how to make meaning in a poetry that has been often accused of having no meaning. Language, I maintain, always carries with it some significance. Readers simply need to know the processes that these contemporary writers use to make sense of their world, and, as a result, their poetry. As I will show over the next three

chapters, Kroetsch's The Ledger, Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T, Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons, and the countless other texts which share their sensibilities, do mean, do have emotion, do have passion, do have thought, and do everything that any traditional critic would ask of a poetic text, but in a very different, and, I believe, far more exciting, manner. As readers, we need the right tools to open up meaning in these texts, and I hope that the following pages will provide a start in that direction.

Chapter 1: Voicing Languages

However, please remember it is the murmur who is singing this. The poet is only an observer, a private individual, and the murmur is an act of the imagination.

Erin Mouré, "Song of a Murmur"

One of the more comforting experiences of traditional poetics comes from the appearance of the single voice of a poet relaying thoughts, personal and contemplative, to the reader. Such a text focuses concern upon the speaking persona. Though not to be confused with the actual poet, the single and personal voice has spoken in texts as various as William Shakespeare's sonnets and Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. A more epic style, such as we find in John Milton's Paradise Lost, features one main voice controlling the narrative (though there are several *characters* involved in the poem). In either example of traditional poetics, one voice dominates the text.

The twentieth century saw a radical change in that voicing. T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," Ezra Pound's Cantos and Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons, for example, mark a significant change from the poetics of earlier centuries. Considered the beginning of the *avant-garde* in the early twentieth century, these modernist texts struck a path for poetics that led away from the single-voiced poetics that had, until then, dominated lyrical and non-dramatic poetry. No longer could a reader be sure that one voice remained consistent throughout the text; several voices came together in a cacophony of different speakers. By no means did this one poetics replace another, or an earlier one; however, it started a movement away from the traditional 'I/you' binary

which Kroetsch, Mullen and Rees have extended and refined as one of their central poetic strategies in the late twentieth century.

While supposing poetry by its very nature to be monophonic, Bakhtin locates polyphony in the emergence of the novel. I believe, however, that Bakhtin's terms can also contribute to an understanding of late twentieth-century poetics. First, Bakhtin's definition of the 'novel' must be examined; he struggles with broadening the meaning behind the 'novel' to one more associated with the new, rather than the generic classification one would normally assign to it. In his essay, "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin argues that "almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent 'novelized'" (5). Bakhtin's argument sites the novel against the epic, which, he argues, existed before reading (which is to say before literacy). In his view, of "all the major genres only the novel is younger than writing and the book" (3). I would argue that poetry, though certainly older than the book and writing, also qualifies as a genre that can be 'novelized.' Contemporary North American poetics certainly reflects Bakhtin's notions of what constitutes the novel.

One of the principle features of the novel concerns the entrance of heteroglossia to literature. Bakhtin states that one of the primary precedents

of the novel is distinguishing “the multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel”(“Novel” 11). He recognizes that unilingual works simply do not reflect the complexity, even multiplicity, of the western world and that ‘artistic prose’ stresses something quite different from single-voiced texts:

The new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world. The world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly. The period of national languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end. Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language. The naive and stubborn co-existence of “languages” within a given national language also comes to an end—that is, there is no more peaceful co-existence between territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, epochs in language and so forth. (“Novel” 12)

Entrance into the modern world, for Bakhtin, meant an entrance into a multivariied language. In turn, an awareness that no one single language exists becomes, not only reflected, but apparent, in the ‘novel.’ As an abstract construct, language should not be viewed as a representation of a national or regional unit but a system divided and subdivided into several dialects. English, for instance, cannot, in a Bakhtinian sense, be viewed as a single language representing “England,” rather it is a conglomeration of several languages. Bakhtin argues that the location for artistic development of this polyphonic mode, or heteroglossia, has existed above all within the novel.

Bakhtin further develops this concept in his essay "Discourse in the Novel." Early in the text, Bakhtin pursues his notion that the novel is a form different from poetry. The argument depends upon some rather stringent requirements in his definition of poetics, and must be further explained in order to apply Bakhtinian notions to contemporary poetics. Bakhtin's initial view on poetics remains very conservative:

In genres that are poetic in the narrow sense, the natural dialogization of the word is not put to artistic use, the word is sufficient unto itself and does not presume alien utterance beyond its own boundaries. Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse. (285)

Poetic discourse, in these terms, does not allow for shifts in register.

Meaning remains contained with a single purpose; language does not flow nor do poets allow for more than one meaning. The single meaning of the text lies in determining what the poet meant to convey. Nothing enters the text other than the poet's own 'words' or meaning. Bakhtin's view of the poetic, then, considers language to be grounded in the poet's fixing language to a uniphonic voice:

The language of the poet is *his* voice, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were, "without quotation marks"), that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention. ("Discourse" 285, original emphasis)

Poetic discourse, in this description, seeks a unity. The poet conveys ‘direct’ meaning through a stable, expressive, and unilingual language. On the surface, heteroglossia appears to have little place in this definition of poetics. Bakhtin does note that *some* forms of poetry do allow for expression of heteroglossia, or even the inclusion of other languages, but he argues that these accommodations normally occur in the comic, or ‘low’ poetic genres, or merely as voices of characters (other than the narrator) in epic poems (“Discourse” 286-7). Aside from those exceptions, he finds that the result of such stringent use of language results in poetry that is “authoritarian, dogmatic, and conservative” (“Discourse” 287). However, in “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin’s further reflections on the ‘novel,’ or, what he starts to call with increasing frequency, ‘artistic prose,’ begins to foreground dialogic patterns of the kind we find in the poetry I am focusing on here.

The transposition may seem difficult for, if Bakhtin argues there can only be a monophonic poetry, how can I pursue Bakhtin’s definitions of the dialogic in ‘novels’ in my exploration of three book-length *poems*? It is possible though, to find, in what Bakhtin characterizes as “artistic prose,” a link to contemporary poetics. Bakhtin certainly is emphatic about what he believes to be the vital definition of the novel:

Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization--this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. ("Discourse" 263)

Again, Bakhtin states that the novel allows the writer a place of exploration of the many voices of heteroglossia in order to represent a polyglot world. The writer, in constructing a 'novel,' makes use of the several languages that surrounds one in society. But these very terms that Bakhtin so confidently aligns with the novel, as I will show in the upcoming pages, aptly apply to the poems which I propose to analyze, and there are countless others, written by contemporary writers, which also are constructed with polyphonic voices. If, however, these texts are in fact poems, how does Bakhtin's notion of the 'novel' apply to them?

Bakhtin himself offers us an opening when, in "Discourse in the Novel," his own definition of the 'novel' begins to slide. The term, "artistic prose," appears to be one that Bakhtin employs with great frequency when describing the type of writing that he also calls the novel. His attempt is to

move away from strict generic definitions of 'novel' and to push the word into a different meaning. Bakhtin explains that the novel is not a single genre:

The novel is an artistic genre. Novelistic discourse is poetic discourse, but one that does not fit within the frame provided by the concept of poetic discourse *as it now exists*. (269, my emphasis)

Bakhtin here supposes that poetry is not capable of achieving the effects that he finds in "artistic prose," but at the time he was writing there was no poetic style that replicated what he saw in the novel.

However, the contemporary poems that figure in this paper blur the traditional borders of poetic discourse. The poems, as I will show, take on Bakhtin's subtle challenge and nudge poetic discourse into a heteroglossia resembling the variety that Bakhtin believes the novel so significantly obtains; however, we need to consider why polyphonic stylistics make meaning difficult to ascertain.

Poetic discourse, as Bakhtin would describe it, mirrors itself in early twentieth-century criticism and remains a striking force in those critics who would oppose contemporary poetics. Christopher Wiseman, in his essay, "The Health of Poetry," lists a number of Canadian poets that he admires and then explains why:

[they] reject surface frenzy and complexity and communicate powerfully and directly, create strong feeling, speak as one feeling and thinking person to another, have their own distinctive voices, base their

work on the organization of sound, image and syntax, are fine craftsmen, are willing and able to expose personal feelings honestly, even painfully, will use, if necessary, traditional rhythmical devices against which to play the wounded or joyful human voice, employ powerful metaphors, know exactly what they're doing when they break a free-verse line, reject the poetically political, don't have the arrogance to believe that the techniques and approaches developed by poets over thousands of years are suddenly irrelevant and out of date. (288-9)

Wiseman expresses an opinion held by a number of critics who hold fast to a traditional view of poetic discourse. In promoting such a view, Wiseman sets up certain requirements for a poetic voice that he believes necessary if poetry is to succeed. His opposition to "frenzy and complexity" as well as the "poetically political" reveals a prejudice against poetry that makes the reader think about new forms, for frenzy and complexity require an alert and aware reader. In rejecting the poetically political, Wiseman ignores the inevitability that language, because it is constructed, always makes a political statement; even if the poetry does not overtly make political statements, the words and forms the poet chooses implicitly impart a political choice. As well as opposing such poetry, Wiseman makes it known what type of poetry he respects. He focuses upon those who can "communicate powerfully and directly" and "speak as one feeling thinking person to another." In defining poetry in such terms, Wiseman expresses a naiveté about the supposed

immediacy of experience, believing, apparently, that poems are acts of nature. He appears to accept *only* the monophonic poetics. In rejecting all other forms, Wiseman asserts that contemporary poets cannot affirm “the wounded or joyful voice, employ powerful metaphors” and do not “know exactly what they are doing.” My argument here is not *against* the value of such steadfast beliefs; it is opposed to any enforcement of those poetics as the *only* realm for poetics.

As well, Wiseman projects upon contemporary poetry values which are simply false. Contemporary poetry can communicate exactly what Wiseman calls for; however, it does so differently. Just as Bakhtin argues that writing the novel requires an entrance into a polyglot world, and thereby results in a polyphonic text, so I would argue that contemporary poetics enters into a comparable heteroglossic space where it cannot be read in a manner appropriate to those writers Wiseman admires.

Views such as Wiseman’s are often shared by those influenced by a New Critical aesthetics. New Criticism dominated teaching in North American academies throughout the 1950’s and, though its tutelage has significantly loosened in recent decades, its influence continues today. The consequences are not to be ignored, as one might appreciate when Terry

Eagleton, in Literary Theory, usefully describes certain features of New

Critical doctrine:

The poem itself was opaque to rational inquiry as the Almighty himself: it existed as a self-enclosed object, mysteriously intact in its own unique being. The poem was that which could not be paraphrased, expressed in any language other than itself: each of its parts was folded in on the others in a complex organic unity which it would be a kind of blasphemy to violate. (47)

What Wiseman finds naked and immediate, Eagleton finds anti-intellectual and mystified. Poems, in a New Critical context, Eagleton points out, were single solitary units of expressed meaning from poet to public; all one needed, apparently, was common sense and some basic training in literature to 'discover' the meanings of those poems that deserved to be read.

However, many contemporary poets violate New Critical beliefs of how poetic discourse should be constructed. The movement of a substantial portion of contemporary poetics has been informed by the qualities that Bakhtin defines in his discussion of the novel: entrance into heteroglossia, and scepticism about the existence of a personal unitary language.

Contemporary poetics has moved away from the unitary and personal meaning prescribed by both the New Critics, and current traditional critics such as Wiseman, for a variety of reasons; the rise of structuralist and poststructuralist criticism being the primary one. From its interrogations rose

a recognition that language cannot carry a stable unitary meaning, and that it can never be a direct expression from one inner self (the poet) to another inner self (the reader). Jacques Derrida, in his essay "Différance," recognizes the difficulty that comes with believing language, a series of signs, carries any consistent meaning:

Let us start, since we are already there, from the problematic of the sign and of writing. The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, "thing" here standing equally for meaning, or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. (9)

Since all language depends upon a series of signs, there can be no guarantee of the referent; signs, therefore, always refer back to more signs and not simply or directly to any 'original' or 'true' meaning. Derrida has clearly shown the inability of language, of text, to convey a single, personal, solitary meaning. Derrida's linguistic scepticism, combined with Bakhtin's multilingualism, a world where language was dependent not only upon who was using it, and how it was used, but also on how the reader received such words, offered contemporary poets an advance into a poetry that not only acknowledges this polyphonic, unstable language, but begins to play with, even celebrate, language's many meanings in the process. Further, this

movement allows us to acknowledge the reader's role in constructing, not simply receiving, meaning from the text.

In constructing meaning, readers of contemporary poems must recognize the role that they play in creating their referents. Traditional poetics assumes, as Eagleton informs to us in his account of New Criticism, that even as the poet figured control by making the poem,

Meaning was public and objective, inscribed in the very language of the literary text, not a question of some putative ghostly impulse in a long-dead author's head, or the arbitrary private significances a reader might attach to his words. (48)

Most contemporary poets no longer believe that all readers will necessarily share the same social-cultural existence or, therefore, the exact same understanding of language. In effect, many would agree with Bakhtin, who recognizes that what may be called a single language, for example English, really consists of several languages. Such poets may also concur with Derrida when he posits that texts can carry no "public and objective" meaning. This leaves the "private significances" that a reader brings to the text, as being, really, the only base from which a critic can start. As a result, the reader of contemporary poetics is left with what appears to be a conundrum.

It is a perplexing conundrum, perhaps, but one that is functional, and I

might add, enjoyable. Polyphonic structures brought into play within contemporary poetics must be recognized as an attempt by writers to bring in the many voices of heteroglossia without simply, or exclusively, privileging their own: a recognition that 'their' own voices will be lost among the many voices of the text, a recognition that 'their' own voices can not be truthfully realized. In effect, reading is an act between reader and text, not between author and reader, and what the reader does with a text is up to the reader. As George Bowering humourously points out in his essay, "The Reader and You," the notion of 'reader' itself can be a tricky question:

So that construct that certain critics like to write about, 'the reader' cant [sic] do anything about what is written. But if you are reading a book you can intervene. You can invent a reading.

You can always skip page 35. You can read from the last page to the first. You can stick pages from a pornographic novel between Northrop Frye's sheets. You can call the narrator of Atwood's second novel Agnes. Or you can intervene simply by reading the way you read.

The person who wrote the book cant [sic] stop you. The 'author' cant [sic], either. And the 'reader' doesn't know you exist.

A lot of what they call 'reflexive' writing is simply the result of the writer trying to be you. You are on the ground of the so-called postmodern. (197-8)

Some critics would argue that Bowering's statement invites anarchy into poetic discourse, if the text can mean anything at all. Quite the opposite,

however, Bowering insists that there is meaning, but that the 'reader' partakes in the making of meaning. Contemporary, or postmodern if you like, poetics not only recognizes this reality, but invites the reader into the polyphonic, unstable text that revels in a constant state of process.

However, how does this polyphonic discourse allow for any meaning to be recognized at all? In the following pages, I will concentrate on explaining how Robert Kroetsch's The Ledger, Harryette Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T, and Roberta Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons, reveal a polyphonic, dialogic strategy. Though the radical reading strategies that Bowering mentions fascinate me, I will not be partaking in anything quite so flamboyant; however, I would remember throughout my own explanations of the poems that "reading the way you do" always involves some form of intervention. My attempt here will be mainly to point out a strategy that denotes some possible readings; no doubt, other readers will come to different conclusions. However, if working off the same text, and aware of the same strategies, critics can come to some conclusions upon how these texts work, if not always exactly upon what they mean.

Of the three poems I am focusing on in this paper, Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons may offer the easiest entry into meaning; however, this book still

radically saturates the reader with a variety of voices. For the most part, the polyphony of the text may be the reason for the heavy emotional content of this poem. Rees combines not only several types of language, but also constantly changes the form that language takes.

Rees's poetic narrative continuously stretches across the heteroglossic world that Bakhtin refers to, situating several different forms of English throughout the text. Rees recognizes from the start that language is not constant, nor meaning stable: "Always back to this, Thi means poetry in Vietnamese, but what / means meaning" (9). "Thi," in Rees's poem, constantly moves back and forth in meaning. It is both the name of a central figure in the text, an entrance into a world and language that the narrator knows as foreign—Vietnamese immigrants—and the doubled meaning between proper name and poetry (*thi* is the Vietnamese word for poetry). Throughout the poem, Rees reminds the reader that words are not stable units of meaning. "Thi" can be read in one of two ways, just as many other of her words are also open to several forms of interpretation. How "Thi" constructs meaning depends upon what language the text is working, upon what language the reader recognizes. However, the cross between a foreign language provides an obvious example of polyphonic strategy; the movement

intralingually, though more subtle, also expects the reader to be aware of the multivariied use of language.

Rees essentially constructs a text that focuses on language. Crucial to defining all the characters as they are mentioned within the text is a peculiar sense of language. Spanning three generations, geography from Vietnam to Calgary, with a heavy focus on Crowsnest, and a range of social class from the homeless to the academic, Rees's words constantly reflect the swirl of language around her:

Downtown. 7th Ave and 1st St. S.E., behind the LRT tracks. Look for Thi's Canada. The Regis Hotel. Strippers. Out of a cab a women in short tight skirt. Zipper up the back, hem to waistband. Man too thin leans against brick, horks. Could be my uncle. Windows upstairs, all highrised Calgary in panes. Look for Thi's Canada. My grandfather in one of those rooms died drunk. (66)

Rees, in this section from "Because Calgary," starts with subtle use of the polyphonic voice. Read in terms of traditional poetics, this section would seem somewhat unpoetic, and yet images and language in this section mark it as different from prose. The words "all highrised Calgary in panes," not only make use of poetic metaphor, they also play upon the double meaning of pane/pain. Though strippers and drunks may not form the content of a traditional poetry in which a contemplative mind searches for deep personal revelations, Rees does offer the metaphor of the poetic search, and in a

somewhat poetic language. The expression “look for Thi’s Canada” appears against western Canada’s urban reality and “horks,” the language that comes with it. In poetic prose, Rees forms a text that further pushes into the polyglot world in order to represent this society.

The part of the title section, a five page prose-poem, moves from the sinking of the Titanic, to Vietnamese classical writing, to the sister suffering bulimia, to the sexist comments of a business man, to the “i’s” genealogy, to the mother’s rape, to the parents’ separation, to Thi’s first experiences in Canada, and back to Thi’s father (31-5). To show how this movement includes the polyphonic, the creation of several voices, it would be necessary to quote the whole passage; however, we can see how Rees employs varying types of language, how she enters the polyglot, by scoring a movement from one mode to another:

Into the bathroom. Look in all the mirrors. Stupid the girl in all the mirrors, stupid. Go away, leave me alone, go away, fuck off. Eyes swollen. Sits on the toilet, her head in my hand, swollen bloated pain in her gut nauseous. No one loves you, i say. Move my hand. Her forehead falls onto her bare thighs. Bitch, stupid bitch. My sister, too, eyes like, staring at all the food. Nibbles watermelon, pushes it away, I’m stuffed. Hips. Calves. Breasts. Smaller and smaller. Eyes like. A man at a party leans over speaks to her breasts. Did anyone ever tell you have beautiful mammaries. Can I touch one. Walks away, voice loud, Don’t be such a bitch, better learn to take a complement. . . (33)

In this small section we move from persons speaking, to internal thoughts, from epitaphs, to lists of body parts. Rees combines the several modes of language to capture the confusion of heteroglossia so that we ask: who is holding whose head? who is “i”? what was said before the man starts yelling? There are no complete, or right, answers to these questions; however, I am left with the impression of confusion, of anger, of despair, and of pain. Meaning comes out of the swirl of the languages and is by no means definitive. Yet, this powerful section, with its rich combinations of voices, mirrors the “artistic prose” that Bakhtin so valued, and with it comes another significant result of the polyphonic within a contemporary text.

Several critics, from Bakhtin to countless others, have stated that form and content are intricately united (“Discourse” 259). That is why contemporary poetry often radically looks different from traditional poetry. To indicate, through the use of form, that there are several voices at work, contemporary poetics often shatters traditional, and more recognizable, forms of poetry. A result of the polyphonic can be seen in a great number of contemporary texts, including certainly Eyes Like Pigeons, which also reflects the radical form that the use of the polyphonic helps to create.

implies, Mullen's text, structured upon the world of the supermarket food store, depends upon varying levels of language to create a text that questions social constructions.

Mullen successfully creates a political economy based upon the language of an ordinary supermarket. She explores, through her text, how the local Safeway offers ground for discussion of gender construction and race relations. Mullen brings those worlds into play primarily through the use of the polyphonic. By observing this pushing together of several multilingual forms, the reader starts to see the political construction behind the apparently unpolitical supermarket:

It must be white, a picture of health, the spongy napkin made to blot blood. Dainty paper soaks up leaks that steaks splayed on trays are oozing. Lights replace the blush red flesh is losing. Cutlets leak. Tenderloins bleed pink light. Plastic wrap bandages marbled slabs in sanitary packaging made to be stained. A three-hanky picture of feminine hygiene. (7)

On the surface, this poem essentially focuses on the packaging of meat products, but because of the varying languages that arise in the poem, Mullen also raises questions about the construction of female gender roles, and of race. "White," at least in the domain of the supermarket here, equals "a picture of health," foregrounding the recognition of value placed upon "whiteness" in our North American culture. With further emphasis in "it

must be white,” Mullen recognizes how our society has associated whiteness with health, and with cleanliness, resulting in “white” being associated with the positive. In recognizing how society projects this pattern, almost subconsciously when it comes to the supermarket setting, she draws out this point; if white holds value as a colour of health and cleanliness, then those who are “white” must also carry this association. In teasing out the awareness, Mullen skillfully reveals how society projects meaning onto objects, or signs, that we would assume are neutral. The apparently simple packaging of meat reveals society’s attitude toward a colour, one that applies as much to skin colour as it does to meat containers.

As well as commenting on race, Mullen’s text reveals a constant critique of gender constructions. She plays off the dual meaning of napkin, one for the “cutlets” and “tenderloins,” and the other for “feminine hygiene.” Throughout the poem, terms that parallel gender stereotypes for women, “dainty,” “blush,” “pink,” and “three-hanky,” are brought into service in describing the display of meat for sale. The conscious effort to link the image of woman to the image of meat reveals how the ‘neutral’ space of the supermarket actually carries over, or can be seen to carry over, social constructs not normally revealed or even recognized. The move should not

be surprising to contemporary readers for as Bakhtin had pointed out, language “can only see itself in the light of another language” (“Novel” 12). Mullen finds the strategy so productive that she also explores the construction of the male gender role by employing the same technique, but with yet another ‘language.’

In a later poem, Mullen examines how supermarket products also reveal that men are shaped by the culture that creates those products and does so with a parody created by two differing voices. She writes:

What’s brewing when a guy pops the top off a bottle or can
talk with another man after a real good sweat. It opens, pours
a cold stream of the great outdoors. Hunting a wild six-pack
reminds him of football and women and other blood spoors.
Frequent channels keep high volume foamy liquids overflow-
ing, not to be contained. Champs, heroes, hard workers all
back-lit with ornate gold of cowboy sunset lift dashing white
heads, those burly mugs. (17)

The stereo-typical image of masculinity combined with the images of a beer commercial (beer being available in an American supermarket) stresses the construction that goes into marketing a product. The dual voice creates a parody of language, and images, often found in beer commercials: “good sweat,” “cold stream of the great outdoors,” and “cowboy sunset.” Mullen combines two romantic narratives that figure in beer marketing (primarily aimed at men) to make a serious comic statement. “Hunting wild six-pack”

reveals the underlying violence of such fantasy by connecting the violent act of hunting with the dulling act of drinking. Similarly, the line “football and women and other blood spoors” places women within these commercials in a point of equivalence to male ‘games’ of violence and death.

In both instances of the polyphonic, Mullen reveals how the language of the supermarket is in fact a language. Throughout the text she pulls in the commercial language not only of the supermarket, but that of cliché, of parable, of pop-culture, of marketing and of cultural criticism. Through the juxtaposition of these voices, Mullen can create a text that brings to the surface a language normally thought politically sterile. She creates a series of poems that questions the assumed constructs that make up the supermarket, and in doing so, also questions the same assumptions as they operate in the general culture. Mullen’s work, then, quite easily fits into a ‘postmodern’ mode.

Like her, Kroetsch writes poetry strikingly different from traditional forms. In Kroetsch’s writing, we find that he is consciously aware, and in turn makes the reader aware, of his entrance into contemporary poetics.

Kroetsch’s The Ledger, among the three books I am investigating, perhaps makes the most use of the polyphonic. I stated earlier that Rees’s poetry may

provide the easiest entry into contemporary poetics, but Kroetsch's work may, however, foreground the polyphonic style in a more expressive manner.

The Ledger obviously takes on heteroglossia by inserting the original, or what one is lead to believe is the actual original, text of Kroetsch's ledger within the poem itself. Whether Kroetsch truly relates the text of the ledger becomes less important than how he brings the language of the ledger to life within the poem:

a. "in bookkeeping, the book of the final entry, in which a record of debits, credits, and all money transactions is kept."

			the book of columns	
page 33: James Darling				
1880				
Mar. 22: to sawing square timber	1.44			
June 21: to 1 round cedar bed	3.50			
June 21: to 1 jack shingles	.50			
Dec. 4: to sawing mable [sic]	1.50	Nov/82		4.10
			(it doesn't balance) (2)	

Kroetsch here inserts into the text three separate voices within a compact half page. First, there is the entry that seemingly appears to be a dictionary explanation of the word "ledger." Next, we find a series that appears to be from the actual ledger, meticulous to the point of adding the "[sic]" as though

the text were an actual quotation, which it may well have been. Lastly, we see the narrator's voice running down in a column, adding commentary to both of the other voices. Kroetsch constantly brings in such voices to create a world of early Canada that includes artifacts from the time, and the awareness that all these voices surpass a single poet conveying a single, unitary, and personal thoughts. Kroetsch here constructs himself as a writer attempting to create a cacophony of voices that illustrate the space they come from. Kroetsch's voices not only appear, they interact; and yet, the narrator questions and corrects the ledger and in doing so, warns the reader about trusting any of the voices. Throughout The Ledger, the reader must constantly question where the particular voices come from.

A later section of the poem shows how Kroetsch not only takes the voice from the ledger directly but also starts to play off the language of the quotations. He writes:

1913
- 1829
84

Cause of death:

went to sit down
and missed the chair

She lies buried to the east
of the church in Spring Lake,
Alberta. She was visiting in
Heisler, Alberta, at the time
of her death: Heisler was so
new it didn't have a graveyard:

Verdammt!

**DEATH PROHIBITED
ON THESE PREMISES**

What do I owe you?

O bury me not
on the lone prairie. (16)

Again, we have a conglomeration of voices: some evident, some much more subtle. The more obvious voices are those of the German (presumably the great-grandmother missing the chair and falling to her death), the voice of the story-teller (re-telling the circumstances of the grandmother's death), and the voice parodic of the romanticized prairie poet (with an emphatic 'O' no less). More subtle variations on the levels of language come with the recounting of figures to find out the grandmother's age; it is not from the ledger, but it appears in the same voice; the language and form of the accounting in the ledger reappears when figuring the grandmother's age. The figures do not appear to have been 'borrowed' by Kroetsch from the actual ledger, but they mimic the act of accounting in counting the grandmother's years. The voice that parodies authoritative language, with its "DEATH PROHIBITED," results in a comic commentary on a town without a graveyard.

Kroetsch's play within language seeks the same possibilities that Bakhtin found so abundant in the novel. Though Bakhtin saw the novel as the place for an artistic exploration of the heteroglossia that makes up the world

of language, Kroetsch pushes his poetry into similar polyphonic expressions. The result reveals a text aware of language's many duplicities and possibilities; its meanings saturated, as opposed to stated, throughout the text.

The contemporary poetic strategy of the polyphonic text, voices, as opposed to voice, has opened up the meaning of the poem and changed well-held beliefs of how poetry 'should' be. As Bakhtin points out, entrance into the polyglot world can result in a prose that reflects that world, the novel. Contemporary poets, though, having to struggle with firmly held beliefs that the poet is a writer conveying personal and deep thoughts to a reader, have opened poetry into the world of the polyglot. Though sometimes disconcerting, and not always easily definable, this strategy exemplifies an uneasiness over the possibility that the sign might carry any stable meaning at all. In reply, Rees, Mullen and Kroetsch all show how the polyphonic does not simply shatter meaning, but can in fact concentrate it. In short, these poems do not lack the qualities supposedly reserved for traditional poetics: emotion, complexity and passion. However, I would argue that they better represent our contemporary society. Voices upon voices, sounds upon sounds, construct our daily life; these poems, in raising those voices, also can start to comment upon them. In short, the polyphonic has become an

important strategy to the contemporary poetic and directly leads into another strategy for generating meaning in contemporary texts, narrative in the long poem.

Chapter 2: Narratively Speaking

the trouble with conclusions is that they conclude. ideas have side-effects too. you have to keep an idea open as long as possible in order to get a feeling for, a notion of, all its possible side effects. the history of ideas teaches us that one lifetime isn't a long enough testing period for any idea.
bpNichol, "Things I Don't Really Understand About Myself"

In focusing upon how meaning is made at the level of voice, that entrance into the heteroglossic world, I have paid particular attention to the poetics of language. Though at times a confusing cacophony of voices works against a unified meaning, readers can make sense of contemporary texts through recognition of the voices and the languages created in the making of a long poem. However, when looking at the contemporary poems I have chosen to focus on here, readers have to ask: how do we make meaning from an entire book? From Kroetsch's twenty-two page poem, to Rees's one hundred and seventeen page poem, we have a striking difference in length; however, we look at both of these works as book-long poems--cohesive texts and not collections of assorted poems. Why? As I have previously suggested, these texts do not depend upon a static form, or unitary language for their cohesiveness; in this chapter, I will focus on how these three poets concern themselves with cohesiveness, and in doing so, create texts that interrogate narrative and narration.

A structure that all of these poems reflect is that of what is now commonly called the long poem. However, we need to consider what actually comprises the long poem. Is the long poem a genre of its own? What makes a text a long poem? How does the contemporary long poem differ

from more traditional narrative poetics, and, how do we make meaning out of it? Once these questions are answered, I will look for possible narrative meanings in the texts I have chosen.

Whether the long poem can be considered a genre is a question that has been often discussed in the last fifteen years. Frank Davey, in “Recontextualization in the Long Poem,” refers to the long poem as, in large part, a documentary text (127). Kroetsch, in “For Play and Entrance,” writes about not only the documentary but the historical elements of the long poem and also focuses on the discursive narrative often found in the long poem. Several other critics, especially in Canada, conceive various other opinions on the genre of the long poem. Certainly, American poets, though they have not always referred to their writing with such a strong sense of genre, have also written versions of the long poem; I offer Charles Olson’s The Maximus Poems and Lyn Hejinian’s My Life as only two examples of countless others. There is then no one definition of the long poem. It is often postmodern assuredly. But what qualifies these texts as long poems?

I would argue that Mullen’s serial sequence of small poems, Rees’s eight long poem sections, and Kroetsch’s one long text do in fact share a

characteristic that allows one to see them as long poems, and it this shared quality that marks an entrance into meaning for contemporary long poetics.

All three of these texts, in their original form, were constituted as books. In his essay “Whole to Part: the Ends of Ideologies of the Long Poem,” Charles Bernstein offers an interesting solution to the problem of defining the long poem genre:

I use the ‘long poem’ in the narrowest sense to mean a discrete work self-conceived as such rather than the many ways of understanding the interrelation of seemingly discrete texts as a connected whole. . . . As an alternative concept, I would propose something very simple--the book. By book I mean something more than a ‘selected’ or a chronological collection of individual poems. I mean a book that is conceived as a single text but is composed of different poems or parts, embodying different ideologies. (178)

The three books I am focusing on, and countless others that now make up a significant portion of texts classified as long poems, share this one quality.

Whether they be serial poems, discursive texts, or collections of long poems, the texts are constructed as complete books. The ‘bookness’ of these poems in effect is what determines them as long poems. These poems did not have to be constructed as entire books; both Mullen’s and Kroetsch’s poems, for instance, could be in much longer works. Eyes Like Pigeons fulfills the normal requirements for length in a book of poetry; however, Rees has linked each section, both in form, photographs, and content, and it should not be

viewed as a collection of assorted poems. All of the poets I am considering, Kroetsch, Mullen and Rees, have constructed their texts to be read as single unitary units. Kroetsch later plays the edges of his text by including The Ledger within a longer book called Completed Field Notes; however, The Ledger also can be viewed as, and has been published as, a book on its own. In any case, the fact that these three poems are books puts pressure on them to act in certain ways; narrative becomes an issue for book-long poems, acting as it does, as a site of confusion in the construction of meaning.

We should not be surprised that narrative would emerge in longer poems, for narrative has long been associated with book-long poems. The most traditional narrative poem, the epic, has often appeared as a unitary book. For instance, Milton's Paradise Lost, or Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales are actually book-long poems. Traditional notions of such poems require that narrative be essential to them. And it is important to remind ourselves that the narrative style carried with it some basic assumptions, or characteristics: a desire for plot or story, a search for temporal cohesiveness, and a dominant narration. Understandably, when readers come to the contemporary long poem looking for these characteristics, and do not find them, or many of them, they must find new conventions of meaning as it is

constructed if the poem is not to fall to pieces. The disjunctive discourse of contemporary poetics would appear to abandon cohesion and yet the books I am focusing on, as do most long poems, have a cohesive nature; they find cohesion not by simply abandoning the narrative but by redefining the form it takes on.

Traditional narrative tendencies suggest a story, or a plot—a notion which contemporary long poems take to task. Unlike the traditional lyric poem, which contemporary poetics do not completely abandon, the book-long poem tries to move beyond the single poem, the single event, the single emotion. Unlike a collection or chronologically ordered text, even the serial long poem attempts to link a number of poems in some sort of structure; and the most familiar structure would be the narrative: to tell a story. As Fred Wah relates in an 1984 interview in Writing,

My sense of prose fiction is one of trying to manipulate a narrative line. I find that I'm not comfortable moving too far into that. I'm more attracted to the poem as an activity that informs me about what's going on in language, in my life, in my perceptions. As a poet one way to get into narrative without going into prose fiction is through the long poem. (45)

Long poems, for many other contemporary poets, have been a genre that allows for an entrance into narrative. However, unlike the epic, the contemporary long poem does not structure meaning within a traditional

story. Epic poetry, normally associated with nation building and myth making, often relies on a 'hero' and recounts tales surrounding that hero. Contemporary poems often move away from heroic tales to recount narratives that are not epic in nature. The confusion concerning meaning often comes out of this re-structuring, rethinking, which effect how the narrative is written.

Another essential quality of the contemporary poetic narrative can be seen in the strategy of delay, or open-endedness. Traditionally, which is to say in an Aristotelian reading, stories should have a beginning, middle and end. M. Travis Lane makes the point effectively in her essay, "Alternatives to Narrative: the Structuring Concept":

Narrative assumes and implies chronology and causality, with their structural implications. And the beginning and end of narrative are defined by the choice of a subject. The hero dies, or the war is over; what comes next is a different story. (145)

Chronology and causality, however they may be formed, register the cohesive nature of the traditional narrative. Such narratives begin and they end, usually centred around a single plot; though that may include sub-plots, they foreground a single plot. However, contemporary narratives (some would call them postmodern or poststructuralist) appear to have moved past this structure.

Until recently, narrative has long remained a fairly static construct.

David Lodge, in his 1966 book *Language of Fiction*, offers a good example of such a view on how we might approach narrative strategies. He advances a rather modernist explanation:

Reading a novel critically is a very delicate and complicated activity. One begins it with an open mind, but one hopes to finish it with a mind which is at least provisionally closed—closed, that is, upon an articulate sense of its meaning and value. (80)

Contemporary views upon the narrative have shifted, however (and certainly Lodge debates such a direction), from valuing a closed sense of meaning to affirming less resolved conclusions. Kroetsch, again in “For Play and Entrance,” posits that contemporary poetics strives for open-endedness, or at least a delay to closure: “Not a quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in the beginning itself” (118). Suspecting the possibility of a closed “sense of meaning and value,” contemporary poetics instead emphasizes a “dwelling” on beginnings, or in them, taking special interest in the process of how the story is told, which is to say how it is constructed.

This shift in contemporary poetics, it has often been argued, represents a significant change from modernist to postmodernist narrative. In the words of Brian McHale, modernism implies a dominant mode that is epistemological, while postmodernism’s dominant mode is ontological

(Postmodernist Fiction 9-10). Whereas modernist writers employed strategies that question the limits of knowledge, he has said postmodern writers question modes of being. Within this movement, then, the long poem's narrative focus turns to one upon process, not product: the telling of the story, not the story itself. As Steve McCaffery and bpNichol write in their book Rational Geomancy,

There is now a shift away from "plot" (the old reality) and from a centrality in such narcissistic ordering, toward a new emphasis on transition (the new reality). This new emphasis leads to a coherence difficult to understand in terms of the old centrality mode of composition and criticism precisely because that old mode is no longer applicable. (101)

Because of a recent focus on transition, narrative no longer follows the plot line of beginning, middle, and end. Instead, process, or what Davey calls "the narrative of composition," when "the poem's subject becomes largely its own writing," drives the narrative impulse ("Language" 184). Unlike Davey, I do not believe that narrative has actually been replaced in the long poem; I think, rather, that it is merely reworked into a narrative with a different goal. As a result, the cohesive nature of these discursive texts, in part, results from the narrative structure. Narrative does not disappear, but a different kind of narrative strategy reveals itself, one which many writers claim more honestly reflects the types of stories they are trying to convey. As Kroetsch points

out, “Perhaps we tell a blurred story because the story is blurred” (“Play” 129). Readers may not instantly recognize the stories told in these texts as having easily definable plot; however, they do constitute a kind of story, one that reveals itself in process.

As well, focus on process corrupts yet another traditional notion of narrative. Narrative implies a narrator, or at least a protagonist, whose role in the long poem will change. In conjunction with the polyphonic voice discussed in the first chapter, and the shift in narrative from plot, or product, to process, we find that the role of the poetic narrator in the narrative long poem also changes. It remains vital in appreciating how meaning is made out of the contemporary long poem to understand how the narration of these poems differs from earlier understandings of narrative strategies.

In one significant change in the role of narrator in contemporary poetics, the narrator is no longer always privileged over the other voices of the text. In acceding to process, the narrator no longer controls the plot of the long poem. Kroetsch, in his essay “The Veil of Knowing” speaks about the erosion of a singular speaker in Canadian narratives in terms that could apply equally, I think, to a marginalized American writer, such as Mullen: “There is in Canadian writing the fascination with multiple narrators. That narrative

method becomes as much a way to cloak as to reveal” (190). Unlike the traditional epic, in which a unitary voice unites the plot of the text, or even the short lyrical poem, where a single voice moves the plot of the poem, the contemporary poem, at least of the kind I am addressing, appears to revel in the loss of a privileged narrator.

Two narrative strategies become relevant. Both strategies are exposed in the books I have chosen as examples of contemporary poetics. In the more common approach, and this would apply to the texts by Rees and Kroetsch, we see a multiplicity of narrators. Though one narrator may appear more often than the others, that single voice does not simply dominate the text.

Douglas Barbour identifies this tendency in his own long poems:

One way to evade the ego-demands of lyric is to create a system in which a series of lyrics comment on each other & offer the possibility of voices rather than simple voice: to play through the serial poem or the sequence, where the voice speaking is simply not ones [sic] own. . . . I like the idea that it is the poem, with any number of possible voices, which is speaking rather than just me. And Ive [sic] found that the more I pay attention to the language, the more what the poem says is not simply some ‘thought’ ‘I’ had turned to verse. (“Open/Entrance” 130)

Like the traditional lyric, where a poetic ‘I’ controls the plot of the poem, contemporary poetry still includes, in many instances, an ‘I’ that appears

within the poem; however, within a polyphonic narrative, that 'I' does not dominate narration.

I have now posited that two strategies define the narrator in the long poem; I lied. The second approach at first glance may appear significantly different, but I would argue that it centres upon a special version of the multiple narrator: the absent, or unmentioned, narrator. Mullen's poem certainly reflects this narrative technique, as do several other contemporary poems: Wah's Music at the Heart of Thinking, or significant sections of bpNichol's The Martyrology, for example. I would argue that the polyvocal texts that these writers compose still have multiple narrators, even in the absence of a specific 'I.' The 'I' may not be mentioned specifically; yet, these texts still depend on some extensions of the writer (as character) speaking within the texts. I will explore this further when looking specifically at Mullen's book. However, the 'writer' narrator, whether conspicuous, or absent, leads to another quality found in contemporary narrative strategy.

Contemporary poetics has often been attacked for either lacking meaning, or being impersonal. Yet, if we recognize the kinds of narrators and narrative strategies I have identified, we find that contemporary poetics does in fact involve a personal poetics that borders on what some would call

autobiography. We need to be quite careful about such a statement, for, as Louis Dudek writes in his essay, "Beyond Autobiography," there is more to this new role of the unprivileged narrator/writer:

I said at the beginning that autobiography as such is not the subject of the long poem, it is merely incidental, since the real subject is something else. . . . The poet is in a completely open situation, seeking his bearings. That's why this 'wandering in a fog,' that's why the 'groping for an idea' -- even the 'private drivel.' The real subject is the search, the search for a truth of personal being and experience such as poetry has never in the past been privileged to explore. (112)

In short, though the poet enters the narrative in the long poem, as a narrator, as a character within the poem, one who is in no way privileged, the plot does not revolve around the narrator, but around the search. In many contemporary poems, including the three I am discussing, that search essentially contributes to the narrative; and so, their focus is on poetic process. This search often entails that meaning never quite closes to a complete and definite end.

Before discussing how these techniques are used within the particular texts, I must forewarn against my own making of meaning. Although the plot focuses on a narrative search for meaning, or on how meaning is made, we need always to remember that where there is no controlling or dominant

narrator, meaning cannot be absolute. Bernstein emphatically makes the point in “Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)”:

So that poetics becomes an activity that is ongoing, that moves in different directions at the same time, and that tries to disrupt or problematize any formulation that seems too final or preemptively restrictive. (62)

My discussion of how these techniques are employed by Kroetsch, Mullen and Rees, therefore, will inevitably have to be restricted to my own reading, because, whatever I learn from other readers, I can never finally transcend myself. What will especially count will be the recognition of how *a* meaning can be made from these poems, not *the* meaning. As Jonathan Culler suggests in his book, Structuralist Poetics:

The task is rather to construct a theory of literary discourse which would account for the possibilities of interpretation, the ‘empty meanings’ which support a variety of full meanings but which do not permit the work to be give just any meaning. (119)

I am not insinuating that these texts will mean absolutely anything, but instead propose that my reading is merely one way of approaching the texts. In other words, meaning in these texts is neither arbitrary nor static.

So how do these strategies work with a contemporary poetic text? As I have mentioned, the three texts that I am looking at are, by no accident of choice, book-long poems that fall within the long poem genre, which

dominates contemporary poetry. Many writers find the freedom of the long poem beneficial in exploring their chosen narratives. However, we need to understand how the long poem compliments their narrative drives. How do poets use the narrative strategy of focusing on process and how does the narrator function within these texts?

Kroetsch's poetic journey in The Ledger focuses on a search for meaning in a document that survives even though the humans who produced the ledger do not. The first lines of Kroetsch's text are strikingly unusual in their topography (appearing at the bottom of an otherwise blank page):

the	the ledger survived
ledger	
	because it was neither
itself	human nor useful (1)

Kroetsch here marks out a narrative that does not 'go' anywhere. The cohesive element in this text is provided by the ledger; however, the story of that ledger is never completely told. The ledger, instead, becomes the document from which stories spring, not only from the words of the ledger itself, but the very form that the ledger takes.

Metaphorically, the ledger becomes a keeper of stories, all related to a making of meaning and of history. Where the ledger comes from, how Kroetsch found the ledger, the very creation of the ledger: none of these form

the main plot of the long poem. Instead the ledger allows Kroetsch to write tangentially from it competing narratives of family history and his part in writing those histories:

my grandfather, Henry (dead)
in his watermill (gone)
on the Teeswater River,
on the road between Formosa and
Belmore, needing a new ledger

the ledger itself (surviving)
purchased in the Bruce County
Drug and Book Store (Price:
\$1.00 PAID), the leather cover
brown. In Gold: *THE LEDGER*:

EVERYTHING I WRITE
I SAID, IS A SEARCH
(is debit, is credit) (3)

The form of Kroetsch's new emerging ledger becomes a story not deriving from the found ledger but accounting for his grandfather's history, local history, and finally, Kroetsch's own writing. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Kroetsch's story essentially focuses on writing, even the writing in a ledger, surviving not only beyond its original writer, but beyond other human activities as well (the construction of the watermill for instance). Throughout the text, Kroetsch creates a narrative that tells about several incidents, several stories; and yet, these stories often not only relate to the community of which the grandfather's ledger is a record, but also double back to a narrative on the writing of writing.

Throughout Kroetsch's text, we can take a double meaning from the narratives. For instance, in the sixth section, Kroetsch again ties together several narratives, all related to ledger:

A man that lies permanently in some place.
A woman that lies permanently in some place.
A resident. *Obsolete.*
The book of final entry.

The book
of columns.
The book that lies
permanently.

The timer supporting the putlogs
in a scaffolding:

e.g., the poem in the chaos (18)

Kroetsch starts the section by working off a dictionary meaning for the 'ledger,' and then moves into a commentary on a binary of the permanence and impermanence of humanity. The narrative then returns to a concern for the ledger, but this time focuses on the binary of truth and lies. Kroetsch plays off this binary, and incorporates the dual meaning of "lies," by suggesting that the permanent prevails through death, through obsolescence. The narrative next folds both plots into a commentary on the poem, with the consequence that "the book that lies" mirrors the "poem." Kroetsch links the act of writing, whether it be accounting in the ledger or poetry in his book, to

an act of fiction; all writing, for Kroetsch, relies on a construction of language. His narrative becomes one that flows in several different directions: concerning itself not only with histories, but with how histories are created; not only with death, but with survival; and not only with writing's permanence, but language's impermanence.

If this is Kroetsch's narrative structure, what about his narrator(s)? As I earlier stated, The Ledger consists of several voices clamouring for attention, no one voice dominating this text. And so, the voices from the pages of the ledger are equal to those from the dictionary; voices which appear in epistemology share equal control with Kroetsch's grandmother stories. Even when the voice of the writer, presumably the voice most likely to dominate as the primary narrator, does come in, the voice expresses surprise at what it comes upon:

No time.

August 17, 1888.

No time.

Shaping the trees.

Pushing up daisies.

I'll be damned.

It balances. (6)

The poetic narrator, the 'I' of this text, never assumes control of the narrative, and therefore reveals no more apparent insight than the rest of us.

Throughout the text, this one voice (and I stress again that there are several

voices that could belong to different narrators) expresses constant surprise: the “I’ll be damned. It balances” repeats a passage from page 5; and “I can’t believe my eyes” appears twice on a page (6) and once more on another (11). By no means, then, does the voice of the writer presume to know the whole story; if anything, the voice of the narrating poet, coming upon things, attempts to make meaning as though it were a sign of simply another reader of the text. In Kroetsch’s poetics this pattern ends up being one of the main narratives that makes this long poem what it is. In making meaning, the text questions how meaning is made.

Moving from Kroetsch’s text with its several narrators, we find that Mullen’s S*PeRM**K*T presents a narrating voice which never appears as an ‘I.’ None of the thirty-two serial poems in the book contains a direct reference to a writer; however, three narrators struggle among other voices that appear in this text. In a more traditional poetic style, Mullen slips in several references to the ‘you,’ presumably someone reading this poem; however the result is a play off the traditional lyrical I/you binary since ‘I’ is never explicitly mentioned and the narrator who speaks to a ‘you’ never overwhelms the poem. For example, throughout the text, the following voice rises: “Aren’t you glad you use petroleum? Don’t wait to be told you explode.

You're not fully here until you're over there" (5). This voice constantly engages with the two other narrators evident in the poem.

The second voice that narrates this text observes another traditional style of narration. The third-person narrator appears, as much as the first-person narrator, to direct herself towards the reader, and almost always refers to an unnamed "she." This Steinian voice parodies what may be seen as women's stereotypical role in the supermarket, and in turn, within consumer driven society:

In specks finds nothing amiss. Rubs a glove on lemony wood.
But the gleam of a sigh at a spotless rinsed dish. Spots herself
in its service, buffed and rebuffed. Shines on the gloss of birds
eye drop leaf maple tabletop. Pledges a new leaf shining her
future polishing skills. The silver dropped at dinner announces
the arrival of a woman at a fork. She beams at a waxing moon. (16)

Though a long way from a traditional linear narrator, Mullen's text does play off a traditional voice in creating the poems. The third-person narrator provides a cohesive element in creating meaning, but not, of course, a whole meaning; instead, the meaning reveals elements, or glimpses, of a larger story. The narrative of this long poem would appear to be completely without cohesion. Mullen plays off the two traditional voices and privileges neither one. In effect, the role of narration falls mainly into these two traditional

types. However, a third voice links the two, drawing out the only possible plot of this long poem.

The language of society upon which Mullen is reflecting also provides another narrator. This narrator has no traditional name and appears in a number of quick statements:

Off the pig, ya dig? He squeals, grease the sucker. Hack that fatback, pour the pork. Pig out, rib the fellas. Ham it up, hype the tripe. Save your bacon, bring home some. Sweet dreams pigmeat. Pork belly futures, larded accounts, hog heaven. Little piggish to market. Tub of guts hog wilding. A pig yourself, high on swine, cries all the way home. Streak a lean gets away cleaner than Safeway chitlings. That's all, folks. (18)

From the cartoon reference, "That's all, folks," to a children's rhyme, "cries all the way home," to what appears to be local dialect, "Off the pig, ya dig?" Mullen works in a narrating voice that reflects and comments upon the language of contemporary society (both consumer-oriented and pop-culture jargons) and the language of the supermarket. In a work that could be viewed as discursive, this voice, set in the world of the supermarket, serves to speak for both the cohesive narrator, and for lack of a better word, to advance a plot. Even so, there is no traditional 'story' to Mullen's long poem; rather, she uses the long-poem narrative to comment upon language, society, and their intertwined relationship. Mullen's reader must form meaning out of how

the three narrators work to reveal the construction of society through language and through seemingly neutral institutions such as the supermarket.

In contrast to Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T, where there is no traditional story, Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons provides a text in which stories abound. Overflowing with voices and plots, the text, in its abundance, renders a problem similar to Mullen's in its lack of plot. How does one make meaning out of such a discursive text?

Unlike Mullen's long poem, Rees's book abounds with the poetic 'I.' However, Rees's 'I,' unlike the singular, traditional lyric 'I,' flows in and out of several different 'characters.' Never sure who is telling the story, we realize Rees's narrators all tell stories that may or may not be Rees's own. I do not want to commit the error of taking the poet/writer to be the narrator, but rather to stress that the text never allows 'I' to become one static character. 'I' could be Rees, could be Thi, could be Rees's mother, Thi's mother, could be any one of the several characters:

all herstories. no basement in your trailer. i walk into the kitchen. you fidget turn your back. i think you've been smoking. you flee out the door pick up a blanket on the porch hands shake. flee out into the yard, horses, pasture, and mountains. will not look back. and Thi running down the hill away. mother crying her name. boat the crossing mother's hair. mother not. in all the photos, yes oh yes. not. not her to touch to touch to touch. not. no. into the bathroom where i am. your head on my shoulder. and shaking, crying, forty-two years running running from her death,

ran into this morning, jesus (59)

In this one short prose run, “i” could be any one of “Rees,” the sister, or Thi. In deliberately confusing our sense of the “i” narrator, Rees, in this section, allows the text to develop a narrative that reflects upon the nature of female familial relationships. In a telling line, one that urges the reader to consider the use of “i” throughout the poem, Rees writes “*you listen, Roberta, but you never tell me about yourself*” (44). Rees’s role as writer engages the roles of storyteller; however, who tells that specific story may not always be clear. Throughout the entire text, stories emerge in which the narrating voice never convincingly remains a single voice.

In a text such as Eyes Like Pigeons, the diffuse layering of stories could work against any sort of cohesion; and yet, this text functions as a long poem and not a collection of shorter works. Why? Cohesion for this text, like Mullen’s and Kroetsch’s, builds on themes repeated throughout the text and not a linear narrative plot. Rees’s text constantly reaches back to cite similarities between the character’s stories, especially those of the women, and in doing so, also constantly refers to the body. A major cohesive element of this text becomes Rees’s contextualization of the body and how bodily recognition constantly appears in the female characters’ lives:

your mother in the photos.

four-foot-eleven in the photos.
air-starved cheeks
Thi's mom in the
round face
hair pulled back
your mother's hair under a hat
brittle ankles
black around the eyes
like pigeons
in the
in the photo's
photos
hair eyes face lips chest hands hips skin
mom. oh mom. (60)

Though there are several sections throughout the poem that refer to the body, I chose this selection because it reveals two of the cohesive themes in this long poem. Though the section contains several fragments of stories, and though this short selection shows two narratives, Rees combines them all into a swirling fusion. At the same time, as this selection reveals, she constantly interrogates the female body, its importance in shaping women's lives, and the relationship of mother/daughter. Rees shows the importance of the body in shaping a woman's life, of how other's expectations of that body shapes a woman's life, and of how the impossibility of escaping the body shapes a woman's life. She also reveals much about female relationships that the women tied to the character of Rees, both family and friends, share.

A third and important cohesive element in this text concerns Rees's attempt to document her family history. Both Kroetsch and Mullen share a historical, or documentary style in their long poems. I will further examine this common element to contemporary poetics in the next chapter.

What we have seen, then, in these three texts is that the long poem requires a new form of narrative; or, perhaps, new narratives require a new poetic form. Either way, the long poem challenges readers to rethink how a story is told. In this process, long poems may appear discursive and utterly without cohesion. I have tried to argue to the contrary that, by adopting certain poetic strategies, the writers do not abandon cohesion, but instead allow for a discursive text to be bound together. Book-long poems also require readers to be aware of a significant change in narration. The loss of the privileged narrator requires readers to be open to possibilities of shifting focus and attention. Significantly, the books focus on process, upon the artifice that writing entails, upon the very language being used to tell the story. In creating such an effect, contemporary writers allow their 'narratives' to flow, and, just as language cannot form static meanings, neither can the narratives; however, we do find a significant theme in the long poem narrative, that of documentary, or historical, recovery. And that, and

the significance that the document has in devising meaning in the contemporary poem, will be the basis for the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Digging a Poetics

but this is nothing, i imagine him saying. meaning unreadable. because this nothing is a place he doesn't recognize, cut loose from history and its relentless progress towards some end, this is undefined territory, unaccountable. and so on edge.
Daphne Marlatt, Ana Historic

The final strategy I wish to discuss may confuse some, especially given the selection of texts I have made in order to discuss strategies of generating meaning in contemporary North American poetics. I want to turn, now, to something which is often discussed in consideration of the long poem, its use of document. The long poem, certainly the long contemporary poem, often takes the form of the documentary. This tendency, which several critics have addressed, perhaps has fallen into some dispute, but the point does provide a starting place to move into the strategy I wish here to accentuate.

For instance, Robert Kroetsch, in his essay "For Play and Entrance," advocates a move away from a merely documentary style in Canadian long poems because even as the poems include documents, they also carry a skepticism for traditional methods of recording history. He, in a move reminding us of the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, proposes that 'archaeology' might provide a new model for historical writing:

Poems in which archaeology supplants history; an archaeology that challenges the authenticity of history by saying there can be no joined story, only the abrupt guesswork, juxtaposition, flashes of insight.
(119)

Drawing on the works of Foucault, I will argue that documentary style in my target texts can be fruitfully read as an expression of 'genealogy,' or what Foucault later calls, 'archaeology.' In my view, the documentary style was

never lost, just further refined. It can be best described with a metaphor; the digging and collecting of archaeology serves as a useful symbol in describing another strategy in determining how meaning is made, though in no way fixed, in contemporary poetics.

We, perhaps, should remind ourselves what the documentary style referred to, and where it has moved over the last few decades. Frank Davey, in his essay "Recontextualization in the Long Poem" credits Dorothy Livesay for naming Canadian long poems as "documentary poems." But what constitutes a documentary poem? Certainly critics have moved beyond Livesay's 1969 essay; Davey writes extensively on the documentary poem, carrying Livesay's work into more contemporary applications. For Davey, primary to the documentary style is the search for truth in a past, but not *the* 'Truth,' which, as post-structuralist critics have told us, has never been available. Davey lays out more implications of that understanding:

Behind all conceptions of 'documentary' lie not only different concepts of how 'truth' can be validated but, by extension, differing concepts of where literary meaning resides--in the writer, the reader, the text, or perhaps . . . previous to all of these in the events and materials to which a literary text attends. (129-30)

Criticism surrounding the documentary poem has come increasingly to focus not on 'what' meaning surfaces from contemporary poetry, but on 'how' and

‘where’ meaning comes to be. Livesay, among others, saw the common convergence of long poems on source texts (evident, for instance, in Kroetsch’s later The Ledger) as a generic marker. Documentary in a sense becomes problematic, not in terms of telling a ‘true’ story, but in working off documents that include actual, or imagined, literary, and artistic ‘historical’ objects: ledgers, diaries, stories, pictures, legends, myths, and many more objects that carry both the weight of ‘document’ and ‘history.’ In the end, though, the term documentary proves to be unuseful because of what it implies or seems to promise—truthful reporting.

Again, I must return to Davey’s essay “Recontextualization in the Long Poem,” for it provides, even in the title, an understanding of the movement away from the documentary and into the archeological mode in describing how to make meaning of contemporary poems. Davey shows in this essay, originally written as a discussion for the “Long-liners Conference on the Canadian Long Poem,”³ that ‘documentary’ fails to convey how meaning really emerges from contemporary poems, and how the word ‘documentary’ no longer fully conveys the poetics behind the poems:

I doubt that there are any purely ‘documentary’ poems. Regardless of the poet’s intentions or aesthetics, the documents he or she appropriates or . . . the contemporary phenomena she attempts to record serve at best not as a pre-existent ‘truth’ but as a ground out of which the new text grows, as a countertext, a pretext, as rhythm and

syllable for her new words, as she links them into other histories.
("Recontextualization" 134)

Documentary fails as a proper description of what occurs in contemporary poetics, then, and a re-telling of the 'true' story becomes an impossibility.

Davey reminds us that post-structuralist theory has dispelled any thought that meaning could be objective and has put into question any attempt to tell the 'true' story:

The realization over the last three decades that meaning may not be objective, that it is a product of the language in which events are recorded, that it may change even as writer and reader perform their interrelated tasks, has given the writer who works with historical materials much more freedom. ("Recontextualization" 130)

The writer now enjoys a freedom to make meanings from source texts that are not necessarily documentary, and in turn, takes up poststructuralist understandings of how history can be related to literary writing.

Foucault's poststructuralist philosophical and historical writings become primary to the developing criticism of documentary in North American poetics.⁴ Though Foucault will later focus on 'archaeology' as a metaphor in writing histories, a sense, I maintain, that carries over to contemporary poetics, he initially writes about the genealogy as a method of "new history." In his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault begins the

formulation of an argument that would eventually become the basis for

Archaeology of Knowledge:

Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times.

. . . genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monstrous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history--in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. Finally genealogy must define even those instances when they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized. ("Nietzsche" 76)

Working from Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals, Foucault insists upon a 'new' history, which he sees in Nietzsche's work. Foucault's sense of history radically questions the capacity of the documentary text to convey any sense of 'truth.' Contemporary poets' use of 'documents' parallels Foucault's: an attempt not merely to document a history, but a realization that a history, a genealogy, requires putting together a number of fragments.

Foucault recognizes that history has always been an attempt to piece together a past with what various pieces of information are available to the historian. However, Foucault's new history attempts to recognize traditional historicity's fiction:

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its

duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. ("Nietzsche" 80)

Two implications rise out of Foucault's distrust for traditional historians' understanding of history. First, historicity cannot truly relate all events. Its attempt to create unbroken continuums always leave out events, all the details deemed 'unimportant.' In having done so, traditional histories have always been a subjective enterprise, while claiming to be merely an objective record of the facts; a genealogy, conversely, recognizes this problem and refuses any claim to represent a continuous line of events. Second, 'history,' which is to say traditional views of how we constitute history, structures itself on great events, and almost always, great men; for Foucault, genealogy also focuses on events commonly perceived as of little importance: the accidents, the 'trivialities,' and the errors. As creating history is a subjective act, traditional histories are disposed to ignore events and individuals that may become significant when viewed by other historians of the kind Foucault envisages. Further, genealogy seeks to expose history's overlying error, its attempt to place the present seamlessly upon the past. Foucault saw it as an error to believe that all events constitute a progression within which present standards could be applied neatly to past events. As well, Foucault saw history not as a

continuum; not all events inevitably lead to the present, nor do they logically follow a sequence. In emphasizing history's fictionality, Foucault insists that a document from the past carries no 'truth,' no fixed, or irrefutable truth, that is, no original meaning. Foucault instead concerns himself with how genealogy allows us to extract meaning from those documents.

He refines this argument when developing his concept of archaeology. In his introduction to Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault adjusts his definition of 'new' history to replace his original term, "genealogy," with another word, "archaeology." In essence, we learn to tell the story with only fragments, and in effect, to create meaning. The movement away from naming this act as documentary to thinking of it as archaeology can be seen in Foucault's questioning of document:

These problems may be summed up in a word: the questioning of the *document*. Of course, it is obvious enough that ever since a discipline such as history has existed, documents have been used, questioned, and have given rise to questions; scholars have asked not only what these documents meant, but also whether they were telling the truth, and by what right they could claim to be doing so, whether they were sincere or deliberately misleading, well informed or ignorant, authentic or tampered with. But each of these questions, and all this critical concern, pointed to one and the same end: the reconstitution on the basis of what the documents say, and sometimes merely hint at, of the past from which they emanate and which has now disappeared far behind them; the document was always treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence, its fragile, but possibly decipherable trace. (6, original emphasis)

Document provides a particular problem for Foucault for, in terms of 'history,' he knows the documents were always received as though they held an internal truth which it was the historian's task to discover. In a telling poststructuralist move, Foucault recognizes that the old history always attempted to reconstitute the document in terms of the original voice:

let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*. . . in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (Archaeology 7)

In the moving away from attempts to give voice to essentially silenced objects, Foucault saw several consequences: the loss of continuous chronologies, the inability to speak of total histories, and the difficulty in speaking of history at all, given such loss of cohesiveness and continuity.

Archaeology, as a metaphor for the new history, allows for a recognition that any discourse on 'monuments' cannot recreate what has been:

[Archaeology] does not try to repeat what has been said by reaching in its very identity. It does not claim to efface itself in the ambiguous modesty of a reading that would bring back, in all its purity, the distant and precarious, almost effaced light of the origin. It is nothing more than a rewriting. (Archaeology 139-40)

In discarding the documentary understanding of history, Foucault opens the 'new' history as a ground where contemporary poetics can come into play. In essence, contemporary poetics, with its frequent visit into historical grounds, gains a validity in Foucault's new definition of history. If history itself is a "rewriting" of the found "monuments," then contemporary poetics too can find value in Foucault's theory.

How might Foucault's arguments inform readings of contemporary poetry? I have spent the last several pages discussing Foucault's notions of new history, and I now want to consider how they apply to making meaning in contemporary poetics. Though I will discuss in more detail how meaning emerges from the texts I have chosen, I would first note that Foucault's writing on history also influences a number of contemporary literary critics. Kroetsch is especially taken by Foucault's work, consistently referring to the metaphor of archaeology and linking it to the work of contemporary poets. In his essay "The Exploding Porcupine," he specifically refers to the metaphor's usefulness:

Archaeology, of necessity, involves violence--the uncovering of past lives. That uncovering . . . involves as well the discontinuity of form. The continuity asserted by history is beyond, lies beyond, the truth of fiction. The reader, like the writer, becomes archaeologist, seeking the grammar of the fragments. (112)

Kroetsch's use of archaeology shows how in Foucaultian ways we can make meaning of contemporary texts. Writers, though they often have not recognized it, have long pieced together their work from many fragments; the metaphor of archaeology, in both writing and reading, does not assume either 'truth' or continuity, but instead focuses upon the fragments, and how they are always, even in traditional histories, fragments still, that allow for an act of uncovering. Contemporary poetics allows for both writer and reader to enter into texts, whether they specifically refer to documents or not, and to uncover meanings that appeal both to the documentary nature of the work and the fictional meanings readers might derive from the documents. Creating history, in Foucault's definitions, allows for an awareness of subjectivity, for a push away from grand themes and continuity. In a similar manner, contemporary critics, taking up Foucault's ideas, shy away from singular over-riding meanings, but allow for subjectivity, discontinuity. They also suppose that poetry, like Foucault's history, is as much an act of archaeology for the reader as it is the writer.

Foucault's definition of archaeology provides an enlightening way for approaching both history and contemporary poetics then. It is quite possible to dig one's way through the layers of ground and find artifacts that allow us

to make sense of the discontinuous and difficult texts of contemporary poetics. In the following sections, I will show how the reader can grab the archaeologist's brushes and shovels and unearth meaning.

In reading both Kroetsch's and Rees's texts, we think of archaeology as a re-assembling of history, that may be understandable, but we may wonder how a text such as Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T falls under any such analogy. Genealogy readily applies to both Kroetsch's and Rees's texts in their searching for a family history. If, on the other hand, we were to think of Mullen's text, not as an expression of documentary poetics, but as an instance of archeological strategy, we can find a way of producing meaning that does not revolve around purely historical means, at least not in the normal definitions that may initially arise when speaking of 'history,' and certainly not as they may be limited to the recovery of family histories. The poet will work from personal or familial narratives, as well as public histories.

On the surface of Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T, nothing stands out as being 'historical' or documentary. At first, it seems, the reader cannot make significance of it in Foucault's terms. However, the text can be approached in terms of a dig into the current past that still is being formed. As well, Mullen provides some visual references in the text, documents, that cannot be

ignored. Though a particularly dense and difficult text, S*PeRM**K*T can, with some care, be brought into meaning.

Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Kroetsch speaking about the violence done to singular notions of text when both writer and reader are left with fragments. In Mullen's book, one is left with a discontinuity of thrown-together images that uncover not a normally historic 'past' but instead a recent and familiar pop-culture, consumer age:

Nine out of ten docks trash paper or plastic. My shrink wraps securely stashed and shredded freshness re-enforced double baggage. All tidy toxic clean dregs folded down in dumps with safety improved twist-off tops. Crumpled sheets, sweating ammunition. A strychnine migraine is a p.r. problem. Every orifice leaks. No cap is tamper proof. (12)

Mullen works with fragmentary images that revolve around current issues in 1990's North American society and with language orientated toward pop-culture. She examines the current focus on recycling and waste: the paper and plastic are trash, the shrink wrap and re-enforced double baggage are overpackaging, and the toxicity of our society results in strychnine migraines. Along with these images of waste, Mullen works in fragments of safety and health: "my shrink" refers in pop-culture jargon to a psychiatrist, migraine headaches reveal sickness, and safety improved twist-off caps emerge in reference to the 1980's Tylenol tampering. In combining these fragments,

Mullen strives to bring together the contemporary problem of reducing or recycling waste and the issue of product safety. Her final line, “no cap is tamper proof,” leaves the reader with a shifting sense that the over-packaging fails in providing the desired safety. She also brings the critique back upon consumer society with the words “a strychnine migraine is a p.r. problem,” implying that the problems of our toxic society are not really solved but sold. In six lines of fragmentary and discontinuous text, Mullen provides a myriad of images that hold to no continuity, nor to an ultimate truth, but that still provide many meanings. I have provided but one.

In first reading Mullen’s work, I knowingly ignored the photographic elements of the text. I want now to turn to them. Three sets of facing pages provide black and white photographs of apparent supermarket shelves—one set at the front, another in the middle, and finally one at the end. After several readings, we can begin to discern two significant elements of the only ‘documents’ that this text includes. In all three pictures, the black and white film and the lighting used in the shots, foreground the packaging of the displayed products. The first picture, one of desserts, highlights the plastic containers surrounding the ‘treats.’ In the second, loose shrink wrap on three baby cereal boxes, as well as the piled glass jars of baby food, again focus the

eye on the packaging. Finally, the last picture of meat emphasizes the white Styrofoam and plastic that surrounds every cutlet. Though Mullen never specifically refers to the pictures, their presence leaks everywhere into the rest of the book. The three photographs, “documents” in their own right, serve as visual metaphors of the packaged consumerism that runs as a theme throughout the book. The second image of three smiling baby faces, one on each cereal box pictured, also reinforces this theme. Although the loose plastic wrap on the boxes at first catches one’s glance, the single baby face on each oatmeal box is also prominent. The three babies, one white, one Asian, and one of uncertain race, serve to reinforce or at least to coincide with Mullen’s means of drawing forth meaning. The three boxes all attempt to capture, and produce, an image of the perfect child. Just as the text shows how consumerism, reflected in the supermarket, determines that ‘perfect’ image, Mullen’s text seeks to show how we in society too are shaped by that culture. The image is eerie in the sense that, visually, it conforms with Mullen’s verbal expressions that people are as packaged as the products they buy.

Mullen’s work provides fertile ground. The text is filled with fragments of images, both visual and lingual, that must be strung together. In

generating meaning, one has to put the fragments together without appealing to a sense of true origin, unique meaning, or clear understanding. Mullen, turning her writing in quite another direction, particularly plays off the dual meaning that words may have, and revels in the jargon of consumerism and pop-culture. However, with some work, the reader can construct meaning from the text. For one thing, we can decide that the text provides a glimpse into recent history and criticizes the present.

In Roberta Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons, we have, in contrast, a text that works both into a historical past and a recent past. In it, Rees shows an awareness of the archaeological nature of recreating a history, a genealogy. Here is an extract from a section called "Bearing Down," in which Rees blatantly relies on the archaeological metaphor:

talk to me sssshhhhhh talk to me sssshhhhhhhh

secret from your family

lonely lonelyRwuanda

ssssssshhhhhhhh

alone to the hospital alone

bury the necklace he

bury digup bury dig bury

bury (76)

Though Rees writes about a secret that has been largely left in the past, she also names some version of archaeology—digging up the buried. She turns the image back upon itself by ending with “bury,” the finality of the words hinting, perhaps, that this particular reference is better left in the past, even though Rees’s very writing still brings it to the surface. Related patterns figure throughout the book. Rees constantly refers back into her own (or at least the “i’s”) and Thi’s family histories, particularly the maternal histories of both characters. Through this intertwining of past histories, Rees creates a text that creates its own voice, mirroring the discourse on history that Foucault has named.

If one accepts, as I suggest, that Eyes Like Pigeons becomes a search for personal history, then it reflects a history unlike those normally given in traditional ‘academic’ or ‘professional’ histories. Rees’s attention focuses on the incidents and stories from the past of two main characters and their relations, but not in a traditional manner. She follows no chronological order. Poems work off stories from the present and bounce to childhood memories, to stories from a mother’s past. Not only are references to time woven together, but so are the individual stories. Several references within the text

equally rely on the i's and Thi's backgrounds. The last section of the text reflects this relationship:

how she waitressed at the Stampede Bar and Grill maybe sixteen
joked with the jockeys walked Christmas eve in the snow with
asked him to sing and sing

how she grew up in Calgary white trash

how she left Vietnam without her mom

how she grew up in the Crowsnest

how her sister died in Vietnam poisoned fetus in her womb

how her brother-in-law and she couldn't tell

how her sister in a Calgary shack slipped into a coma aspirin
the doctor said too late too poor dead in two days

how her sister in Crowsnest

how her sisters

how she lost her mother when she was eleven (115)

In all of these references to "she," we recognize traces of the many characters who appear earlier in the text: "i," Thi, and mother and sister of each.

However, in some of the references, the histories (or "herstories") that the reader has built for each character start to fade into one another, until they apply across a number of characters. In this brilliant end run, Rees combines all the preceding recantations of stories and creates a history not of a specific

character but of a composite “she.” Rees relates the features of each character’s own personal history and how it effects the creation of a female voice. The focus moves from the familial history and into an exploration of a female perspective familiar to Western Canada: the immigrant (both in the past and more recently), the small town, and the struggle to survive in lower class-urban life. Remembering Foucault’s terms of an archaeology, the reader makes meaning out this wandering and dense text, following personal voices that would often be ignored in official histories. Rees creates a text that not only foregrounds those voices, but an overlying public voice which belongs to the “she” who ends this book. That voice never relies on a specific or ‘true’ history, but a collection of memories, fictions and constructions. In creating a history, then, Rees seeks a past and present whose historical moments are never static.

A wandering voice, a voice that opposes rigid history, emerges out of Rees’s work. Though not dealing with specific archaeological documents, Rees works out of another archive of history, that of personal story and familial fictions.⁵ She recognizes that family histories are archaeological creations that are fictional, added onto, and never complete or original as ‘Truth.’

Kroetsch, too, relies heavily on family history but also employs the artifact, or document directly into the poem. As a result, Kroetsch also depends on an archaeological construction in creating meaning. The Ledger, as documentary poem, relies on pulling several actual “documents” into the poem and working from them. Obviously, the ledger itself, which the narrator finds and quotes, dominates the entire text; however, Kroetsch also drags in a 1861 census, maps, letters, and even a tombstone elegy. Kroetsch works with documents in two specific ways: he constantly reminds the reader that the document fails to record any find of truth; and secondly, he views the documents not as a record of the past but as a way of speaking in the present. Kroetsch attempts to show a history in which the documents cannot relay truth, and, in the process, comments metalingually on the making of history.

As we have seen, a large part of recognizing how Kroetsch makes meaning out of the ledger emerges in his working with the inconsistency that “documents” are archaeological ‘truths’ that point to a certain origin. A common refrain throughout the text, “it doesn’t balance,” marks Kroetsch’s recognition that the document he is reading, though it is not invalid, does not provide a certain ‘truth,’ does not “balance,” or does not ‘make sense.’

From the beginning, the ledger, as a document from the past, displays a number of errors. In the same manner that Foucault suggests that genealogy should focus on the mistakes, the misprints, and the missing bits that official histories ignore, Kroetsch lets go of the official document and recognizes that, as document, it too is subject to the same uncertainties as family stories and town myths. In a particularly pertinent section titled "Census, 1861: County of Bruce:" Kroetsch recognizes how 'official' documents were often constructed and why they should be questioned:

The enumerator "got his feet frozen and another had to finish the work. Both made oath to their respective sheets and these are numbered and designated separately." (8)

The construction of this 'official' census note is remarkable. First, the apparent quotation comes without any link to whom it is quoting. In the lack of such information, the language becomes somewhat suspicious: "got his feet frozen," and "made oath" both show signs of a grammar that seems out of place in an official document. The verbs hold more in common with vernacular speech than with the more formal conventions according to which official documents are normally written, though the nouns do observe this decorum. Also, the theme that one person wrote and enumerated sections of

the 1861 census is, in The Ledger, put into suspicion. On the following page, Kroetsch further puts the official document into question when telling the story of the first hanging in the County of Bruce; twice, he uses the refrain “(I can’t believe my eyes).” Though it could be read as a reaction to the murder and subsequent hanging, the possibility that the statement also refers to an error, or to some incredulity, in the official census cannot be denied.

Kroetsch reminds us throughout the text that the so-called ‘authentic’ documents of history are as capable of ‘errors,’ or, I would prefer, ‘fictions’ as are the family tales and myth. We realize then, that with its affirmation of the historical and the mythic, The Ledger is as much a text about making history as it is an actual history.

Another of the suspicions which informed Foucault as he was writing up a “new history” in part arose from his concern that official histories were more focused on validating the present than actually finding a past. Kroetsch turns this sort of scepticism slightly in using texts of the past in his writing about the present, but in that act he also comments on the difficulty of creating a history, or *any* history. Kroetsch is aware of the construction that his own historical writing ultimately is. In writing upon the grandmother

figure in this text, for instance, he not only recognizes her matriarchal presence, he also notes how difficult writing her a history is:

An A-1 cook	
Kept a spotless house	
She wasn't just careful,	
she was tight.	
Went to church more often	Men felt terror.
than was necessary.	They proposed. (15)

And then later on the same page:

in a/c Theresia ~~Kroetsch-Messner~~ Hauck

Jan 19: to white ash	12.05	PAID IN FULL
Aug 24: to black ash	2.84	PAID IN FULL
Nov 10: to pine 216 ft	2.16	PAID IN FULL

Owing that woman money
was a mistake (15)

Kroetsch revels in the presence the grandmother character takes on within the text he has found and relies on both the “document” of the ledger and the familial stories of her life in order to create her character. As well, he muses playfully on writing a history based upon her, repeating the line, “You must marry the terror,” a number of times in the text. He not only puns on the grandmother’s apparent longevity and power, but on his own struggle in writing a historical document. The grandmother figure may well have been a “terror,” but Kroetsch also recognizes that he must “marry the terror,” the terror of writing a history that can never fully be ‘true.’ Meaning springs

forth in multiple ways because of the constant warnings the reader receives that this history—the one Kroetsch reads, and the one the he writes—is only one view and that one must be as suspicious of the ‘artifacts’ as one is of the family fictions and letters. Kroetsch ends the text with a series that relies on this knowledge:

Some people go to heaven.
Some people write poems.
Some people go west
to homestead.

Cut to the rock
the rock rose up.
Tombstones are hard
to kill.

REST IN PEACE
You Must Marry the Terror (20-1)

This section shows Kroetsch’s recognition that artifacts are often all that remain to those who would create a history: “Tombstones are hard/to kill.” But he also draws out of the line a dual ending by structuring this section into two columns that open the line to be read either in a column (top to bottom), or across the page (left to right). This results in a line that could also be read: “Tombstones are hard/to homestead.” In such a reckoning, documents are indeed valuable, but they are never complete. That is why the final repetition of the line, “You Must Marry the Terror,” not only refers to the grandmother, but also invites the reader to realize that in creating a history, the poet engages in uncertain and fictional elements. Kroetsch not only acknowledges

archaeology's difficulty, but rejoices in it as a marriage. Well aware that history is a fiction, and not a progression, Kroetsch never attempts to validate the past in any simple or nostalgic way. On the contrary, he realizes that what 'history' creates, dependent upon the fictions of both official documents and family myth, remains a construction of the present.

Foucault's writings, then, inform our the reading of contemporary poems. In opposition to traditional views of history, Foucault's concepts on archaeology provide a fertile ground to start looking at how contemporary writers often employ historical artifacts in their writings. With this knowledge, the reader of contemporary North American poems can start to understand some of the meanings to be found in fragmentary and apparently discontinuous texts. As I have shown, in all three texts an emphasis upon a fragmentary nature, a lack of continuous themes, and a refusal of 'truthful' origins, all serve to define the contemporary poem. Awareness of history's failure to fully know the past allows Kroetsch, Rees, and Mullen to create works that use the past, not to impress a present knowledge upon the past, but to work and create a present that is conscious of the constructed nature of both the past and the present. Meaning flows from this construction and is never bound by it.

Conclusion: The end of the line

A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? yup—
Michael Ondaatje, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.

‘To conclude.’ ‘To finish.’ Both appear unrealistic requests in an essay such as this. Throughout my discussion, I have attempted to avoid absolutes and finalities. Coming to a final conclusion opposes this project, as this has, in time, now become a beginning into the search for meaning in contemporary North American poems.

We have seen how the polyphonic in contemporary poems can create a cacophony of seemingly disparate voices; however, out of that chaotic combination comes a fusion that reflects the contemporary world. Bakhtin’s insistence on a literature that reflects the modern world, with its entrance into heteroglossia, found form in his definition of the “novel.” I believe that contemporary poets, in many instances, attempt to take something like Bakhtin’s thinking into their own poems. Struggling against the traditional beliefs that poetry should be a solitary, unitary voice of a poet feeding meaning to a reader, contemporary poets, in bringing the polyphonic to the text, not only express a theoretical uneasiness about language’s capacity to carry unitary meanings, but also express the world around them in an articulate, honest manner. Certainly, postmodern views on language’s construction have coloured how contemporary poets attempt to express that

language. As a result, poets may create poetry consisting of many voices, but these are voices that can be heard, and voices that can speak.

I have considered the polyphonic primarily at the level of language. At the level of the book, there remains considerable confusion about narrative and how that affects the import of contemporary poems. Often, traditional critics accuse these poems of having no cohesion. On the surface, contemporary poems do look discursive, and yet, they often come together as “books.” The long poem, as a genre, though not new, has significantly influenced contemporary writers. In reading them, I have concentrated on two sources of meaning. Writers have not abandoned cohesion, but have found different ways of constructing texts not bound by conventional forms of narrative, nor are they constrained by traditional modes of narration. In making meaning of the contemporary long poem, we must understand the unorthodox constructions of narrative and narrators.

When we begin to formulate an understanding of the long poem, we can also see that treatments of historical subjects are often the focus of such poems. Though by no means the only substance of long poems, they significantly impress themselves upon contemporary poetry. I have shown how understanding Michel Foucault’s writings on “new history” or

“archaeology” can contribute to generating meaning in contemporary long poems by serving as a useful metaphor for how we construct meaning from the text. Foucault wrote about histories of the fragmentary, the discontinuous, and the impossibility of ‘truthful’ origins. In turn, contemporary poets, whether their subjects actually be historical or not, have often applied these very same conditions towards their poetry, not in an attempt to stifle or restrict meaning, but to open up the possibilities of what their texts may mean.

Though my paper certainly could have spent more time reflecting upon theories of meaning, my objective was to explain, stylistically, how the poems work. I found I became responsible for discovering how the poets may have applied such theories when writing their poems, and how I, as reader, could employ these theories in constructing a meaning. Analyzing how the polyphonic, the narrative, and archaeological, figure in the texts has been both the most difficult, and the most rewarding, process for me. Still, I had to consider the philosophic thought of Bakhtin, Foucault and a number of other writers. As well, I have spent a significant amount of time with three excellent, and too-often-ignored, book-length poems.

Robert Kroetsch's The Ledger is a text I had, until now, often treated as a mere introduction to Kroetsch's long poems: a few pages between the introduction to Field Notes until I reached Seed Catalogue. I found, instead, a significant exploration of family, history, and writing. Kroetsch's sensitive, and humourous, awareness of the connection between language and history is, in that text, particularly striking.

Equally compelling is Harryette Mullen's S*PeRM**K*T. I discovered Mullen's writing at the start of this project and have found her poetry to be an impressive and politically perceptive treatment of race and gender in American culture. Though, perhaps, the most difficult of the texts I chose to read for this paper, her work stunningly acts upon the reader. Her multivocal discursive poem carries the reader through a variety of sensitive issues. Overtly political, Mullen's words are a thoughtful introspection of the pop-cultured, consumer society that surrounds us all.

Roberta Rees's Eyes Like Pigeons remains a text I have long enjoyed. Her work, for me, provides an excellent reply to any traditional critic who believes that contemporary poetry lacks emotion and passion. Her visceral poetry effects the reader in a wonderful exploration of genealogy, Western Canadian society, and gender roles. Alert and animated, her contemporary

style bounces off the page with an extraordinary energy that has been too long ignored by the academic community.

I would hope that this essay marks only a beginning into searching for how meaning is conveyed in contemporary poetry. The three theories I have chosen to discuss are only a start on the many processes that both readers and writers utilize in constructing texts. Furthermore, the limitations produced by using only three book-length poems became evident, for the focus woefully disregards other excellent poems I could have chosen. In my introduction to contemporary poetry and poetics, I feel I have merely started on the topic into the explanations, and have many more poems, and theories, left to investigate.

In a final retort against traditional critics who believe that contemporary poetics is not worth their time, I would hope that this paper shows that meaning abounds in contemporary poems. For students of contemporary poetry, though I am well aware of my bias, I would like my exploration into producing meaning of contemporary North American poetry to serve as an example that poetry should not be restricted to a traditional view of poetics. . Poetry did not come to the end of the line two centuries ago; whatever antagonistic critics may say, contemporary poems are also full of emotion, passion, and thought. Poets continue to struggle with generating

meaning of the world they live in, and in expressing those meanings in language.

Notes

¹ Perrine's book was one of the first books I was taught from in university-level English detailing "how" poetry should be read.

² Again, I cite this quotation out of a book used in my own first year university-level English class; I point this out to support my claim that this would serve as an introduction to poetry for many students.

³ Davey presented the original paper, "Contextualization in the Long Poem" at this conference.

⁴ Though Foucault's texts offer a rich variety of poststructuralist thought on contemporary poetics and literary criticism, especially power, I wish to focus on his concerns with writing histories.

⁵ Rees does include a photograph at the start of each chapter, but never refers to them specifically within the text.

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