

7-5-2012

## Publishing and Reading as Dissent: Resistance, Literary Tourism and Arsenal Pulp Press

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### Recommended Citation

Stepaniuk, Casey (2012) "Publishing and Reading as Dissent: Resistance, Literary Tourism and Arsenal Pulp Press," *The Word Hoard*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 11.  
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss1/11>

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# The *Word Hoard*

*/wɔrd/hɔrd/* n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

## Publishing and Reading as Dissent: Resistance, Literary Tourism and Arsenal Pulp Press by Casey Stepaniuk

*The very act of publishing a queer novel in a Conservative regime is an act of resistance, if the regime is also bent on destroying and silencing queers. In this climate, reading is also resisting.*

Daniel Allen Cox, quoted in Matthew Halse and Dock Currie, *Word Hoard*, 10

*[T]he practices of publishers who are only interested in narratives that have a hint of exoticism while lacking any elements that have the potential of upsetting readers... [create] narratives produc[ing] the phenomenon that Owens calls "literary tourism."*

Karim Abuawad, *Word Hoard*, 89

### *I: Introduction*

What are the places of publishing and reading in a community's resistance? Can the acts of publishing and reading be considered acts of dissent? If so, what kind of publishing and reading is dissent, and what forms are reinforcing dominant systems of oppression? The author of "Postcolonial Theory and Indigenous Literatures" points out that the publishing and reading of certain kinds of Indigenous literatures partake in a "literary tourism" that supports oppressive because stereotypical conceptualizations of Indigenous peoples while catering to non-Indigenous readers' interest in the domesticated exotic.

In other words, this literary tourism fails to resist colonization. Conversely, in the interview "Prometheus Queer," Montreal author Daniel Allen Cox states that in Canada's current Conservative regime the act of publishing and reading certain kinds of texts—in his case, queer novels—is resistance. Cox's most recent novels are published by Arsenal Pulp Press, a Vancouver-based publishing house which recently celebrated its fortieth year in publishing. I would like to explore this press as a publishing house that exemplifies the kind of radical dissenting publishing and reading practices that Cox calls for, and resists those which Abuawad critiques. This kind of publishing and reading, then, accepts the challenges of resisting and refuses to participate in the use of publishing and reading as means by which to consolidate the dominant order.

### *II: The Politics of Publishing*

How is publishing made to serve the interests of the dominant order? In the past few decades, international conglomerates' purchases of smaller publishing houses and the consolidation of their monopoly on the production and dissemination of cultural commodities have been a disconcerting trend. Although some might argue that who publishes a given title is irrelevant as long as the books themselves are still as resistant as they ever were, I would argue that given the goals of multinational publishing

companies it is not likely the same kinds of books are going to ever get the chance to resist—they will not be published; perhaps they will not be written.

Pointing out that both Kafka and Brecht's first print runs were very small, Klaus Wagenbach, a German independent publisher, eerily asks: "What would have happened if someone had decided that was not worth it?" (147) Wagenbach argues that "independent publishers...disappearing into the grasping arms of the same two conglomerates . . . [is] not just bad—it's disastrous...In our hypothetical future . . . censorship [would be] imposed by the tastes of the mass market" (qtd. in Schiffrin 146). How will texts without proven markets—texts that are "not worth it"—even be given a chance to develop readership if they are not published and picked up by the readers who are looking for these kinds of books—and perhaps more important, those readers who are not necessarily looking—resistant literatures will not survive.

I am reminded of a salient strip of Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. In response to the closing of Madwimmin, the comic's iconic women's bookstore, employee Mo laments, "Jeez, I thought we were going to make the world safe for feminism" (129). Her employer Jezanna replies: "We did. To be packaged and sold by global media conglomerates" (129). Treating books and revolutionary thought such as feminism as mere commodities ripe for profit is dangerous. The feminism Mo refers to is not going to remain the same in the hands of a corporation with a package and sell mentality. Feminism in this case is sold like Luce Irigaray's women on the market; feminism becomes another feminine commodity.

How are minority writers, such as Daniel Allen Cox and Patricia Grace, to resist the dominant order if their books are treated as commodities valued

solely on their (in)ability to guarantee huge sales? In order to promise such sales, Indigenous and queer authors would have to not only write to the centre—not to their own communities—from their perspectives, but they would have to write in a way that does not challenge the centre's status as centre and majority. As Abuawad notes, citing Louis Owens, it is "the practices of publishers who are only interested in narratives that have a hint of exoticism while lacking any elements that have the potential of upsetting readers" that create the kinds of narratives and texts that are available to readers (89). Although Abuawad discusses the selectiveness of publishers as a key problem, there is also this issue: what is being written and submitted for publication itself is already altered by the assumption that Indigenous authors' work should appeal to non Indigenous readers, and that queer authors' work should appeal to straight audiences. It is the selective practices themselves that might pressure writers when they begin writing to feel they need to cater to a large audience—and to what a publishing house thinks a large audience wants. Foreign—either literally or figuratively—to these communities and representing the imaginary majority, publishing houses controlled by global media conglomerates construct literary cultural work by members of (Indigenous, queer, Canadian, and other) communities as risky and challenging in terms of market value. The real problem is that this situation is a vicious cycle: if only works considered "sellable" are on the market, what is considered marketable in the future becomes what has already sold. Readers are supposedly capable of choosing what is offered them in this way, but what they get back is what they have already purchased. This situation is the old paradox of capitalism: the illusion of choice ("Look at all these gay authors on the shelves!")

amidst an actually minute amount of alternatives (“Funny that they are all middle class whites”).

The Canadian publishing industry is an interesting case with these issues in mind, especially since a number of Canadian literary icons are queer and/or Indigenous (Dionne Brand, Tomson Highway, Joseph Boyden, and Anne-Marie MacDonald, for example). In January of this year, news broke that McClelland & Stewart had officially passed into the hands of Random House Canada, itself owned by the multinational media conglomerate Bertelsmann. McClelland & Stewart once promoted itself as “the Canadian Publisher,” and published the early works of Margaret Atwood, Morley Callaghan, Margaret Laurence, Stephen Leacock, Hugh MacLennan, Michael Ondaatje, and Gabrielle Roy, to name a few. It is hard to predict McClelland & Stewart’s future commitment to publishing Canada’s next great literature. Will Canadian authors prove sufficiently profitable for a company that functions in the global marketplace? Is there a danger that Canadian authors who have not proven themselves will not be given the opportunity? What effect will foreign ownership of such a company have on the Canadian cultural and literary landscape? In Arsenal Pulp Press’s blog of January of this year, publisher Brian Lam expresses his worry that multinational publishing firms’ dedication to Canadian authors will only go as far their foreign interests—in other words, profit—allow. He emphasizes the fundamental relationship between the domestic ownership of publishing houses and the flourishing of Canadian literary culture; the regulations of the Department of Canadian Heritage that would have theoretically protected Canadian publishing companies from being bought and controlled by foreigners point to this link.

In a gloomy piece for the *Toronto Star*, Martin Knelman writes that “[t]he book business has changed not just here but everywhere. And sooner or later, Canadian government regulations [such as those of the Department of Canadian Heritage] [will] have to reflect that change”; the kind of figurative literary country Jack McClelland imagined and helped create is dead. Knelman cannot bring himself to lament this death, cynically asserting that “Jack McClelland’s Canada is gone with the wind.” Knelman is unconcerned about the links between foreign ownership of companies and the vitality of local communities’ literature. In the face of overwhelming change, Knelman sees neither reasons nor models for resistance: Knelman is resigned, but not everyone is.

### *III: An Example of Resistance*

Arsenal Pulp Press, a small house with approximately two hundred titles in print and based out of Vancouver, is a publisher that promotes itself as one that supports “Books that speak loudly.” Their mandate is to publish “literary fiction and nonfiction; cultural and gender studies; LGBT and multicultural literature; cookbooks, including vegan; alternative crafts; visual arts; and books in translation” (“About Arsenal”). The press further states that they “are interested in literature that traverses uncharted territories, publishing books that challenge and stimulate and ask probing questions about the world around us” (“About Arsenal”). In other words, the texts Arsenal Pulp wants to publish are those that resist the territories that are so very well trampled by mass-market writers and readers.

The history of Arsenal Pulp Press is worth going into, as it speaks significantly to the kind of publishing house they are. They formed in 1971 as a collective of university students and associates who,

according to the brief history on Arsenal's website, were "disenchanted by what they perceived to be the academic literary pretensions of Canadian literature at the time." Run as a cooperative, the press initiated the three-day novel contest in Vancouver (which Arsenal continues to distribute today) and published early, gritty, urban Vancouverite writers such as D. M. Fraser and Betty Lambert. Acclaimed Canadian poet b.p. nichol won the three-day novel contest while Arsenal was running it. The press became Arsenal Pulp Press officially in 1982, and as the press's interests evolved, they added literary nonfiction in the form of gender and multicultural studies titles to their publishing interests. In the 1990s, Arsenal launched a gay and lesbian publishing program. The publication of Daniel Allen Cox's work by the press is, of course, part of this incentive. Another element of the queer publishing program is the revolutionary *Little Sister's Classic* series, which began in 2005. For readers unfamiliar with Vancouver, Little Sister's is a legendary queer bookstore in the West End village. The bookstore has survived an ongoing battle with Canada Customs for the right to bring so-called obscene material into Canada; Little Sister's is a place that resists and fights for the rights of readers, writers, and booksellers. As Daniel Allen Cox reminds us, "reading is also resisting" (6); Little Sister's has fought for years for the rights to read and resist. The collaboration with Little Sister's to publish a collection of classic out-of-print gay and lesbian novels for a new generation of readers is a great example of the kind of dissenting work that Arsenal takes on.

Indeed, every title APP publishes is an act of dissent. For example, nearly half of their cookbooks are vegan, including the popular *Eat, Drink, and Be Vegan* by Dreen Burton and the *How it all Vegan!* series by Sarah Kramer and Tanya Barnard. What better way for a publishing house to resist the hor-

rific practices of factory farming that harm non-human and human animals alike, as well as the environment, than to provide information on how to live without using animal products? Arsenal Pulp's titles thus reflect an agenda—one that speaks for and to the communities of which they are a part. This kind of intimacy with and belonging to the communities their titles appeal to is a hallmark of APP's practice, and it is something a multinational corporation aiming to please the most consumers possible cannot do.

Another innovative, resistant series published by Arsenal is their *Unknown City* guides. Functioning as an alternative to *Frommer's*, *Lonely Planet*, and *Let's Go* guides, the *Unknown City* titles provide the traveller with the kind of information one would get from a like-minded friend who has lived in the city for years. They are meant for the kind of visitor not interested in the well-trod path of the fanny-pack, beige-wearing tourist. The guides, which cover Canadian and American cities, straddle the boundary between guidebook and literary nonfiction; they are actually an interesting read, as opposed to the factual and honest but often dull *Lonely Planet* that usually functions as my Bible when I am travelling.

Even Arsenal's fiction titles, both novels and short-story collections (a genre that is itself a risk to publish, given that only Alice Munro seems to have been able to make a living as a short story writer), are often atypical narratives that challenge the very idea of what constitutes a narrative. Ivan E. Coyote is a prime example: her intermedial forms of cultural production do not exist in isolation, but rather inform each other, blurring traditional boundaries between forms, genres, and disciplines. One of Coyote's stories, for example, originally written as a newspaper column, is reincarnated as part of a live story-

telling performance, recorded with music in CD format, and then published in a collection by Arsenal. Her kitchen-table-style storytelling is one that feels colloquial and oral even when the stories are on the page. Are Coyote's stories fiction? Non-fiction? Are they essays? Destabilizing readers' generic (as well as gender) expectations, the stories' very form asks these kinds of questions—the probing, challenging, stimulating questions that Arsenal wants to ask: the kinds of questions that “have the potential of upsetting readers” (Abuawad 88).

In addition to what they publish, the way in which Arsenal publishes titles is also significant. What I find especially resistant is their collaborative and locally-focused methods: the *Little Sister's Classic* series is by no means the only collaborative work that Arsenal does. Arsenal often partners with culturally dissenting organizations and individuals—frequently also from Vancouver—to create titles that are produced with both publishing, as well as another perspective, in mind. They have, for example, often worked in conjunction with art galleries and other artistic institutions—particularly the Vancouver Art Gallery—to publish nonfiction titles on the visual arts. Many of Arsenal's cookbooks are published in conjunction with local restaurants: *As Fresh as It Gets* has its roots in Vancouver's Tomato Fresh Food Café, Dolly and Annie Watts' *Where People Feast*, one of the few Indigenous cookbooks available in Canada, is authored by the former owners of Liliget Feast House in Vancouver, and *Tongue Twisters* (forthcoming) is by Gord Martin, chef and owner of Vancouver's Bin 941 and Bin 942 (restaurants specializing in the sensuality of food). Local topics abound in Arsenal's other publishing categories; these titles tackle such topics as the Downtown East Side's history and culture, Vancouver architecture, and residential school experiences in British

Columbia. I would argue that these methods function as coalition work and build alliances with other (local, rather than international) movements of resistance—an assertion of a place in the world for perspectives other than the prevailing ones, for lives that are lived both locally and globally.

#### IV: Conclusion

Arsenal Pulp Press thus functions as a community of resistance, enabling both readers and writers to access and produce literatures that, rather than consolidating the dominant world order, defy it. Both their publishing methods and the titles themselves exemplify the kind of resistance that Daniel Allen Cox calls for and celebrates in his interview, “Prometheus Queer.” Indeed, Cox's own works are published by Arsenal; this publication is a different kind of act than the arsonists of his novel *Krakow Melt*, but a queer challenge nonetheless. Abuawad highlights a troubling situation for resistant readers and writers, and the communities from which they speak, responding to the same need that Cox does: the necessity that publishing and reading are able to function as ways in which dissent is not crushed, but expressed and inspired. Reading and writing garners resistance by bringing together readers and writers in both imaginary and material communities where dissent is passed down, built on, and multiplied.

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