

Letter from Buffalo

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The Peace Bridge war is raging between Buffalo and neighbouring Canada.

Buffalonians want a signature bridge to replace, or at least complement, the existing, overstressed 1927 structure, but the Canadians won't sign the cheque.

Elsewhere, the giant grain elevators which once inspired Walter

Gropius, the Italian Futurists and Le Corbusier, and terrified Anthony Trollope - embarked on an Industrial Age Grand Tour - are rusting, ruins-on-stilts (or on "marine legs"), on the city's waterfront. Nearby, the vast Art Deco mausoleum of a railway station, New York

Central Terminal, lies abandoned, awaiting bulldozers (or at best the more insidious assault of a shopping-mall make-over), like a medieval

fortress awaiting siege. Buffalo is landmarked by resonant husks.

In the partly autobiographical essay that opens her collection of early poems, *Frame Structures* (1996), the poet and Buffalo resident Susan Howe gives an ironic account of

the city's founding narratives, when "our

Romulus", Joseph Ellicot of the Holland Land

Company, came across what he rightly saw as a natural junction for east-west transportation routes, and christened it with that most transitory of colonial appellations, New Amsterdam. Members of the indigenous Seneca nation already called the area Teuh-sce-whe-aok, or Buffalo Creek, because herds of buffalo once frequented salt licks in the area. Ellicot later drew up plans which, if fully realized, would have made the city an elaborate baroque

collage, replete with radiating boulevards; a composite of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's design for Washington, DC, and the gardens of

Versailles in full bloom. If Buffalo never quite achieved such grandiose status as a destination, its importance as a way station, for grain in the era of the Erie canal, for diverse goods in the railway age - not to mention its guide

book vocation as the gateway to Niagara Falls and

Canada - was undisputed.

These days, Buffalo is one of a grim federation of depopulating American cities that vie to define decline. Yet, the State University of New York at Buffalo, or more precisely its Poetics Program, which I am visiting, is in many ways a portal into the future. The Program seems to offer a bridge - virtual, yet somehow more resilient than its contentious steel equivalent at the border - between innovative poetry past, present and future. The faculty includes the distinguished poet Robert Creeley, now in his seventies and a living link with that quintessentially trail-blazing anti-institution, Black Mountain College; and poets associated with Language poetry, such as the aforementioned Susan Howe and the indefatigable poet, essayist and provocateur Charles Bernstein, who holds the David Gray Chair. A crucial (dis)embodied presence is the Digital Poetics program and its cyberspace institute, the Electronic Poetry Center:

“the largest digital resource for poetry in the world, averaging over a million connections a year from 80 countries . . . 25 gigabytes of data in 9,000 files” (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc>).

Even the Poetics Program’s resident novelist, Samuel R. Delaney, is a man of the future, albeit with an acute sense of the vanishing past. Best-known for his science-fiction writing, Delaney’s latest book, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), has been a surprise best-seller in the United States, where its non-fiction account of the way corporate development homogenizes social geography, how the global writes itself over the local, has touched a national nerve.

Sitting in his office, black with a billowing white beard, a genial multicultural Santa Claus, Delaney expounds to me his theory of “network zones” - homogeneous areas where everyone is bent on similar goals, such as office/corporate environments; and, in contrast, “contact zones” - heterogeneous spaces where people of all stripes meet and mingle at random. In Times Square, Disney-led, sanitized networking is replacing genuine contact with all its risk,

pleasure and surprise; but this is merely a lurid, neon-lit version of what is happening, equally inexorably, in a city like Buffalo with its fast-disappearing downtown public space (and fast-disappearing public, for that matter).

The SUNY-Buffalo Amherst Campus site is an extreme architectural example of a non-

contact zone, of town/gown divides made

concrete and four-laned. Marooned by the freeway, fifteen miles from downtown Buffalo, the

students are perennially snowed in by hard

Buffalo winters. That the new campus wasn’t built in the old downtown area, cementing

cultural links, is one of the many missed boats in Buffalo’s history. Instead, realism and real-estate opportunities won out; the downtown was left to picturesque dilapidation. Meanwhile, the city-centre school system is succumbing to that all-American bane, White Flight. Indeed, the city’s Main Street is as clinical a white-black divide as one could fear to see; white West, black East. Local legend has it that the average police

response-time to crime on the Westside is five minutes, while on the Eastside you had better be prepared to hold.

The campus is fringed by formerly toxic wasteland. It is now, inevitably, a designated conservation area, I note as I trek to college across buoyant, once poisonous terrain, enjoying the springy consistency of the rehabilitated grass, enduring the incredulous looks of motorists drop-jawed at the sight of someone negotiating a distance further than that from faculty to car-park on their own two feet. The campus is reactively anti-utopian, a precinct of panoptica, designed and built in the wake of Vietnam-

protest paranoia to discourage dissent and

prevent incendiary gathering. This is manifest most glaringly in the dining areas, which eschew the traditional collegiate communal bench for table-for one isolate booths. Apparently, the design team justified the food-court look by claiming it would make contemporary students, pining for the old-town mega-mall, feel at home. To which one exasperated professor reportedly replied:

“So why don’t we just show them TV all day, make them really feel at home?”

In such unpromising surroundings, the

Poetics Program exists as a kind of progressive enclave. SUNY-Buffalo has been associated with innovative poetry since the early 1960s when the six-foot-eight-inch frame of Charles Olson, author of *The Maximus Poems*, and former Rector of Black Mountain, bestrode the original downtown campus. Olson read alongside Creeley at then lively joints such as the Central Park Grill on Main Street, opposite the jazz club where John Coltrane would on occasion hold court, in the days when Buffalo’s

status as railway hub placed it squarely at the heart of things, en route for everywhere. There is still a beguilingly Olsonian mixture of ambition and eccentricity about the place, a maverick sense of poetry as a map of possibilities. It is also a rare institution where poets are entrusted with teaching literature rather than creative writing; trusted, that is, to know a bit about the art as well as the craft.

Charles Bernstein’s spring seminar is an interdisciplinary affair composed in concert with the music faculty. Students are encouraged in their own projects, which, on a typically atypical afternoon I attend, range from an acoustic-

ornithological journey through the rich sound-world of the poet Ronald Johnson’s modernist, birdsong-inspired collages, to a Spanish-

American student’s sung-through encounter between Lorca and flamenco. This desire

fully to tap the sonic resources of the medium (Bernstein, with a characteristic newer-than-New Criticism twist, is an advocate of “close

listening”) strangely echoes that paradigmatically utopian college envisioned by Francis Bacon in his *New Atlantis* (1627), complete with “Sound-Houses” for audio innovation.

The seminars are supplemented by visits and



performance from poets like Clark Coolidge -

himself a dedicated jazz sticksman, a fact that informs his syncopated bop poetics and connects him to Buffalo's jazz stopover past.

The Digital Poetics workshop run by Loss Pequeno Glazier is also startling, part Laputa, part laboratory, a space where poets, teachers and students can explore the potential of the computer as a compositional and editorial tool.

Here students, relatively new to the software, unveil translation machines, poems that scuttle like beetles across the screen, signage that advertises its own architecture. Amid the more elaborate constructions are numerous lovingly tended websites, providing bibliographical,

critical and scholarly information on a vast

and catholic diversity of poets. SUNY-Buffalo also boasts an exceptional Poetry Special

Collection which makes the rarest and most samizdat works accessible at a keystroke. Up from the stacks comes a range of material from literary modernism's grandest projects to

its most idiosyncratic expressions, all carefully preserved.


The same cannot be said for those other motors of modernism, the grain elevators, whose remains line a waterfront area which resembles a theme park designed by David Lynch. These towering structures, supporting belts and buckles, were first constructed in the nineteenth century to transport grain from the ships that arrived from the Great Lakes, ships too large to navigate the Erie Canal, on to smaller canal boats. Their very novelty paradoxically provoked Trollope, writing in his *North America* (1862), to scan prehistory for comparison: "In uncouthness of form it outdoes those obsolete old brutes who used to roam about

the semiaqueous world, with their great hungering stomachs and huge unsatisfied maws."

Trollope's choice of analogy seems to bear out Walter Benjamin's assertion that "the alluring and threatening face of primal history is clearly manifest in the beginnings of technology, in the living arrangements of the nineteenth century".

In 1913, Walter Gropius saw in the elevators' unembellished celebration of function the seeds of an international style, which were later to grow into "the magnificent FIRST FRUITS of a new age", according to Le Corbusier in 1923.

Only a couple of grain elevators are now in operation, the rest merely gigantic mementoes of a time when Buffalo once led the world and inflected international modernism. The hulk of a huge ship clenched in a deathly embrace with an abandoned elevator is one of many riveting sights still to be seen in the waterfront area, where, on an improvised tour, I sit in the

Swannie House bar at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Ohio Street, its historic exterior striped by the elevators' long shadows. My guide is Loss Glazier, digital poet and gatekeeper to a very different kind of future. 

In such surroundings, however, even digital poets are prone to nostalgia, and Loss asks the barmaid if, as we've heard, Swannie's is the oldest bar in Buffalo (I discover later that it is the second

oldest, just as Susan Howe's book boasts an engraving of "the second oldest view of

Buffalo"; Buffalo seems to specialize in such almost-but-not-quite perspectives). "I don't know, it's pretty old", she replies. "The owner told me that stuff one time, but I forget." We say she might want to have that kind of information ready for people who ask. She smiles: "Do you know, you're the only ones who ever have?"

The steely resistance of most Americans to architectural sentiment is brought home by two working joes who arrive and hand their weekly paychecks over the bar in what is clearly an established ritual, a serious drinker's direct debit.

Susan Howe had enthused to me about the vast abandoned railway station, how it had been opened for a day a couple of years ago, enabling her to walk inside as if into a time-warp (her own poetry is rich in dizzying temporal shifts); a mid-century heyday, right down to the poster ads extolling necessities which no longer exist, luxuries that are now commonplace. The ghosts of transportation past - the Erie Canal, the railroad - haunt and taunt the new city. "Whaddya wanna go there for?", ask the mill workers, completely bemused. In the end, they furnish meticulous instructions in the customized demonstrative terms employed by men comfortable with directions: "You're gonna go down Michigan, then you're gonna do a right at Moore, you're gonna see a left, but you're not gonna go down it" We arrive


at the now barbed-wired and guarded Grand

Terminal, all the more eerily magnificent in its abandonment. In my pocket is a bar napkin on which Loss has drawn his subjective, artist's impression of the American contender for the Peace Bridge Proposal (which he has carefully transcribed as all loving loops and roller-coaster peaks) and the Canadian contender

(rendered as a half-hearted, shortest-distance-between-two-points scrawl). The border

skirmishes continue, despite the fact that the Peace Bridge was originally named to honour 100 years of non-hostility between the two nations; the Canadians say they like the bridge as it is, and any additional span should merely echo it; the Americans suggest the Canadians favour a Forth Bridge-like state of perpetual repair which keeps their countrymen in work, rather than a low-maintenance, high-concept, signature bridge that will get Buffalo back on the map and bring back to light a hidden masterpiece of Frederick Law Olmsted parkland, obscured by the current bridge approach. As I write, the latest development is reported in the Buffalo News; apparently, the company behind Detroit's successful Ambassador Bridge has been drafted in for intensive think-tanking. "We are asking you to support our vision", said Remo Mancini, corporate vice president for the Detroit bridge companies. "You may not like our vision, but our vision is simple, clear, and will do great things for this community." You may not like our vision. But, hey, a vision is a vision . . .

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It is significant that the city of Buffalo is once more staking its future identity on a means of transcending itself, of passing through and out. The limbo-fates of the railway station and grain elevators suggest that even function married to architectural audacity cannot guarantee posterity. By contrast, the Poetics Program, with its painstaking curatorial care for the literary works of early modernism, and its energetic attempts to extend 

modernism's experiments into the twenty-first century, is determined that Buffalo should become a vibrant gateway to the future. In this regard, it has much to teach its

parent institution, city and state. A way station still, but in an auspicious informational age of links, portals, search-engines, Buffalo could yet be coming into its own.

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