

TDR The Danforth Review

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TDR Interview: Anne F. Walker

Anne F. Walker's books of poetry include [The Exit Show](#), [Into the Peculiar Dark](#), **Pregnant Poems**, and **Six Months Rent**. She founded Redwood Coast Press, and edited the anthology of poetry and poetic prose [bite to eat place](#). Her poetry has been granted awards from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Film Development Corporation, and the bpNichol Memorial Fund, and twice been awarded the Eisner Prize for Poetry. Her website is at <http://www.poets.ca/linktext/direct/walker.htm>.

Michael Bryson interviewed Anne in March 2004.

[Photo credit: Alfred Arteaga]



Tell us a little about yourself. Right now you're in California working on a PhD, raising a son, and publishing poetry. Is this where you thought you'd be at this stage in your life?

My first thought is "*absolutely not*," then followed by "*in a way, yes*." The first part of that comes from the twenty years growing up in Toronto, where I increasingly recoiled from the thought of ever moving back to America. I was born in Berkeley in the midst of the Free Speech Movement and my family moved when I was almost seven. I remember waking up from a nap seeing police chasing a large group of hippies up my street. I remember peace protests, and seeing the army occupation of Berkeley roll up University Avenue. I remember hearing about my sister (three years older than me) having to leave a public swimming pool because police had thrown teargas into it. One of the other children's parents was a suspected socialist agitator. Police had wanted to make a point. Then I grew up in Toronto, got my BFA in Creative Writing at York, studying primarily with bpNichol, and also substantially with Frank Davey. Eli Mandel and Susan Swan were also teaching my writing. It was amazing... fantastic writers and thinkers. I had

been writing since about seven.

bpNichol gave me the idea of publishing poetry, encouraged me that way. My early/mid twenties I lived the downtown artist life, working in film and writing poetry. As result of being socialized in Toronto, it just makes sense to me, the way people move with each other on the street, the pauses and forwards in conversation. When my son was born his father and I started a strange obsessive/compulsive travel stint all around North America. The smell and air in Berkeley makes sense to me in a very early-distillation way, the right flowers blossom at the right times. Settling here in Berkeley was logic to a really primitive grounded part of me. My ex liked the weather, and flowers. Still, I have never socially acclimated to the American culture of "rugged individualism." As a global military force, domestic tendencies toward individual aggression are largely applauded. The disparity between rich and poor is pronounced and constant. Communities tend to insulate themselves from one another. America is brutal. The constant aggression here still startles me: I still find myself uncomfortable with it. Toronto makes sense more easily to me. So, I would not have imagined I would have moved here, and am still surprised by it.

The "yes" part of this response though comes from a different part of what I found here. When I think about the life that I want to have had when it's done, it is a life of colour and diverse texture, of moments

I could not have expected that led me in new directions. I have found much of that here. I started graduate work at Berkeley, first studying with Robert Hass, now concluding my work with Alfred Arteaga, Hertha D. Sweet Wong, and Lyn Hejinian. Being in this particular community of world-class intellectual practitioners on literature, poetry, poetics, and culture, has been both mind-expanding and confidence-building. I have continued to find poetry here. It is beautiful. Today is March 9, 2004: white tulip tree petals are falling and the air is warm. The purple blossom trees are behind a few weeks, still just opening: I wonder about that. It's different, semi-tropical feel today, and beautiful, with pockets of strong social opposition that it takes institutionalized repression to form. The contrast and tone of the environment, and the flow of time, has stimulated a change in poetic voice for me. I'll talk about that more in response to your later questions.

And... I never thought I would be a single parent. It simply forces me to be a better human every single day. Plus, he's fun.

The program at Berkeley that you're studying in is called the "Program in American Urban Poetics." What does that mean? What are "urban poetics"? What kinds of things are you studying, writing about?

The "Program in Urban Poetics" is an Interdisciplinary American Literature and Cultural Studies Ph.D. program I designed at Berkeley. It reads primarily post-1950 American Urban Poetry in relation to the social and physical architectures integral to the works. Historically the idea of Urban Poetics has origins in the introduction to Charles Baudelaire's book of prose poetry **Paris Spleen** where he wrote: "it is by frequenting the spaces of the large cities that this obsessive poetic ideal arises. by coming into contact with the numerous interrelations between things that this poetic shape comes into being." In the intricacies of a city, the diversity of architecture and activities, and the constant change and movement of people through any given street, alley or corner, create a specific urban aesthetic that is reflected in the culture's art. The central concept underlying Urban Poetics is that the structure of place—the creation of meaningful spaces and experiences evoked by, and originating, works of literature—becomes involved in the structure of those works. A city's rhythms and the rhythms of urban poetry will be in dialogue, both manifesting poetics of form. Both are tropes of social consciousness and are thus inexorably linked.

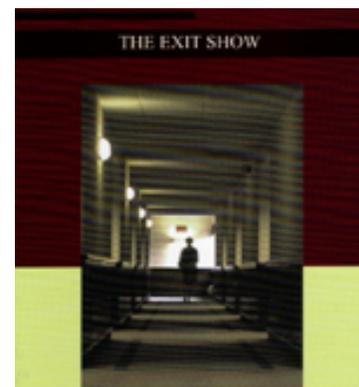
Through the process of writing the dissertation I realised that creating a definition for the term "Urban Poetics" could mean articulating its constitutive literary elements and functions. I use multiplicities, overlaps, slippages, schisms, difrasismos, poetic interrelations, collaborations, meccas, disjunctions, temporal dislocations, apo koinous, and seams as defining component parts of *Urban Poetics*. Exploring definitions of these terms is the organizing principle. Living here has given me an opportunity to peripatetically absorb and digest a lot of information that lingers in the culture.

One of the coolest things I came across was an articulation of the idea of flux as it relates to artistic depiction. In Baudelaire's essay, "The Painter of Modern Life," he describes one mutually-constructive relationship between the creative city and its creative citizen (flaneur) as it is manifest in the transformative power of mid-nineteenth century Paris. The flaneur's imaginative process is mimetic to the flux of urban modernity through being an attentive interactive element mobile within its parameters. Baudelaire's aesthetic emphasis is not on perfected static renditions; exactitude is found in illustrations of procedure where form reflects flux. The object in transition will change character through processes of interrelating; thus an artistic focus on rhythms of change will be, eventually, more lasting than attempts to depict those objects which manifest the individual steps of change. The emphasis here is on what Baudelaire regards as a modern sensibility toward motions and rhythms that follow in the wake of constant transitions. That whole idea left me breathless: in it, the twists and turns become more solid than the pauses.

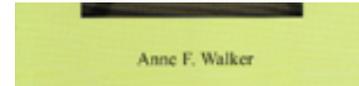
Your latest book is THE EXIT SHOW. The back cover says this is a book "about coming to terms with plurality." Maybe you could explain your project here a little?

Many levels of pluralities are important within **The Exit Show**. Both the poetic aesthetic and content thematics explore variation. Rather than link myself with one particular school of poetics I utilise fusion. I see value in a tremendous range of forms and explorations. Some of these I practice in **The Exit Show**. Sometimes I mix and match, and sometimes let the forms stand cohesively within a particular piece. On the large scale this is to do with the varied styles within the collection as a whole: lyric, prose poetry, short stories, email form, and an integrated linguistic montage piece. On the closer-reading scale, tones switch sometimes within individual pieces.

In **The Exit Show** I played switch with narrative voices, sometimes narrating my own stories, sometimes others', all using a mix of third person and first person, playing with directive and tense structures, and filtered through imagination. I stay away from autobiography, or its



antithesis, as universal rules. A closer-reading scale example of this is in "Retail Slut," where I had the she-character speak in present tense, and the third person narrator speak predominantly from inside the he-character's perception, and placed that awareness in past tense. A schism then exists between the time each character works within, even when they are in immediate dialogue. The story was based on a real story, but I switched the characters' genders.



Social and physical landscapes integrate to me as both are, in human terms, aspects of consciousness. We understand both via our apparatus for comprehension. That which we see may be more descriptive of our tools for interpretation than anything else. This is what I mean by both being tropes of consciousness. When I can link place with motion, and with sound and overlaps, I feel joyous in my craft. I move that way in "start sequence 8. selling a car":

a glide of space above a boxy red jeep cherokee beneath
a white heron slides through air above freeway next to
(you were a bird. you were) next to the estuary

those constant small motions, of the series of docks
in which your boat is tethered, begin to suggest
how delicately (to me briefly, you were the ocean

I worked to develop a way to describe how the delicacy of motion between water and vehicle describe a personal attachment, and doing so with a rhythm that mimics the small waves, with imagery of repetition, and an endless end. The lyric works with elision of time and space, of narratives that overlap simultaneously via parenthetical interjection. I am very interested in temporal dislocation. When consciousness leaps away and returns I wonder how it connects to pluralities in the flow of time.

How is THE EXIT SHOW different from your other work?

My first book, **Six Months Rent**, developed a more contained poetic voice. In the second, **Pregnant Poems**, I explored open and overlapping fragments as a cognitive/creative stance. **Into the Peculiar Dark**, my third book worked heavily with binary oppositions... there was death and there was new life. In **Into the Peculiar Dark** I began to work more with mixing aesthetic forms more dramatically.

The Exit Show is definitely an aesthetic relative to **Into the Peculiar Dark**. The change is that the subject matter itself is also to do with plurality, with breaking the image of heteronormative monogamy. Moving around into various narrative stances, with various aesthetic tools, helps me to understand a more complicated, plural, model of the world. It's a open process of growth.

What's the view of Canlit from California? Are you able to keep up with what's going on here? Any recent work you've been pleased to discover?

Basically I come back to Canada to check in with CanLit. And I spend a fair bit of time in Toronto. Lately in poetry I've really enjoyed the work of Saghi Ghahraman and [Margaret Christakos](#). Goran Simic's new book, [Immigrant Blues](#), I find to be compelling, musical, imagistic, storytelling.

In Toronto, this winter, I went to a "Night of Sirens" orchestrated by Cheri Michael. The artists (which included Jill Binder, Sophie Levy, Vitalia Fedossova, Joy Thompson, Paisley Rae, Sandra Di Zio, and more) all performed really amazing sets. Some of it was spoken word; there was flamenco and tap, both with spoken word; more traditional poetry readings; and music. That series was a pleasure to discover.

In Canadian prose I really like Peter Darbyshire's recent book [Please](#). I find his work very delicately sculpted and strange: a good combination. In fact, I used [the TDR interview with Peter](#) of while teaching literary nonfiction through Johns Hopkins University last summer. I used a few examples of historical and contemporary "statements of aesthetics," and the TDR interview really seemed to be that for Peter. The students had really mixed responses, which was interesting. It definitely got them thinking.

What are you working on now? Have you got a new project on the go?

Can't discuss. Might jinx.

[Michael Bryson is the editor of The Danforth Review.](#)

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