Population Me: Essays on David McGimpsey
edited by Alessandro Porco

Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

David McGimpsey is a “hyphenate,” like some of the figures in his pop-culture world. He is a poet whose titles include Sitcom and Lardcake, among several others, as well as the fiction collection Certifiable. He teaches creative writing at Montreal’s Concordia University and is a radio host at local station CKGM 990. He contributes articles to the Globe and Mail and songs for his rock band Puggy Hammer. He is a Canadian cultural pachyderm, at least on paper.

Palimpsest Press and Alessandro Porco, a graduate student at the State University of New York (Buffalo) asked eight literary and scholarly writers to define this elephant. The reader must determine how blind these observations actually are. Fortunately for McGimpsey, another poet, Jason Camlot, and the editor allow McGimpsey to explain himself. Unfortunately for the observers, they are undistinguished essayists who are outclassed by their subject.

All seem to agree on one idea: McGimpsey is a poet who uses his advanced education without adopting a pseudo-sophisticated sense of superiority towards his material. Not surprisingly, Canada’s cultural guardians have problems with this professor’s philosophy. He compares himself with the protagonist in “the Ralph Machio [sic] feature Crossroads, in which Eugene . . ., a classical guitarist, is continually frustrated by his Julliard [sic] instructor’s resistance to him learning and incorporating blues guitar licks into ‘the repertoire’” (137).

Unfortunately, he is not a Ralph Macchio character, and New York City students are not subject to Canadian nationalist scrutiny. He has admitted that he faces “the screeds of Canadian jingoists” (138), which are motivated by “a yawning, routine anti-Americanism” (138). Luckily, these frontier sentinels are a mere nuisance, not an insurmountable literary obstacle. They may block his path to The Malahat Review, but he can find, or create, other outlets. He has his audience.

The author did not invent “pop culture” poetry—he acknowledges “distinct influences coming from poets like . . . Roger McGough” (141), who satirized Batman in “Goodbat Nightman.” McGimpsey’s claim to fame is that he celebrates the lesser products of an American culture that we are supposed to resist. He does not favour his sanctified treasures, like the blues. He might admire B.B. (“Blues Boy”) King, but his soul belongs to the late Alan Hale Jr., who played the Skipper on Gilligan’s Island (46). Hale was a “second banana” on a third-rate CBS situation comedy, but he is depicted as a once-husky man ravaged by cancer – an image that everyone can identify with. This poem proves that McGimpsey reaches for “the real tinsel."

His spirit is whimsically apolitical. He shares Nova Scotia poet Alden Nowlan’s humane sensibility, but he is no Canadian nationalist. His roots are in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, Gilles Duceppe’s constituency, but he is no separatist. He chooses his own private California over Barack Obama’s Illinois or Sarah Palin’s Alaska.

He refuses to play the stereotypical role of “the man on the street” who challenges the elite, stating that “I actually prefer my snobs snobby” (138). Such individuals are actually harder to find in public life; urbane gentlemen are supplanted by tattooed morons. The grand bourgeois are absent
or unresponsive – he attacks the petit bourgeoisie instead, respectable folk who repudiate social Darwinism, but sneer at NASCAR. He may perceive a “simple bigotry behind it all” (138), but those cultural elitists may express their disdain with a gentle discretion that will not disturb their consciences.

It may be amusing – up to a point – to view popular culture with a bemused tolerance and take potshots at those who seek gravitas in Canadian poetry, but eventually you have to apply standards. The child who is taught not to scrounge in garbage cans may become the callous adult who denounces “dumpster divers,” but s/he cannot go through life without this lesson. It is fine to root for Lindsay Lohan, but one needs to condemn a toxic celebrity culture that turns Anthony Hopkins’s co-star into a drug-addled defendant who scrawled an obscene message to a judge on her fingernail. David McGimpsey is a skilled humorist, not a valued teacher. Perhaps young people, and others, should take their cues from Rick Kushman, the former Sacramento Bee columnist, who wrote, “You don’t know whether to weep for the fate of the world or join the insanity.”

David McGimpsey is a cultural omnivore who embraces “a Tijuana bar or . . . Mahler’s 6th Symphony” (137). This revelation may not impress confirmed snobs or slobs. Fortunately, his work has inspired this anthology, which takes him to the next level—that of inspected and graded literary product. Bon appétit!”

Ronald Charles Epstein attended a David McGimpsey reading in downtown Toronto.

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