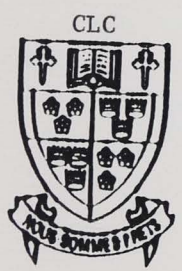


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WRITING CANADIAN
WOMEN WRITING

Edited by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli

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Fred Wah

Which at first seems to be a going back for origins

Notes on a reading of some American women writers

MY TITLE IS AN EXPOSURE FROM SOME OF MY NOTES FOR THIS ESSAY. I HAVE DODGED THE WINDING, EXPLORATORY material surrounding the phrase and burned in a previously uncontrasted phrase. By changing the focus on a piece of language you can reveal structures hitherto unnoticed, blurred and hidden in the apparent, normal and expected syntax. It is a sensibility I have learned from reading some contemporary Canadian and American women writers.

I find myself drawn to feminist writers who are focused more on exploring language issues than social issues. Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard have been particularly important poetic researchers and shapers.¹ The intensity of Marlatt's proprioceptive prosody has done frontier duty for me and many other writers. She has confirmed the primary relationship between language and body. Brossard's precise insistence on the 'text' has been elementary in any recent formal consideration. Her navigations in the reconstruction of a feminine language reveal for me a degree of linguistic particularization unavailable anywhere else. Other Anglo-Canadian women whose writing is of note in these matters are Anne Szumigalski, Gail Scott, Smaro Kamboureli, Pamela Banting and Libby Scheier.²

I've chosen, here, to pay attention to some American women writers because, for whatever reasons, these writers have also shown a serious interest in language issues. I don't believe there has been much interchange between these writers and their Canadian counterparts. The concurrency of their writing activity might be due to the concurrency of social and ideological issues, but I don't know that for sure and I don't propose that view here. These are notes on

¹See my introductory essay to Marlatt's *Net Work: Selected Writing* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980) and my 'Standing and Watching the Writing Writing,' *la nouvelle barre du jour*, 118-119 (novembre 1982), 156-58.

²Note particularly Anne Szumigalski's *Doctrine of Signatures* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1983), Gail Scott's *Spare Parts* (Toronto: Coach House, 1981), and Smaro Kamboureli's *in the second person* (Edmonton: Longspoon, 1985). Libby Scheier is a Toronto writer and Pam Banting is a Winnipeg writer.

poetics of a particular bent and they can as easily be applied or discovered in the Canadian context.

In the past several years a particular group of American women writers has been at the forefront in their unique investigations in language. These women do not necessarily coalesce around exclusively feminist issues and literary relationships. There are many men working in similar stances. Much of what I discovered recently was in the context of gathering material for a 'poetics' presentation at the Long-liners conference at York University.³ Some of the critical material I found was by women and I extended my search into their creative writing.

³Published as 'Making Strange Poetics,' *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1985), 213-21.



Leslie Scalapino

When I first saw two of Leslie Scalapino's early books, *Instead of an Animal* and *This eating and walking at the same time is associated all right*, I was impressed with the imbalance of the last title and with an equally interesting imbalance in the poetry. The writing held me. As I said in a review of *Considering how exaggerated music is*, a collection which includes the first two books, I couldn't leave the writing alone. Scalapino writes with a quirky focus on segments of language that, like the title, jar my attention to syntactic movements I wouldn't normally pay attention to. She assaults expected syntactic orders, freshening the phrase and the clause. Very simply, she interrupts the flow of normal constructs by changing the periodicity of the sentence. Here is an example from her most recent work, 'that they were at the beach—aelotropic series.'

A man—I was immature in age—was a stowaway so not having been active, taken from the ship we're on in a row boat.

(A sailor had fallen out of the row boat then, was embarrassed. So it's like paradise—the embarrassment, therefore it's depressed—seen by his waving at us as the other sailors are coming at him).⁴

And Scalapino tends to write serially so these pieces of story-talk become larger narrative chunks played with in a similar disjunctive manner.



Talk

The Quebecois feminists call it (somewhere) 'bavardage,' small talk. Some contemporary women writers are particularly good at paying attention to the murmur, the light yak-yak between two or more people, sometimes of the same sex, sometimes woman and man. It's going underneath the referential layers of language to tap, maybe, the reflexive roots of the psyche. Brossard's *A Book*⁵ operates largely from that kind of ear. Here's an instance of the kind of involuntary and repercussive writing that results from letting the 'bavardage' generate. This is from Carla Harryman's 'Sublimation.'

What is under
the lard
in Beuy's yard?

By asking you this I am lying about my position (I had wanted to begin slowly. An egg cracking next to my ear, slowly. My head sinking deeper into the pillow, mimicking any pressing tone of voice.) The world on the other side of the pillow was flesh. I would never come to the point. Some

⁴As published in *Epoch*, 33, 2 (Spring-Summer 1984), 198. My review of *Considering how exaggerated music is* appeared in *Brick*, 18 (Spring 1983), 8-9. *Considering how exaggerated music is* (San Francisco: North Point, 1982); this volume also includes *This eating and walking at the same time is associated all right* (first published Bolinas: Tombouctou, 1979) and *Instead of an Animal* (first published n.p.: Cloud Marauder Press, 1978). For Scalapino's critical sensibility see her recent essay, 'Poetic Diaries,' *Poetics Journal*, 5 (May 1985), 12-21.

⁵*A Book*, translated by Larry Shouldice (Toronto: Coach House, 1976).

⁶Carla Harryman, 'Sublimation,' *Vanishing Cab*, 6 (1984), n.p.

⁷Fanny Howe, 'The Contemporary Logos,' in *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, edited by Michael Palmer (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1983); published as *lo*, 30, 54.

⁸Lyn Hejinian, *The Guard* (Berkeley: Tuumba, 1984). Published as *Tuumba*, 50 (September 1984), n.p.

⁹Susan Howe, 'Statement of Poetics,' for *New Poetics Colloquium*, Vancouver, August, 1985.

¹⁰Rae Armantrout, 'Silence,' *Poetics Journal*, 3 (May 1983), 30.

¹¹Susan Howe, *Defenestration of Prague* (New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1983), 56-62.

kind of sexy dreaming woke me up. Words empty these standings without you three feet away, I remarked inkily, drowning my fingers in ink. The filthy language we spoke yesterday has been replaced.⁶

Absent-mindedly speaking. Text as mind. In an essay entitled 'The Contemporary Logos,' Fanny Howe explores some of the implications of this wandering mind/voice. 'Poetry writes twice, and produces another sound from the ordinary. In this sense it is free out of its longing to escape the cell of syntax.'⁷ She begins the essay with some projections on the placement of the voice:

Two shocks run in continual opposition: one is the shock of visible existence; the other is the shock of the invisible. That is, consciousness. Both can leave you shaking. For the fact is, the voice in the void is as weird as a miracle. Human voices—babble, anonymous speech, prophetic speech—these murmurs out of invisible thought are not demystified by the mechanism of larynx and tongue. (47)

Howe's use of the term 'consciousness' reminds me of Daphne Marlatt's concern to account for the same word regarding the proprioception in her own writing. Or maybe it's the middle voice, the voice that bounces back, almost accidentally. Look at the reflexive movement involved in Lyn Hejinian's long poem, *The Guard*.

... the knowledge of 'empty'
surpasses the capacities of language ...
the swivel, a mound ...
'I am a construction worker, I work at home'
with stiff serenity ... this
is the difference between language and 'paradise'⁸



The language of uncertainty

That's what Susan Howe calls it.⁹ She says it is a 'backing off from being too quickly understood.' This is the negative capability and *ostranenie* that has been much in the news for the past 150 years. In recent writing the technique extends throughout any processual articulation and works noticeably at the level of morphology. Let me reiterate Ray Armantrout's outline of the writer's experience of 'cessation.'

1. She may end a line or a poem abruptly, unexpectedly somehow short of resolution.
2. She may create extremely tenuous connections between parts of a poem.
3. She may deliberately create the effect of inconsequence.
4. She may make use of self-contradiction or retraction.
5. She may use obvious ellipsis.¹⁰

Note how aptly some of these apply to the Hejinian poem just quoted. The results are usually para-syntactic; they slow the reading down to intense observation, frequently within large and more lucid propositions. Susan Howe's 'Bride's Day'¹¹ moves (seemingly haphazardly) through the kind of 'tenuous connections' Armantrout mentions.

Shall obediently approach Love
Where
Lines blown to the north wind

Tenting

Seagray stone mirror and master

Eros

Dim artificer enchantment proud

Father

Countless secrets hissing together

Seemseem (57)

Notice how the otherwise fractured 'Seemseem' can operate as a satisfying cadence in the context of the disjunctive, spacy text. And apropos of 'uncertainty' I should note, as well, Lyn Hejinian's very useful essay, 'The Rejection of Closure,' in which she quotes from Luce Irigaray: "'She" is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious—not to mention her language in which "she" goes off in all directions.'¹² Hejinian's synthesis of such material is useful news of these directions.



Poetics Journal, Lyn Hejinian, etc.

Since 1982, Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten have edited the outstanding *Poetics Journal*, five issues of important notes, essays and reviews pertinent to new writing. Since the demise of *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e* the magazine has provided a serious and intelligent sense of a number of writers, including Rae Armantrout, Carla Harryman, Johanna Drucker, Susan Howe, Beverly Dahlen and Lyn Hejinian.

The *Poetics Journal* issue on 'Women and Language' is full of leads to some of the new material. Beverly Dahlen's text and commentary 'Forbidden Knowledge'¹³ appeared in that issue. The piece is a striking interplay of a double talk: a talk that sounds like it's preconceived and pre-written is interlined with a post-commentary. Simple, and perhaps not new, but the intelligence at work on the subject of 'free association' shows an acute awareness of writing and thinking processes. For myself as a writer, I find this extreme sensitivity to process valuable and it has led me to the women writers I'm noting in this essay.

A central aspect of the writing process for women is, as I've indicated, dissonance and fracture. It's hard to maintain that stance in prose because of the balance required with narrative. Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* shows how a nice mix can work when the fragmentation is moderate.

Sway is built into skyscrapers, since it is natural to trees. It is completely straightforward. And doesn't it make a difference to me, reading this book now, to know that you are going to read the same book afterwards, in the same copy, these selfsame words—and would that difference made be different if you were reading your own copy of the book at the same time that I was reading mine. It seemed natural to her to confuse the romantic with the motherly. Still, I was learning to talk about old cars in cherry condition.¹⁴

A similar tendency toward moderating dissonance seems to result in a recent Hejinian book of poems in a more normally syntactic and fluid kind of poetry than some of her previous work.

¹²Luce Irigaray, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, edited with introductions by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981), 103. Quoted here from Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure,' *Poetics Journal*, 4 (May 1984), 142.

¹³Beverly Dahlen, 'Forbidden Knowledge,' *Poetics Journal*, 4 (May 1984), 3-19.

¹⁴Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1980), 73.

Each fact gains mobility. Imagine
 enjoying that little bit of life naively
 as on a postcard associated with a gaping
 landscape or a sound that resembles its source.
 Apparently what the throat thinks, we drink.¹⁵

¹⁵Lyn Hejinian, *Redo* (Mississippi: Salt-Works Press, 1984), n.p.



The list

Jean Day and Rae Armantrout illustrate another example of the use of the disjunctive in their extreme use of the 'list.' This technique breaks into the syntax of a statement or sentence as a separate, collatable item. It is not always attractive nor easy to read, but the tension created between the text and the context (title of poem, expected objective of book, implied narrative, etc.) is worth observing. Here's a part of Armantrout's poem 'Fiction.'

Excitement of being someone else about whom a remark was
 imagined, dominated her morning.

Being young, he drew weather and taped it on the walls.

Everywhere posed scenes solicited explanation.

The bumper-sticker on the white pick-up read, 'Alien.'

It was exhausting and provocative.¹⁶

¹⁶Rae Armantrout, 'Fiction,' *Vanishing Cab*, 6 (1984), n.p.

¹⁷There are many examples, but two notable recent Canadian instances are Phyllis Webb's play with the ghazal in *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals* (Toronto: Coach House, 1984) and Patrick Lane's *A Linen Crow, A Caftan Magpie* (Saskatoon: Thistledown, 1984).

The attack on syntactic continuity has by now become a fairly common mode of exploring writing, for women and men.¹⁷ When it is adeptly used as a stylistic foundation for other, synchronous activity, it can be very attractive. For so much friction it can also be strangely cold, as in Jean Day's 'A Bronzino.'

So strong are the bonds between the stars and the sky that no will can
 separate them.

Do you know what is of interest to everybody?

Two kinds of light, immense displays.

Boiling boiling over the bounding.

The usable past lodges in the back room, parallel and friendly with the
 front.¹⁸

¹⁸Jean Day, *A Bronzino* (Oakland: Jimmy's House of Knowledge, 1984), n.p.



Origins

In their search for an inherently female language, many writers have gone to the device of dictionary-style definitions and etymologies. An early long poem of Barbara Einzig's, *Color*, plays with such lexical inquiry

Discern: to make out with the eyes.

And

grace:
 akin to "sigh" Sanskrit.¹⁹

¹⁹Barbara Einzig, *Color* (Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1976), 2 and 'By Way of Introduction.'

The method seems very attractive to some novice writers but, unfortunately, has lately been overused and tedious. I suspect there's a connection between this work on roots and the listing syntax mentioned above, and, similarly, when

it is synchronously used to support other material in the writing, it too can be engaging. Susan Howe, for example, uses the technique in a fresh manner in a short dramatic poem.

STELLA: Did we pass by?

CORDELIA: (*Remembering*) I knew a child—

STELLA: —all in leaf her snowy flesh—nickname White
her forehead ash.

CORDELIA: —secret saltbox - flooded marsh
king = father hunting in evening
and his return.
Tracks dog to hollow tree.

CORDELIA *pulls off her blindfold. They both rush around the stage picking up what they have left scattered. Then pack the knapsack hastily as if planning to flee.*

TOGETHER (*Urgently*): Space—room—gate—lid—noise—ruin
heart—breast—years—family souvenir—wedding ring—
Whatsoever—clear as day—²⁰

²⁰*Defenestration of Prague*, 100.

Diane Ward also uses the definition-perception and syntax in some very smooth collisions.

meaning a context or vision to confer with this which could be a book.
meaning what I just said confers with this but a licking sound.
Amplified and forming an idea far from original.
A distance which becomes whimsical tension.

For instance, then an origin, an image a fantasy becomes ironic; at home.²¹

²¹Diane Ward, *Never Without One*
(New York: Roof Books, 1984), 3.

Perhaps the use of the list device is generated from the listing of usage in the dictionary. Perhaps this focus on the lexical, as tedious as it has become in some writing, will lead to some useful clarification of semiological paradigms.



At first it seemed

It has been suggested to me that this notion of 'origins' is the imposition of a male point of view. That's probably true. Really, however, I am more interested in the actualization of the writing than in the reasons for it. The language of the women's writing I'm most engaged by is dissonant and fractured. The break-up of a dictionary definition into alternatives may be indicative of strong need for alternatives. How the break-up is used in reconstructing the writing, however, is what I find useful to observe. Men are at some of these same frontiers in writing, perhaps for different reasons. Language, as well as ourselves, is the beneficiary.

July 30, 1985

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Louky Bersianik, after having written for radio, television and film and having published several children's books, authored the first Québécois feminist novel, *L'Euguélonne* (1976), which became a best-seller and has since been translated into English (1982). Her works since then include *La page de garde* (poetry, 1978), *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* (essay-fiction, 1979); *Maternative* (poetry and dramatic fiction, 1980), *Les agénésies du vieux monde* (feminist essay, 1982), *Au beau milieu de moi* (poetry, 1983), and *Axes et eau* (poetry, 1984), as well as numerous poetic and fictional texts, and critical and theoretical essays in journals in Quebec and elsewhere.

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Barbara Godard is Associate Professor of English and Women's Studies at York University. A founding editor of the feminist critical collective *Tessera*, she has written many essays on English Canadian and Québécois writers and on feminist critical theory; she has translated into English works by Quebec writers Antonine Maillet, Yolande Villemaire, Louky Bersianik and Nicole Brossard; and she is the editor of *Gynocritics/Gynocritiques: Feminist Approaches to the Writing of Canadian And Quebec Women Writers* (1987) and her book on Audrey Thomas will appear shortly.

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Sarah Murphy was born in New York City which she left for Mexico when she was twenty-one. More recently she has lived in Toronto and Calgary. Although trained in the visual arts, with group shows in Toronto, Mexico and New York, and solo shows in Toronto and Calgary to her credit, she has, since moving to Alberta, turned increasingly to the writing of fiction. Her short stories have appeared in several literary reviews and her first novel will be published by NeWest Press in 1987.

Heather Murray is a research fellow at the University of Western Ontario. Her research interests are in feminist theory, Canadian writing, and the institutionalization of literary study and criticism. Her recent articles and talks have been on Atwood, Gallant, Ethel Wilson, Charlotte Brontë, and F.H. Burnett, and on English-Canadian criticism and the politics of literary pedagogy.

Shirley Neuman, a founding editor of both Longspoon Press and NeWest Press and Professor of English at the University of Alberta, has written essays and books about modernist, Canadian and women writers, and about autobiography and is now working on a book about Gertrude Stein's novels.

Janet Paterson teaches in the Department of French at Erindale College, University of Toronto. She is the author of *Anne Hébert: architecture romanesque* (1985) and is working on a book about the postmodern novel in Quebec.

Jeanne Perreault has taught English language and literature for several years, most recently in China and at the University of Alberta. She is working on her doctoral dissertation on contemporary American feminist writers.

Laurie Ricou is an Associate Editor of *Canadian Literature* and teaches at the University of British Columbia. He has written essays and books about Canadian literature.

Constance Rooke is a critic and short story writer whose most recent book is an anthology from Oxford University Press, *Night Light: Stories of Aging*. She is also editor of *The Malahat Review* and Associate Professor of English at the University of Victoria.

Gail Scott, a former journalist, published a collection of short stories titled *Spare Parts* with Coach House Press in 1981 and a novel *Heroine* in 1987. She was a co-founder of the French-language literary review *Spirale* and is an editor of *Tessera*, a bilingual journal of feminist criticism and writing.

Marni Stanley, who grew up on a farm in Sturgeon County, Alberta, is co-editor of *Writing Right: Poetry by Canadian Women* (Longspoon, 1982). She is currently writing her doctoral dissertation at Oxford University on British women travel writers. Her only regret is that she gets travel sickness even on a bicycle.

France Théoret is a novelist who teaches in a CEGEP. She has been co-director of *La Barre du Jour*, co-founder of *Les Têtes de pioche* and co-founder and director of *Spirale*. Her work has appeared in many reviews in Quebec and elsewhere; her *L'Echantillon* was published in *La Nef des sorcières*; and the journal and publishing house Les Herbes Rouges has published her *Bloody Mary* (1977), *Une Voix pour Odile* (1978), *Vertiges* (1979), *Nécessairement putain* (1980), *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* (1982), *Intérieurs* (1984) and *Transit* (1984).

Sharon Thesen works as an English instructor at a community college. Her books of poetry include *Artemis Hates Romance*, *Holding the Pose*, and *Confabulations: Poems for Malcolm Lowry*. Her poems and essays have appeared in a number of Canadian and American periodicals. She is poetry editor of the *Capilano Review* and she edited the selected poems of Phyllis Webb, *The Vision Tree*, which received the Governor-General's Award.

Lola Lemire Tostevin is a bilingual author who has published three books of poetry, *Color of Her Speech*, *Gyno Text*, and *Double Standards* (Longspoon, 1985). A fourth book of poems, *Sophie from A to Z* will appear in 1988 and she is presently working on a novel. She lives in Toronto with her family.

Aritha Van Herk published her third novel, *No Fixed Address*, in 1986. Her previous novels have been widely published and translated. She is also the co-editor, for NeWest Press, of two anthologies of fiction, *More Stories from Western Canada* and *West of Fiction*. She has been, besides an editor and a novelist, a secretary, a hired hand and a bush cook. She is now Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Calgary.

A.J. Holden Verburg is Associate Professor of French at the University of Alberta. She has also been a translator for many years.

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University have been recognized by the creation of the Mair Verthuy Scholarship Fund for outstanding students in women's studies. She has organized national and international conferences on women's studies and has also published on French and Quebec feminist writing and on feminist literary criticism, as well as on multiculturalism and on writers such as Camus, Ferron and Vailland. She is preparing a book on H el ene Parmelin.

Jennifer Waelti-Walters is Professor of French at the University of Victoria where (from time to time) she also teaches women's studies (her students translated Bersianik's *L'Eug elionne*). She has written essays on several twentieth-century writers and books on Michel Butor and J.M.G. Clezio and is also the author of *Fairytales and the Female Imagination*. She has just finished a book on French women novelists between 1900 and 1914 and is now working on a monograph on Jeanne Hyvrard.

Fred Wah was one of the founding editors of *TISH* and now is a contributing editor to *Open Letter* and a managing editor of *SwiftCurrent*, an electronic literary magazine. He was the founding coordinator of the writing program at David Thompson University Centre and now teaches in the Applied Writing Program at Selkirk and for the Kootenay School of Writing. The author of eleven books of poetry, he won the Governor-General's award for *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985).

Lorraine Weir is Associate Professor of English and Chair of the Comparative Literature Programme at the University of British Columbia. Co-editor of *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System* (1983), she is currently working on a book on the semiotics of James Joyce.

Janice Williamson is a Toronto writer, critic and teacher. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on feminist theory and Anglo-Canadian women poets, is co-editing a book on Canadian women in the peace movement and is preparing a book of interviews with Canadian women writers.

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