



Prismatic Publics

Innovative Canadian Women's
Poetry and Poetics

Edited by Kate Eichhorn
and Heather Milne

Contents

Introduction	9
NICOLE BROSSARD	
Interview	18
‘Igneous Woman, Integral Woman’	29
from <i>After Words</i>	34
from <i>Downstage Vertigo</i>	36
from <i>Notebook of Roses and Civilization</i>	38
SUSAN HOLBROOK	
Interview	42
‘misling the laureate’	53
‘Insert’	58
‘News Sudoku #19, Level: Lowest’	59
from ‘Nursery’	60
NATHALIE STEPHENS	
Interview	64
‘Paper City’	76
‘Scatalogue’	77
‘A Fuckable Text’	78
from <i>The Sorrow and the Fast of It</i>	79
from <i>Absence Where As</i>	82
GAIL SCOTT	
Interview	86
from ‘Everyday Grammar’	99
MARGARET CHRISTAKOS	
Interview	112
from <i>Not Egypt</i>	124
‘Mother’s Journal Notes’	125
‘M1. UK Breast Milk Toxic: 13 July 99’	126
‘M2. Ada and Eva’	127
‘M3. Milk was recently lethal agent her twin will run across’	128
‘Grounds 20A’	129
‘An Open Erotics of Gzowski’	130
‘My Attaché Case’	131
M. NOURBESE PHILIP	
Interview	138
‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’	149
from <i>Looking for Livingstone</i>	153
from <i>Zong!</i>	155

Contents

KAREN MAC CORMACK	
Interview	166
'Approach'	174
from <i>Quirks & Quillets</i>	175
'At Issue IX: Diminish'	177
'Otherwise:'	179
from <i>Implexures</i>	181
RACHEL ZOLF	
Interview	186
from <i>Masque</i>	197
from <i>Human Resources</i>	199
from <i>The Neighbour Procedure</i>	206
ERÍN MOURE	
Interview	214
'Memory Pentitence/Contamination Eglise'	225
from 'Calor'	230
from 'vigo papers'	235
DAPHNE MARLATT	
Interview	243
'Rings, iii.'	253
'Ghost'	255
'The Difference Three Makes: A Narrative'	257
'booking passage'	259
'Short Circuits'	262
CATRIONA STRANG	
Interview	268
'Hand'	278
from <i>Busted</i> (with Nancy Shaw)	279
'Song for the Silenced'	285
'Vows to Carry On' (with Nancy Shaw)	286
'Notes for appearing compassionate' (with Nancy Shaw)	290
DOROTHY TRUJILLO LUSK	
Interview	292
'First'	302
'Vulgar Marxism'	304
from <i>Decorum</i>	308
SINA QUEYRAS	
Interview	316
from 'Scrabbling'	329

‘Untitled Film Still # 35’	333
‘Roadside Memory #1’	334
from ‘A River by the Moment’	336
from ‘On the Scent’	338
from ‘Virginia, Vanessa, the Strands’	341
from ‘The Waves, An Unmaking’	342
RITA WONG	
Interview	344
‘write around the absence’	354
‘meaning implies purpose’	355
‘canola queasy’	357
‘the girl who ate rice almost every day’	358
‘ricochet’	361
from <i>sybil unrest</i> , part 2 (with Larissa Lai)	363
LISA ROBERTSON	
Interview	368
‘Liberty’	383
‘She Has Smoothed her Pants to No End’	385
‘In My Heart as Drooping Pith’	388
‘For Girls, Grapes and Snow’	389
from ‘Tuesday’	391
‘A Hotel’	393
About the Authors	396
Acknowledgements	401
Permissions	402
Index	405

Introduction

Questioned at the border, the writers in this anthology would all check out as Canadian and female. However, nation and gender are politically saturated concepts, and when adopted as selection criteria or frameworks for analysis, linguistic innovation is often eclipsed. For the purposes of this anthology, we chose to define ‘innovative’ poetry and poetics as writing that, at the very least, approaches language as an inherent problematic and subject of inquiry rather than mere vehicle for representation. While many of our dialogues explore how poetics are structured by the publics in which they take shape, this book privileges the aesthetic over the identity. Staying attuned to linguistic innovation and experimentation, we believe this anthology does the work it set out to do by staging encounters with some of the best writers working in and in response to feminist, language, conceptual, investigative and other poetic traditions.

But if, as we claim, our concern is with innovative poetry and poetics, why edit an anthology that remains bound by the constraints of gender and nation at all? Although this question dogged us from the outset, we had no way of anticipating that we would find ourselves editing this book in the midst of the most significant debate on feminist poetics in the past decade. What would come to be known as the ‘numbers trouble’ started with the presentation and eventual publication of Jennifer Ashton’s article ‘Our Bodies, Our Poems’ and Jennifer Scappettone’s response. The subsequent publication of Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young’s ‘Numbers Trouble’ and Ashton’s retort in the *Chicago Review* ignited months of online debate on questions of gender, poetics and the so-called ‘separatist anthology’ in early 2008. Ashton claimed that anthologies of innovative writing by women are inherently contradictory because much of this writing works to destabilize fixed notions of the gendered body. Structuring an anthology around the category of ‘women’s writing’ maintains a ‘logic of essentialism ... despite all claims to the contrary’ (221). Ashton concedes that historically there may have been reasons to risk such essentialism, but now that women have achieved parity with men in terms of publishing and related venues, this risk can no longer be justified. Spahr and Young, and many of the writers and critics who eventually weighed in online, countered that there is little basis upon which to substantiate Ashton’s claims of ‘parity’ in innovative writing communities where women often continue to find themselves underrepresented, misread and read for the wrong reasons.

In the end, the ‘numbers trouble’ resolved few quantitative questions about the presence of women in the contemporary literary avant-garde, but the debate would reify rather than shake our commitment to this project. As Scappettone observes, ‘Until *Moving Borders* was printed in 1998, and the *Where Lyric Meets Language* conference and anthology followed, women were consistently slighted in representations of the avant-garde because a corrective focus on gender threatened to undercut the critique of identity or to trump aesthetic standards and because women had not yet assumed sufficient sway over poetic discourse or the means of production’ (179–80). She further argues that Ashton fails to recognize that the aforementioned anthologies helped to lay the groundwork for many of the new and emerging critical, curatorial, editorial and publishing venues where women writers are now investigating how ‘Intermittent poetic acts may summon without reifying the lyric I as a socially moored body’ (180). Significantly, Scappettone emphasizes that there are important generational differences that mark these recent interventions: ‘emerging from a climate repoliticized by right-wing ascendancy, these acts necessarily deploy tactics deviating from those of the eighties or the nineties’ (180). But in this climate, old tactics also take on new roles. If the so-called ‘separatist anthology’ was once valued as an important vehicle because it was believed to hold the potential to represent what was absent, the value of such collections may now lie precisely in their ability to generate dialogue, incite debate and demarcate differences. So, for us, the ‘numbers trouble’ confirmed what we already suspected – the presence of and desire to expand a public dialogue on gender and poetics that is both attuned to the realities and discourses of a new generation of writers and critics and attentive to histories of innovative women’s writing.

That the ‘numbers trouble’ debate was staged primarily in the United States seemed to make little difference. As publishing, reviewing and dialogues between writers increasingly occur online, the nation is no longer as relevant to the circulation of writing and ideas as it once was, nor does it limit these conversations to the extent that it once did. However, it would be premature to conclude that the nation no longer matters. There are no existing Canadian anthologies of innovative women’s writing; this will be the first. Although several Canadian writers appear in Maggie O’Sullivan’s *Out of Everywhere* (a British publication), no Canadian writers appear in Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr’s *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* or Cynthia Hogue and Elizabeth Frost’s *Innovative Women Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary*

Poetry and Interviews. Notably, the editors of these American anthologies felt compelled neither to justify nor even to acknowledge their reasons for adopting the nation as a selection criteria, reminding us that, south of the border, the nation still does not readily present itself as a problematic. There are, of course, other important historical differences that cannot be ignored. Canadian women writers have always shaped the nation's literary avant-garde, often playing central roles in defining the contours of new movements and schools of writing both as aesthetic innovators and cultural activists. Considering the contributions of modernist writers, such as Dorothy Livesay and Phyllis Webb, Daphne Marlatt's role as a founding editor of *Tish* and Nicole Brossard's role as a founding editor of *La barre du jour* in the 1960s, the groundbreaking work of Marlatt and Gail Scott on the feminist collective Tessera in the 1980s, and Lisa Robertson and Catriona Strang's involvement in the Kootenay School of Writing collective in the 1990s, our lineage is clearly different from the one that led Scappetone to conclude that, until recently, women writers had 'not yet assumed sufficient sway over poetic discourse or the means of production.' As Sina Queyras observes, 'In many ways Canadian feminist poetics has been a model for feminist poets in the U.S.'

Without losing sight of these important historical and contemporary differences, this project ultimately exists in tension with the nation. Almost half of the writers included in this anthology have spent time living and working outside of Canada, primarily in the United States, and most of the writers have strong ties to literary communities that transcend the nation's borders. Although geographic specificity is still a focus of some of the writing in this anthology, much of it is preoccupied with the emergence of global spaces, movement, exile and travel. Many writers move between national and international contexts, exploring past and present acts of nation making. The selections from M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* might be read as residual shards of a language placed violently under erasure in the name of nation building. Rachel Zolf's most recent work explores the conflict between Israel and Palestine, questioning what it means for a nation to speak in one's name as it commits violent acts against a neighbour. Other writers, including Margaret Christakos, investigate home in and through the deterritorialized domain of the Internet, destabilizing conventional understandings of the domestic on many fronts.

While few of the writers in this anthology have an uncomplicated relationship to nation, and most, for a range of reasons, maintain a complex

relationship to gender and its implied identitary and political bonds, they are all engaged in work that is informed by or seeks to engage in the construction and interrogation of publics. Throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium, the concept of publics has, as Michael Warner observes, ‘gone traveling’ (10). We have come to accept the fact that ‘public’ means many things to many people and that these meanings are culturally and historically contingent. But this concept has proven stubbornly persistent even as it has drifted away from its original context. Perhaps this is because under modernity the concept of ‘public’ has always recognized that the circulation of texts, be they literary, journalistic or judicial, is important not because texts hold the potential to mirror the world but rather because they are actively engaged in making social worlds by fostering dialogues, bridging, assimilating and reifying differences, and authorizing and delegitimizing ways of speaking, knowing and being.

The ‘prismatic publics’ referenced in our title evoke publics that are even further fractured. They are marked by the surprising and often ephemeral forms that appear through the bending, turning and breakage of properties. Appropriately, our title is also a somewhat ‘bent’ form of found material – an ekphrasis culled from an email. Asked to comment on a series of potential covers, Margaret Christakos described Cheryl Sourkes’s photograph, which appears on the cover, as a ‘prismatized public.’ Christakos chose to modify ‘public,’ held in quotations, with a verb form, as if to emphasize that publics are works in progress (always being acted upon) and tenuous constructions that must be adopted with caution. But in many respects, her description not only captures Sourkes’s photograph but also the workings of much of the writing in this anthology. The frame grabs in Sourkes’s ‘Public Camera’ series challenge the division between public and private spaces, as well as the relation among subjects, objects and contexts. Her figures have a tendency to lose identitary markers and to bleed into their surroundings. As subjects are mysteriously reconstituted as the surfaces upon which a surrounding environment’s objects are reflected, bodies *in context* become bodies *as context*. This conceptual investigation of subjectivity resonates with the investigations of subjectivity explored by many of the writers in this anthology. In the selections from ‘The Sutured Subject’ that appear here, Gail Scott introduces a fractalling subject or ‘campily re-sutured subject-in-becoming’ and asks, ‘Does not our own nervous system, our own body (=) the outside world?’ Dorothy Lusk discusses her writing in relation to the ‘suprajective,’ alluding to the possibility of a subject infinitely refracted. Albeit in different

ways and in reference to different forms of writing, Scott and Lusk both point to subjects that are not only in process but also contiguous with the materials and space of writing itself.

Although most of the writers in this anthology are preoccupied with interrogating or undermining the subject's relation to writing, they do not share a common lineage, school or set of practices. While some of the writers are comfortable being cast as 'experimental,' others reject this description. Karen Mac Cormack may be the only writer who has been consistently aligned with Language poets, yet most of the writers identify Language poets as important allies. A few of the writers, including Daphne Marlatt, Erin Moure and Sina Queyras, also express affinities with lyric poets. Margaret Christakos understands her recent work as 'performing strategies upon the lyric.' Several of the writers work across and between genres. Brossard and Marlatt are poets who write novels, but their novels have often challenged the genre's conventions. Nicole Brossard's early novels, including *A Book*, *French Kiss* and *Picture Theory*, are often read as poetry. Marlatt's most recent text, *The Given*, was written as a novel but published as poetry. Scott is a prose writer who has always been in dialogue with poets and considers her location within poetry communities essential to her practice. Lisa Robertson, a poet, is perhaps best known for her sentences. Other writers work at the nexus or the collapse of genres. Mac Cormack describes her most recent two-volume prose work, *Implexures*, as a form of 'transhistoric polybiography' that combines 'multiple biographies, time frames and historical circumstances with a poetic focus' in order to critique conventional narrative methods. Nathalie Stephens resists generic classification altogether and, revelling in this refusal, raises provocative questions about the viability of understanding innovative writing through the lens of genre categorizations. Simultaneously, Stephens raises analogous questions about the validity of gender categorizations.

Some of the writers in this anthology understand their poetic projects as deeply rooted in feminist, Marxist, postcolonial and/or queer political struggles, but most, if not all, are wary of writing whose primary objective is to make political claims. Susan Holbrook's writing, for example, unabashedly addresses issues of gender and sexuality, but much of her writing is based on Oulipean procedures. As she emphasizes, 'I argue for taking responsibility but I capitalize on the illusion of arbitrariness.' What matters to Holbrook, and the other writers in this anthology, is what the work is *doing*, and this can only be understood through the process of learning how to enter and read their writing. In this sense, all

the writers in this anthology are committed to the project of working out problems *in* rather than simply *with* language. They share our definition of innovative writing as a stance or approach that recognizes language as a problematic and further recognizes that a problematic, even an insurmountable limit, may sometimes be the most tactical or only way to tackle 'big questions,' be they ontological, epistemological or political. In fact, what is most exciting about much of the writing in this anthology is how it effectively demonstrates the expressive and sometimes transformative qualities of constraints. As our interviews reveal, writers gravitate to constraint-based poetics for many reasons, and for some, working within constraints is not even understood as a choice. As M. NourbeSe Philip discusses, she may have chosen to lock herself in the two-page legal document from which *Zong!* was generated, but she is, as a writer of Caribbean ancestry, always already locked in the imperialist language in which she writes. Similarly, several of the writers in this anthology, including Christakos, Holbrook and Catriona Strang, who write in and around the interruptions, noise and surprises of their domestic lives, speak of their poetic procedures and constraints in part as conditions of circumstance rather than choice.

Much of the writing in this collection is the product of working in and against systems – linguistic, libidinal, affective, technological, economic and ecological. As with all systems, the import or redaction of elements has profound effects on flow and meaning. Meaning is produced through the processes of circulation, recirculation, recombination and procedure and, as such, this work must be understood as enacting a poetics of flux not stasis. Rather than bring the reader to a single or fixed truth claim, this writing asks the reader to become an active agent in making meaning and more importantly, to abandon 'getting it' as the only or primary objective of reading. Writing through and across multiple languages with varying degrees of fluency, Erin Moure reminds us that fluency cannot be easily understood as a singular achievement or point of arrival. Her translations and transliterations invite the reader to enter linguistic economies where no degree of fluency is sufficient, but there are still many ways to navigate Moure's poetic terrain. The ecologies of Rita Wong's *forage* demonstrate the grave dangers and rich possibilities of living in systems where the collision of foreign and indigenous, technological and organic, human and animal elements has become the norm. These ecologies do not always 'make sense' but neither do the 'logics' of late capitalism, globalization and genetic modification Wong investigates in much of her writing, and as she

emphasizes, such material conditions also ‘disrupt syntax,’ necessitating new approaches to writing.

Perhaps because writing is usually solitary work, we were struck, while editing this anthology, by the number of writers who have, at different points in their careers, chosen to write and work in collaboration. Two writers chose to include collaborative texts amongst their selections here: Strang’s selections include several poems written with Nancy Shaw, and Wong’s section includes work co-written by Larissa Lai. That both of these writers are from Vancouver may not be a coincidence; as Lisa Robertson emphasizes, collaboration, multidisciplinary dialogue and collective labour have long been integral to the innovative writing community on Canada’s west coast, and notably, this is a condition that cuts across gender lines. The other forms of collaborative work and personal and professional alliances that shape the writing in this anthology may be less visible but they are no less important. Over the past three decades, Gail Scott has worked in collaboration with both Francophone and Anglophone feminist writers, but also aligned herself with the San Francisco-based New Narrative writers and, more recently, a younger generation of American experimental prose writers. Robertson, Strang and Lusk have been associated with the Kootenay School of Writing. Wong positions herself in relation to both Asian and First Nations writing communities along the west coast. There are, of course, many other affiliations alluded to in the interviews included in this anthology. As will become apparent, the writers in this anthology are also connected by a myriad of friendships, mentorship relationships and, yes, even rivalries, but only time (and the archive) will reveal the depth, complexity and importance of these relations and their impact on the writing.

Our impetus to edit this book was motivated by a desire to expand the space for public dialogues on poetry and poetics and to expand the context in which the writing in this anthology, much of which remains under the radar, might circulate. Although we briefly considered the inclusion of critical essays on each of the fifteen writers featured here, we wished to avoid imposing a single and authoritative framework on the writing. Instead, we chose to provide a space for the writers to articulate their own analysis. Because we took our cues from the writers with whom we were in dialogue, all the interviews are unique. While some are formal interviews, others more closely resemble intimate conversations shifting between registers. Most would be best characterized as dialogues rather

than interviews. Whenever possible, we chose to meet with the writers in person, usually in their own cities. Since most of these interviews took place in person, we tried to preserve as much of the vernacular language and rhythm of these dialogues as possible, because this too offers insights into how a writer thinks, approaches language and positions herself as an author. Although all of the dialogues focus on poetics, they cover a range of topics from quotidian concerns to politics, technology, spirituality and knowledge. Read in relation to the selections of writing, the scope of these interviews is not surprising. After all, the writing in this anthology is made from the raw materials of everyday life – vernacular speech, scraps of texts, memorable lines cut from emails, office memos, unforgettable headlines, instructions pulled out of boxes, appropriated laws, doctrines, master narratives, texts revered and reviled, texts contiguous with the making and contestation of subjects writ large.

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NICOLE BROSSARD



KATE EICHHORN: Most interviews with writers now take place online, but I don't think that an online exchange can replicate what we're about to enter – this face-to-face dialogue. Writers talk about their work in the present in very different terms than they do when reflecting and writing in response to a list of questions. I also wanted an opportunity to speak to you in person because the conversation or dialogue is, in a sense, one of your genres, like poetry, the novel, the essay and the journal. Can you talk about the place conversation and dialogue occupy in your work?

NICOLE BROSSARD: I always say that in life I like to have a table in front of me, whether to write, to eat or to share a conversation. In most of my novels, you will find women getting together around a table to talk. I like the posture of addressing the other face to face with a space for negotiations which would be the symbolic space of the table possibly transforming spoken words into written words. In my mind, a conversation makes more space for free-floating subjects and thoughts than a dialogue, which would tend to be more directed if not toward a specific goal at least to the idea of making progress through questioning and answering patterns. Trust and confidence and listening are necessary in a conversation, as sharpness, knowledge and processing are more needed in a dialogue. That being said, probably the word 'relationship' is the key word as well as what is being exchanged and what circulates through that relationship. A good conversation brings a lot of energy, can nourish strong creative emotions – friendship, love, admiration – and stimulates renewal of thoughts or attitudes. It's also possible that I like to put characters face to face around a table because it might be my only chance to listen to them as characters. I would be lying if I were to say that my main interest is in characters – it is not, but maybe I like their conversation because they serve as strategies to unveil pain and desire, desire and feelings.

I've been asking myself many questions about the notion of dialogue, especially in relation to theatre. For a long time I've been wanting to write a play. Probably you can notice that tendency in *Mauve Desert* as well as in *Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon*. One thing for sure that I observe is that I cannot really write dialogues suitable for theatre because instead of being about emotions they very rapidly become philosophical. In other words, I feel like I could never have the characters quarrel or yell at each other or say horrible things to each other. I'd rather have my characters get together to share the fruit of their thinking or to seduce each other.

KE: As I was preparing for this conversation, I was reading your work and thinking about the difference between the very explicit moments when

people come together in the fiction and the essays and the different sorts of conversations or dialogues enacted in the poetry. I'm thinking about one of the selections that we've chosen for this collection from *Lovhers*, as it's known in English. Could we think about this as a conversation with Adrienne Rich and Gertrude Stein, writers living and dead?

NB: Well, it could be, but I have to say that my first interlocutor at that moment was my lover. Of course in writing there are always dialogues with other writers and their work, contemporary and from the past. That's the beauty of literature, it keeps books, ideas, landscapes and people interactive no matter how far in time or space or from their mother tongue. But I think once the process of writing starts, the dialogue can also fade away. Of course, it varies depending on the intention of the text, but naming, quoting, referring to a writer meaningful to you at the very specific moment of your writing are significant. At that time, both Adrienne Rich and Gertrude Stein, as well as Monique Wittig, were very meaningful to me. I would say that the dialogue occurs before the writing, in stimulating the desire to write. Of course if there are things to argue about, then the dialogue can go on much longer in the text. Recently I noticed that more than ten books have been written taking Franz Kafka as a character. There is definitely a dialogue going on there.

KE: I realize this is a very rigid distinction, but do you think about the poetry as a more private or intimate genre than your fiction or essays, a genre less amenable to fostering public conversations, dialogues?

NB: Poetry is condensation. It compresses meaning. It renews meaning, but I don't see it as a more private genre than any other kind of writing. It all depends on the society you belong to. In South America, poetry is shared in public places by thousands of listeners for private and political reasons. What is inside a novel and what comes from a poem is energy. In a novel the energy is more diffuse. Writing a novel requires time, continuity. There are consequences for the coherence of the book if you start the writing of a project too soon or too late. But in poetry, no matter if you work on a poem for three months or three years, you are always in the present, in an existential and a semantic tension. It's a different approach when you write a novel. Poetry and prose originate from different postures toward time and language. In a narrative, no matter how fragmented the story and the characters might be, part of your relation to the universe is mediated by characters that you empowered. In poetry you are in direct line with the cosmos or whatever can be called space or

immensity around you. The only thing between you and the universe are words and respiration. When I write novels, it's somehow because I need to negotiate with reality. So probably I use the characters to do that work in my name. In poetry, no matter what the theme is, the pleasure of words is all over the place. With the novel, it's another kind of pleasure because you lose some of your freedom, more or less. It all depends on what risk you are willing to take and how conventional is your idea of a novel. Maybe you can keep your freedom if you write, as I did in *A Book*, one page at a time with a lot of white space. Then, maybe that white space will give you back your freedom. But if you are engaging in a story, you are minimally caught in a direction. I don't think poetry is more private. Though it is more strange and puzzling. Why? Because technically a line in poetry has to be puzzling otherwise it becomes prose. Compare Eluard's sentence 'La terre est bleue comme une orange' with the plain reality of 'La terre est ronde et le ciel est bleu.' Prose informs, poetry moves.

KE: We've been discussing the differences between your poetry and novels. One of things we've noticed editing this collection is the number of writers who work in and at the intersection of genres – Gail Scott, Daphne Marlatt, Nathalie Stephens – but also the number of poets who dwell in the sentence. Since many of your earlier novels can be approached as poetry – I'm thinking about *A Book*, *French Kiss*, *Picture Theory* – and even your more recent novels remain marked by an attentiveness to the poetic line, can you talk about some of the similarities between your poetry and novels?

NB: My novels have a poetic dimension because I get bored when straight sentences repeat what I already know or can foresee as reader. I do not intend my novels to be poetical, they become so because this is the way I think, question and enjoy language and reality. You are right in asking about the similarities between poetry and novels. I have noticed that more prosaic sentences with a narrative tone usually appear in my poetry after I have just finished a novel or before I am about to write one. An example of this would be: 'The Silence of the Hibiscus' in *Museum of Bone and Water*. I guess the similarity between my prose and my poetry is a philosophical trend reflecting consciousness, melancholy and the expression of revolt concerning the lies and violence that are part of the human condition. For me the story is not in the action or the suspense, it is in thoughts and emotions. It is a lot in the writing itself: rhythm, harmony and rupture of tone. This is usually what I try to translate or reshape in my writing. For that I need words with

a symbolic dimension and words of such usually have a poetic aura. Indeed I am not a storyteller, neither in my prose nor in my poetry.

KE: You already noted that your earlier novels had a different visual presence than your more recent novels – often, there are just a few lines of text floating at the top of a page – and this space enabled you to maintain some of the freedom you associate with poetry. But the kind of novels you were writing changed in the late 1980s with the publication of *Mauve Desert*. As a poet, what moved you to adopt a slightly more conventional novel form at that time? What possibilities has this form opened up for you since?

NB: I think that since my first novel, *A Book*, I have been trying to expand the ‘Once upon a time’ framed sections that we can find in all my novels from *Sold-out* to *French Kiss* to *Picture Theory* where a whole chapter is written almost as if we were in a real novel, and finally there is *Mauve Desert* where first fifty-five pages of the narrative constitute the longest story I had written up to that point in 1987. There is no doubt in my mind that if my novels are structurally unconventional, there is in me a desire to write a ‘real’ novel. By that I mean to create a space, a world, in which I would be able to make a synthesis of the excitement, fear, questions, emotions of ‘my time’ and of my Montreal. Just for once. A sort of challenge to see if really I can tell and develop a story. I guess writing *Intimate Journal* and the short autobiography in *Fluid Arguments* comes from the same ‘yes, I want to see how I will behave in that kind of normal writing.’

KE: You have often written about being a woman ‘of the present.’ I’d like you to elaborate on this, but also on something you admit at the beginning of Louise Forsythe’s collection of essays on your work – ‘I’ve always said I’m a woman of the present, and now I’m beginning to feel that there is too much present.’ For some time now, you’ve been exploring new technologies in your work – the shift from the book, from print culture, to a virtual culture and to the screen. There is a sense that this transition is full of potentiality, but it also poses a threat. Is this why you feel there is too much present now?

NB: Well, when I say that I am a woman of the present, I mean that as a poet I absorb the moment, the instant, with an extreme concentration, which is a way to feel and question meaning, space and time. I use all the strength of my senses to enjoy being alive and to reflect on that life. I have written a lot about that pleasure of *ici et maintenant*, here and now, sometimes with the question why, sometimes with no question. I’d say

most of the poets are in the here and now when they write poetry. They are in the sound of being alive. This is how they can produce not a statement but sequences of thought and of emotion, which urgently produce modulations in language. It is interesting to notice that as an individual, living in the present is rich and creative, but I wonder if it is the same when living in the present applies to the society and culture that are now ours. What happens when a society loses memory and simply keeps surfing on the here and now of sensations? Sensations are easy. There is not much time for desire and emotion because of the instantaneity of everything. Emotions take longer to build because they require the encounter of memory, presence and desire, a three-dimensional volume.

Postmodern writers gave us sensations more than emotions, unless we decide that in the long run a strong sequence of sensations produces a specific emotion. So when I say that in the new bio/info/techno/society there is an overflow of the present and immediacy, I think that we might be losing something, but to the profit of what? I don't know yet, we don't know yet and once we know, it will have already happened. What is exciting is the transition. But for sure it brings also chaos, deception, fear. Rules are changing constantly. Humanist values are fading away and when they reappear you wonder if it is just because of good marketing. I was recently talking with a young Canadian novelist. I was telling him that I live with 70 percent humanist thoughts but with the other 30 percent, I am open to the new reality constructed by new technologies. I asked, what about you? He answered with the same proportion. It was interesting that the difference of age did not change the proportion. Of course, he is a writer, and if you are a writer somehow it's difficult to escape the humanist tradition, which makes you believe very strongly in the power of the book and of the written word and so on. It's very difficult to discard that tradition along with what came with the Enlightenment in the 18th century. That is the whole question. I need to understand what's going on historically and scientifically around me as my relation to time and to space changes, as my relation to the body alters, as my relation to other people is renewed in the virtual space. I keep asking questions, because I want to understand how the new technologies affect our notion of life, death and future. In French we use the word *le désenchantement* to express the feeling that there is less and less hope of regaining our 'humanity' as we have known it for centuries. But if I think as individuals, enjoying the instant is a sort of privilege as much as silence and time have become precious. As individuals, we gain from the present, but as a society we might be losing something.

I don't know yet because it's in fifteen to twenty years from now that we will understand. One thing is for sure: we live in an ultra merchant society in which human parts and human genes are manipulated, transformed and are ready to be sold for a profit more than for 'progress.'

KE: Has your poetic practice been affected by these new technologies or new conditions or constraints? Are they changing how you write – your process or procedures?

NB: They certainly brought new questions about sense and non-sense, life, nature, birth and death. I have also noticed that my writing time is more fragmented though I try to keep my independence in regards to email and time on the web. It seems that there is too much stimulation for what our brain is able to process properly. It is hard to pinpoint the changes because the changes are numerous but insignificant until you feel strange about the change. The rules keep changing every day, be it in banks, in airports or in your computer. And of course, time-space relation is different than it was even ten years ago. Fiction and reality have become obsolete categories compared to real and virtual. Finally it all amounts to the question of meaning which obviously needs to be regenerated by each generation no matter what has already been said brilliantly before us. For the first time probably in history it happens that a generation has the possibility to think twice about the 'human' condition.

But to come back to poetry, in my most recent book *Après les mots*, which could be translated as *After Words* or *After the Word*, there are two long poems taking into account those questions and one poem resisting the dark side of it by being a poem written with constraints which in a way is very liberating. Constraints force you to tap into the language in a way that would never cross your mind. In other words, you immerse yourself in the vast possibility of the language without worrying about your small universe. And even under constraint, I don't think you cheat on your essential values, because they keep popping up with a new face.

KE: I want to follow up on that – the fact that it appears as if you don't just play the game for the game's sake. It seems to me that many feminist innovative poets make a conscious effort to not simply immerse themselves in the play, in the language games, but do so for a reason.

NB: Sensations and fun games with language in the short run or emotion and consciousness in the long run? In my playful texts I have always tried to write in such a way that the playfulness of the text would not dismiss a

meaning close to my thoughts, feeling or ideas. Even though I believe that our ego/bio is not always as interesting as it seems, I have never believed in *la mort du sujet*. The subject as always is very much alive and at work, and what is being thought or envisioned from a woman's point of view, feminist point of view or a lesbian point of view will make its ways into the text. Playing with words in a neutral way can also make the subject fly out and burst out so it designs in language an unknown subject of desire. The most irreverent poets in regards to grammar and syntax are usually responsible in other ways because their manner of dealing with meaning raises ipso facto relevant questions.

KE: And is that responsibility political?

NB: It could be seen like that but there is always more to it. You may be referring to what was once a popular dictum: 'the personal is political.' We have now a better psychological understanding of the interaction between the personal and the social world. It is provided by the ego-ecological theory that has shown a continuous blending between the personal and the political, so that we will think of 'the personal is political' in simultaneity with 'the political is personal.' Marisa Zavalloni, the author of the theory, has provided a vivid illustration of this process in a dialogical exchange with Mary Daly and in her analysis of some of Sartre's and Nietzsche's texts.

We always have to discriminate what's fun and provocative for a writer to write and how it resonates in readers and society. Or let's say that what's on paper sometimes has to remain on paper. For example, if we take the sentence of André Breton, saying that the most surrealist act is to go out on the street and shoot into the crowd! Well, we know that every year people are being killed by someone performing that 'surrealist' act. Until the 1970s you could say so many things in literature that would be exciting and revolutionary. Now, because of *déjà vu*, it has no or less impact socially, or if it does, it seems more the result of good marketing than of thoughtful ideas. That being said, I still believe in the power of words. They still matter for better or worse. What exactly would be exciting and meaningful in poetry today?

KE: What would be exciting?

NB: I think what's exciting is deeply rooted in the matter of language itself. Different levels of meaning, a sudden modulation, repetition of sounds or rupture in meaning and reconfiguration of it, sharpness in creating ambiguity. Language is physically-mentally exciting, and this is probably what

Roland Barthes meant when he talked about *'le plaisir des mots.'* Language is exciting, exhausting, exhilarating. What it does to us remains a mystery the same way we cannot define beauty.

KE: You mentioned André Breton, the French surrealist writer, and of course, as a Francophone writer, you write as part of a long avant-garde tradition that we can trace back to writers like Breton, but also to Mallarmé and even earlier to Baudelaire. This is a very different lineage than the one inherited by innovative writers working in English. But you also write in a language full of constraints – French is a very gendered language, a language of rules and restrictions, and a language that has been proven far less protean than English, which always appears to be in flux. For all these reasons, it seems that experimenting with language and genre means something very different in French than it does in English, and it follows that what's exciting would also differ across these languages, no?

NB: Probably. Language and gestures in one given culture have a subliminal zone of visibility that foreign speakers or readers cannot experience. Even in the same language, experimenting can be different in regards to literary references, to vocabulary and syntax. I think of the French language in Québec, in Belgium, in Martinique, etc., and of English in England, Canada, Australia, United States. But you are right. For example, think of the long poem in the English and French traditions. Its practice is very different. In English the long poem has served to deconstruct, but in French deconstruction took place in short poems. In English the long poem is made of short cuts in genres but in French it is written with long lyrical narrative shots. There are things that one can do in one language that are unthinkable in another language. This is why it is so important to be able to speak and play with another language than our mother tongue. Accessing another language renews one's imagination.

KE: As we've been discussing, what is exciting is culturally specific, but it is also historically contingent. For example, there are several younger lesbian writers in this collection, but the way they write about the subject, if and when they choose to do so at all, is completely different from the project you were engaged in the late 1970s and 1980s when it was still radical on a political and linguistic level to simply be writing about the lesbian subject. Can you reflect back on this part of your poetic project?

NB: Well, there was a very specific energy that was as much about love, sexuality, as it was about freedom, self-empowerment and understanding

what it meant symbolically to be a lesbian. That was huge. It was huge because it could go against all the notions included in patriarchal meaning and symbolism. In that sense, two women directing their gaze at each other because of sexual attraction was an incredible transgression. I mean concretely and symbolically, a woman being interested amorously by another woman-subject was in itself a statement of recognition, a very transgressive and subversive affirmation against the common belief that women exist for men's benefit without being taken into account as it is taught especially by monotheistic religions or traditions in most of the countries on this planet. I think that all my work during that period was trying to make a space for a relation that would nourish differently the imagination not only of love but about women. Lesbian desire and lesbian energy have nourished my work from *Surfaces of Sense*, *Intimate Journal*, *Lovers*, *Picture Theory* and *The Aerial Letter*. So there's a cycle that goes along with the poetry, the novel and the essay as well. Indeed that was a specific historical moment that allowed for a strong we. Now everyone has gone back to I, singular.

KE: I wonder if this work is even more radical now, however, than it was then, since in some surprising and disturbing ways, we appear to live in a more conservative time. I also wonder if some of the possibilities opened up by that writing have already been closed off?

NB: We had to make a huge leap in the imagination, in the metaphors. In order to translate what was going on in our bodies, in our thoughts, we also had to make a huge leap in language. Therefore, it affected the design of the poetry and even sometimes the structure of the novels. It was something very special that could not have been carried only by lesbian anecdotes. Language had to be questioned in a radical way, so it could suit our needs of expression and welcome the 'I love you' to other women. Yes, it had to do, I believe very strongly, with language, and of course with the imaginary and the knowledge of the physical lesbian experience. At that time, I often said I would rather talk about the skin than different parts of the body because skin covers your entire body. Each cell of your skin is being informed by a caress, and I think this renews the possible metaphors of the lesbian body. Voice, skin, sleep, touch, taste: all the senses convene to new performances and a new understanding of life.

KE: Since you've already given an entire vocabulary to another generation of lesbian writers, in a sense, we don't have to do that work.

NB: It depends on what your questions are ... in 2008, what are your questions?

KE: I think they are very different. One of the things I've been thinking about as I read across the work of the two or three generations of writers represented in this collection are how different generations of writers take up questions of space and place. I've noticed that writers of your generation are far more inclined to write about specific places, specific cities. You write about Montreal but you also write about New York and Buenos Aires and other cities. By contrast, in the writing of Nathalie Stephens, the city is still very present but it is rarely named, and for many younger writers, the city is a dystopian space. It's not a space of potential as it has been for you. How do you understand your ongoing preoccupation with specific cities, especially Montreal, and with the city as a site of potential and possibility?

NB: It is true. The city is perceived differently depending on the historical moment. But for my generation of Québécois writers the city is positive, a synonym of renewal. In the 1970s, the theme of the city became important. Before writers were from a rural Québec and spoke more about the beauty of the landscape than about the urban energy. And so for my generation, I'd say, there was an immense desire and excitement about the urban reality and the social space. The city equalled modernity, freedom, discovery, places like bookstores, cafés and places to meet and to talk about artistic and political projects. I also think that our interest in Montreal has to be related to our pride of being North American and the need to map the Québécois culture in that space. Later on I also organized a special issue of *La barre du jour* on women and the city which also brought new perspectives on the subject. This is where I say I am an urban radical and that it is in the polis of men that I want to work at changing the patriarchal laws.

Today the city is imagined differently, and we can understand why especially if we think of surveillance all over the place, pollution, people living in the streets, etc. But the New York of 2009 is very different than the New York of 1980. Yes, cities can be seen as dystopian. Last year I was in Mumbai and in Ciudad Juárez. I have to say that those experiences are important to me.

Each city brings its history, comments, desire and fear. Venice when there is no light on the Grand Canal brings you back in time but also to what it means to disappear. Cities are like people. They provide for our imagination to be filled with joy or fear or excitement. At one point, they

appear in close up in our mind, for six months, two years, and then they fade away. And sometimes reappear. And I guess it's the same thing with themes or questions that traverse us, obsess us for a while, and then they fade away. They fade away sometime because we have written enough about them and the creative tension has gone somewhere else looking for another page, another book to write.

Montreal, April 2008

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