

Women who invite collaboration: Caroline Bergvall, Erín Moure, et al.

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What is meaning, after all, if it is not “our” meaning?

- Erín Moure (“Translation” n. pag.)

How does one create textual works where the authorial hold over the text is somehow distanced, perhaps neutralized, yet where the structural impact of experience, of living, of loving, of knowing, of reading, are in fact recognized.

- Caroline Bergvall (“The Conceptual Twist” 21)

In a 2010 dissertation that locates a genealogy of transnational feminist thought in Canadian women’s writing, Andrea Beverley speaks of the centrality of collaborative theory and practice (35).¹ For innovative women writers from Canada, transnational and even transhistorical connections have been enabled by collaboration. “[W]omen’s fraught relationship with nationality,” Lianne Moyes notes in an article on citizenship in Erín Moure’s work, “has often led them to affiliate differently and transnationally” (123). It has also led them to imagine collaboration and collaborative writing otherwise. For multilingual, mobile, and intellectual poet-investigators like Moure and Caroline Bergvall, the category of the national or even the hemispheric is not big enough. But neither is a single language, historical moment, or author-based notion of collaboration. For Moure, “Poetry [...] emerges from or in [...] collaboration.”² In Bergvall’s words, “[w]e need other

platforms on which to do poetic work” (Rudy "A Conversation with Caroline Bergvall" n. pag.). This chapter outlines what some of those other platforms already look like and how poetry emerges there.

Imagining Collaboration Otherwise

In the neo-liberal university of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the word “collaboration” has a legitimacy that it lacked in the 1990s when the research on collaboration first appeared.³ Lisa Ede and Andrea Lundsford’s *Singular Texts / Plural Authors* (1990) was the first to combine theoretical and historical explorations with actual research on collaborative and group writing. And yet, as recently as 2001 Ede and Lundsford continued to argue that no matter how thoroughly “the status of the author has been problematized, deconstructed, and challenged” (“Collaboration” 354), we in English Studies “are often more comfortable theorizing about subjectivity, agency, and authorship than we are attempting to enact alternatives” (356).

In an effort to encourage collaborative efforts, Ede and Lundsford’s 2001 article points to several examples of humanities scholars’ success at collaborative research and writing, including The University of Alberta’s Orlando Project. As evidence of the crucial role collaboration played in the project, they highlight the “number of scholars involved, the breadth of the goal, and the multiple perspectives necessary to illuminate the writing of women across such a broad span of time” (361). Clearly the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory follows in this mode.

But my focus is on alternative collaborative modes in innovative women’s writing communities. A bridge from Ede and Lundsford’s argument to my own may be found in

their attention to the work of Kathy Acker, whom they describe as a “self-styled autoplagiarist” (362). In Acker’s work they find a practical example of the “theory that language cannot be owned—particularly not by a coherent, autonomous, individual author” (363). Also useful is Ede and Lundsford’s discussion of an “invitational rhetoric” that “grows out of collaborative principles,” one that offers an alternative to the “agonistic individualism characteristic of so much academic writing” (360). As much as I admire and have learned from their research, I find it a bit unsettling that despite their call for ways of thinking about writing that are genuinely collaborative, what they really want to see is work that as being written by *two* coherent, autonomous individuals, two authors, rather than one. Their collaborative writing is still, to paraphrase the title of their book, a “singular text,” but it is now written by “plural authors.”

Breaking the authorial hold: collaboration as connivance

In the work of innovative women’s writing in Canada, there is both a critique of the author and an enactment of an alternative: a collaborative space of friendship, networking and conviviality that Nicole Brossard calls “connivance.” In an article on Brossard’s *Baroque at Dawn*, Jodi Lundgren gestures toward the meaning of “connivance” when she sets it alongside the word “complicity”:

[T] the “respectful connivance” (230) and “nice complicity” ([*Baroque at Dawn*] 118) that develop between her [Nicole Brossard] and her translator offer hope for an intimate, transnational exchange between women of words. (Lundgren 18)

This notion of collaboration as an “intimate, transnational exchange between women of words” is strangely absent from recent scholarship on women’s collaborative writing. Despite the complex vision of collaboration analysed in Lorraine York’s *Rethinking Women’s Collaborative Writing* (2002), for example, when it comes right down to it collaboration means, simply, “overt co-authorship or co-signature of a work of art” (4).

Rethinking Women’s Collaborative Writing begins with an epigraph, one that takes us to that fantastic moment in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* when, “perhaps for the first time in literature” (78), a woman liked another woman. She “collaborated” with her in the sense that they “shared a laboratory.” Or did she? York cites Woolf’s text as follows:

Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together.

When the text actually looks like this:

‘Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together ...’ (79)

In deleting the quotation marks and the ellipses, York has eliminated both the fictional writer and imagined reader of these lines, both of whom were crucial for Woolf’s argument and for grasping Woolf’s vision of collaboration otherwise. In order to write the sentence “Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together” Woolf had to

collaborate with herself by creating a heteronym -- a novelist by the name of Mary Carmichael – who ostensibly writes these words in a novel that the “I” (also “a convenient term for somebody who has no real being” [6]) of Woolf’s text is reading. Woolf’s imagined women readers are also collaborators in the telling of this tale. We are addressed directly: “Are there no men present? [...] We are all women you assure me?” (78).

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, “connivance” involves sharing a covert understanding with a person, co-operating with that person. The Latin roots of the word “collaborate” are “col” -- “together” -- and “laborare” -- “to work.” To collaborate means “to work in conjunction with another or others, to co-operate.” Authorship has nothing to do with it. For Woolf, connivance required her to connive, to undertake a covert operation. For Brossard, collaboration is overt and involves “a fine adventure of encounters, discussions, sharing, friendship and writing,” as she explains in a fragment of conversation with Louise Forsyth entitled “Connivance” (Forsyth 27):

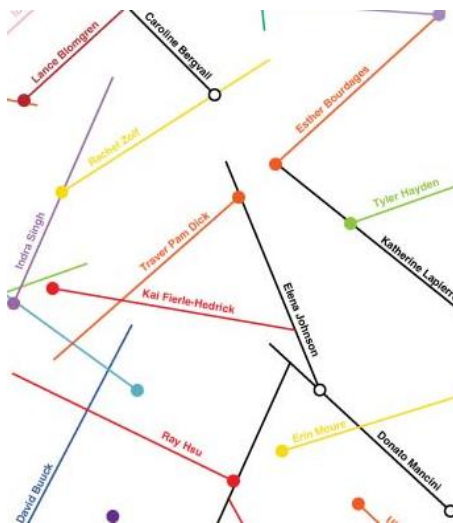
One part of my connivance with women showed up in activities linked in the first instance with literature or cultural life. It started with the film *Some American Feminists* with Luce Guilbeault; then there was the creation of the feminist newspaper *Les Têtes de pioche* [*Battle-axes*] and the collective work around the play *La nef des sorcières* [*A Clash of Symbols*]. Next there was the organization of the theatrical show *Célébrations* in collaboration with Jovette Marchessault and, of course, *L’anthologie de la poésie des femmes au Québec* with Lisette Girouard, of

which we have just launched the second edition bringing in twelve new poets. (27)

“I work in places where there are affinities,” Brossard asserts; “Work spaces among women linked by a project are stimulating and productive, and I have always associated pleasure, friendship and festivity with them” (27).

A Mapping Issue

By way of offering a concrete image of this alternative notion of collaboration, let me turn to one of the “stimulating and productive” “work spaces” shared by Caroline Bergvall and Erin Moure. Rather than list them on a conventional table of contents, Oana Avasilichioaei and Kathleen Brown, the co-editors of the 2011 “Mapping Issue” of Calgary’s *dANDelion* magazine decided to include the names of the contributors on a page that looks like this:



As this small section of the map indicates, Erín Moure may be linked to Caroline Bergvall via a collaborative space that includes Donato Mancini, Elena Johnson, Kai Fierle-Hendrick, Traver Pam Dick, Indra Singh, and Rachel Zolf. Several additional chapters could be written tracking the generative collaborative links between this set of names alone. But let me look briefly at just one of them: Rachel Zolf. Previously based in Toronto, while studying at the New School in New York, Zolf designed and mounted possibly the “first collaborative MFA in Creative Writing ever.” “The Tolerance Project” emerged out of an online archive of “poetic DNA” that she elicited from eighty-six writers, artists and thinkers from across North America, all of whom are listed as collaborators.⁴ Moure’s name is listed on Zolf’s “Tolerance Project” site, as is that of another of the writers on the *dANDelion* special issue map above: Kai Fierle-Hedrick. Moure donated poetic DNA; Fierle-Hedrick produced a poem based on the archived donations. And Caroline Bergvall included Rachel Zolf in *I’ll Drown My Book* (2012), her co-edited anthology of conceptual writing by women. Bergvall and Moure et al. write in this always-expanding, rhizomatic field of what Nicole Brossard calls “connivance.” As a reader of their work I feel invited to participate by noting the ways that their alternative collaborative writing practices connect texts across space and time in a way that also expands our understanding of collaboration.

Caroline Bergvall: “I run a project”

[Y]ou're a very different kind of animal when you compose for a gallery.
At the moment, I run a project where I have a project manager and a
technical team. (Bergvall in Rudy "A Conversation" n. pag.)

Born in 1962, to a French mother and Norwegian father but based in London since 1989, Bergvall is a multilingual poet and artist who has published four books, several chapbooks, and a compact disk of performance texts entitled *VIA: Poems 1994-2004*. The John Hansard Gallery at the University of Southampton is preparing a DVD release of several projects for release in 2012. Bergvall works with collaborators who are architects, composers, musicians, and installation artists. She has mounted sound-space-text installations in Britain and the United States, including one at the Tate Modern in London and another at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Bergvall even runs her website (carolinebergvall.com) like a project. The front page, for example, features a series of photographs from three recent projects: "Ghost Cargo," a sky banner prepared for Refugee Week; photographs from "IDJ2MANY," an audiotext with vinyl lettering installed in the main lift of the Theatre du Grötli in Geneva from 2-5 February 2012, and a photograph of "VIA (48 Dante Translations)," part of a group show at Fundacio Tapiès in Barcelona, October 2011 – February 2012.

Bergvall's texts are not singular either; they exist in always morphing iterations and the installation work appears in different contexts with different content and effect. Only in particular moments of reading and performance, as Jacob Edmond argues, can a singularity be grasped:

These repetitions and variations stress the singularity of each embodied

instantiation at the intersection of multiple vectors of iteration, what Bergvall (2011: 5) elsewhere calls ‘a series of intersecting lines or tissues of lines’. (114)

Bergvall’s comments in the published version of an interview I did with her about her installation piece “Say Parsley” offers some insight into the way she thinks about the relation between different iterations of a text

Rudy: And the piece “For Walls” — was that in the 2001 version of *Say Parsley*?

Bergvall: No, that’s completely new.

Rudy: So the Bristol version is really a completely different piece then.

Bergvall: No, it’s the same.

Rudy: Tell me about how it’s the same when it’s made up of such different pieces?

Bergvall: Well it’s about how the piece fits the space, for one thing. And of course the time that elapses between iterations. And the pursuit of the question. (Rudy “A Conversation” n. pag.)

Bergvall and Moure’s alternative collaborative writing practices take seriously the implications of Barthes’ notion of the death of the author. If writing requires the death of the author why not collaborate with dead people?⁵ They’ve both done so. In *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person*, Moure collaborates with Pessoa. And in *Alyson Singes*, Bergvall collaborates with Chaucer, rewriting the Wife of Bath’s tale from the point of view of a contemporary woman named “Al.”

The opening of *Alyson Singes* describes the invitational rhetoric she experiences in reading Chaucer: “Do we let ourselves go back to the ancients, or do they catch up with us? No matter. An outstretched hand suffices. Lightly they cross over to us, our strange guests who are like ourselves” (n. pag.). The English language itself is a strange guest in Bergvall’s mouth. Having grown up speaking French and Norwegian, she describes her move to London in 1989 as precipitating what she calls her “language’s work” in English.

[W]hen you move to another country, [...] you have to change your language, change your being. [Hybridity] remains a very powerful trope for me, particularly as it relates to my sexuality, since this is what kind of propelled me into English. I know that as a young gay woman I was being defined, often negatively, by others, and this means that processing language with pleasure for me became very connected to a necessary physical act of verbal distancing from home languages, and eventually physical migration. Responses to my sexuality were the main reasons why I moved both myself and my language’s work into English. (Bergvall in Rudy “A Conversation” n. pag.)

Bergvall collaborates with the English language – “meddles” with it, to use the adjective of her recent collection of texts *Meddle English* – in order to, in her words (which I cited in the epigraph to this chapter), “create textual works where the authorial hold over the text is somehow distanced, perhaps neutralized, yet where the structural impact of experience, of living, of loving, of knowing, of reading, are in fact recognized” (“The Conceptual Twist” 21).

Jacob Edmond sees Bergvall's practice as one which simultaneously asserts and erases both "voice and identity" (114). But I prefer to see it as entering into a collaboration with itself and others, with itself as other. Like Moure, Caroline Bergvall describes her practice as not solely motivated by linguistic and verbal concerns but also by "concerns of context & situation" (*VIA: Poems 1994-2004*). Bergvall's practice inhabits what Joanna Drucker (among others) calls an expanded field of writing that includes recorded sound, the speaking body in performance, and text installations. One of the signifiers that shows up repeatedly in Bergvall's texts in this expanded field is the graphic sign of collaboration: the ampersand. Bergvall sees the ampersand as, in her words, a sign "of interconnections and spaces of inscription." It offers an alternative to the either/or space of the binary opposition that in literary contexts is figured as writer/reader and gestures toward the fundamental importance of collaboration for Bergvall's practice.

Erín Moure: "Poetry [...] emerges from or in [...] collaboration"

In contrast to Bergvall, who began publishing in the 1990s and whose work with text was performative and innovative from the start, Erín Moure was initially recognized within Canada as a sophisticated and capable but resolutely lyric poet. However, by 1988 when her fifth book, *Furious*, won the Governor General's Award for poetry, Moure was already "furious" about "the way people use language" (86) and bored by what she called the "Erin Mouré poem." As I wrote in 2005, "With each book since *Furious* won the Governor General's award for poetry in 1988, Erin Mouré, has posed increasingly complicated challenges to herself as a writer and to her readers" ("what can

atmosphere” 205). Like Woolf, she has created a fictional collaborator, the heteronym Elisa Sampedrín, who first appeared in *Little Theatres* (2005). Sampedrín is listed as a co-author, along with Moure and Avasilichoiaei, of *Expeditions of a Chimaera* (2009). Consider the following overt invitation to the reader to collaborate on the first page of *Expeditions of a Chimæra*:

You're me
I'm you
She's we
We's it
Us they thee: huh?
What if the first one
To turn the page
(there's still a page)
Plays author.
It's safer that way.
OK. Ready?

Turn! (7)

Moure's practice of signing her texts with multiple names further challenges the notion of a single point of origin for a text. In their collaboratively written epistolary text "O Yes,"⁶ Bergvall writes to Moure:

Dear Erin, dear Erin Mouré, dear Erín Moure,
Dear Eirin Moure, dear EM,

I wasn't sure by which name to address you, so just to make sure, I thought I'd greet you in all the ones I know for you. I should say, the ones I know for your work. The more your work as a poet and as a translator proliferates, the more your names do too. (167)

Bergvall might well have addressed Moure herself as “Erin Mouré et al.” This proliferation of authorial identities began when Moure signed her name “Eirin Moure” on the cover of *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person* (2001), what she calls her “transelation” of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's *O guardador de rebanhos* (itself published by Pessoa under the heteronym Alberto Caeiro!). By using the Portuguese spelling of her name—Eirin—she exemplifies the ways that, for her, “A practice of reading is always embodied” (“Hi Fidelity!” n. pag.) and it always engages an “other.”

In the words of Edouard Glissant, “[r]hizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). Despite the fact that Pessoa died in 1935, Moure's experience of translating his work sounds a lot like she has collaborated with him:

I translated Pessoa by responding to him as a person. I, a person, and Pessoa, a person. For in Portuguese, *pessoa* is person. I just read the Pessoaan poem line, then wrote my line, or read a few lines, then wrote mine. It was abrupt, direct, total. (“Notes in Recollection” viii)

The “elation” of translation arises, for Moure, in those moments when the lines between author, translator, and reader can no longer be clearly delineated. When we're all collaborators, especially with ourselves. As Ann Levanthal writes in a review of Moure's

collected essays, her “beloved wager” is on the opportunity the collaboratively written/read text gives for us all “to be changed by language and have the world created anew” (n. pag.).

Co-labour: an exquisite risk

[E]ach subjectivity [...] is dented and moved by what is proximate to it [...] and by the unpredictability and exquisite risk of working alongside another person.

- Oana Avasilichioaei & Erín Moure (“Curiously ‘My’ Writing” 35)

This essay originated in a collaborative research project with Erín Moure⁷ and was extended because of a collaborative project with Caroline Bergvall.⁸ As I have demonstrated, Bergvall shares with Moure a commitment to “poetry as an intellectual and investigative form of writing-knowledge” (Bergvall and Moure 170) that requires the presence of many engaged bodies. Their impulse to collaborate, to take the “exquisite risk of working alongside another person,” has come about because they are multilingual, because they are translators as well as poets. But they also share a marginalised sexuality (they are both lesbians) and further research could be done on this aspect of their collaborative work.

In Bergvall’s long poem *Cropper*, she speaks directly and autobiographically about her body’s relation to language and to the collaboration with language that she must maintain in order to “make sure that what [she calls] her body would remain in the transit from othr [sic] languages” (146). In Norwegian, the word “kropper” means

“bodies” and this long poem explores what Alison Weir might have called the “sacrificial logics” of identity formation, the ways that “any concept of self-identity necessarily represses the fragmentation or multiplicity of the self” (3). The way the self must be “cropped” in order to exist.

How does one keep ones body as ones own, what does this mean
but the relative safety of boundaries, could I make sure that what I
called my body would remain in the transit from othr languages,
that it would hold its progression into English, and because I didn
know and wasn sure, and since for a great number of people, for an
overwhelming number of persons, for an overwhelmingly large
number of person, for an always growing number of persons, this
is far from self-evident, this is not self-evident, this does not
apply, this doesn even begin to figure, I never knew for sure— (*Cropper* 147)

For Bergvall and Moure, as for Brossard, whom they have both translated,⁹ connivance offers the opportunity to celebrate the multiplicity of the self with others, to collaborate with language which, because it “takes place outside `me’ as an individual” (Avasilichioaei & Moure “Curiously” 36), ceaselessly challenges the authorial hold on the text. Let it go, their texts say. Take the risk. Consider, instead,

Observing a form as one observes tranquility

Or a period of silence

Or an invitation.

To act so that today will matter in form.

(Bergvall *Fig* 116)

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NOTES

¹ My thinking about collaboration has been based on several close working relationships with innovative women writers, including Bergvall, Brossard, and Moure. I first collaborated with Bergvall in 1996 when, after seeing her stunning sound poetry performance at the Assembling Alternatives Poetry Conference / Festival at the University of New Hampshire,¹ I invited her to spend a week at the University of Calgary as a visiting scholar. Most recently, our conversational text about Bergvall's collaborative performance piece *Say Parsley* appeared in the University of Pennsylvania's online journal *Jacket2* in 2011. My collaborations with Moure also began in the 1990s and have continued. She contributed her essay "The Anti-Anaesthetic" to an issue of *Open Letter* I was editing and an interview that Pauline Butling and I did with Moure appears in our collaborative book project *Poets Talk*. Moure, Bergvall and Butling all participated in the 1997 Women and Texts conference at the University of Leeds, an event that arose out of another collaboration, between myself, Lynette Hunter, and Marta Dvorak.

² This line is taken from the biographical description of Erín Moure on the Lemon Hound blog on 13 Feb. 2012. (See Moure "Translation" in the bibliography). The full description appears as follows: "Erín Moure is a Montreal poet who writes in English,

multilingually. In her recent *O Resplendor* and—in collaboration with Oana Avasilichioaei—*Expeditions of a Chimæra*, poetry is hybrid, and emerges from or in translation and collaboration.”

³ It has become imperative for academics to participate in at least some forms of collaborative work. In *Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University*, for example, Jonathan Church speaks of the “intensive collaboration” required of faculty members who, rather than being the “sole providers of knowledge” are expected to be part of teams creating “pedagogical products” (35).

⁴ In Zolf’s article “The Tolerance Project: Projection of the Intimate into the Historical” she lists all of the following as her collaborators:

Sandra Alland, Gary Barwin, Emily Beall, Joel Bettridge, Gregory Betts, Christian Bök, Jules Boykoff, Di Brandt, Laynie Browne & Jacob Davidson, Kathy Caldwell, Angela Carr, Abigail Child, George Elliott Clarke, Stephen Collis, Communications & External Affairs, Jen Currin, Moyra Davey, Anonymous Donor, Thom Donovan, Sarah Dowling, Marcella Durand, Kate Eichhorn, Laura Elrick, Jennifer Firestone, Rob Fitterman, Jenna Freedman, Dina Georgis, Barbara Godard, Nada Gordon, Kate Greenstreet, Rob Halpern & Nonsite Collective, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Holbrook, Catherine Hunter, Jeff T. Johnson, Reena Katz, Bill Kennedy, Kevin Killian, Rachel Levitsky, Dana Teen Lomax, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Jill Magi, Nicole Markotic, Dawn Lundy Martin, Steve McCaffery, Erica Meiners, Heather Milne, K. Silem Mohammad, Anna Moschovakis, Erín Moure, The Office of Institutional Research, Akilah Oliver, Jena Osman, Bob Perelman, Tim Peterson, Vanessa Place, Kristin Prevallet, Arlo

Quint, Rob Read, Evelyn Reilly, Lisa Robertson, Kit Robinson, Kim Rosenfield, Paul Russell, Trish Salah, Jenny Sampirisi, Heidi Schaefer, Susan Schultz, Jordan Scott, Evie Shockley, Jason Simon, Cheryl Sourkes, Juliana Spahr, Christine Stewart, John Stout, Catriona Strang, Chris Stroffolino, Michelle Taransky, Anne Tardos, Sharon Thesen, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Aaron Tucker, Nicolas Veroli, Fred Wah, Betsy Warland, Darren Wershler, and Rita Wong. (n. pag.)

⁵ With thanks to my partner Frances Bowen who, when I was stuck, read a draft and then asked if I really intended to claim that Moure was collaborating with dead people and fictional versions of herself. The insight is hers.

⁶ In *Antiphonies: Essays on Women's Experimental Poetries in Canada* (2008).

⁷ Our goal was to find a way to imagine, describe, and eventually build “The Erin Moure Living Knowledge Site” as a portal to both Moure’s current and new work and to the writers, editors, and artists with whom she collaborates and with whom her work directly engages. During a 2009 sabbatical in Britain, my work with Bergvall led me to imagine this dynamic mode of engagement with Moure’s work. Moure has described the Living Knowledge Site as

A locus, a site, a place (not just a *carrefour* or intersection, there are structures there) where the highways in and out are visible and can be followed by other people ... where knowledge is created, altered, comes to be when people can intersect with ideas, cause alterations, open discussions, involve the writer in discussions. (Moure email to Susan Rudy)

We have applied for two SSHRC research grants to support the building of the site; both have been unsuccessful. CWRC has offered us support to develop a template for the site. For personal reasons, I am on an extended leave in Britain, which has delayed further progress on the project.

⁸ We are working together to see if we can put together a book of her selected essays.

⁹ Bergvall has translated two pieces by Brossard – “Typhon dru” and “La matiere harmonieuse manoeuvre encore”; they appeared together under the title *Typhon Dru* and were published by London’s Reality Street editions in 1997. With the innovative poet and novelist Robert Majzels, Moure has published three translations of Brossard’s texts: *Notebook of Roses and Civilization* (2007), and, under the “Mouré” spelling of her name, *Museum of Bone and Water* (1999) and *Installations* (1998).