

Canadian Feminist Writing and American Poetry

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Recommended Citation

Sojka, Eugenia. "Canadian Feminist Writing and American Poetry." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.2 (2001): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1128>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1128)

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Volume 3 Issue 2 (June 2001) Article 12**Eugenia Sojka,****"Canadian Feminist Writing and American Poetry"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/12>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 3.2 (2001)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/>>

Abstract: In her article, "Canadian Feminist Writing and American Poetry," Eugenia Sojka explores contemporary English-Canadian feminist avant-garde and language-focused writing and its intertextual linkages with American Language Poets. Texts of English-Canadian feminist writers such as Lola Lemire Tostevin, Daphne Marlatt, Betsy Warland, Erin Mouré, and Gail Scott are read with reference to ideas and hnuques inscribed in the writing of Ron Silliman, Charles Berstein, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Carla Harryman. Sojka focuses first on the socio-historical dimension of the writing and proceeds to the exploration of several discourses inscribed in the texts of writers associated with both groups. Their texts return to the politics and aesthetics of the historical avant-garde and reincarnate the spirit of carnival. They re-read earlier female avant-gardes, carnivalize monologic concepts of language and writing, experiment with the "new sentence" and interartistic projects, and carnivalize the traditional concept of the genre. While Canadian writers engage in the re-reading of American feminist avant-garde, their focus is on the Canadian socio-historical and political situation. What distinguishes Canadian language writing from other international avant-gardes is their intertextual dialogue with Québécois-Canadian feminist writers and the intense work on language closely linked with the complex and problematic nature of Canadian identity in a post-national and globalized world.

Eugenia SOJKA**Canadian Feminist Writing and American Poetry**

Before the 1980s English-Canadian feminist writing had been primarily known for its expressive realism. Literary critics indulged in the "images of women" methodology that was far from theorising any questions of representation or gender as shaped by language. Women were shown as objects of knowledge instead of its producers and consequently the status quo was preserved. It was in Québec that feminist literary and critical discourse developed differently owing to close links of writers with French philosophy of language and culture. For them it became clear that it was "language [that] makes women nonexistent" and hence they should "perform rituals of presence" (Brossard 179). Nicole Brossard's words aptly encapsulate the rationale for the development of language-centred writing in Québec by such writers as Louky Bersianik, France Théoret, Louise Cotnoir, and Louise Dupré, to mention a few. It was the year 1979, as George Bowering points out, that marked the beginning of a dialogue between writers in English Canada and Québec. Nicole Brossard edited, in both French and English, an anthology of avant-garde Canadian writing, *Les stratégies du réel*, which in George Bowering's words was her "first significant gesture to English-speaking Canada" (Bowering 101). English-Canadian women writers were encouraged to experiment with writing that challenged Canadian expressive realist discourse. Similar to Québec feminist writers their texts are not only language- but also theory-oriented; not only do they problematize language, relish linguistic experimentation and innovation but also dialogue with various critical discourses. The Québec connection, however, is not the only shaping influence or rather an intertextual link, to use Kristeva's concept, with the English-Canadian feminist writing of the 1980s and 1990s. Texts and theories of US-American Language Poets form an important intertext to this experimental group of women writers. I would like to add here that the concept of intertextuality does not relate to questions of influence by one writer upon another or to the sources of a literary work; rather, it "replaces the challenged author-text relation with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself" (Hutcheon 112). Exploration of intertextuality involves attention to the sociohistoric level of the text and to the interaction of various codes and discourses that traverse it.

My objective in this paper is to examine intertextual connections between English-Canadian feminist experimental writing and the language writing in the United States. Before I discuss several discourses "traversing" the texts of writers associated with both groups, I focus on the socio-historical dimension of the writing I explore (see also my "Language and Subjectivity in the Postmodern Texts of Anglo-Canadian and Anglo-Québécois Writers"). Language-oriented writing in the United States is a phenomenon of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. A postmodernist label is frequently attached to this writing by critics who forget that the postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s lost its earlier political associations. Language writing is inherently political and therefore postmodernism, considered to be a quintessentially Canadian movement -- as Robert Kroestch and Linda Hutcheon try to convince us -- in view of its current apolitical nature, has nothing to do with the experimental language- and theory-focused writing. In fact, language-oriented writing is a response to the apolitical nature of current postmodernism and hence it can be regarded as contemporary avant-garde or to use Hal Foster's term -- an "arrière avant-garde," thus to emphasize intertextuality with the historical avant-garde of early twentieth century. Avant-garde movements are not radically new conceptualizations of art. In "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" Rosalynn Krauss crashes the myth of originality and argues that avant-garde art is created not by "those who have new ideas but by those who challenge their time's hegemonic conceptualization of art" (1). With these words in mind, there should be no hesitation to classify both US-American and Canadian language-oriented writers as a contemporary avant-garde.

This late twentieth-century avant-garde challenges dominant modes of writing espousing the expressive theory of language. In the United States language poetry emerged as both a reaction to and an outgrowth of the "New American Poetry" as embodied by Black Mountain, the New York School, and Beat aesthetics (in the mid 1970s). Within the pages of little magazines like

Tottle's, This, Hills, and the Tuumba chapbook series, writers such as Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman, Ron Silliman, or Barrett Watten developed modes of writing that implicitly criticized the bardic, personalist impulses of the 1960s and focused attention on the material of language itself. This practice was supplemented by essays in poetics published in journals such as *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, *Open Space*, *Paper Air*, *Poetics Journal*, *The Difficulties*, *O.blek*, *Writing*, *Riddle Moon*, *Talisman*, *Sulfur*, and *Temblor*. The new texts interrogated the expressive basis of much postwar US-American poetry, the earlier generation's use of depth psychology, its interest in primitivism and mysticism, and its emphasis on the poetic line as a score for the voice (see *The New Princeton* 675).

Not only does the contemporary avant-garde but also the earlier one function as an important intertext to Canadian language writing. Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews point out that language writing "takes for granted neither vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program or subject matter" (ix), and that it embraces theory: "Theory is never more than an extension of practice" (Bernstein, *Content's* 488). In general, however, it is impossible to define a common poetics of the writers associated with the language movement which, as Marjory Perloff points out, "has always been an umbrella for very disparate practices" (174). The writers vary in their specific backgrounds and concerns which is particularly clear in the texts of the female representatives of the group. Such writers as Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Kathleen Fraser, Carla Harryman, Rachel Du Plessis, Rae Armantrout, Beverly Dahlen, and Rosemarie Waldrop explore various aspects of feminist agenda and gender politics but they do not avoid other political and social issues. In contrast to male writers they explore issues of sexual difference, subjectivity, and language which have been given a theoretical frame by post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and such French theorists as Cixous, Irigaray, Lacan, and Derrida. Critical discourse relating to feminist language writing was conspicuously marginal in the 1970s and 1980s; only the 1990s marked the beginning of an interest in feminist language-focused texts. Language writers in Canada do not form a unified group of writers, either. Also here, this predominantly male group of writers including bp nichol, Steve McCaffery, bill bissett, and Christopher Dewdney has been given more critical attention than women writers working within a similar poetics. Daphne Marlatt is the only woman usually cited as associated with the *Tish* group (1961-69), considered to be a forerunner of language-oriented writing in Canada. The group is identified immediately with such writers as Frank Davey, George Bowering, Fred Wah and Dave Dawson; women working within the movement -- Gladys Hindmarch, Pauline Butling, Ginny Smith, Carol Johnson, Maxine Gadd and Judy Capithorne -- are hardly ever mentioned by critics (Marlatt, "Between" 102). All the major narratives of English-Canadian avant-garde poetry have little to say about women writers. More recent academic publications, however, draw attention to texts by such women language-oriented writers as Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Betsy Warland, Gail Scott, Phyllis Webb, Sharon Thesen, Smaro Kamboureli, Claire Harris, and Marlene Nourbese Philip; the non-academic press, however, is silent about them.

Both US-American and Canadian language writers appropriate techniques of writing associated with the European historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century. The Canadian writers, however, who usually look for literary models in Great Britain, this time took a different route in their intertextual linkages. The already mentioned writers who were associated with *Tish: a poetry newsletter* and later with *Open Letter*, advanced a new poetics which, for them, was a result of an intertextual dialogue with American Black Mountain writers such as Olson, Duncan, and Creeley who in turn were responsible for adapting the "Dada-Surrealist revolution in language" to the North American literary discourse (Godard, "The Avant-garde" 100). When in the 1970s bp nichol, Victor Coleman, bill bissett, Christopher Dewdney, and Steve McCaffery began contributing to *Open Letter* and made it a leading magazine they also "supported interchange between the Canadian and international avant-gardes" (Davey 625). One of the most effective exchanges has been with the American *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* review and hence with Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, or Ron Silliman.

Texts of US-American feminist language writers are intertextually connected with those by male writers associated with the group; the writers, however, also choose to examine alternative

female experimental techniques inscribed in texts by Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, or H.D. In Canada the situation is similar: Daphne Marlatt, for instance, managed to combine the male tradition of avant-garde writing with the alternative avant-garde female literary practice. From such mentors in the sixties as Duncan, Olson, Creeley, Snyder, Ginsberg, Williams, Pound, she turned to the writing of H.D., Denise Levertov, Gertrude Stein, Marguerite Duras, Virginia Woolf, Nicole Brossard, Phyllis Webb, Louky Bersianik, Adrienne Rich, Julia Kristeva (Marlatt, "Between" 99), and later to such American Language writers as Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe. It is interesting that Marlatt's openness to the Black Mountain projective poetics, to the bio-feedback of her body in the act of composition, was the basis of her shift into *écriture féminine*, the feminist "bringing of the body into the act of writing" (Marlatt, "Between" 99), so typical of Québec literary practice. Her interest in "body writing," in the somatization of literary practice, developed then from her translation of the projective poetics of Olson, a poetics feminized in Marlatt's case by the specificity of a woman's body as well as her feminist concerns and interest in the experimental writing of other women from various cultural backgrounds. Marlatt's career demonstrates that the poetics and aesthetics of the feminist language writers are a result of a multiple process of translation/transmutation from different avant-garde traditions associated with modernism and postmodernism. What is important to point out here is that language writers consciously choose specific avant-garde intertexts to work with.

Canadian feminist language writing certainly has links with the male avant-garde writers of *Tish* and *Open Letter*, but they also choose to work with ideas and techniques from texts by Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian or Carla Harryman, for instance. The dialogue between contemporary feminist American and Canadian language writers takes place on the pages of such Canadian journals as *Tessera* and *West Coast Line*. Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian published their collaborative text "The Wide Road" in *Tessera* 15 (1993). Gail Scott works with Harryman's ideas on narrative writing in *Spaces like Stairs*. Erin Mouré reflects on Hejinian's poetics in *Search Procedures*. Her words are cited in several sections of this book of poetry. The epigraph to Gail Scott's *Main Brides*, "We are the philosophical investigators of the late 20th century. Or only women. Practicing," comes from Carla Harryman. American language writers are invited for readings to Canada and vice versa -- the dialogue goes on. The 1995 conference and poetry festival in honour of Robin Blaser allowed for an exchange of ideas between many American and Canadian language writers. Some of the papers presented at the conference are published in *West Coast Line* (Fall 1995).

Language writing is considered to be difficult by many readers. Several publishing projects, however, have helped to popularize the Canadian feminist avant-garde. Apart from *Tessera*, a bilingual magazine, other literary magazines propagate essential theoretical and feminist issues. An important literary and theoretical dialogic activity takes place on the pages of *Open Letter*, *West Coast Line*, *Fireweed*, *Room of One's Own*, and *(f)Lip* (1986-89) (co-founded by Warland). The profile of the magazines is not thematic or sociological but language-centered and text-oriented. Women are invited to respond to the work published in the magazines and young women writers are encouraged to join the dialogue. Moreover, bilingual anthologies of feminist criticism such as Barbara Godard's *Gynocritics/ Gynocritique* (1986) and Shirley Neuman's and Smaro Kamboureli's *A/Mazing Space* (1986), and books of essays and interviews like *Language in Her Eye* (Ed. Libby Scheier, et al.) and Janice Williamson's *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers* provide a powerful explication and popularization of innovative Canadian writing by women. Canadian and American language-focused writers are intertextually connected through various discourses they choose to work with in their texts. Their texts return to the politics and aesthetics of the historical avant-garde and reincarnate the spirit of carnival. They re-read earlier female avant-gardes, carnivalize monologic concepts of language and writing, experiment with the "new sentence" and interartistic projects, and carnivalize the traditional concept of genre. Similar to the historical avant-garde, aesthetics and politics are no longer dichotomized in contemporary feminist avant-garde texts. Erin Mouré makes this clear when she says that "the social function of language marks our civic place as women. Marks civic memory" ("Poetry" 72), and "leaving language as it is would mean agreeing with the civic order" (Mouré, "Acknowledging" 128). She also argues that "language itself is ideology and dominance

and oppression ... Poems that say that poetry is not political are usually just reinforcing the dominant order without questioning or acknowledging that it is there" (Mouré, "A Chance" 80).

Language writers believe that political structures are informed and supported by particular verbal structures; when they are questioned and dismantled they open a space for social transformation. Through the exploration of language the writers reveal the power structures of representation; their writing acts not only as a critique of society in general, but of the patriarchal structures inherent both in language and society. The writers are very much interested in the political and socio-historical discourse of the day and their texts deal with events important to a given society. Canadian politics and cultural discourse are examined in texts by Canadians although they do not avoid issues of international importance. They engage in a re-reading and re-writing of Canadian history and politics (Scott in *Heroine* and *Main Brides*, Mouré in all her work, and Marlatt in *Ana Historic*); the question of Canadian linguistic identity is explored by all Canadian language writers. The American writers, on the other hand, engage in a re-reading of American history and literature (Howe's critical study *My Emily Dickinson* [1986] and Hejinian's essays on Gertrude Stein). Howe is fascinated with the interrelation of American topography, history, and language (*Pythagorean Silence* [1982]), *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* [1987]). All of these writers are interested in gender issues, culture, and tradition and their relationship with voice and identity. The work of language is foregrounded here and although the reader is continually confronted with the same words, each time a new instance of perception, and new relationships among the words are established. Such technique underscores the arbitrary nature of meaning. It ruptures any attempt at narrative.

Further, avant-garde writing can be read as a reincarnation of the spirit of carnival in subversive art and literature. In a carnivalesque text "drama becomes located in language. Moreover, prohibitions (representation, monologism) and their transgression (dream, body, dialogism) coexist" (Kristeva 79), forming a typical Bakhtinian ambivalent text "both representative and anti-representative" (Kristeva 79). The discourse of carnival deals with different sign systems, verbal, visual, musical, tactile, olfactory, and gestural. When translated into literature, it allows for inter-artistic comparisons between its component semiotic systems. Many carnivalesque texts can be regarded as experiments in verbal synaesthesia, as a translation among various senses. They draw on the avant-garde traditions both in written, visual and music compositions. Some of them promote the idea of the Total Work of Art which combines literality, musicality and visuality and hence the fusion of all artistic mediums. For feminist writers the concept of synaesthetic writing (the writing that appeals to the eye, ear, the sense of touch or taste simultaneously), is closely connected with the idea of translating the female body into writing. It entails experimenting with the picto-ideo-phono-graphic notation that effectively carnivalizes the phonetic alphabet. In their linguistic experiments American and Canadian language writers return to the old notation systems in which writing is "an intensely physical art, one that activates several senses at once" (Young 5). They are interested in exploring the picto-ideo-phono-graphic notation typical of hieroglyphic or ideogrammic writing. Being aware that the phonetic standardized language produces a standardized, highly reproducible discourse and that readers become "serialized language consumers" (Silliman, "Disappearance" 15), they discard the linear alphabetic logic in favor of the picto-ideo-phono-graphic features of language. They question standardized orthography and standardized spelling that take the sensuality out of language. Their texts examine strategies of hieroglyphic writing that is "at once plastic art and language, spatialized and nonlinear, functioning by agglutinations, joining together in one graphic code figurative, symbolic, abstract and phonetic elements" (Ulmer 271). They write texts that employ aural, visual and performance poetics or to use Tostevin's words, texts that incite the reader "to hear to see to smell to taste to touch" ("re," no pag.).

Several language-oriented writers experiment with a model of writing which is simultaneously verbal and non-verbal and that inscribes multiple senses. Many of them are visual artists themselves or they show interest in both the graphic and musical arts. Susan Howe is formally educated as a painter (and she always places her words on the page with painterly awareness, see Reinfeld 127). She relishes linguistic and topographic irregularities. Betsy Warland

is also formally educated as a visual artist and her texts do reveal this kind of training. The visual quality of her writing is stressed even in titles of her texts: *Serpent (w)rite* or *Proper Deafinitions*. Many of the writers show their interest in non-literary discourses. Gail Scott points out that she envies "people who work with visual images (performance artists, film makers, installation artists). The audience seems to accept that visual images can 'slip', may have multiple meaning, whereas writers, especially those working in prose, can easily be trapped in the preconceived notions ascribed to words by ideology" (Scott, *Spaces* 89). In *Heroine* and *Main Brides* she experiments with form and language that translate both the visual, aural and kinetic into the space of her text. The title of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* has an obvious visual quality which is also close to ideographic notation; it reminds of the title *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a magazine of discussion focused on contemporary visual art, edited by Susan Bee and Mira Schor (Reinfeld 38), to which a number of American language poets contribute. The writers use unique graphic, textual, spatial, conceptual and corporeal forms which revive similar experiments within the historical avant-garde.

The cover pages of some of the discussed texts create an awareness of unique visual and tactile structures. Susan Bee, an American visual artist, provided the cover paintings for Bernstein's *The Sophist* and *Content's Dream*. In Canada, Cheryl Sourkes created cover art for Scott's *Heroine*, *Main Brides*, and Marlatt's and Warland's *Double Negative*. Moreover, the writers are carrying the self-conscious art practice begun by Duchamp with his "ready-mades." They appropriate images and recontextualize them, frequently for parodic purposes: Tostevin's use of Baldung Grien's painting "Allegory for Music" on the cover page of *sophie* and of "The Annunciation" by Simone Martini on the cover page of *Subject to Criticism*. The books become hybridized constructs, both writing and painting, writing and photo-collage (Scott's *Heroine*). The techniques from various arts are translated into the written text. Again the reader emerges as an active co-creator of the book art.

Many American language texts are known for their interesting experiments with alphabetic notation that inscribe both aurality and visuality into writing. This carnivalesque feature of writing is also examined in many Canadian texts. Tostevin's text entitled "re" signifies an operation of language as both verbal and nonverbal, as both writing and musicating, and as interweaving of the linguistic, graphic and musical codes/rules. The syllable "re" has both linguistic and musical connotations and it is used for the exploration of simultaneous operation of the codes of music and codes of language in a written text: "writing as reading (the past?) would only be writing / without breathing a word while writing as rereading / doubles back to recall *to hear again the resonance* as / re tears from the rest reenters the mouth with quick / motions of tongue rolls liquid trills laps one / syllable to the next" and later: "the urgency of writing with a vengeance revenge / it's only human you said an eye for an eye a word / for a word writing that repels the peels of laughter / rebels bell-mouths to bellow to howl in the hollow / the holocryptic cipher that gives no clue to the reader / with the missing key the second name of *ré* riding on *do's* back close to / the heels of mi up and dothe diatonic scale of C *to see the tune to which the / text is set* to hear the beat the beating hollow / that allows the verb 'to write' to reverberate" (*Double*, no pag.; my italics).

The technique of a syllable leading, or a syllable play functions here as a crucial element in discovering new words and in furthering the text. Apart from syllable leading, Tostevin uses nearly all the other devices of musicating, alliteration, vowel leading, consonant play, internal rhyme and repetition. References to hearing and seeing sounds are repeated ("to hear the resonance," to "see the tune to which the text is set"). The text shifts between visual and oral/aural codes. The punctuation is replaced by pauses and the recurrence of the technique can be considered an instance of musicating of structure. Phonetic echoes build metonymic associations not only between English words but also between French and English ones: e.g., "*cuisante de remords qui mordent*" leads to "her lingual position from/ dormant to mordant," or "the might of mote" to "*le mot* that place" ("re"). The sound associations are more stressed than the traditional syntactic or semantic associations, but Tostevin also foregrounds the semantic value of sound. The words evoke recognizable images and concepts that augment the effect of sound. The text inscribes self-reflexivity about the process of writing and reading, about the erotic nature of the process, about translation between both systems and between both languages and their worldviews. It is also an

excellent example of the dialogic nature of language. It stages a linguistic dialogue between the phonetic and semantic aspects of the words and it also enacts a dialogue between the writer/reader and the context, between the two speakers and the bilingual Canadian context of their text. The dialogue between French and English in Tostevin's text has political implications and is a clear testimony of her semantic position: it acts as a symbolic verbal image of the desired dialogue between the two cultures. The act of reading becomes a sensual act as "I can literally feel the words rolling on my tongue. The words are touching, brushing, knocking against each other causing in me a peculiar dance of the speech organs" (Shklovsky qtd. in Steiner 151). The sensual, the kinetic and the gestural return in Tostevin's writing, which aims at evoking the original synaesthesia of language. Here the structure of language also epitomizes the erotic idea of seduction. Marlatt's words which point to the dialogic notion of linguistic eroticism explain such a unique operation of language: "Sounds will initiate thought by a process of association, words call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance ... a form of thought that is not rational but erotic because it works by attraction" ("Musing" 45).

Feminist language writers make prose structures of their texts both visual and audible. Lyn Hejinian in *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991) uses a form of a "new sentence" in brief chapters consisting of eighteen lines visually reminiscent of traditional poetry lines. The repetition of paratactic sentences produces a musicating effect, the musicating of structure. Ron Silliman, who theorized the idea of "new sentence" in a book of the same title, claims that "poetic form has moved into the interiors of prose," that "the completed sentence ... has become equivalent to a line" (Silliman, "New" 89, 90). This is also exemplified by Scott's texts that superimpose the poetic function (poetic in a sense of drawing attention to language itself), to the textuality of writing on an extended prose structure. In her *There's No Such Thing as Repetition. A Short Novel Written in Paris* there is no division into chapters. Some of the paragraphs are as short as lines of poetry, and the optical feature is not accidental but deliberate. Blank spaces, the visual silences, become an important element of the narrative. Scott consciously does not combine the sentences into paragraphs. She manipulates the standardized syntax and uses sentences with multiple shifts which encourage attention to the act of writing itself.

Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* explores the poetics of "new sentence" differently. The book consists of 37 paragraphs of 37 sentences, each one of which leads to the next by the substitution or replacement of materials from the previous one or by multiple forms of association. Language is not used here for expository and descriptive purposes; it translates the narrator's past, but in a way that reveals its uniqueness; the poetic structure of "new sentence" shows that the narrator does not accept the larger narratives of power which, as Silliman believes, a properly structured grammatical sentence entails. According to him, the rules of grammar and the use of the phonetic alphabet itself have standardized and desensualized both writing and reading. Contemporary Roman and Gothic typography is based on a way of thinking that reduces letters to an endless horizontal line. Phonetic standardized language produces a standardized highly reproducible discourse. Readers become "serialized language consumers" (Silliman, "New" 15). Language writers oppose this kind of commodification of language. Feminist language texts are multi-genre compositions, collages of various forms of writing. This inclusiveness of collage entails openness to the world of discourses and their use for creative ends. The various discourses are like the *objets trouvés* of Cubism or Dadaism that are examined for aesthetic and political ends. Multiple modes of writing are embraced in one form that is open to a dialogue with all other forms of writing. Both prose and poetry "contaminate" each other. Feminist books of language-oriented poetry, novels and essays are, in fact, multi-generic texts, cumulative and contrastive collages of various forms of writing whose frames/structures (both linguistic and compositional) are foregrounded as they bring various languages and ideologies together. Most of the already mentioned text here belong to this category of writing.

It has been argued that traditional genres are monological and hence supportive of the socio-political situation. If women writers choose the standard genres they also implicitly agree to the status quo and hence to the invisibility of woman in a literary discourse. To avoid this, women writers opt for a dialogue with the patriarchal tradition. They engage in multiple acts of

transgression, in multiple acts of subversive translation/transformance. In Scott's words, "the boundaries of genre are only there to step over" (Scott, *Spaces* 74). The writers are also aware that to "choose to write in or on a particular genre is also to choose a particular mode of social, not just narrowly aesthetic intervention" (Monroe 32). Such monologic genres as "the epic, the tragedy, the history, classical rhetoric and the like" (Bakhtin 107) are supportive of the socio-political and socio-economic establishment. It is clear then why language writers opt for open dialogic forms of writing. Contemporary feminist avant-garde relishes contamination of fixed generic structures. This is nothing new in a postmodern discourse but theirs is a feminist carnivalization of genre with a feminist ideology behind it. The writers explore the idea of what I call a *femminage*, a form of writing that combines various forms of a collage / montage / métissage composition with the practice of *l'écriture au féminin*. These are hybrid forms of writing that mingle and confront multiple discourses. All of them operate on the basis of an ideogrammic principle. They embody/illustrate the historical avant-garde idea of a total work of art, which combines literality, musicality and visuality and hence the fusion of all artistic media. It is then a rethinking of the very notion of verbal art, a translation of the visual and music aesthetics into a verbal aesthetics. The feminist language- and theory-oriented texts also embody Charles Bernstein's vision of a 'constructive writing' practice in the form of "a multi-discourse text, a work that would involve many different types and styles and modes of language in the same 'hyperspace'" (59).

In *Heroine*, Scott explores such diverse modes of writing as a diary (and its "cut up, collage style" (Scott, *Spaces* 104), life writing, romance, melodrama, tragedy, fragments of revolutionary leftist lectures, poetry, manifestos, and automatic writing; in *Main Brides*, the focus is on the diary form, surrealist dream narratives, travel narratives, history, and a theatre/film script. There is a constant slipping between the various discourses and hence between their ideologies, which is performed in a conscious way by a self-reflexive narrator. Many other Canadian and American texts could be mentioned here as language writers relish a dialogic play of discourses. Some language texts enact the Wagnerian concept of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or a total work of art, in which music, drama, poetry and the visual arts would be synthesized into one spirit. In Tostevin's *Frog Moon*, various arts are translated intersemiotically not only at the level of narrative, but also at the level of the book's structure. It is another example of book art, and book as a physical object. The cover illustration (a stylized letter F in a gothic type, with a frog sitting in it) signifies only one level of the text's interest (letters = writing and the concept of metamorphosis symbolized here by the frog). The section of *Frog Moon* entitled "Le Baiser de Juan-Les-Pins" points to multiple processes of intersemiotic translation enacted in the text. *Frog Moon* defies the notion of a book as a commodity, as easy material for public consumption. Installation, film, theatrical performance, abstract painting (collage), literature -- all these forms/genres are not only inscribed at the narrative level but they are also enacted in the structure of the book.

My analysis of various discourses and codes inscribed in texts of language-oriented writers shows the importance of intertextual linkages between the English-Canadian and American language texts. The major difference between them lies in their different focus related to the idea of re-reading discourses of literature, history and culture. American writers re-read and re-write America, Canadians concentrate on Canada. Canadian writers do engage in the re-reading of American feminist avant-garde, but their focus is primarily on the Canadian socio-historical and political situation. What distinguishes Canadian language writing from other international avant-gardes is their intertextual dialogue with Québécois-Canadian feminist writers and the intense work on language closely linked with the complex and problematic nature of Canadian identity in the postnational globalized world. The major characteristics of language-oriented writing -- the dialogic concept of language, the interest in interartistic comparisons, the notion of art as translation between the verbal and nonverbal, the idea of a "total work of art," or, in general, the carnivalesque approach to verbal art that challenges the dichotomization of aesthetics and politics so typical of many politically ineffective theories, give the contemporary avant-garde movement an important role in the globalized world. Language writing addresses political and epistemological

spaces that other texts do not. It reminds us that language can and does manipulate us if we are not vigilant enough and that "leaving language as it is" means "agreeing with the civic order" which "reduces some of us to absence" (Mouré, "Acknowledging" 128).

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