

Delineating a non-place in the UK? 10 notes on experimental poetry written by women: Caroline Bergvall and Redell Olsen.

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Delineating a “non-place” in the UK? 10 notes on experimental poetry written by women: Caroline Bergvall and Redell Olsen

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Résumé

Cartographie d'un « non-espace » au Royaume Uni ?

10 notes sur la poésie expérimentale écrite par des femmes

Il existe un paradoxe au Royaume-Uni : les femmes écrivent de la poésie dite expérimentale, mais leur œuvre reste souvent marginale voire absente. La notion de « non-place » empruntée à Rosmarie Waldrop permet, après un examen du contexte, de délimiter les contours d'une écriture non-essentialiste. En effet, l'espace que les femmes écrivant de la poésie expérimentale occupent au

Royaume-Uni est un « non-espace », un espace en creux qui, paradoxalement, leur permet d'ouvrir la poésie britannique à une écriture poétique transnationale. Par une double approche littéraire et sociologique, il s'agit de montrer que leur écriture ne saurait être sans le contact fréquent et fécond avec la poésie expérimentale écrite en Amérique du nord. Leur poésie du territoire déconstruit, et de l'identité en question se donne à lire dans deux œuvres particulières : celle de Caroline Bergvall, poète dont la langue inassignable bouscule la syntaxe du monde en redéfinissant les frontières entre les langues, et celle de Redell Olsen dans laquelle les territoires fixes, familiers et controversés de « l'identité nationale » sont constamment battus en brèche dans *Secure Portable Space*, notamment par une hybridation des textes du poète américain Charles Olson.

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- 1 I borrow the term from Joan Retallack (1).

1In a year when Verlaine and Rimbaud's house in London is going to host "Poets in the city", which, as the French daily *Le Monde* says, "is an interface between the worlds of poetry and finance, and has more than two thousand members belonging essentially to the first financial centre of the world", one could wonder what space experimental poetry written by women will find or, more accurately, if there is a space for such poetry in the UK. The question of the "place" or "space" of "the experimental feminine"¹ is a paradoxical one: though experimental poetry is being written by women in the UK, and has been for at least forty years, it remains virtually non-existent in print and its place seems to be a "non-place".

2Originally coined by poet Rosmarie Waldrop to describe her own position as a woman and a foreigner in the field of American poetry (79), this phrase is apposite to reveal the minimal place experimental poetry produced by women occupies in the UK. How should one define the territory or, to take an overtly sociological term, the field of production of experimental poetry written by women in the UK? As Caroline Bergvall suggested in her introduction to an issue of the magazine *How2*, experimental poetry written by women in the U.K. is still in need of a map

(2001).

3 This article does not claim to draw such a complete map, but wishes to delineate some of its contours in a few interrelated notes guided by the idea of the inadequacy of essentialist thinking, be it when it concerns gender or the much discussed “national identity”. The initial question could now be termed as follows: is there such a thing as “British experimental feminine poetry,” or isn’t it all a question of articulating the community of women poets to the singularities of individual authors, as Julia Kristeva says of “l’écriture féminine” (130)?

4 Indeed, the notion of moving poetic territories challenging that of national (and mainly male) poetry is fostered by some of the most interesting poets working in the experimental field. In spite of their differences, poets such as Caroline Bergvall and Redell Olsen seem to articulate their poetic texts and performances in relation to the notions of space, geography and the limits that these notions presuppose. Although their poetry should not be limited to that, they both seem to understand their position within the broader poetic spectrum as that of experimental poets, which allows them to deconstruct categories and definitions, or in a word to displace and perhaps transgress the fixed territories of poetic language, national poetry and sexual identity.

I. Description of a situation: The sites of the experimental feminine in *the UK* or *the making of a non-place*?

“I have always thought of poetry as a way of building a world (...), building a counterworld, not better, but other” (Waldrop 2002, 64).

51.

What is experimental poetry and what are the sites of its production? John Cage famously defined the experimental as “an act the outcome of which is unknown” (13). Because of its tendency to escape fixity, experimental poetry is not easily circumscribed in a definition. As Eric Vos suggests: “It is merely too early to hope for positive and unequivocal definitions of ‘Experimental poetry,’ ‘Visual Poetry,’ and ‘Concrete Poetry’” (25). Though some of what makes experimental poetry lies precisely in the fact that it escapes categories and that it regards itself as in process, Eric Vos identifies four dimensions to experimental writing:

Developments through time, particularly the issues of historicity, genealogy, and (opposing) stance towards prevailing poetic practice provide for one of these dimensions. The second consists of the range of the language-related concerns of poetic experimentalism, from auto-

reflexive, linguistic invention to language's role as an instrument in ideological and political activism. The third involves an orientation on two not necessarily incompatible experimental objectives, namely analytic investigation of norms and rules – verbal, inter-artistic, sociopolitical, etc. – on the one hand and their purposeful excess or transgression on the other. In the fourth dimension, the poem becomes a “meta-poem”, presenting both a sample and a (partial) theory of Experimental (...) Poetry. (27)

6It might be added that experimental poetry cannot be defined without describing the construction of a field within which experimental writing is produced, read and analysed. The poetic field can be mapped out when due attention is paid to writers, public reading venues, publishing houses, critics and students, academic institutions, grants. The Bourdieusian idea that writers and writing are historically and socially determined is also fostered by North American poets such as Charles Bernstein (147) or Lyn Hejinian: “ The community creates the context in which the work's happening happens” (35).

72.

- 2 For more insight into the development of small presses and poetry magazines in the US between 1960 [\(...\)](#)

In the United States and Canada, women write and publish experimental poetry and are well integrated in the field of experimental writing. They are and have been accepted on a par with their male counterparts for some ten to twenty years. Rae Armantrout, Abigail Child, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Rosmarie Waldrop are, among many others, poets of note who emerged in the 1970's. Their voices created new vectors in experimental poetry, as the wealth of women writers published each year demonstrates. Moreover, these poets hold significant positions as critics or academics. To name just a few prominent poets, Hejinian teaches poetics in Berkeley, Joan Retallack is Professor at Bard college, feminist poet Eileen Myles teaches at the University of California, San Diego, and Cole Swensen at Iowa; Barbara Guest was a prominent critic. Though the world of small presses and poetry magazines in the 60s and the 70s was largely dominated by male figures, women also contributed – and still do – to the ebullience of the poetic life in the US via small presses and alternative journals²: in 1961 Waldrop created Burning Deck with her husband, from 1976 to 1984 Hejinian ran Tuumba Press, and in 1983 Andrea Fraser created *HOW(ever)*, a poetic journal devoted to experimental poetry written by women, and analysis thereof.

83.

The vantage point of these diverse voices has helped women to significantly contribute in shaping experimental poetry in the USA. In Britain, on the contrary, experimental poetry is still largely seen as male dominated, and very little space or

very few sites represent the experimental feminine. In *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* (Hamilton 1994), J.H. Prynne and Tom Raworth are given an entry, whereas women of the same generation such as Denise Riley and Maggie O'Sullivan are not. The "non-place" given to women poets is even greater in anthologies. To take only three of the most important anthologies of experimental poetry in Britain: there was only one woman out of the seventeen poets of the "British revival" in Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville's *A Various Art* (1990), only five female poets among the thirty-six poets in Iain Sinclair's decisive *Conductors of Chaos* (1996), and out of the fifty-five poets in Caddel and Quatermain's *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (1999) only eight women.

9 These facts and statistics may seem irrelevant, and unintelligent to a reader of poetry who thinks that poetry will automatically be represented because of its intrinsic, essential worth. Indeed, selecting is the privilege and the risk that the anthologist is willing to take. It can seem beside the point to criticize the structure of anthologies, since it is the principle of good anthologies such as *Conductors of Chaos* not to include everyone, lest they should dilute their underlying discourse into an impossible panorama. Yet, these facts methodically evince the historical underrepresentation of the experimental feminine in Britain. Eric Mottram (a professor of American Literature and a poet) and poet Maggie O'Sullivan, who respectively edited *The New British Poetry* (1988) and *Out of everywhere* (1996) stand as rare counterpoints. Their two anthologies "suggest(ed) (...) the extraordinary range and diversity and also demonstrat(ed) that much of the most challenging, formally progressive and significant work over recent year (...) is being made by women" (O'Sullivan, 9).

- 3 See for instance Philip Larkin's reaction to Gertrude Stein's writing: "Only the larger libraries [\(...\)](#)

10 One reason for women's paradoxical presence *in absentia* might be that British poetry has been historically less bent toward the experimental than North American poetry, whose constitutive factor was to be a laboratory for new and deconstructive poetics (notably with Pound, Stein, Williams, Cage and the Language poets). It might also have to do with the reluctance to accept that a feminine voice mistreats or deconstructs language to such an extent. Another reason could be that one of the traits of experimental poetry is that it is usually written at the periphery of accepted poetry: experimental poetry in Britain could very well be defined as poetry dismissed by poetic (male) institutions³.

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The notion of "non-place" gradually delineated here emerges from the furtive presence of experimental poetry written by women within the field of British poetry. The notion also allows conceiving of a place from which experimental poetry written by women in the UK would take shape, and come into existence in spite of the underrepresentation. The "non-place" of the experimental feminine is

an aporetic space, which though it is, is not or is the exact counterpoint of a fixed territory granting security through a vain definition of essential limits.

12 Indeed, what are the sites for experimental poetry written by women in Britain, if not other than British? The polemical rhetorical question arises from the fact that the experimental work of women writing in the UK is fostered, if not produced (albeit symbolically) elsewhere than in Britain.

13 To Larkin's protective rejection of Stein, for instance, or to Ted Hughes' refusal of most of North American poetry, experimental authors have responded by creating a dialogue with North American poetry: "What is noticeable (...) is an engagement with modernist poetics and a consciously internationalist stance quite at odds with the 'little Englandism' of the official poetry of the 50s," (Barry and Hampson, 6-7). Given their historical lack of representation in British poetry, the situation is even more acute with the experimental feminine.

14 Caroline Bergvall used to teach at Bard College where she was co-chair in writing. Redell Olsen wrote a PhD on women Language poets and their relation to the visual arts. She was also invited by Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania for a reading at the Slough Foundation, and read at Bard College with Juliana Spahr and Drew Milne. Moreover, Bergvall and Olsen are among the North American names featured on PennSound, the audio web-archive run by poet Charles Bernstein at the university of Pennsylvania.

15 Olsen's productive dialogue with American poetry also informs her poetry from within. In an interview with Lucy Sheerman, she relates her poetic practice to that of four North American Language poets of considerable importance: Susan Howe, Carla Harryman, Joan Retallack, and Leslie Scalapino. Similarly, O'Sullivan collaborated with Language founder Bruce Andrews, and sees her own poetic practice determined by Jerome Rothenberg's seminal work in ethnopoetry. If these were not enough to suggest that experimental poetry written in the UK cannot be discussed without reference to its dialogue with North American poetry any longer, this would at least suggest that part of the experimental poetry written in the UK engages in transatlantic cross-pollination.

16 One of the best examples of this exchange is the web journal *How2*. With Stein, Toklas and their dog Basket as emblematic godmothers, *How2* started in the US as the paper magazine *HOW(ever)*. Fraser saw it as a space for experimental poetry written by women. Created by a North American, *HOW(ever)* has now become the web magazine *How2*, and its editorship has been given to Redell Olsen. It features work from experimental poets, proceedings and videos from the 2006 conference on Women poetry, as well as an issue on contemporary British innovative poetry written by women edited by Caroline Bergvall. Thus, the poetry written in North America coexists with poetry written in the UK, thereby stimulating creative and critical dialogue between the two. Is *How2* American or British? And does it matter so much? It actually seems that the editors managed to design a specific

transnational place for poetic practice and critical thinking.

17 This transnational space was also fashioned by the composition of O'Sullivan's anthology: *Out of everywhere, linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America & the UK*. Published in the UK by a small press editor, it gathered poets from North America and the UK. The anthologist was cautious not to use the adjective "British" or "English" to refer to the poetry she had chosen. With the prepositional phrase 'in the UK,' she decided to promote a geographical rather than essentially national definition, thereby suggesting that the territory or the field of production of experimental poetry was a "non-(national)-place". The first part of its title reads as a militant manifesto for the diversity and multiplicity of innovative poetry produced by women. To readers who think that women writing experimental poetry do not exist because they are not represented, the title and the anthology presents a firm and amused denial: women are "out of everywhere," as if coming out of their hide-outs, or suddenly escaping prison in a mutinous mood against those who kept them there. The image of poetry coming "out of everywhere" is a way to relinquish the determination, the marks and the alienation of the recuperative, essentialist discourse of nationality. In this context, "out of everywhere" can be read as "not from *one* determined conventional place but from nowhere" or, that is, from all sorts of interrelated yet independent sites. Indeed, the space that this anthology builds produces the experimental feminine in so far as it allows it to exist altogether for the reading public. Like *How2* it is one more step in the process of their legitimation, and in the process of the invention of themselves as poets.

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The space created by the transnational dialogue between poets, by O'Sullivan's anthology, and by *How2* could be at once defined as a "non space," provided that the term comes to mean extraterritorial space. For instance, though Redell Olsen has no doubts whatsoever about being British, because she says that this is "the context in which (she) produce(s) (her) work", she also argues that *How2* "has allowed (her) not to be just based in terms of poetic output or in terms of poetic influence in Britain" (2006).

19 Indeed, the experimental field in North America not only welcomes, but seems to be a driving vector of extraterritoriality, and a constitutive part of the field that produces experimental feminine poetry in the UK. In other words, geographical and national territories (The UK or Britain) do not overlap with the poetic space built through a dialogue with North American poetry. These poets then displace essential national definitions of writing. Though it does not automatically veer into internationalism, the "non-place" of women poets calls for a redefinition of the long-standing hermetic line drawn between North American poetry and poetry produced in the UK.

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In *The Sinking Island*, Hugh Kenner gave a rather apocalyptic image of the development of British poetry (3-7; 245). Barry and Hampton show that he ignored the sites of resistance, which they call “the site and the struggle” (7). For instance he disregards the importance of little magazines and small presses. I have wished to give a more contrasted view: though their work is seldom shown and heard in Britain, experimental women in the UK have created a place which amounts to a non-place, from which they have gradually invented their voices through association with North American experimental poets, and through the construction of plural and extraterritorial sites.

21 These sociological and, to some extent, political facts might be enough to account for the furtive presence of women writing experimental poetry in the UK but do not exhaust the notion of “non-place.” The paradoxical space, which emerged out of the marginalisation of women writing, is also one where it is possible to become what Julia Kristeva calls “une(s) femme(s)” in the process of fleeing a sense of national community – the nation meaning here a coherent, cohesive and alienating aggregate of people subjected to a supposed shared understanding of the fictional “national identity” uniting them.

22 If such a thing exists, the constructed community of women writing experimental poetry lies precisely elsewhere than in a binding sense of national community. It is hypothesized here as a multiple “non-place”, a notion perfectly expressed by Kristeva. For the French thinker and psychoanalyst, the singularity of feminine approaches to writing, of which the experimental is the best example, is that they highlight the “foreignness” and strangeness of writing within writing: from a psychoanalytical perspective, she argues that one, and even more so a woman, is always foreign to herself; she proposes that a woman writer or artist is always “une(s) femme(s),” i.e. a woman is always in the process of becoming part of a gendered – as opposed to essentially granted – construction, and is also in the process of becoming singular. From a more rhetorical perspective, Frédéric Regard explains his non-essentialist “le féminin” as a space where the common places of a coherent and totalitarian system are transgressed into a reinvention of a space where figures are deformed and distorted (Regard, 6). He later argues that V. Woolf writes from a space “that is not a site or a ‘place’ of stability but an unstable and unfixed zone, (...) a non-place” (90).

23 The dialectics underpinning feminine experimental writing and its “non-place” is that this “non-place” is a productive field of criss-crossing territories, which construct the individual writer. From this “non-place,” women write in conversation with others, which prevents their being captured by Britishness, a category and a territory that they analyse and deconstruct.

II. Analysis: Singularities or examples in poetics of the non-essential

“I would also want to know why, as much as where to.” (Bergvall)

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“Je vous vois assez proche de certaines femmes-écrivains qui, partant de la situation d’exil, de la situation de dissidence, à laquelle on est confronté quand on se trouve être à la fois étrangère, femme, en d’autres cas juive ou autre chose, font un travail sur la différence, sur la différenciation qui est ouverture, amour, foi” (Kristeva, 145): this comment made to Kristeva could apply to Caroline Bergvall and her work. Though she is not a political exile, her political singularity is to have created a space whereby her writing cannot be defined nationally, and opens to differentiation.

25Born of Norwegian and French parents, Bergvall has resided in the UK for many years now, but has travelled extensively to the US for creative and teaching purposes. Moreover, Bergvall writes and is published in the UK as well as in the USA. She was one of the few women poets to be published in *Conductors of Chaos* and is to be found among the women anthologised in O’Sullivan’s *Out of Everywhere*.

26In a text published in *Jacket*, an Australian web-journal, and speaking of her reinterpretation of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, written for an American conference at the suggestion of Ch. Bernstein, Bergvall says: ‘it is Chaucer’s flexible and intensely rich and varied idiom that has become the model for our own English’ and adds “even the unfamiliar aspects of Chaucer’s vocabulary were tinged with familiarity for the French national that I sill am” (2007). Given the fact that this is written in an American, Australian, and British context, given Bergvall’s saying that she is “a French national”, and bearing in mind that her text was read from France on the web, “our own language” is not exactly easy to assign. Even with the knowledge of her residence in the UK with hindsight, the sense of belonging to a national community expressed in ‘our own’ is at once destabilised by all the other extraterritorial elements and is almost tinged with fiction.

- 4 See Cheek 2006.

27Unsettling chartered territories such as the body, syntax, and poetry, seems to be what her poetic practice consists in. Indeed, referring to and working in collaboration with contemporary artists, her printed texts emerge from or are bound to be turned into performance⁴. She thus places her work in the experimental field. Moreover, her poetry displaces and perhaps transgresses the fixed territories of poetic language, national poetry and sexual identity. In her interview with John Stammers, Bergvall looks back on the beginning of her writer’s life in terms of moving in and out of languages: “When I moved over into English is when writing became a public project to me, it then became the idea of getting it out. For me the idea of the move into another language became the idea of writing” (1999). Her creative impulse therefore lies in the very fact of choosing

another language than her first language as a space for the exploration of the creative questions a writer is confronted with. Choosing to “move into” a foreign language and trying to dwell in it, to make the home of one’s writing, creates a paradoxical if not aporetic situation whereby one never dwells completely in it. And, indeed, her texts are as much a move into as a move between languages through the exploration and the disfiguration of syntax.

- 5 For a description and analysis of her multilingual puns, see Broqua 2007.

28Bergvall often argues that she writes at the crossroads of languages. Indeed, to use a term that she is keen on, her poetic texts “traffic” between French and English languages (even Middle English and Norwegian and Latin). Some will see her language as an unreadable texture; some will read it as an opening of linguistic territories, and as a liberation of insightful illuminations. Indeed, her multilinguistic puns and deconstructions open signification to diverse trajectories of meaning⁵.

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- 6 C. Bergvall to V. Broqua, 15.09.2007.
- 7 Energy is ‘the power of doing work.’ In this context, the term is used in a modernist acceptance, (...)
- 8 For another analysis of these lines, see Broqua 2007.
- 9 *Ail* and *aïe* almost sound alike in French and the doubled sound for a French person will mean that t (...)

In fact, she sees these trajectories of meaning between words, territories, and languages as heuristic: “I would also want to know why as much as where to”⁶. From the arrows, the opening and closing structures in *Éclat* (2004), to the hilarious and political reinterpretations of the ironic pilgrimages of Chaucer’s tales, her poetry consistently builds a heuristic topos of travelling as travail: engendering transportation via linguistic, acoustic and bodily energy⁷. The topos appears explicitly in the multilingual pun: “en train en trail / en trav Ail Aïe / La bour La bour La bour” (Bergvall 2001, 23)⁸. The anaphoric “en” hints at the process of *en*-gendering work: *travail* in French and *Labour* in English become the English *travail* and *labour* of childbirth. The energy thus created is also released by means of capitalisation, paronomasia⁹ and dissociation of syllables, which troubles reading by allowing phonemic and graphic segments to associate freely. The disfigurement of syntax and the corresponding laryngeal obstructions make language trip and stumble into an explosion of meaning under the plosives /t/ and /b/, which threaten to exhaust the reader’s breath into syncope. Textual processes thus open words or syllables to semantic and semiotic differentiation. They allow the text to *make* sense.

30With different poetics, “VIA” (Bergvall 2005, 64-71) is also a peregrination into the cultural creation of differential meaning. Read as an English word borrowed

from the Latin, the title acts as a preposition meaning “travelling through (en route) for a destination” or “by way of, through” as well as “by means of”. It thus articulates the text to the notion of travelling through and to the relation that its prepositional nature is ready to enact. According to this reading, the text is a crossroads of possibility: a Purgatory of sorts. But one soon understands, when reading the text, that “VIA” should not first and foremost be understood as an English title but as an Italian word translated as “the way”, “the path”, “the road”. The poem takes the first three lines of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as its material, and “VIA” is the fourth word in the third line of the *Inferno*. Instead of “via” Bergvall could have chosen “Cammin,” translated as “journey.” But what makes sense in her title is both the dovetailing languages and the possibilities the title consequently bristles with, as well as the merely grammatical prepositional nature of the English “via.” The English shifter splicing with the Italian noun for road and path says exactly what the text strives to do: it endeavours to relate, contrast, put into motion differing variations on the same fragment, and therefore open onto a historically situated thought on the Dantean text and the language that produces it in English.

31Indeed, “VIA” is a procedural poem: it collates and thus links together the 47 English translations of the first terza rima of Dante’s poem that Bergvall found at the British Library. Translations are listed in alphabetical order according to their first letter. The names of the translators and the dates of publication are systematically indicated under each fragment. As a performance, the work has an obvious and inescapable litanic quality, not without comic relief when a translation is particularly odd (“Halfway through the trek of our life”). Formal repetition could remain an exercise in recording the various translations of Dante’s poem, and a witty collage taking an amused stance at the vast variety of variations on the same theme. Yet, the names and dates impede a merely formal reading. They re-contextualize the fragments. Because of its procedure, the text is also an archaeology of language and poetics. For instance, as one might have guessed, inversions tend to be rife among 19th century translators. Stylistic audacities such as “I reawoke to find myself inside” (Phillips) or “Miles away from the road” (Ellis), and poetic condensation (Pinsky) or fragmentation (Schwerner) are instead signs of late 20th century translations.

32“VIA” creates crossroads of reading. It is a trip taken into the English language as much as a displacement of Dante’s three lines into the scope of experimental poetry. Furthermore, with tongue in cheek, Bergvall translates institutional contemporary poets such as Heaney, and classic figures (William Michael Rossetti and Longfellow) within the territory of her gestural poem, whose poetics is closer to experimental North American poets such as Jackson MacLow and John Cage than to the aforementioned authors. When performing the poem, she guides us, albeit for a minimal amount of time, into their various poetic choices, like Virgil guiding the Italian poet through the circles of *Inferno*. Moreover, she makes their words and styles trip into her words and voice. They trip because while moving

into this new list of texts, they fall and lose their balance as they are ventriloquized into what the subtitle of the text calls the “48th variation” or, that is, the missing translation, which is the sum of them all via Bergvall’s voice.

33In her preface to the text, Bergvall insists on the amount of labour that this entailed: the gestures of copying, the going back and forth to the Library to check errors in her notes. She herself calls the composition of this poem “a task”, since travelling through these words also involved her body. In many ways, in “VIA” the word trips/travels into and through work. It is through the process of doing this task that Bergvall ended up “becoming” the material of the poem (2005, 65). *Via* the decomposition and re-composition of the self through this process, a text was generated. The writing of this piece is thus a trip within linguistic processes at work in translation, and in the translation of the processes of writing within the self of the writer. What this trip within work and word endlessly reveals is that though the procedure seems fixed and easy enough, and though the role of the writer is limited to the determination of the parameters of the procedure, the biographical mode still has a place within the construction of a seemingly impersonal text as it becomes inscribed within the body-voice of the poet.

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In poems such as *Goan atom* or “About Face”, cultural clichés surrounding the feminine body are deconstructed through an anatomisation of language. Paronomasias and anagrams such as *Goan Atom*, (suggesting *atom*, *anatomy*, as well as *at home*), go hand in hand with the figure of Hans Bellmer’s disarticulated “doll” and his “anatomy of desire” (2006), constantly referred to in the text.

35The displacements engendered in and by her texts are also disturbances of gender: if language is open and travails/travels, then meaning is never essential, it is a process of crossing limits, creating new associations and challenging the modes of signification of daily language. For instance, “sits on the cha/ irk daisy/ stickin gout/ and a big bal/ looms in the cranny” perhaps recaptures the disturbing (‘irk’, ‘looms’) associations of surrealism, where a balloon becomes a sexually threatening object. And the dislocation of words (‘chair’, ‘sticking out’) creates images that could be linked to the hybrid constructions of surrealism. Yet Bergvall’s operations on language do not posit the surreal. In the here and now of the disarticulated text, they rather seem to combine the criticism of sexual identity explored by Louise Bourgeois’s sculptures and installations, and Cindy Sherman’s colder mannequins.

36With her language of combination, concentration, and differentiated speeds of reading (such as in “Woo Pops/ Er”, where “wooer” forms with a delay after the tmesis), Bergvall foreigns the text and shatters received processes of reading and opens the territory of British poetry to foreignness. Though it is turned towards the English language, her poetry is transnational. To return to her *Canterbury Tales*, the mix of Middle English words with contemporary English (extracts from the

BBC are collated within the poem), and French words hinders the full development of the narrative and obstructs the clear understanding of the provenance of the text. Like a pilgrim, the reader travels through various linguistic sites of meaning, which open new forms of meaning.

37By these constant displacements, Bergvall places her poetic acts in perpetually shifting, if utopian spaces. She engenders a “non-space,” and is thus able to question the notion of united self, of single national community, and of territory.

3810.

- 10 For an analysis of the cover, see Fisher 2005.
- 11 As a small slim book, *Secure portable space*, can indeed be carried everywhere.

With *Secure Portable Space*, Redell Olsen also casts a utopian albeit more ironical glance on notions of territory. Like Caroline Bergvall, and like most experimental poets, she constantly blurs the limits between the poem, the page, and the arts. For instance, her texts are sometimes responses to films, they sometimes use photographs of performances, and reproduces artworks on the page. These extratextual elements question the notion of the “home” of poetry. Jokingly, the book ends on a black and white photograph of a work of art done by the poet and presented as if the collection was an art catalogue, therefore questioning the intra or extra textual status of the last page. This artefact was apparently made of wood into which “homesick” was carved in gothic font. When Caroline Bergvall argued that her writing “responded to and critiqued the myth of home(coming)” (2002, 207), Olsen also antiphrastically deconstructs the idea of home as the secure place for women. Home and domesticity as the place to which women were relegated are very efficiently nullified. Her ironic poem-artwork also acts like a coda for both the title and the cover of the book designed by Redell Olsen from a photograph by her sister: “secure portable space” is typed in white over a photograph presenting a container on a backdrop of palm trees¹⁰. Over the doors of the portable container is a found poem: the words “secure portable space” are displayed vertically on a poster. The space for the poetry of the book is thus defined in an extraterritorial space (palm trees), and words are situated in a space between the vertical and the horizontal, i.e. in “the possibility of running to the line”, which Agamben defines as a condition for poetry (47). More than announcing the book itself as a “portable space,”¹¹ the threshold of the book states that the poetics of the book will be one of ironic displacement, where the fiction of reading will merge with the reading of fiction, and threaten to destabilise the syntactical structures of language.

39Being defamiliarised by fiction and defamiliarising fiction is what “Era of heroes” explores (Olsen, 55-74). Written in the context of the war in Iraq, the poem is an alphabetical list of names of pop culture heroes. After the text itself, but wholly integrated within the book, a series of eight black and white

photographs inscribe on the page the actions involved in the performance of this poem at the Bookartbookshop where Redell Olsen read the list while walking around in circles wearing Mickey Mouse Ears. On the photos, the barely distinguishable silhouette looks like one of the grotesque impersonations of Californian artist Paul McCarthy. In the window of the bookshop, an elegantly handwritten neon sign alternated between “eraofheroes” and “heroesoferrors”. The political permutation of words, the transformation of the body of the poet becoming a cultural fiction, and the reading of the list reinterpreted and critiqued the values of the epic in a largely depoliticised world of mass consumption. The performance and its multiform transcription in the book displace the discourse on heroism: because a hero is a singular and almost godlike human being, the concatenation of heroes in the poem desacralizes their idiosyncrasy. The process of reproduction of the names on the page and its repetitiveness weakens their aura: they become no more than a list of names, a concretion of letters or, that is, an act of language.

- 12 For an analysis of her rewriting of Olson, see Durand 2007.

40The (trans)-portability of the space of the poem concurrent with a critique of cultural icons is well brought out in the last section of the book. With “The Minimaus Poems,” Olsen parodies Olson’s *Maximus Poems*. Where the phallic American poet had written an epic resonant with Whitman and Pound, the British female poet writes a short section of poems looking back on modernism. Her beginning is witty: where he had it ‘maxi’, she has it ‘mini’. Where he had “Maximus” referring to a Greek philosopher, she has “Minimaus,” hinting at Disney’s cultural icon. Moreover, Olson’s rhetoric is also deflated with an oppositional poetics in the rewriting of the poem¹².

41Her systematic debunking of modernist grandeur is also supported by the very homonymy of their names. In the difference from Olson to Olsen, where the ‘e’ is a ruptured form of the ‘o’, seems to lie the clichéd difference between man and woman, between British to American. Yet, as always with parodies, Olsen’s text could not be without Olson’s poem. It is a palimpsest of the American poem. And though Olson’s American Gloucester and the British town of the same name overlap in Olsen’s poem, though North America and the UK intersect in this book, it is from North America that the legitimisation of Olsen’s book comes: the three blurbs written on the back cover are by two important North American poets (Joan Retallack and Carla Harryman) and a younger New York feminine writer (Kristin Prevallet).

Conclusion

42In spite of their poetic differences, Caroline Bergval and Redell Olsen both traffic between various sites of meaning. They explore and question the very space of the experimental feminine, i.e. the very possibility for a woman in Britain to

twist, melt, create, deconstruct, love and hate language.

43With their texts and their relation to women poets in North America, these two poets, as well as the situation of experimental poetry written by women in the UK, question the relevance of the dichotomy between “American” and “British” poetry now. Experimental poetry written by women in the UK makes sense in relation to the notion of constant extraterritorial changes, it exists in relation both to a here and now, and to an elsewhere.

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Notes

[1](#) I borrow the term from Joan Retallack (1).

[2](#) For more insight into the development of small presses and poetry magazines in the US between 1960 and 1980, see Clay 1998.

[3](#) See for instance Philip Larkin's reaction to Gertrude Stein's writing: "Only the larger libraries need feel responsible about Miss Stein's poetry".

[4](#) See Cheek 2006.

[5](#) For a description and analysis of her multilingual puns, see Broqua 2007.

[6](#) C. Bergvall to V. Broqua, 15.09.2007.

[7](#) Energy is 'the power of doing work.' In this context, the term is used in a modernist acceptance, and hints at the transformational energies of language (Dachy 1980).

[8](#) For another analysis of these lines, see Broqua 2007.

[9](#) *Ail* and *aïe* almost sound alike in French and the doubled sound for a French person will mean that there's trouble ahead.

[10](#) For an analysis of the cover, see Fisher 2005.

[11](#) As a small slim book, *Secure portable space*, can indeed be carried everywhere.

[12](#) For an analysis of her rewriting of Olson, see Durand 2007.

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