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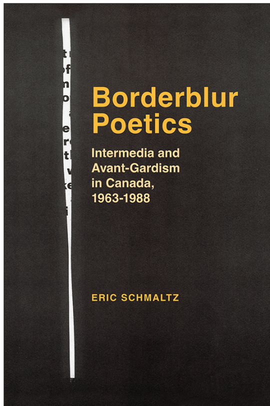

BORDERBLUR POETICS: INTERMEDIA AND AVANT-GARDISM IN CANADA, 1963-1988

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Intermedial Poetry in Canada Today

As it manifested in Canada, borderblur became enmeshed with an emergent sense of the world as the conditions of that world infiltrated the cultural, social, economic, technological, and political aspects of daily life. Poets and writers such as bpNichol, bill bissett, Steve McCaffery, Roy Kiyooka, Gerry Shikatani, Judith Copithorne, Ann Rosenberg, Penn Kemp, and many others created within this world as its lines were being redrawn by the rise of electronic media, mass advertising and publicity, increased travel, and the consequent ease with which ideas and persons moved across time and space. These conditions affected how these poets created their work, and, more significantly, their sense of themselves as cultural creators within Canada's borders and among the artistic currents connecting them to avant-garde communities abroad. In sync with an international network of like-minded avant-garde practitioners, these Canadians created intermedial texts against the backdrop of rapid change to interact with cultural and sensorial domains of visuality (concrete poetry), sound (sound poetry), and movement (kinetic poetry). Their work does not actively consolidate the formation of a Canadian literary identity, even though many of them came to their positions as cultural workers during the peak and in the wake of mid-century cultural nationalism. Instead, taken collectively, it forms a paratradition that challenges the conventional narrative of Canada's literary history while contributing to literary discourse beyond the confines of cultural nationalism.

In "Canada: The Borderline Case" (1977), Marshall McLuhan captures this conception of borders when he declares that "the vast new borders of electric energy and information that are created by radio and television have set up world frontiers and interfaces among all countries on a new scale that alter all pre-existing forms of culture and nationalism."[1] McLuhan suggests an alternative framework for thinking about borders: "A border is not a connection

but an interval of resonance."[2] Inspired by the interface of electronic media, which ushered ideas, persons, images, and sounds across national boundaries and into the homes of Canadians, McLuhan attempted to reimagine borders as liminal spaces wherein oscillating forces produce overlapping frequencies to generate new social, political, and cultural harmonies and disharmonies. Thus, just as Arjun Appadurai, Jahan Ramazani, and others would argue decades later, the imaginations of artists, poets, and citizens are always altered by incoming flows of cultural production that shape their sense of belonging within the nation. Nationalism as a basis for communal belonging is even more complex when we are confronted in our daily lives with ideas, things, persons, and art from elsewhere. This has always been the case for settler literatures in Canada; yet many of the existing narratives affirm a desire for a definitive sense of Canadian identity produced by its art and culture.

Borderblur is compelling since it emerged concomitantly with Canada's nationalist cultural surge, but the poets belonging to this network were seldom interested in contributing to that sense of belonging. Instead, their intermedial, cosmopolitan avant-gardism complicates the belief that Canadian poetry is necessarily an expression of Canadian national identity. The literature created by this loose coterie of artists was generated by the harmonies and disharmonies produced by new forms of communication that afforded them new possibilities for poetic expression. For poets like bissett, as he explained to Phyllis Webb and Nichol during their 1967 interview on CBC Television, a nationally defined vision for literature in Canada was ultimately unsatisfying. To install a literary tradition centred on national placeness, as defined by Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, Northrop Frye, and others, recapitulates a colonial model that is similarly restrictive. bissett was attuned to writing that was emerging elsewhere and to the changing shape of cultural production and dissemination in the mid- to late twentieth century. He was compelled by the possibilities of writing when the poetic line is extended beyond the conventions of artistic modes and tradition. Thus, another way of positioning the argument of *Borderblur Poetics* is to consider borderblur as a mode of delineation—that is, as an intermedial poetics that simultaneously effaces the borders separating communicative and artistic modes while at the same time creating a new cluster of poetic activity that thrived outside of the dominant national literary poetics, which is to say the established mainstream in Canada. Borderblur facilitates the simultaneous effacement of artistic and national boundaries, and in so doing also generated new poetic lineages. The

lines that define borderblur are many and multidirectional. They overlap; they generate new frequencies as they meet each other. Borderblur poets simultaneously made and unmade the idea of a Canadian poetics while forming their own intermedial, cosmopolitan avant-garde. The paratradition simultaneously enriched and challenged the notion of Canadian poetic expression.

While this book formally ends in 1988, the energy and ideas of borderblur continued to propel poets well after the 1980s. Indeed, some of the poets examined in this book still write and publish today. The earliest-born practitioner of borderblur identified in this book was West Coast poet and painter Roy Kiyooka (born 1926); the latest are the poets Susan McMaster, Gerry Shikatani, and Richard Truhlar, all born in 1950. Many were born during or just after the Second World War. The work of these poets laid the ground upon which new intermedial approaches could expand and evolve, and in the decades since new generations of poets and publishers have been attracted to the possibilities of the approaches described in this book, though they have of course found their own ways of contributing to this paratradition. More work could be done to forcefully situate the poets born in later decades and who established themselves in the wake of borderblur's beginnings in the 1960s. Poets like Margaret Christakos, Gary Barwin, jwcurry, and Stuart Ross—all of whom knew Nichol directly as a friend and mentor—were born around the same time in the late 1950s and early 1960s, just as borderblur was being born in Canada.

In her "poem for bp" from *Psychic Unrest* (2000), Lillian Allen laments Nichol's death and recognizes his lasting impression on writing in Canada: "u never really left," she writes,

> and u became a womb
> birth a child of Canadian culture
> promise destruction of borders
> in the turbulence of language[3]

Allen has made significant contributions to Canadian writing herself—especially through her involvement with dub poetry—yet it is notable that she cites Nichol as a significant figure in the development of Canadian literary culture and recognizes how his work promises the effacement of borders. Allen would identify Nichol as representative of Canadian literary culture, I believe, because he was central in creating a kind of literary zeitgeist in which

Allen's own intermedial work as a dub poet fits nicely. Ojibway poet Wayne Keon similarly praises bissett in "an opun ltur tu bill bissett" (1972), wherein he notes bissett's influence on his writing. In an orthography reminiscent of bissett's own, he writes,

> deer bill
> i don't think
> i evr met yu
> but sum peopul i no did
> the rezun i am riting
> this letr is tu tel yu
> that i used sum of
> yr lines[4]

Keon goes on to thank bissett at the end of the poem. While he gives bissett the same degree of recognition as Allen gave Nichol, Keon's similar orthography suggests that bissett's influence far exceeded the immediate coterie of poets that this book examined.

Like Allen and Keon, many writers in Canada found meaning in the activities and ideas of borderblur. In 1986, Paul Dutton and Steven Ross Smith edited a substantial *festschrift* for *Open Letter* dedicated to Nichol and his work. This issue included contributions from Canadian and international writers, including George Bowering, Bob Cobbing, Robert Kroetsch, Barbara Caruso, Dick Higgins, Margaret Avison, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Stephen Scobie, Daphne Marlatt, Fred Wah, Gerry Shikatani, Earle Birney, Jíri Valoch, and many others. As evidenced by this list, Nichol had a unique ability to formulate relationships across generations, styles of writing, and geographical contexts. Evidence of Nichol's persisting influence appears again in later issues of *Open Letter* showcasing various intellectual and creative engagements with his work. In 1998 a special issue was published, entitled "bpNichol + 10," edited by Frank Davey and with contributions from Nichol's friends and a younger assemblage of writers and scholars, including Lori Emerson, Darren Wershler, Peter Jaeger, Stephen Cain, and Christian Bök. Ten years later, Lori Emerson published two additional issues of *Open Letter* dedicated to Nichol (in 2008 and 2009), featuring Clint Burnham, Stephen Voyce, Steve Zultanski, Marie Buck, and Jim Andrews, a list that speaks to Nichol's continued influence on writers across borders. Nichol's work continues to be

revisited by poets and scholars, including Derek Beaulieu and Cain, who have both recently edited volumes of Nichol's lesser-studied writings.

Writings that praise, celebrate, and study the legacy and personalities associated with borderblur have not been limited to Nichol. bissett was the subject of a 1997 issue of the *Capilano Review* containing several anecdotal, creative, and scholarly engagements with his work. Contributors to this issue include Susan Musgrave, Jamie Reid, Adeena Karasick, Judith Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Darren Wershler, and Renee Rodin. This was later republished by Guernica as *bill bissett: Essays on his Works* (2002), edited by Linda Rogers. McCaffery, too, has had two issues of *Open Letter* dedicated to his work, the first in 1987 (edited by bpNichol) and the second in 2011 (edited by Cain). These issues, like those dedicated to Nichol and bissett, speak to McCaffery's lasting influence in creative and scholarly contexts. In "Becoming Clinamen: McCaffery and the (new) York School of Writing," Gregory Betts describes a "less articulated group [of poets] made up of those who capitalized on the opportunity afforded by McCaffery's employment as a professor in the English Department at York University from 1998 until 2003."[5] These writers include Bök, Cain, Wershler, Angela Rawlings, Bill Kennedy, Suzanne Zelazo, Jason Christie, Jay Millar, and Geoffrey Hlibchuk. This was a group of poets, Betts writes, that

> emerged in the late nineties and "Oughts" during McCaffery's tenure at the Toronto university, and that remains active today albeit in a variety of loci, [and they] might have encountered McCaffery through the auspices of a formal education (if they weren't already actively engaged with his work) but used his influence to provoke multifarious and radical literary practices both inside and outside the institution.[6]

While McCaffery, Nichol, and bissett have received these most apparent forms of praise and recognition from poets, critics, and fans, other writers have undoubtedly had their share of influence, undocumented or less documented.

Poet damian lopes, who ran the Nichol-inspired micro-press Fingerprinting Inkoperated—which released work by Nichol, Nelson Ball, jwcurry, David UU, and others—comes to borderblur with both admiration and critique. His prose poem "requiem for the avant-garde" offers an oblique characterization of borderblur: "twelve whitemen in ordered succession stand

in an idle pub to regurgitate carefully rehearsed dada protest commodity. primal screams of ignoble savages in neutral zurich defying the brutality of a world gone mad with African rhythms over pints of beer, around the body counts of colonial armies."[7] The "regurgitation" described here is perhaps a reference to the neo-Dadaism that marked theorizations of borderblur's intermediality by poets such as David UU and others. lopes's critique identifies a critical misstep of borderblur poetics despite its international scope and gestures toward inclusion: the failure of some poets to adequately consider race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity in the formation of their communities and as a factor within their work. This book has provided evidence that numerous, previously overlooked women were integral to the formation and proliferation of borderblur poetics. However, the overwhelming whiteness and various cultural appropriations that informed borderblur's initial vanguard is notable (as discussed at various points in this book). lopes's critique identifies a blind spot in borderblur's program of "openness" and highlights a fundamental problem that emerges when the world is believed to be radically open.

Canada is undergoing a renaissance of poetic activity that began in the 2010s and continues into the 2020s. This later generation of poets has once again extended the intermedial paratradition, working in ways that often consciously address and intervene in social and political contexts, ranging from identity, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, class, labour, and religion. Poets like Jordan Abel, Sacha Archer, Kyle Flemmer, Helen Hajnoczky, Kate Siklosi, Dani Spinosa, Matthew James Weigel, and others are empowered by the intermedial environment of the computer, and some embrace a DIY aesthetic when creating and publishing their work. In many cases, these poets engage with the visuality of concrete poetry through various inimitable means, often blending digital and analogue methods of composition. These more recent additions, interventions, and continuations extend, expand, and enrich the legacies of Canadian intermedial poetics, but this work—much like the initial wave of borderblur poetry—has been welcomed into new micro-communities abroad, such as the magazine *To Call* (Germany) and the publishing outfits Timglaset (Sweden), Paperview Books (Portugal), Penteract Press (England), and Happy Monks (United States).

Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel is perhaps the most well-known of these poets since his work has received several well-deserved literary accolades, including the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize and the Griffin Poetry Prize. As the recipient of these prizes, Abel has received far less public criticism from members

of Parliament than Nichol did in the 1970s. This may be an indicator of a broader acceptance of intermedial approaches today, but it also points to the urgency and necessity of Abel's poetry. Across his books *The Place of Scraps* (2013), *Un/inhabited* (2014), *Injun* (2016), and *Nishga* (2020), he has updated the predominantly analogue methods of concrete poetry by creating with digital tools while advancing decolonial politics. For *Un/inhabited*, Abel data-mined the many settler colonial romance novels stored in the online textual repository Project Gutenberg. Abel used the language from these novels as his source text, which he then manipulated to create poems in a variety of forms, including lists, prose poems, erasures, and visual poems in the shapes of maps, landforms, waterways, and abstract palimpsests. As I have argued elsewhere,[8] the section of his book entitled "Cartography" gestures toward a word-world relationship that accounts for how language impacts the shape of the world, and vice versa. Abel's intermedial, map-like poems recognize the impact these novels have had in shaping settler-Indigenous relations by presenting, for example, Indigenous people and nations as "savage others" while presenting white European settlers as romantic heroes. The visual poems of "Cartography," for example, depict the shorelines to which colonial forces arrived before stealing the land from Indigenous inhabitants. The settler colonial novel was one of the ways that colonizers articulated and shaped their relationship to the land and their memories of it, denigrating the presence of the Indigenous people that preceded them. These visual poems are not reclamations of land; rather, they remind readers that language and stories shape the world and the cultural and social values and political systems of any given society. Abel's poetry represents a digital, intermedial poetic that intervenes into literary history and textual representations of settler colonialism.

Like Abel, anarchist-feminist poet Dani Spinosa has also breathed new life into borderblur, most obviously in her book of *glosas*, *OO: Typewriter Poems* (2020), wherein she creates analogue concrete typewriter poems and then digitally manipulates them. These poems imitate the style of many twentieth- and twenty-first-century concrete poets. Spinosa's work, like lopes's, is both inspired by and critical of previous generations of intermedial poets: "I love these poets and these poems, and I mean to show that love," she writes.[9] However, she continues, her "relationship with visual poetics is fraught."[10] While lopes is critical of previous generations on account of their lack of racial sensitivity, Spinosa's book addresses the historical marginalization of women within concrete poetics in Canada and beyond. In her dialogic "Afterword"

with Siklosi, Spinosa explains that, before she completed the research for her book, she “had no idea about the long history of women who were doing this work,”[11] which is a direct result of the way previous generations of poets and critics have historicized borderblur, nationally and internationally. Her poem, riffing on the style of Dom Sylvester Houédard, is written in a vertical column of *o*’s that descend while bouncing across horizontal ledges of typewritten dashes. As the *o*’s reach the bottom of the page, the typewritten letters *g* and *d* appear. The poem, then, is an elongated expression of “O God,” a reference to Houédard’s religious devotion. On the other hand, the poem’s elongation of “O God” could also be read as an expression of exasperation, as in the common expression “Oh God,” often accompanied by an eye roll. If read this way, and given that Houédard coined the term “borderblur,” it could be said that the speaker of this poem is rolling her eyes at the predominantly masculinist tradition that Houédard’s notion arguably set in motion in the 1960s. In this way, Spinosa’s *OO: Typewriter Poems* is a significant contribution to the legacy of borderblur poetics since it offers an expanded methodological approach while contributing to critical conversations regarding this work and the historical displacement of women from the established narrative.

Though borderblur poets in the mid- to late twentieth century received scant recognition from the literary mainstream, intermedia has evidently become increasingly commonplace. There is much work to be done on Canadian intermedial literature in the 1990s and 2000s, and the more recent examples from Abel and Spinosa confirm that borderblur poetics continues to thrive even though it might not be labelled as such. Borderblur and the intermedial literature of today may be distinguished from the past by their social and political foci, but they share an interest with previous generations in expanding poetic form and the poem’s cultural context. In this way, they both share—inadvertently or not—an inclination toward Nichol’s expanded sense of the poem in his search for unlimited “entrances and exits” into and out of poetic production. Nichol conceived of his practice, and by extension the work of borderblur more broadly, as a means of expanding linguistic expression, of expressing oneself and one’s connection with other individuals and communities. In his time, Nichol saw this as a way of responding to the consolidation of a conventional, nationalistic literary tradition that did not adequately reflect the conditions of expression or connection in the mid- to late twentieth century. Subsequent generations of poets have seized on the possibilities of an expanded field of poetic production, and the combination

of image, sound, and movement continues to dominate broader cultural productions today. In these ways, intermedia and the legacy of borderblur poetics expands the possibilities for expressing the complexity of self and community.