

CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTAL POETRY IN CANADA AND BRAZIL: CONVERGENCE AND CONTRAST

POESIA EXPERIMENTAL CONTEMPORÂNEA NO CANADÁ E NO BRASIL: CONVERGÊNCIA E CONTRASTE

Odile Cisneros¹

Submetido em 12 de junho e aprovado em 22 de agosto de 2013.

Resumo: Atualmente estou envolvida na criação da primeira antologia de poesia experimental canadense de língua inglesa a ser publicada no Brasil. O processo de seleção dos autores e dos textos para a antologia, visando a reunir uma coleção que tivesse relevância com o público leitor de poesia no Brasil, revelou convergências e contrastes surpreendentes. Através de uma seleção de exemplos e balizado na conceituação “O que é Contemporâneo?” do filósofo Giorgio Agamben, o presente ensaio explora como poetas experimentais em ambos países se aproximam dos aspectos materiais da poesia, da diversidade de identidades (indígena, imigrante), da oralidade, e de preocupações ambientais.

Palavras-chave: Poesia canadense contemporânea; Poesia brasileira contemporânea; escrita experimental; poéticas comparadas.

Abstract: I am currently involved in creating the first anthology of contemporary English-language experimental poetry from Canada for a Brazilian audience. The process of selecting both the authors and texts for this anthology, with a view to assemble a collection that would “resonate” with the poetry-reading public in Brazil revealed surprising convergences as well as contrasts. Through selected examples and relying on Giorgio Agamben’s theorization “What is the Contemporary?”, this essay explores how experimental poets in these two countries

¹ **Associate Professor; Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies**, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canadá. cisneros@ualberta.ca

approach the material aspects of poetry, the issue of the diversity of identities (Native, immigrant), orality, and environmental concerns.

Keywords: Canadian contemporary poetry; Brazilian contemporary poetry; experimental writing; Giorgio Agamben; comparative poetics

In 2008 I began a project with the Canadian poet Christine Stewart to create the first-ever anthology of English-language experimental poetry from Canada for a Brazilian audience. The process of selecting the authors and work for the anthology was not easy, not only because of the sheer amount of excellent experimental writing coming out of Canada at the present time, but also because of the responsibility involved in bringing together these two contemporary poetry scenes that historically have had very little contact. How does one “present” (here echoing the Portuguese term “apresentar,” or “introduce”) without attempting to “represent” (with all the implications of creating narratives that inevitably will seem exclusionary to some)? At the same time, how does one assemble a collection of work that could “resonate” with sophisticated Brazilian poetry readers who, however, may not be familiar with Canada’s contemporary writing scene? What indeed could be the connecting threads?

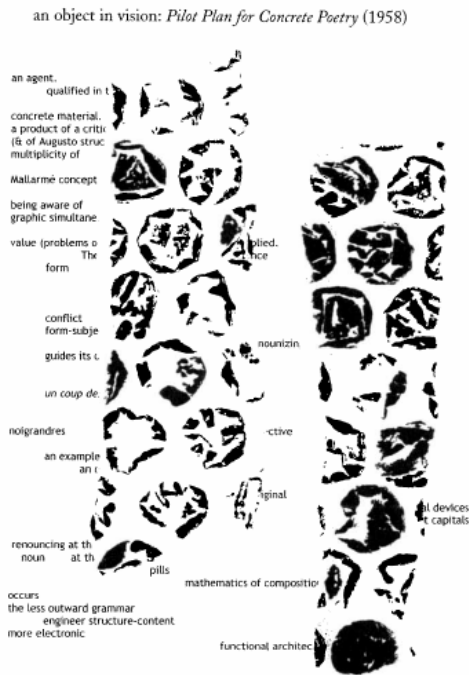
As I grappled with these questions, I found in the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s essay “What is the Contemporary” the echo of some ideas from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which helped me articulate my understanding of how two seemingly far-flung poetry scenes such as those from Brazil and Canada could be brought together and understood through the concept of the contemporary. The literary critic Helga Geyer-Ryan has noted that, as a modernist philosopher of history, “Benjamin called into question such notions of traditional historical discourse as continuity, development, process, progress and organicity [...] As a modernist theoretician of historiography, he was critical of

traditional narrative with its rosary-like chain of cause-and-effect stories,” favoring instead fragmentary, discontinuous forms based on the principle of montage (GEYER-RYAN, 1985, p. 66). In his critique of historicism, Benjamin equally challenged progression through a homogeneous empty time, in which events unfold in a cause-effect, endless continuity. To this, he opposed what he termed “Messianic” time, a time in which simultaneity rules and, as he states, “a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past,” making it possible for all moments in the past to “become citable” (BENJAMIN, 1968, p. 261, 254). These temporal concepts can shed light on what we call the contemporary in cultural production.

Agamben illustrates these ideas with the example of fashion: “Fashion can therefore ‘cite,’ and in this way make relevant again, any moment from the past (the 1920s, the 1970s, but also the neoclassical or empire style). It can therefore tie together that which it has inexorably divided – recall, re-evoke, and revitalize that which it had declared dead” (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 50). The contemporary subject, Agamben concludes, “is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times” (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 53). This characterization, thus, was particularly useful to me, when I decided to delve into the for me terra incognita of contemporary Canadian poetry, carrying as compass a background in modern and contemporary Brazilian poetry, in particular the concrete poetry of the Noigandres group.

To my surprise, the focus on the material aspects of poetry – which in Brazil has lost some of its currency after the decades-long influence of concrete poetry – was nevertheless of great interest today to experimental poets in Canada such as Christian Bök and Derek Beaulieu, both based in Calgary. Christian Bök won the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize for *Eunoia* (2001), a volume partly inspired by the experiments of the French OULIPO poetry group. In *Eunoia*, where each chapter only contains words

using one vowel, the strong focus on sound is reminiscent of the “verbi-voco-visual” poetry introduced in Brazil by the Noigandres poets, Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, and Décio Pignatari. Beaulieu for his part, in his 2006 book of concrete and visual poetry *Fractal Economies*, includes the poem “an object in vision: *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry* (1958),” which cites, in a deliberately fragmented and quasi illegible form, the famous manifesto by the Noigandres poets:



In Beaulieu’s piece, words from the English translation of the manifesto “plano piloto para poesia concreta,” appear truncated and rearranged using techniques developed by modernist poets such as Tristan Tzara and William Burroughs. The piece is also overlaid with “collaged monoprints made from bubblewrap,” and “photocopy degeneration is applied on top of the newly formed texts” (Beaulieu, Email communication, May 21, 2012).

The De Campos brothers and Pignatari originally published “plano

piloto para poesia concreta” in their little magazine *noigandres* 4 in São Paulo in 1954. Writing in Calgary more than fifty years later, Beaulieu, appropriates this manifesto for his own contemporary poetic practice. The poem (and for that matter Beaulieu’s entire book) thus puts the concrete moment in relation to the current times, recalling, re-evoking and revitalizing that which (in the Brazilian context) has been declared dead by some. “Revitalizing” is key here, because it’s not a matter of a simple “homage” or citation of a vanguard from the past. It is instead a question of critically harnessing and unleashing its potential for the present, of “mak[ing that past] relevant again,” as Agamben puts it (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 50). The way Beaulieu achieves this is through a careful and critical consideration of the contexts in which concrete poetry emerged, and although in the genealogy Beaulieu establishes he references less the Brazilian concrete poets than their Swiss-Bolivian counterpart, Eugen Gomringer, his points are equally valid for the Brazilian context.

Concrete poetry appeared and flourished in the postwar era of graphic design, advertising, mass communications, and sought to produce a universal poetry that could be quickly and effectively consumed by all. But, as Beaulieu notes in the “afterward”[sic] to *Fractal Economies*, “the form of the modernist concrete poem today is no more than an advertisement; completely co-opted by the ‘golden arches,’ the Nike ‘swoosh’ and the Dell logo [that] directly and unquestioningly underwrites capitalist exchange” (BEAULIEU, 2006, p. 81). Beaulieu, instead, endorses a concrete poetry “without one-to-one signification [...] rhizomatic in its composition [and] which focuses on excess – the leftovers, the refuse, the waste” (BEAULIEU, 2006, p. 82). He further challenges the “author-function” by proposing a poetry where business machines (photocopiers, scanners, printers, three-hole punchers) are seen as fulfilling part of that authorial role through a poetics of waste and refuse, which in turn is a critique of the capitalist commodification of language. Specifically in the piece cited

above, Beaulieu uses bubble wrap and photocopiers to create the visual effect of the poem, which, ironically, produces a somewhat illegible piece, rather than an “object in vision.” Beaulieu’s work, therefore, can connect with a contemporary Brazilian audience because it effectively puts the (Brazilian) concrete moment back into circulation through a critical practice that overcomes or circumvents its limitations, extending, so to speak, its “shelf life,” and, ultimately, making it relevant for the contemporary world.

Coupled with a desire for formal innovation, our survey of the variety of voices in contemporary experimental poetry in Canada also revealed a concern with issues of identity, and here too there were surprises in the way the past can reemerge revitalized. To this effect, Agamben comments on the relation between the contemporary and the archaic: “The key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial and the prehistoric [...] The avant-garde, which has lost itself over time, also pursues the primitive and the archaic” (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 51). This is something that Canadian experimental writers like AnnHarte (penname of Marie Annharte Baker) have understood well and incorporated into their poetic practice. A First Nations performance poet, storyteller and grandma (Kookun), AnnHarte draws from the oral traditions of her Ojibwe background, referencing Native prehistoric and folk characters. In the poem “Mama Sasquatch,” for instance, the poetic voice identifies with the folk character of the “Sasquatch” or Bigfoot of the Pacific Northwest, while reflecting, in the midst of a gritty urban scene, on the complex reality of race relations in Canada:

if we got back time immemorial
greet ingratitude with goodbye
bag lady buddy is warning to me
next time I displace teacher of
canadian literature I will practice

Indigenous scribble on the permanent
face Mama Sasquatch reflects
(BAKER, 2008, p. 19)

In this poem and others, the author explains, these poetic voices represent “the tough street women,” she knew as a child and “have found to be great storytellers” (GRAUER & BAKER, 2006, p. 121). This type of identification of the poetic voice with an ancestral folk character also appears in the poem “Bird Clan Mother,” where, as the author notes, “the poet persona evolves from ‘Prehistoric possum mother’ to ‘Bird Clan Mother’ [enabling her to] escape the stress and competition of life to regain personal vision and power” (GRAUER & BAKER, 2006, p. 117). These poems, thus, are contemporary (following Agamben) not only in their pursuit of the archaic but also, as with Beaulieu, in how these references to origin are cited and made relevant for identity constructions of today. Writing in 2006, in a witty and incisive way, AnnHarte observes: “Because it is the Year of the Dog (2006), the canine compulsion to chase one’s own tale still coincides with the identity quest (especially after years of colonization) as circular and not always a linear progression of pre-ndn, ndn, and therefore post-ndn” (GRAUER & BAKER, 2006, p. 126). These words seem to echo precisely what Agamben says about the continuity of origin in historical becoming:

Only he who perceives the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary. ‘Archaic’ means close to the *arkhé*, that is to say, the origin. But the origin is not only situated in a chronological past: it is contemporary with historical becoming and does not cease to operate within it, just as the embryo continues to be active in the tissues of the mature organism, and the child in the psychic life of the adult. (AGAMBEN, 2009, p. 50)

Another Canadian experimental poet we include in our anthology, Oana Avasilichioaei, might be cited here as well as yet another example of

not only how ancestral motifs make their way into contemporary writing, but also, precisely, how the child lives on in the psychic life of the adult. Her long poem “The Tyrant and the Wolfbat: A Tailing or A Telling” is a rhapsodic free-form piece prompted by childhood memories of listening to the storytelling of her Romanian relatives, her grandmother in particular. Avasilichioaei’s text is populated by mythical creatures who are neither animals nor humans, but, like the Wolfbat, an indefinite mixture of both:

Wolves nibble, chat in tongues with the elders.

A culture of creatures *te deum* the wildflowers

strutted elbows and hipbones
circling palm to palm, in the valley way

child, do you hear the calling?

one blue wolf eye
one brown wolf eye
one wolf hung by its own tail from the tallest branch
gathers the truth of bats
how to say ahhhooooooooo in elder tongue
(AVASILICHIOAEI, 2008, p. 21)

Avasilichioaei’s poem also makes evident the influence of orality, the pre-history of literature as written word. In *We Beasts* (2012), where this poem was republished in somewhat revised form, Avasilichioaei further explores the aspects of orality in an intriguing work entitled “Spelles,” performed last year at The Poetic Performance Lab of the Calgary Public Library. An audio of this performance is available in the Penn Sound website, from where I quote the following summary:

Spelles is inspired by a medieval French manuscript, *Les Évangiles des Quenouilles*, and its medieval English translation, *The Gospel-*

les of Dystaues. Under an anonymous author, this manuscript is supposed to mark the first instance in western writing, when stories, which had previously been transmitted orally by six female voices, were inscribed on parchment. Spelles attempts to gloss and dislocate inscription back into orality. (<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Avasilichioaei.php>, Accessed May 19, 2012)

There is a convergence here with not only the orality of pre-print cultures, but also with the emphasis on sound in the historical avant-gardes (Dadaists such as Kurt Schwitters and Hugo Ball) and concrete poetry, to return to the Brazilian side of things. Much contemporary poetry in Brazil, as well, has drawn inspiration from popular music, and as Ant3nio Ris3rio, in an introduction to an anthology of emerging Brazilian poets, notes, “[t]he poetry of Brazilian popular music [...] has had the power to warn us against any technological exclusivity in the terrain of poetry” (RIS3RIO, 1998, 20).

A contrast, though, can be noted when trying to bring these two contemporary poetry contexts together. While similar native folklore and vast immigrant populations with storytelling traditions also exist in Brazil, it is difficult to find contemporary poets keen on reworking archaic indigenous motifs or similarly tapping into ancestral storytelling practices in comparable ways. There are some parallels, but they remain mostly in the past. One can think for instance of Brazilian Antropofagia’s modernist rewriting of native motifs in Raul Bopp’s *Cobra Norato* (1938), or of Jo3o Cabral de Melo Neto’s appropriation of popular speech and the oral-based *literatura de cordel* in *Morte e vida severina* (1955). But, in a sharp and interesting contrast, contemporary poets in Brazil have mostly shied away from revisiting the ancestral past for the purposes of identity constructions in the present. Jo3o Almino notes that the concrete poetry movement “postulates a rupture from narrative and the disappearance of the ‘self’” (ALMINO, 1997, p. 19). And while the so-called “poesia marginal” of the 1970s and

80s in Brazil did try to recover orality, it was mostly a “colloquial and informal poetry of immediate experience” (ALMINO, 1997, p. 21), rather than an exploration of archaic sources.

Perhaps one notable exception is the Afro-Brazilian poet from Minas Gerais, Edimilson de Almeida Pereira. As one critic notes, Almeida Pereira, who is also an anthropologist, “draws on his training as an anthropologist and capitalizes on his interest in Afro-Brazilian history, literature and tradition by transmuting his experience as a field researcher to his poetic discourse” (BARBOSA, 2000, p. 63). For Almeida Pereira, “language is also part of a mystic and historical environment used in the backlands of Minas Gerais and/or in the religious and secular Afro-Mineiro rites, recounting the past without losing sight of significant changes in the present” (BARBOSA, 2000, p. 63). But Almeida Pereira’s case is rare, and it is interesting that despite a vast repository of ancestral indigenous and African sources, contemporary poets in Brazil have not, as a rule, attempted similar explorations of the past with a view to rendering them relevant for the present.

Another fascinating convergence was how some experimental poets attempt to link their practice to environmental concerns. The work of Angela Rawlings (a. k. rawlings) in her series “signs of engenderment,” “signs of endangerment,” “signs of extinction” establishes a connection between gender, language, and environmental risk:

SIGNS OF ENGENDERMENT

His her he she him hers. Who
is she? Is he? Is he her? Is she
him? He hers her his. Her him
his her he. Who his he?

Moose or moth. Them or him.

Her trout or her trees. The trout is. She is.
The moose were. They were.
Trees. She's

SIGNS OF ENDANGERMENT

Still were moose here. Still, moose were here. Still, here
were moose. Still, here moose
were moths here? Were moths still. Here
were still moths. Here, moths were still. Here, trout still
were trout still here? Trout were still here. Trout were
here
still. Trees
still were here. Trees here were still
were trees here still?
Yes yes you were here

SIGNS OF EXTINCTION

Yesyesyou were here still. You were here.
Yes with me. Here with me. Here still.
(RAWLINGS, 2009, p. 116)

In a clever paronomastic play on the words “gender” and “danger,” the poems associate the gendered nature of language to environmental risks faced by plant and animal species indigenous to the Canadian biosphere. What appears at first a mere linguistic exploration of personal pronouns in the first poem, leads to a meditation on the continued existence of plants and animals that are iconic of Canada (trout, moose, trees), and ends with an ambiguous statement about the survival of humans as well as a more general ontological question. Contemporary poets in Brazil such as

Astrid Cabral and Sérgio Medeiros have also approached environmental concerns in their work. One of Cabral's works published in translation as *Cage* explores the diversity of the fauna of the Amazon region where she grew up, and Sérgio Medeiros's poetry volume translated as *Vegetal Sex* puts forth the concept of a gendered plant world.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the issue of "What is the Contemporary," perhaps with the insight I gained from my attempt to connect the poetic experimentalisms of Canada and Brazil, namely, that the "contemporary" is not necessarily the "contemporaneous." Seen synchronically as "contemporaneous" these poetries may not have much in common with each other (due perhaps to the lack of contact and exchange as well as differences in their sources and influences). But in a diachronic way, in the way that Benjamin spoke for instance of "a secret agreement between past generations and the present one," these poetries are contemporary in their own right and contemporary to one another. Benjamin also suggested the image of a "constellation" that the historical materialist perceived had been formed between his "own era [. . .] and a definite earlier one" (BENJAMIN, 1968, p. 263). The image of distant stars and closer ones forming a constellation coincides also with his conception of Messianic time where past and present are simultaneous, citable next to each other. This allows us to see the way these poetries engage with their own past or the past of other traditions, making it relevant for the present, making it new. In this way, they can be brought into a productive and mutually-enriching dialogue with one another when read side by side, and even more so when physically brought into contact through translation.

References

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio. What is the Contemporary? *What is an Apparatus?*
Translated
by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford U P, 2009.
- ALMINO, João. Foreword; Palmer, Michael; Bonvicino, Régis; Nelson Ascher. *Nothing the Sun Could Not Explain: 20 Contemporary Brazilian Poets*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1997.
- AVASILICHIOAEI, Oana. From Gossip in the Valley. Farr, Roger (Ed.) *Open Text: Canadian Poetry and Poetics in the 21st Century*. Vol. 1, North Vancouver: CUE 2008.
- BAKER, Marie Annharte. Mama Sasquatch. Farr, Roger, Ed. *Open Text: Canadian Poetry and Poetics in the 21st Century*. Vol. 1, North Vancouver: CUE 2008.
- BARBOSA, Maria José Somerlate. Strategies Of Poetic Language In Afro-Mineiro
Discourses. *Luso-Brazilian Review* 37.1 (2000): 63-82.
- BEAULIEU, Derek A. *Fractal Economies*. Vancouver: Talon Books, 2006.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. Theses on the Philosophy of History. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- GRAUER, Lally; BAKER, Marie Annharte. A Weasel Pops In And Out Of Old Tunes: Exchanging Words. *Studies In Canadian Literature/Etudes En Littérature Canadienne* 31.1 (2006): 116-127.
- GEYER-RYAN, Helga. Counterfactual Artefacts: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History. Timms, Edward and David Kelley, Eds. *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. 66-79.
- RAWLINGS, Angela. Signs of Engenderment. Signs of Endangerment. Signs of Extinction. MADHUR, Anand;

DICKINSON (Eds.) *Regreen: New Canadian Ecological Poetry*. Sudbury, Ontario: Your Scrivener Press, 2009.

RISÉRIO, Antonio. Introduction: On the Gathering of the Flowers of Speech. *Outras praias: 13 poetas brasileiros emergentes/Other Shores: 13 Emerging Brazilian Poets*. São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1998. 18-25.