

innovations of gay and lesbian documentary, and detailing the long and difficult struggle to publish his illustrated history of homoerotic imagery, *Hard to Imagine*. As with the earlier pieces, these essays display a passionate engagement that is fortunately matched with a sense of humour. There is much to be grateful for in this volume, not just for its documentation of the battles that have been fought and the ones that remain, but for the revolutionary energy that produced these writings (and their subjects) in the first place.

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bill bissett. *b leev abul char ak trs*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000. 144pp. \$16.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-433-1

Mark Cochrane. *Change Room*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000. 144pp. \$15.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-432-3

Daphne Marlatt. *This Tremor Love Is*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2001. 112pp. \$15.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-450-1

Erin Mouré. *Pillage Laud*. Toronto: Moveable Type, 1999. 99pp. \$25(Cdn) ISBN 0-9684908-0-8

Erin Mouré. *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*. Toronto: Anansi, 2001. 131pp. \$16.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-88784-660-2

nathalie stephens. *Somewhere Running*. Vancouver: Advance Editions, 2000. 96pp. \$13.95(Cdn) ISBN 1-55152-089-3

Rachel Zolf. *Her absence, this wanderer*. Ottawa: BuschekBooks, 1999. 71pp. \$14.95(Cdn) ISBN 0-9699904-8-0

Charles Watts and Edward Byrne, eds. *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1999. 464pp. \$35(Cdn) ISBN 0-88922-388-2

## JOHN C. STOUT (McMaster University)

Contemporary poetry – in Canada and elsewhere – affords the most interesting site for doing, and for studying, experimental writing. Among the many highly talented and original poets producing experimental work in this country, queer poets have made an especially outstanding contribution. In this review I want to focus on seven recent books of poetry by queer writers, along with a volume of critical essays on radical poetics in honour of Robin Blaser. These eight texts – all first-rate, in my opinion – demonstrate the range and vitality of these new poetics.

**bill bissett**

Since the 1960s, bill bissett has made a substantial and important contribution to Canadian poetry. He is, indeed, one of Canada's most innovative and prolific experimental poets. Critics have studied his work mostly within the context of the development of the new poetics in this country during and after the 1960s (see Caroline Bayard, *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*). His achievement has been compared with that of bp Nichol, Steve McCaffery, Paul Dutton, and other male experimentalists. However, the gay sexuality that distinguishes his poetry from theirs remains unexplored by his critics. For example, Karl Jirgens's monograph on bissett avoids all discussion of the gay content of the poems. Significantly, for bissett himself, his sexuality is of fundamental importance for interpreting his work and understanding his view of language. He has told me that he suspects that lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people have a relationship to language that is quite different from that of heterosexuals.

Traditional lyric themes, such as love, longing, spirituality, and a closeness to nature frequently surface in bissett's poetry. His poems often resemble entries in a personal diary, recounting events in his life and the lives of his friends. In these respects, his work may appear rather conventional. However, throughout his oeuvre he practises an idiosyncratic respelling, or 'misspelling,' of familiar words, substituting his own phonetic spellings of the words for the 'proper,' dictionary spelling. bissett thus reinvents written language. He alters his reader's feeling for, and relationship to, everyday reality by radicalizing language. One could argue that, by means of this 'odd' approach to spelling, bissett is queering how and what poetry communicates. His writing expresses an estrangement from conventional written language while, at the same time, opening up that language to evoke a fresh perspective on experience. A sense of childlike wonder at the beauty of the world, with its unexpected coincidences and surprises, characterizes many bissett poems.

*b leev abul char ak trs* is a splendid new collection of his poems and drawings. The poems present a joyous immersion in experience, including sexual experience:

we leev our bodeez th bluez afr th serching  
tongue cock mouth carresses evree opning letting  
go uv anee with holding thers time 4 that afr th

raining will occur tho 2 sit n stare at th rain  
 endlesslee til sumthing ionik is almost satisfied  
 thn getting bizee promising mor lushness we live (17).

As is evident in this passage, bissett's poetry is characterized by an openness and receptivity to the world around him. The outlook the poems express remains fundamentally optimistic and tender, as he blends the personal, the political, the erotic, and the ecstatic.

### Mark Cochrane

In his new collection of poems, Mark Cochrane uses the metaphorical space of the change room to explore the construction and transformation of male sexuality. The poems' speaker is a father to two small children. He is involved in a heterosexual relationship with his partner, Miranda. However, many of the poems focus on his fascination with male bodies (those of hockey player Pavel Bure and of the men he observes lifting weights at the gym). The increasingly erotic contemplation and description of these bodies leads him to sexual encounters with another man. At the end of the book, the speaker outs himself as a bisexual.

The title *Change Room*, as the book's back cover tells us, is meant to act as "a barbed hook of seduction for the reader in love with the body of language." Many of these poems revel in a macho imagery of gay jock erotics. At the same time, Cochrane displays a cocky inventiveness with poetic form and language. I especially enjoyed the two poems "Sexing the Page" (130) and "Thief's Journal: Glottal Jack" (131), where the poet brings together linguistic playfulness and in-your-face gay eroticism, while showing his awareness of writing in, and beyond, a gay male tradition including bill bissett and Jean Genet.

The final section of *Change Room* is a long poem in XIII parts. Throughout this sequence, Cochrane continually references leading queer theorists: Michel Foucault, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, and others. Although the text's earlier sections had foregrounded a heterosexual lifestyle, here the sex is decidedly homo – and hot. The speaker's pleasure in the presence of men's naked bodies becomes his chief preoccupation. He makes homo physicality coextensive with textuality, quoting Whitman: "Camerado, this is no book/ Who touches this touches a man."

The final poem in the collection, "Bi," allegorizes inness and

outness; it voices the (potential) ambiguities of a bisexual identity:  
 even if the body of the man be far gone (in) or come out  
 already, wherever in is/ out is, the rays of knowing  
 him, or thinking so, hung to fade on choice's  
 cusp - & we scorn his flicker, wave fists  
 in the air yet cut with no shadows  
 a picture of one who is neither

there nor there (142).

Like the texts of his contemporaries Stephens and Zolf, Cochrane's *Change Room* deserves to be recognized as an exciting and challenging example of the new poetics in Canada.

### **Daphne Marlatt**

Daphne Marlatt is, unquestionably, one of the most gifted poets writing in English in Canada. Initially linked to B.C.'s Tish poets, and influenced by the Black Mountain School of poetry and poetics (Olson, Creeley, Duncan), Marlatt is now best known for her crucial contribution to the development of feminist poetics in Canada. She was one of the four founding editors of *Tessera*, one of the leading theoretical/creative journals for feminist writing from Quebec and English Canada. Through her activities as an editor, poet, professor of Women's Studies and organizer of feminist conferences, she has played a major part in encouraging women's creativity. In her own poetry, she has succeeded in giving voice and form to a lesbian desire considered illicit or heretical within patriarchal culture. Addressing other lesbians, she asserts that "we have to break language, its syntactical rules, its labels, to convey the repressed, even the previously unthought or unthinkable – lesbian experience, its articulation" (*Readings from the Labyrinth*, 2). The catalyst for much of Marlatt's most influential writing, such as the long poem "Touch to My Tongue," is the need to enunciate and celebrate lesbian eroticism:

To mark eros with lesbian identity: a new word, *lesbera*, the  
*lesberetic* (yes, here-  
 tic) expression of erotic power as a trans-forming energy we  
 revel in each time we move  
 our lovers, our readers and ourselves to that ecstatic surging  
 beyond limits. Each time we



follow the language-surge of connection writing beyond conventional limits across the page. (*Readings from the Labyrinth*, 49)

*This Tremor Love Is*, described on its back cover as “a memory book – an album of love poems spanning twenty-five years,” includes both heterosexual and lesbian love poems. The earlier, heterosexual poems are dedicated to Roy Kiyooka, Marlatt’s partner in the 1970s, prior to her coming out as a lesbian. Two sequences of her later love poems, “Small Print” and “Sea Shining Between,” are dedicated to Betsy Warland. A more recent sequence, “Impossible Portraiture,” is dedicated to Bridget MacKenzie. All these poems are carefully written, aesthetically innovative and pleasurable, and extremely sensuous.

In “Sea Shining Between” the poet evokes a voyage to present-day Lesbos with her female lover. The quotes she presents from such ancestors as Renée Vivien, H.D., and Sappho as well as from contemporary poets (Nicole Brossard, Olga Broumas) connect Marlatt’s quest, and her poetic voice, to a wider intertextual community of lesbians. Sappho, in particular, provides the main context for this journey linking love and writing:

like her, precisely on this page, this mark: *a thin flame runs under / my skin*. twenty-five hundred years ago, this trembling then. actual as that which wets our skin her words come down to us, a rush, poured through the blood, this coming & going among islands is (72).

At the end of the sequence, B.C.’s Gulf Islands provide an analogue to Sappho’s Lesbos as a privileged domain of lesbian desire and creativity.

The book ends, in “Impossible Portraiture,” with the poet’s suggestion that it is, ultimately, not possible to create an exact, fully accurate verbal portrait of “this tremor love is.” Still, crucial fragments of it may be transposed to the page:

this tremor love is, all premise  
promise, fold-  
  
over-

-no hold anywhere ...

finding the aperture  
 opens me to you (96-97)

### Erin Mouré/ Eirin Mouré

In two very different recent books of poetry, *Pillage Laud* and *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*, Erin Mouré once again demonstrates her quirky, brilliant and highly inventive approach to poetry and poetics. As in her earlier collections *Search Procedures* (1996) and *A Frame of the Book* (1999), Mouré's latest work combines a keen interest in philosophical speculation on language, the body, and being, with her project to develop a lesbian textuality. In a discussion of *A Frame of the Book* that was reprinted in *Tessera*, Mouré sums up her concerns as a poet as follows:

In my body of work over the years, I've pursued a kind of questioning: what does it mean to love, to exist, to communicate? How does the social framework influence us? Limit us? What are the limits of 'the person', of tenderness, of grace, of honesty, of speech? (25)

Thinkers as diverse as Wittgenstein, Lyotard, Donna Haraway, and Gilles Deleuze provide her with catalysts and interlocutors for her textual pursuit of these, and other, issues. In this way, Mouré moves the (traditionally) strongly personal genre of the lyric into the public, civic sphere. Although she acknowledges that "The usual images of girls fucking are not what you will find in my work, for the most part" (*Tessera*, 30), she nonetheless labors to eroticize language, to work with language as an erotic medium.

*Pillage Laud* is a dazzling, virtuoso text. It parallels the finest achievements of the contemporary American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, while affirming a lesbian erotics that is seldom present in their work. To compose the poems of *Pillage Laud*, Mouré began with a combination of the high-tech and the aleatory:

Pillage laud selects from pages of  
 computer-generated sentences to pro-  
 duce lesbian sex poems, by pulling  
 through certain found vocabularies,  
 relying on context: boy plug vagina  
 library fate tool doctrine bath dis-  
 cipline belt beds pioneer book ambit-  
 ion finger fist flow.

The poet divides the book into twelve separate “pillages” followed by two codas at the end. She shapes the material taken (pillaged) from the computer program in order to praise (laud) the rapturous encounter between women that sustains her writing. The poems of *Pillage Laud* seem to me to be the most linguistically inventive and clever lesbian sex poems since Gertrude Stein’s “Lifting Belly.” Like Stein, Mouré offers coded, playful and indirect evocations of lesbian sex:

Those visas between every vagina and some business.  
Has so bold an era between the hole and the book nodded?  
Whom were they piercing? The sister term: a waist.

While you drank me, museums vanished.  
Depths met this.  
The strap (her partner) badly paused.  
To nod uncorked our jerseys (23).

With *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person*, Mouré shifts gears to offer her reader a work of eccentric, nontraditional translation, which she calls “a transelation.” In this case, she is “transelating” a famous work by Alberto Caiero, one of the five heteronyms of the great Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa (whose name, in Portuguese, means “person” – hence the title ... *by a Fervent Person*). Mouré herself writes *Sheep’s Vigil* via the heteronym “Eirin Mouré,” an extension of herself. The poet explains the book’s genesis with this anecdote:

A temporary move to Toronto last winter, a twisted ankle, an empty house - all inspired Mouré as she read Alberto Caiero/Fernando Pessoa’s classic long poem O Guardador de Rebanhos. For fun, she started to translate, altering tones and vocabularies. From the Portuguese countryside and roaming sheep of 1914, a 21st-century Toronto emerged [...] And her poem became a transelation, a transcreation, the jubilant and irrepressible vigil of a fervent person. (*Sheep’s Vigil*, dust-jacket description).

Eschewing the impersonal and self-effacing stance of the traditional translator, “Eirin Mouré” inserts personal, Toronto-centered details into “Caiero”’s pastoral poem. Thus, the river Tejo in the original poem is replaced by the Humber River in her translation. She also adds extra lines in many passages of her English

“transelation” that have no source in the Portuguese original.

“Mouré”’s irreverent, ludic approach to translation suits Pessoa’s poetry perfectly, as Pessoa himself, through his heteronymic equivalents, often adopted a tongue-in-cheek attitude to what he was writing about. As a transelator-appropriator of “Caiero”’s long poem, “Eirin Mouré” makes us aware that language is not – cannot be – transparent or impersonal, however much some translators may wish to perpetuate the fiction that the meaning and tone of any work can be reproduced fully in another language. *Sheep’s Vigil by a Fervent Person* becomes a model for a new kind of appropriation of the classics by radicalizing translation.

### **nathalie stephens**

Born in 1970, nathalie stephens has now published five poetic texts, three in French and two in English. *Somewhere Running* takes its place in her oeuvre as the third panel in a lesbian triptych which she began with *Colette, m’entends-tu?* (1999) and continued with *Underground* (2000) (both published in French by Editions Trois in Montreal). Each of these three texts focuses on a linguistic-erotic-existential encounter between two women in search of a language and a history (or, more precisely, a herstory). The first-person narrator of *Colette, m’entends-tu?* writes impassioned love letters to her lesbian ancestor/lover, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, author of the pioneering queer text *Le Pur et l’impur*, originally published in 1932 as “Ces plaisirs...” The narrator of *Colette, m’entends-tu?* makes lesbian desire and herstory present through her evocations of literary and historical figures (Virginia Woolf, Joan of Arc, and others). Her imagination creates “the [textual] garden of my dreams” where she and Colette embrace even as she acknowledges the harsh, gritty reality of the city around her, where lesbians struggle to claim space. With *Underground* stephens describes the meeting of two strangers, Madicole and Ernestine. Each of the women stands on the opposite side of the tracks in an anonymous subway station. Their largely mute efforts to make contact with each other across, and in spite of, the intimidating “abyss” of darkness and danger (both literal and figurative) that separates them from each other gives a powerful political and social meaning to *Underground*.

In *Somewhere Running* stephens recasts her writing style through an appropriation of the literary techniques of Gertrude Stein. Stein’s



modernist experiments with breaking the narrative line to create a continuous present of spiralling repetitions informs stephens's own practice of carefully choreographed repetitions of words and phrases, as in this passage:

This woman this one woman who catches a glimpse  
of another and she too the other woman the  
woman unseen until now becomes visible and here  
perhaps they the one woman and then the other  
glance briefly at one another saying nothing at all  
waiting waiting for the woman the second  
waiting for the first or the other way around  
the one who stands this woman seen for the  
first time who doesn't speak or move but both  
are present motionless speechless (10).

As her press release indicates, *Somewhere Running* "irreverently examines the tensions between two women ('the artist'), a photographer ('the eyes that watch'), and 'the city.' Beginning with a very simple premise – two women standing at a distance from one another – the text circles hypnotically as details come into focus and the pull between figures intensifies ... Tentacular and rhythmically insistent, the text exposes what it means to be seen, takes on the artist as voyeur, and charts the transformation of the two women from *objets d'art* into autonomous subjects of their own desire, voice, and movement." Thus, stephens takes on the media and processes of aesthetic representation (writing, art, photography) in order to lesbianize them. Here, seeing, writing, and describing transpose women's desire for other women playfully, but purposefully. stephens opens *Somewhere Running* with a quote from Gertrude Stein: "Successions of words are so agreeable." Following Stein, taking (lesbian)pleasure in language, in description, and in the image are the goal of this expertly crafted, innovative, and compelling text.

### **Rachel Zolf**

Rachel Zolf's *Her absence, this wanderer* explores issues of post-Holocaust Jewish identity and lesbian desire. Zolf bears witness to the difficulty of transcribing memory after the Holocaust through a complex, multilayered textuality in which individual fragmentary phrases alternate with blocks of verse placed against the blank space of the page. Reading this text, we catch glimpses of a historical reality

that is distant and, almost, too painful to contemplate. Through a series of photographs placed at the centre of the book, Zolf juxtaposes images of tombstones from Jewish cemeteries in Poland and Czechoslovakia, images of WW II death camps as seen in 1996, and photographs of family members who died at Treblinka. She thus combines the roles of archivist and poet. As an archivist, she faithfully records and restores fragments of historical reality; as a poet, she transmutes this historical material into a postmodernist collage where various voices and perspectives interact.

Zolf's achievement in *Her absence, this wanderer* recalls that of other young Jewish-Canadian artists, such as filmmaker Elida Schogt (*Zyklon Portrait, The Walnut Tree*) who seek to restore their family's history while recognizing the difficulties and aporias involved in retrieving what has been lost. Snapshots, graffiti on a wall: these are the models Zolf employs as metaphors for the arduous process of recovering the past: "layers on layers, palimpsest text/ -ures, found fragments// stitchings// how the pieces/ don't quite fit together" (64).

Her exploration of her sexuality serves a different, though also crucial, personal quest for the speaker of Zolf's text. Her presentation of sexuality in the sequence of poems entitled "erotic play" is intense, though, at times, ironic:

why can't she be a good lesbian  
and write a real poem

?

full of slippery tongues and thighs  
deep thrusts and sighs (19)

Zolf's word-play here, and her use of dramatic structure (with sex acts named for acts in a staged play) seamlessly blends the erotic with the linguistic: "so goes the erotic stanza, unleashing/desire: pungent, ambrosial -/ syllabic enrapture// how the black ink bits slip and slide/ how the ululant turns pustule/ how the w(ou)nd gapes, weeping// so goes the erotic stanza/ devouring// trompe l'o(r)eil(le)"(24). This eroticization of language through lesbian desire links Zolf's writing to Marlatt's, Mouré's, and Stephens's. Like francophone writers Nicole Brossard, Michele Causse, and Monique Wittig, all four poets have produced outstanding examples of a new lesbian writing that is changing the contemporary literary scene.

**Coda: Robin Blaser**

To complete this brief survey of some recent works of queer lyric in Canada, I wish to note the publication of *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser*. This is a generous and impressive book of essays by well-known poets and literary scholars that focuses on compelling, difficult problems of ethics and aesthetics raised in the work of US-born B.C. poet Robin Blaser. Through his incisive, challenging thinking on poetics and the poet's role in society and, preeminently, because of his brilliant long poem *The Holy Forest* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993), Blaser ranks as one of Canada's finest poets. As in the case of bill bissett, a gay critical perspective has, to date, remained largely absent from discussions of Blaser's poetry. The reclaiming both of bissett and of Blaser as *gay male* experimental poets is an important task for gay criticism on Canadian poetry in years to come.

Vive La Poesie Queer!

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**Peter Dickinson. *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 262pp. \$19.95 ISBN 0-8020-8210-6**

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**H**ere *Is Queer* contributes a much-needed Canadian presence to a growing body of gay, lesbian, and queer scholarship concerned with the complex relationship between nationalism and sexuality. Many of these existing texts address the