

A Web of Words:

Forging Writer-Researcher Alliances in the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory

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This essay emerges from a series of conversations and interjections between Susan Brown and Aritha van Herk, critic-writers engaged with the question of what collaborative interaction might contribute to the problematic but fascinating coalition of the creative and the interrogative, the speculative and the investigative. This composition eschews the univocal, linear argument of the academic essay for an actively collaborative voice—a movement between unified thinking and individual reflection—that we hope demonstrates the synergies and tensions involved in this kind of venture. This piece illustrates such contingent process, even as we aim to argue that there are specific affordances to collaboration in an online environment that may help to counter the continued marginalization of women’s writing in Canada and in the digital public sphere. The Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory examples how such a virtual venue can enable an ecumenical synergy and coadjuvancy, even while respecting the individual’s creative capital. A *rapprochement* of creative and critical activities in online media extends a long tradition in Canadian culture and writing more generally, but announces more possibilities for dynamic and flexible collaboration than heretofore, assuring wider exposure and impact, even as it identifies particular challenges to this project of putting the potential of new technologies at the service of women’s writing.

Rather than separate our dialogue into discrete and identified segments, we have merged this colloquy so that our voices overlap and combine, with the result that our alliance or web is

more palimpsest than seesaw. What follows then, is a variety of *mutatis mutandis* where the form of this essay seeks to demonstrate both percolation and content. The we/I subject position articulating careful separation is both acknowledged and transcended, serving then as bridge more than divide. Where a first-person voice erupts into our prose, we signal its identity in order to help situate the reader, but we do not mark an end to our separate voices, which quickly meld, both erased and emerging, into the contrapuntal utterance that we hope enacts the kinds of collaboration on which this piece reflects.

We engage this mobile collaboration in the emerging context of a “collaboratory.” An infrastructure-in-progress, the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory, or CWRC (pronounced “quirk”), is being designed as online space, as workspace, “to enable unprecedented avenues for studying the words that most move people in and about Canada” (CWRC). Studying how words circulate and stimulate requires a dynamic environment, in which words not only develop in new ways and into new conjunctions but in which neoteric words also emerge. Such a milieu enables discussion, debate, annotation, and elaboration within a space that fosters the sharing of materials, the interpellation of complication, and the combination of our efforts.

If things digital are always already new and shiny, writing has always already been collaborative. If “[c]ivilization is an open-source project” (Katz n.p.), then language is its interface, the contact zone between people and ideas, practices, and objects, our shared mediating factor. This was what Bakhtin meant by “dialogism.” Polyphony and heteroglossia, those “centrifugal, stratifying forces” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 272), underlie our shared conviction that our language is always already the speech of others, caught up in a historically and socially charged web of statements, responses, or quotations, all presupposing the language that came

before and that which will follow in the continuing series of utterances that is discourse. “The words of a language belong to nobody,” he says, reminding us that:

Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including our creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of “our-own-ness” [...]. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (Bakhtin, *Speech* 89)

Words thus weave in and out of texts, histories, and contexts in the process of coming again to utterance. Writers may be declaredly more conscious of this “borrowing” than literary scholars, but both participate in the continuing reconnaissance and utilization of language as a provisional site.

Scholarship in its current form is deeply imbricated with print culture, particularly in the humanities. The long-form argument has annealed in a range of ways related to the institutionalization of the monograph and scholarly journal article. Although scholarship necessary involves dialogue and disagreement, print freezes that dialogue into static form and materially isolates texts from each other, embedding intellectual exchange in the form of quotations and citations, and occasionally in co-authorship. Collaboration is the exception rather than the rule, in part because the conventions of credit in the humanities are still very largely based on single authorship; for instance, the number of co-authored articles in *American Literary History* from 2004-2008 was less than 2%. Print as medium may be partially responsible. Those experimenting with and embracing the potential of digital tools as a vehicle for research and scholarship are, notwithstanding institutional biases, much more likely to collaborate: co-authorship rates in the leading digital humanities journal, *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, approach 50% (Spira). The contrast suggests the potential that digital tools and digital research environments offer; the digital may enable scholarship to break away from the modes of solitary composition and production that have dominated scholarly production for centuries. The

potential of digital media for broader distribution and openness (through the World Wide Web), particularly when scholarly resources are open access, also presents the possibility of bridging the gulf that has opened between the reading public and academic thought, notwithstanding the fact that literary scholars in particular engage with materials of considerable relevance to mainstream culture. The extent to which both categories of scholar cite, quote, and literally incorporate the words of others into their works demonstrates the extent to which coming to utterance means, among other things, to grapple viscerally with the internally persuasive force of another's word, even "to experience it physically as an object" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 348). Digital humanities scholars, however, engage with each others' words immediately, publicly, and more variously as a result of the ease with which the digital is transmitted and transmuted. Digital media allow for greater degrees of flux in the output of scholarly work, so that scholars can make work available at earlier stages, allowing for peer commentary and even open peer review as forms of collaborative dialogue and thinking that can precede and even continue to co-exist with the "final" published form of a work. Even genres of scholarly engagement are expanding. The online periodical *Vectors*, which foregrounds the use of digital media, or projects using the Scalar platform, which helps scholars to incorporate multi-media resources, are examples. The unwieldy and amorphous term "database" covers a multitude of emergent scholarly forms that partake of but cannot be bounded by older print-based categories such as encyclopedia, edition, journal, collection, or monograph; "blog" likewise encompasses diverse types of scholarly output. Not coincidentally, databases and blogs are frequently collaborative.

[Aritha]

Bakhtin lurks behind our Leningradian inclinations to bounce words between one another, like the red ball of childhood, a time when we were willing to try new tastes on our tongues, make of discovery an occupation. Clark and Holquist argue that it was in Vilnius, Lithuania, that Bakhtin encountered a dazzle of “languages, classes, and ethnic groups” (Clark and Holquist 22), and thus came to celebrate heteroglossia: “the mingling of different language groups, cultures, and classes [...] guaranteeing a perpetual linguistic and intellectual revolution which guards against the hegemony of any ‘single language of truth’ or ‘official language’ in any given society, against ossification and stagnation in thought” (Clark and Holquist 22). In Vilnius, Lithuania, I once found myself trying to explain diasporic debris, the bricolage of multiculturalism as a distinctively Canadian form of collaboration that has imbued Canadian writing. My explanation may or may not have been successful, but in that place I collaborated with Bakhtin’s eyes, his historical immersion in turbulence and contamination, the way that language and idea dissolve into another. This collusion tingles, in my writer’s vertebrae, with a recursive frisson, that delicious incentive of seeing an image within an image within an image, each one identical and iterative and yet holding infinite possibility in its reference to the intersection of many other collaborations and their echoes. Such recursivity goes deeper than any mirroring effect to engage with a vanishing point, an infinite enfolding of one idea inside another (Fig. 1).

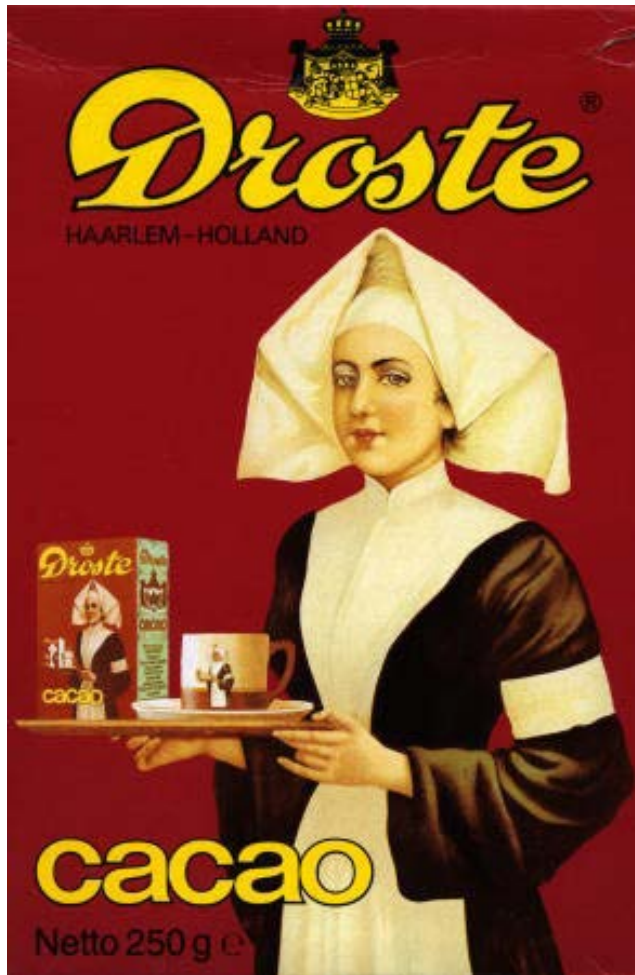


Figure 1: Recursivity (source: Wikimedia Commons).

Although the tang of the word “collaboratory” does give every writer pause, it invites her graffiti side to do damage to its provenance. *Collaborateur* carries a terrible hiss. Words bend to playfulness, can incite delicious misemployment. (As lemon peel may be an ingredient in a certain kind of martini and beneficial as a digestive, but is also a striptease performed under hot yellow light.) Unable to resist the playful temptations of language, a writer might invent portmanteau words for collaboration. Kohlrabi-elation sounds positive, even if most cooks have no clue of how to use the German turnip to its best effect. Or clobber a Tory, which might be tempting at this particular moment in Canadian politics. Or Co/lavatory, those unisex bathrooms in Europe that require a definite collaboration with held breath and blind eye. Writers work,

continually, are conduits for connection: the connection between language and meaning, symbol and image, word and emotion, text and reader. Writers enact the connective tissue between bald event as it plays itself out, and the record or recreation of that event—or thought or moment of metaphor. Always already we make allusion, a form of thought-collaboration, as recursive as writing itself.

That weaving conversation, its reciprocities and tensions, are even more intimate in Canada. Collaboration between writers and researchers is part of the fabric of our cultural life (York, “Crowding”). Barbara Godard early identified that direction in her work on the literary journal *Tessera*, ultimately gathering together examples in the volume entitled *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera* (1994). Not only do we have the strong tradition of women who elegantly straddle the apparent divide between creator and critic, we have universities sustaining the teaching of creative writing, and researchers embedded in the literary scene, in magazines, contests, and festivals.¹

The symbiosis between critic and writer manifests in book sales, critical responses to those texts, and both academic and writing careers in this country. Scholars need the books on which they in turn publish, and a book’s fortune beyond the initial period of publication is powerfully affected by whether it is adopted for courses and incorporated in critical discussion

¹ We do not aim here to provide a survey of the relationship between criticism and writing with respect to women in Canada, but are inspired by the notable tradition of writers, beyond those mentioned in the body of this text, whose work spans that divide. Perhaps due in part to the embedding of writing within academic institutions through the Canada Council Writers in Residence program and the frequent combination of creative writing and literature programs, there is significant cross-fertilization between the critical and the creative both within the oeuvres of some writers in addition to those mentioned here, Margaret Atwood, Marlene Norbese-Philip, and Sina Queyras, to name only a few. Critics including Marguerite Anderson and Marie Carrière have established the rich creative-critical exchanges that have shaped the development of an *écriture au féminin* or subversive feminist textuality within anglophone and francophone writing by women in Canada in the later twentieth century. Nor is such interdiscursivity and intertextuality unique either to women or to the Canadian context, although there are specificities to do with both gender and the nation-state. Fred Wah’s *Faking It* sees writing poetry as synonymous with thinking critically. Nicholas Royle’s theory of literature as *Veering* explores and enacts in a central chapter the tensions and correspondences between “Critical and Creative Writing” (66-7). See also Christl Verduyn’s work on Canadian poetics. This rich vein of interchange between critical and creative practices has also spawned creative-critical engagements with other writers, such as Stephen Collis’ *Phyllis Webb and the Common Good*.

—an ongoing web of words. When we think about collaboration then, in the context of Canadian digital culture and in the context of the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory, or CWRC, the site suggests an arena of continuity rather than rupture, built upon exchange and mutuality rather than isolated production.

There persists an understandable perspective that nothing is more anathematic to a writer than “sharing,” and that contaminating originality performs a disservice to idea. But while “originality” cherishes its own commodification, it works from, with, and around the ongoing praxis of language and play: thought, theft and transition. Collaboration then is a version of suspended competition, a mergence and emergence that fuels experiment and hybridity, refreshment and innovation. Such intersective suspension is not for the neophobic. Solitary workers that writers must be (no room on our keyboards for four hands, no matter how wonderful Schubert’s Fantasia in F minor), we appropriate and ponder and quote, effectively sharing space with the entire oeuvre of what we have read, whether we remember the details of our absorption or not.

[Aritha]

As a writer, I generally avoid “group work” with its “sharing” component: one person is certain to do nothing at all, four people shuffle their feet, and one determined goal-oriented achiever does the lion’s share of the work. But collaboration can enable the better part of digression, which I might example here. Why does the lion, always, get assigned the biggest part? Blame Aesop, I suppose, but I find myself on the lion’s side, and not because “partnership with the mighty is never trustworthy” (Phaedrus, Fabula I.5) as that Roman fabulist, Phaedrus (born a Thracian slave, but the first writer to Latinize Aesop), informed us. I sympathize with the

lion because he is required to serve as an object lesson, and has been appropriated by Disney and Apple, by C.S. Lewis and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, put to work as their servant. Circuitously, these references provide a hands-on or hands-off example of how a writer works, and how in the process of writing a riff on the connotations of collaboratory, I have consulted couture sites, wandered into my kitchen and tried to figure out how to execute a perfect lemon peel from a recalcitrant lemon lurking in the bottom drawer of my fridge, digressed to Aesop and Francis Barlow's illustrations of lions, fallen in love with the story of the fabulist born as a slave who exercised such influence over the fables that we still re-tell, all while trying to figure out why the metaphorical lion is always male, when the female, the hunter lioness, implies a more interesting allusion. This same digression deepens the collaboratory that leads me to discover that lions are the only members of the cat family to display obvious sexual dimorphism—that is, males and females look different, the mane apparently sexually irresistible to females. And sexual dimorphism gestures toward Judith Butler's theories of performativity and the body, an active concurrence that doubles back to the lion as a metaphor for laziness, since they spend most of their time resting, and are supposedly inactive for about twenty hours per day. Only at night do they enjoy hunting, socializing, grooming, and defecating. Which can only provoke the question of why lions have become such popular markers for movies and computer programs, and for Christian apologist writers. From there, an irresistible excursus might follow C.S. Lewis, his Irish skepticism of England, his peculiar relationship to Jane King Moore, his re-conversion by the argumentative J.J.R. Tolkien, and his career as a teacher and thinker, until the weirdly kinetic event of Lewis's death, on the same day as John F. Kennedy was assassinated and Aldous Huxley too died, November 22, 1963. Fortuity might then interpose wardrobes (of much greater import to collaborative material culture than C.S. Lewis), in particular my mother's tall oak

wardrobe, which she called a *garderobe*, or a *kleerkast*, and which had crossed the ocean before I was born, filled with the high-quality linens that she suspected, rightly, she would not be able to find in Canada. A lengthy excursion into wardrobes, their peculiar arrangement and how the advent of walk-in closets has made them virtually obsolete becomes irresistible, but ultimately leads back to the kitchen, where my collaborative I proceeds to chop kohlrabi for a particularly satisfying dish, the recipe for which I learned from a young Croatian scholar who last year came to Calgary to study Canadian literature. While writers might be suspicious of collaboration's collusion, it is in practice and in fact the world entire for those who work in literature, whether as writers or critics or both. There can be no escape from process and praxis: using, being inspired by and riffing from other people's words and ideas is the basis for all literature—and literary scholarship. It is breath and life.

Women's writing is particularly collaborative. Take, for example, the evidence of the Orlando Project, a precursor to CWRC, a collaboratively produced, born digital, history of women's writing that leverages digital methods, the markup or tagging of its own text, as a kind of indexing of its contents. Taking collaboration in the narrower sense, the textbase of *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present* marks 1446 instances of collaborative authorship (Fig. 2).

Emma Caroline Wood 1802 - 1879 [profile](#)

By 29 July 1865 ECW and her daughter Anna Steele published a book which was Emma's first (but Anna's second): *Ephemera*, a co-authored collection of poetry under the pseudonyms 'Helen and Gabrielle Carr'. [↗](#)

The collection featured ECW's "slight, but graceful" [↗](#) and charming line drawings, [↗](#) many of which feature cherubs.

Many of ECW's poems are elegiac in tone. Like her daughter, however, she often uses poetry to glorify instances of masculine heroism (especially in "'Our Navy, past and present", written in 1854 and equipped with long explanatory notes). [↗](#) But she fiercely criticises the management of Empire in "A Dirge", about a brave soldier and loving husband who finds preposterous charges levelled against him. He writes to prove his innocence, but is dismissed nonetheless. After this he learns that his letter of defence was never read; he falls into delirium and dies the victim of an unjust system. A poem which ECW addressed to the husband of her daughter Emma Barrett Lennard was then set to music by the younger Emma. [↗](#)

The *Athenaeum* reviewer predicted that "these little poems, with their simple tenderness and unaffected sympathy with what is true and noble, will be welcome," [↗](#) while also criticizing the authors for minor spelling mistakes and other inaccuracies. [↗](#)

Catharine Parr Traill 1802 - 1899 [profile](#)

1826 With or without sisterly collaboration, Catharine Strickland, later CPT, published a children's story as *Prejudice Reproved; or, the History of the Negro Toy-Seller*, as 'the author of The Telltale, Reformation, Disobedience, Early Lessons, &c.' [↗](#) [↗](#)

Catharine Parr Traill 1802 - 1899 [profile](#)

CPT sold articles on natural history to the *Anglo-American* magazine, published in Toronto, and the *Horticulturalist*, published in Rochester. [↗](#)

1868 CPT's botany book *Canadian Wild Flowers* was published in Montreal. [↗](#)

This book came into being under the determined leadership of CPT's niece, Agnes Dunbar Moodie Chamberlin (writing under the name of her first husband FitzGibbon), who secured a publisher (John Lovell of Montreal) and subscribers before laboriously providing the illustrations herself, perfecting lithography in her own home when no one else would do it for her and then colouring by hand all 5,000 images for the edition. [↗](#)

The book was well received, thanks in part to the coincidence of Confederation, which stirred an appetite for all things Canadian. The *Montreal Gazette* wrote admiringly, "we rise from its perusal full of hope for the future literary reputation of the Dominion." [↗](#) The book went into a third edition in a short time. [↗](#)

Harriet Martineau 1802 - 1876 [profile](#)

Nightingale and England and Her Soldiers

By 28 May 1859 HM's *England and Her Soldiers* took up Florence Nightingale's cause of sanitary reform in the army. [↗](#)

Although Martineau appeared as the book's sole author, she and Nightingale were in effect collaborators. The latter solicited her help on the issue of sanitary reform, and supplied the data, including printer's plates for statistical graphs. In a letter to Nightingale dated 20 September 1861, Martineau writes of "Our book" and its success in America. [↗](#) Nightingale bought and distributed copies of the book, although she seems to have been wary of too close association, even in print, with the controversial HM, whom she declined to meet in person. [↗](#) The work was reissued by Cambridge University Press in 2010, online and in print-on-demand format. [↗](#)

Figure 2. Examples of search results for collaborative authorship in *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*.

Formal co-authorship, however, is only a particularly overt form of literary engagement with the words of another. If we add to these results a search for discussions marked for engagement with "intertextuality," the total rises to 6228 ways that *Orlando* identifies the relationships between women's writing and the words of others. It was of course Kristeva who introduced the word "intertextualité" in her own translation/mutation of the work of Bakhtin towards a revolution in understandings of poetic language:

any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double. (Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, Novel" 37)

toute texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte. A la place de la notion d'intersubjectivité, s'installe celle

d'intertextualité, et le langage poétique se lit, au moins, comme *double*. (Kristeva, "Le mot" 146)

This transpositional web of words can extend much further of course, if one chooses to commence an expedition through the tracking of influence, responses, fictionalization, and so on, or via the thousands upon thousands of hyperlinks between people, places, organizations and titles hyperlinked to each other within *Orlando's* web of words. As Miranda Hickman says, "What *Orlando* allows you to do, in a spirit nicely faithful to the agility implied by Woolf's *Orlando*, is to choose your own adventure" (183). Bakhtin, Barthes, and Kristeva envisioned that adventure and its articulation: "Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text" (Barthes, 39).

Enabling adventures is a major *raison d'être* for CWRC, an online space that will allow for the creation of similar resources on Canadian women writers, for whom no such resource exists. Yet this vision is not that of a single, centralized research project. Instead, it mobilizes multiple projects tracing divergent but linked threads, so as to allow new paths to emerge, enabling unforeseen patterns out of a diversity of approaches. A multiplicity of efforts can, by using a common technology similar to *Orlando's* markup and hyperlinking, create a collaborative account of women's writing in Canada that will help to counter the reversal of feminist gains in the field of Canadian writing. Canadian Women in the Literary Arts (CWILA) was founded because it is abundantly clear (documented by an annual count of the rates at which men and women were being published and reviewed) that women's writing receives far less attention than men's. The numbers declare a clearly measurable gender bias in Canadian literature. On the web, as Amy Earhart observes, early DIY sites on women writers and other disadvantaged groups have given way to a reassertion of the canon in high-profile scholarly

projects (Earhart 313). As the research publicized by CWILA shows, marginalization continues in the broader cultural sphere, which is more and more the digital public sphere. CWRC thus aims to promote women's writing within this apparently brave new digital context, while also reinserting some of the energy and diversity of those early DIY days by making it easier for scholars to participate in the often daunting and increasingly complex world of digital scholarship.

An online collaboratory offers a precise moment of opportunity to employ the tools of digital culture to actualize in new ways the thought-weaving of both writer and scholar, whatever angle or approach they may choose. One of many challenges is how to build such an environment to benefit both writers and scholars, to foster collaboration, and to enable a feminist aesthetic and a space for women to speak within a digital world still very much the domain of lions rather than lionesses. The prevalence of sexism on the web is gaining, finally, more attention.²

Such inflections colour responses to collaboration as well. As Lorraine York's *Rethinking Women's Collaborative Writing: Power, Difference, Property* claims, the eagerness to isolate and identify influence is a pervasively masculine, bourgeois, and economy-focused desire, one less interested in fussing with community and domesticity than it is in the production of works of genius. York identifies, through the words of Margaret Atwood, the extent to which "the writer in Western countries is often regarded 'as a kind of spider, spinning out his entire work from within. This view depends on a solipsism, the idea that we are all self-enclosed monads, with an

² Note the recent UN Women poster campaign mounted to critique the overtly sexist responses elicited by Google Autocomplete to, for example, "women should [...]". Suggestions are generated automatically, based apparently on different factors, including the popularity of particular search terms in the internet, but also inflected by recent common responses to phrases. If search engine suggestions reflect what users are looking for, then the web is not merely a collation of sexism, but rabidly offensive in its trajectory. See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/10/women-should-ads>.

inside and an outside, and that nothing from the outside ever gets in” (Atwood, *Second Words* 342). This constellation of author projections—the individuated, unified and unifying, solitary spider-artist—is a potentially energizing one for women collaborators to react against, for it chimes in so readily with constructions of masculinity as non-rooted, gloriously and aloofly individuated” (York 28-29). Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland’s *Two Women in a Birth* does suggest, by the playful crowding of two women into a birthing process, how creativity can react to and against the supreme authority of the genius writer alone in his garret. This is not to say, as York so cogently argues, that power dynamics or differences are suspended, but that the space of collaboration enables disagreement and divergence as well as concurrence and cooperation.

It is this combustible and adventurous space that CWRC engages with, expanding the dimensions of connection at a time when the digital has opened a huge and wonderfully generative capacity. The arena does not privilege women’s voices or discoveries for the very simple reason that women have had little access to such privilege and so are both cautious and circumspect about engaging with the digital (which has also been for women impenetrable, and to some extent, proscriptive). If we note that the gains women made in the heyday of feminist thinking and publication have been quietly sliding toward the more subdued and confined arena of social justice,³ then every initiative that might counter that erosion becomes an opportunity to empower women’s voices. In such reinvigorated places can women’s negotiation of history, interest in continuity, and reaching out for acknowledgement, find a place to work. There is the operative imperative: to work. The verb here is interactive, effortful, interested in progress and enablement, willing to confront complication and impediment.

A sense of the potential of the digital for new collaborations has been key to CWRC from the start. The online space is in its infancy, and we hope that new modes of collaboration will

³ See Camille Paglia, “Feminism Past and Present: Ideology, Action, and Reform.”

emerge as people begin to work within and explore the potential of what it has to offer. A few collaborations mooted to date give some sense of the possibilities. Our most active initiative thus far involves the Playwrights' Guild of Canada. Ann Wilson and Dorothy Hadfield are working with the Guild's Women's Caucus to create online profiles through a survey of its female members that will form the basis both of Guild-sponsored profiles that can be easily maintained and updated, and of a profile that can be expanded and extended by CWRC scholars through further research and critical writing on the playwrights' work. From such a symbiotic partnership between playwrights and scholars, detailed and accurate information about living writers will be made freely available, indexed and interlinked with related material within and beyond CWRC, and profitably susceptible to collaborative updates and enhancements by the scholarly and artistic community. Digitization of information is spreading rapidly; the key for CWRC is that collaboration will be enabled rather than merely situated.

[Susan]

Disseminating unprecedented bodies of information about Canadian authors is just the start, though promising in its active collaboration between writers and scholars. The flexibility of the digital medium remarks its potential to enable and facilitate many more direct interactions between creative writers and critics. Cynthia Northcutt Malone, noting that digital media "make possible the blending, fusing, even violent yoking of forms and genres" imagines a new kind of "mashup":

Thanks to the digital storage of texts, contemporary writers could easily graft the words of a critic or reviewer into a literary work. The digital era simplifies the creation of hybrid forms: just as mixing musical tracks once required great labor and technical skill, so splicing criticism into a literary work once required tedious resetting of the text. Now, however, a writer could invite critics to enter one version of his or her literary text and exile the critics from another, shaping multiple versions of the "same" work. Writers and

critics could work collaboratively, creating hybrid forms that emphasize the dialogue between writer and reader. (Malone)

In contemplating working digitally on and with Canadian women's writing, and in new ways, not simply publishing digitally about it, we arrive at the touchy area of intellectual property. CWRC at best would help to address the lamentable difficulties facing scholars wishing to engage in digital analysis of contemporary Canadian writing. Having lunch one day with a former research assistant on the Orlando Project who was finishing her doctorate in contemporary Canadian literature, I asked how her digital experience had informed her doctoral work. Not at all, she replied: all of the texts she was discussing were in copyright. She had no access to digital versions. It is no accident that digital literary scholarship, that is, the use of digital tools to explore their capacity to allow us to engage with text in new ways—whether through text analysis methods that are indebted to computational linguistics, via an “algorithmic criticism” that maintains a sense of continuity with traditional hermeneutic methods, or by means of what is now being debated as “distant reading” (Schriebman et al; Siemens et al; Ramsay; Moretti)—has flourished most in fields where text digitization is not entangled with copyright concerns.

There is no doubt that the big win for scholars within CWRC will be if we can somehow manage to make not just eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century Canadian writing available to use with tools for text analysis and visualization (Fig. 3), but also work by the living writers who are shaping our cultural present. This is undoubtedly the terrain of transgression and betrayal, or at least anxiety about them, given the upheaval in intellectual property practices that is accompanying the digital turn, and the copyright wars that are not yet resolved. Yet there is potential to build on the already collaborative relationship between writers and the academy. The use of a text for digital research by no means necessitates the open availability of that text on the web, and digital scholarship done properly will actually promote awareness and discussion of

Canadian writing in ways that could be beneficial to the embattled Canadian publishing industry and to small presses in particular. Certainly, we need spaces in which to experiment with and model collaborative relations between the research, writing and publishing communities in order to demonstrate the gains that would result from solving or at least illuminating this problem. At the very least, opening connectivity if not property can engage with the differentials of rights and the legal principle of “fair dealing” in tandem with accessibility and its positivities, not least because writers as well as scholars are dependent upon the work of other writers, and increasingly also on engaging with that work in digital forms.

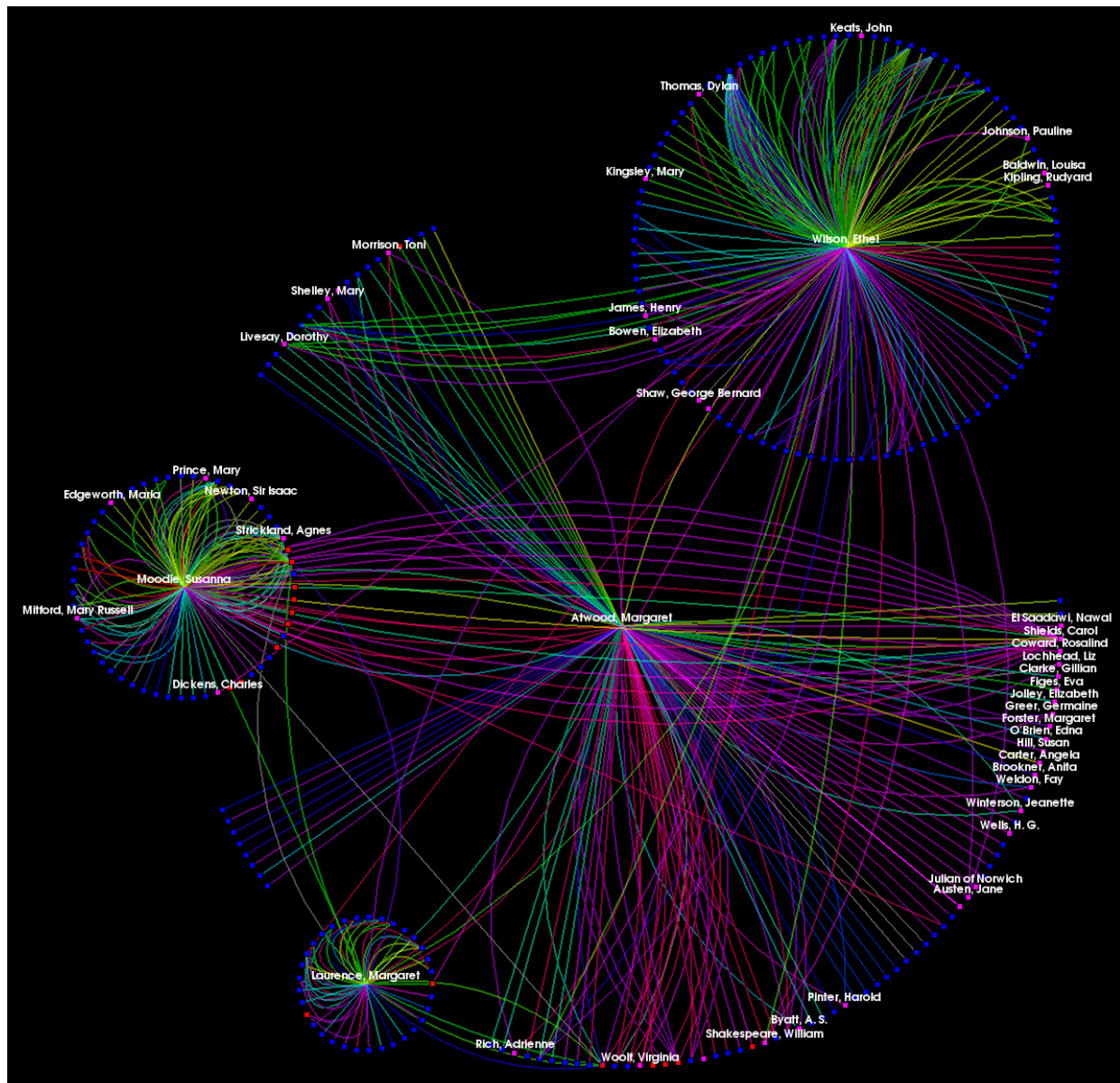


Figure 3. Visualization of networks of connections amongst writers linked to Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Susanna Moodie, and Ethel Wilson, based on the digital markup in *Orlando*.

Writers quote and revise, intervent and steal, network and reference. To claim that we do not is a false disingenuousness, a now old-fashioned manifestation of a Bloomian “anxiety of influence.” Here, in that area of constructive contamination, is where CWRC can enable what are already evocative cross-dressings, the connection between writer and critic who need to talk to one another more and about one another less, the promotion of the work of women writers who

still have to struggle to be heard. The 2012 founding of CWILA (Canadian Women in the Literary Arts), following the model of VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, the American grass-roots structure which was founded in 2009 to “address the need for female writers of literature to engage in conversations regarding the critical reception of women’s creative writing in our current culture” (VIDA), argues for the urgency of intersected communication and collaboration. CWILA came out of an articulated need for “a discursive space to address the politics of representation, the critical reception of women’s writing in the literary press and the ways in which we can foster stronger critical communities of women of all ages including genderqueer writers, indigenous writers, as well as other women and/or genderqueer writers of colour” (CWILA). These initiatives engage with more than the statistics of the count referred to earlier. They enable mentoring and articulation, so that women’s work on and with women is made both easier and more readily available and accessible.

The potential of digital forms and digital transmission is starting to emerge in Canadian women’s writing. Witness how *Lemon Hound* has moved from individual voice to lauded and awarded print collection to collective voice (Queyras).⁴ In 2012, Margaret Atwood and Naomi Alderman co-wrote a serialized zombie novel, *The Happy Zombie Sunrise Home*, which was posted chapter by chapter on the story-sharing website Wattpad (Atwood and Alderman). The two writers’ product and process enact the fizz of idea and situation that characterizes collaboration, the challenge of sequence, set-up and even retaliation. Atwood declared the collaboration “a lot of fun,” saying, “We shared interests in technology, the history of religion,

⁴ The *Lemon Hound* blog site was founded and run by Sina Queyras in 2005, at <http://lemonhound.blogspot.ca/>, becoming the premier online location for the circulation, review and discussion of poetry and poetics in Canada, expanding the dialogue significantly beyond the academic or high-brow and countering the dwindling of attention to poetry in print venues. Her poetry volume of the same name in 2006 won the Pat Lowther Award and a Lambda Literary Award. In 2010, Queyras morphed *Lemon Hound* into a group blog, and then in 2011 into “a dynamic bi-monthly Literary Journal” (“About”) at <http://lemonhound.com> that deals with fiction and narrative as well as poetry. The site deals with writing by women and men and is explicit in its feminism.

and little-known monsters” (Abrams). But most interesting for writers and readers alike is the visible friction of creative back and forth, the intricate weaving and unweaving of different energies and postulations. This kind of movement among forms, between voices, and across textual modalities builds on the culture of collaboration in Canadian literature by women but it is also specifically enabled by the internet and the ability of databases to be updated more cheaply and easily than print. Consider Project Rebuild, a writing project inextricable from software development, which solicits the reader to become a collaborative author of the piece, moving creative writing into the space of reading (Murakami and Barkarson). To cite these demonstrations of collaborative potential is also to site them in non-academic digital spaces and recognize the extent to which academic venues, seeking as they do to valorize and isolate the scholar as authority figure, are by and large inimical to this kind of collaborative endeavor.

For the energy, ferment, creativity, and cross-fertilization evident in these early examples to emerge within academic contexts, and in particular for scholarly-creative collaborations to thrive, we need venues for research in which technologies are accessible, user-friendly, and flexible. This kind of venue can also serve to break the documented paucity of women contributing to web-based information. “Surveys suggest that less than 15 percent of [Wikipedia’s] thousands of contributors are women” (Cohen), resulting in what is certainly a skewed articulation of public knowledge. A space less intimidating to women, and more amenable to experimentation, that also tries to leverage the core strengths of scholarly environments such as citation, quality control, and peer review, would perform a powerful service. For the intersection of the critical and creative to bear fruit, such venues will need to include creative texts, not just for citation, but for analysis and other forms of digital engagement.

How might an online collaborative research space incorporate recent Canadian writing, and lots of Canadian women's writing, in ways that benefit both writers and scholars? CWRC is an experiment in creating such a space. As the examples of digital collaborations already mentioned show, it is part of a larger cultural movement, but one that is trying to mobilize scholarly work in ways that will be productive to the profession and help to negotiate the major shifts effected by the digital turn. The scholarly community needs to connect with the kind of energy bubbling in the creative community and the creative community needs to harness the authority of the scholarly community. We need an environment in which to forge new kinds of scholarship, realizing the potential for much more extensive collaboration afforded by digital tools. One possible route is evident in the projected collaboration between English professor Susan Rudy and Erin Moure, building and expanding on Rudy's experience of creating the Fred Wah Archive. For writers such as Moure—another who straddles the apparent critical and creative divide, and who revels in very direct engagement with the words of others and in digital experimentation—a living archive would harness the ability of the web to capture response and process, that ongoing dialogism of writing. CWRC will have the technical infrastructure to support linking out into other literatures and across languages, thus providing a rich and revealing context for the work of someone like Moure. The collaboration between writer and scholar in the creation and curation of such an archive would harness scholarly labour and resources to the preservation and open dissemination of portions of a writer's oeuvre that would benefit from a digital form and from being embedded in a social and critical space. Such partnerships between writers and scholars might assist in producing hugely valuable collections that in turn stimulate reputations, textbook sales, and demands for readings or further publications. Quite focused collections could provide a new kind of lens on Canadian writing.

Fostering and enabling audience must surely be one of the ways that CWRC can help aspiring writers. Enhancing awareness of what is available, giving people a place to search for and sample new Canadian writing, and providing a larger context in which to place that writing can facilitate recognition and attention. There are yet more possibilities, including a writers' showcase that allows emergent authors to post a selection of their work, selective exposure of work to enable readers to choose whether to buy it or set it for a course, or a virtual writer-in-residence position that promotes dialogue within a context that foregrounds the flux into which the digital turn has flung both creative writing and scholarly research.

[Aritha]

Context remains the passport; there can be no text without context. And context is greater than merely the parts that contribute to meaning, but a site of connection, from *contexere*, to *join together*. To transcend definition by performing an example again, I search for clues, read toward the dance of translation as a collaborative art, the relationship that Nicole Brossard addresses so cogently: “‘We translate all the time,’ says Nicole Brossard. ‘Even when two people are speaking the same language, each person is always wondering what the other person meant’” (qtd. in McGillis). Here is the goal of collaboration: to wonder what another person means and to embark upon a quest to discover shades and elements of that meaning.

I read Nicole Brossard most often looking out from my window across the foothills to the Rockies. I am always, when I open Brossard, reminded of her 50th birthday and how I had just moved into the house where I live, but because she was 50 and she was Nicole Brossard, I gave her permission to smoke, which no other writer or critic has ever been allowed to do, and no other writer or critic or text has been permitted to do in this house. I read Nicole Brossard with

the determined distractedness of a writer refusing to be a critic, but yearning to unpack every inch of her cigarette smoke in the most and least of scholarly exegesis.

And so, I re-read again *Hier, or Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon*, the translation by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood an “installation” that recites the lives of women as a rich text unfurling referentiality. The novel is comprised as a conversation between two women, a discourse rich and allusive, filled with time and travel, characters and historical figures lingering on the pages like fine scent. As always, I loiter over the Appendix. It performs as a space where the book replaces a replacement in the translation of a translation of a conversation between Descartes and Helen and the Cardinal, and in the process prescribes—no, that is not the right word—unfurls a net of intertext, a list of books that the narrator has, over the years, purchased. That list is offered playfully:

On the way back I stop at Librairie Pantoute where I leaf through novels that make me want to write. I always buy at least one book so I can have the pleasure of a new novel in front of my stimuli-starved eyes. That’s how, here and there, over the years, I purchased *Our Lady of the Flowers* by (Carla signals with her hand that we need to guess the authors’ names) -----, *To the Lighthouse* by-----, *Paradiso* by [...]. (Brossard 203)

and so on, and so on, an inventory of more than sixty titles. The list is a tease, a challenge and a disquisition. The well-informed reader will know the authors of the novels listed, will have read them as well, and will gauge their influence with all the rich and erotic intent of the novel. “You see,” says the narrator, “I need books in order to come and go in the complex beauty of the world” (Brossard 204). As do we all, need books, and lists of books, with authors and without authors, reading the truly collaborative art of decoding symbols to connect and to exchange ideas. As if to tenderize the reader’s complicity and bewilderment and collaboration, Brossard concludes *Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon*, with the *coup de grâce* of the Appendix, the same list of books again, with authors attached this time. This pivot of novels at the end of Brossard’s novel

about the intersection of four women who recite the world in the Hôtel Clarendon—the oldest continuously operating hotel in Quebec City, once a house owned by printers (*vraiment!*) and transformed to a hotel in 1870, its Art Deco embellished and completed in 1927—speaks to the unending potential of words webbed into alliance with both creation and explication. Nothing is ever accidental, *bricolage* and architecture and translation, notes and travels and time traversed, streets and windows and music all relevant, the recitative gestures of the novel underscoring its ecstatic agony in moving toward that final Appendix, an inventory of novels for how to read and read between, and across, ending so gently, with Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual* (Brossard 237).

All of which is to say that the ultimate transgression would be to separate words from their pleasure, to paint a line between and to insist that there is no tenderness shared by writer and researcher, critic and reader, language and meaning, reference and interest, text and intertext. All readers yearn for a space to talk back to and intersect with *Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon*, for it is in that space that new discoveries allow themselves to be invented. The outcome of such a space might be more engagement with the creative community and the reading public, but the rhizomatic and effervescent structure of this essay is meant to suggest precisely the extent to which ideas and words and things are in flux, and to identify as well the challenge of translating the possibilities into any medium, whether print or digital. The end of Brossard's novel pulls the endeavor together, concluding, "It's just a little sentence for healing" (Brossard 229).

And there we can begin with collaboration and the collaboratory, as a site of healing and as a site where women's writing in Canada and Québec today makes alliances, enables generative transgressions, and tests betrayals.

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