Contents

Introduction 7

Karen Mac Cormack 14

Jennifer Moxley 47

Caroline Bergvall 80

Andrea Brady 103

Bibliography 144
INTRODUCTION

This book explores the poetry of Karen Mac Cormack, Jennifer Moxley, Caroline Bergvall and Andrea Brady by means of face-to-face interviews carried out between 2008 and 2009 in the UK and USA. The roots of this project lie in a series of six interviews which I conducted between 1999 and 2000 with the poets Allen Fisher, Adrian Clarke, John Wilkinson, Ira Lightman, Maggie O’Sullivan and Ulli Freer.1 In that earlier research I was seeking to place my own poetic practice in context as well as doing critical work on the poets involved, inspired by the example of Allen Fisher in his long essay Necessary Business (1985), which contains excerpts from conversations with Eric Mottram and cris cheek. As both a poet and a critic, I see the interview as a kind of halfway house between full-blown academic writing and a more relaxed literary journalism, whilst also satisfying my writer’s need to be in contact with my peers; sharing ideas and developing understandings that help me to orient myself in the contemporary poetic landscape. This is where the term “poetics” in the title stems from, referring to the discourse of writers reflecting on their writerly practice, following Robert Sheppard’s definitions in his essay “The Necessity of Poetics”.2

In the interviews that comprise this book I wanted to discover what were the most important creative issues facing these poets. I was curious about their views on innovation, on literary theory and literary history, on teaching, politics, gender, aesthetics, performance, language and so on. I also wanted to get closer to understanding the origins, intentions, and meanings of specific examples of their work from across their respective oeuvres. My approach was informed in part by my ongoing interest in the relationship between what Barrett Watten calls method and technique in writing—which I paraphrase as distinguishing between the part of the writing that is to do with why it is made (method) and the part which is to do with how it is made (technique).3 I am fascinated by the subtle

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1 Published in issues of the Austrian journal Poetry Salzburg Review between 2002 and 2006.
relationships between these aspects as they play out across a body of writing. To the extent that they might be hard to separate, and may indeed be a somewhat artificial distinction, I consider them as the opposite ends of a scale of attention that runs from the macro level of method down to the micro level of technique. Throughout these conversations this scale is reflected in the movement between general discussions of poetics and close readings of actual poems.

Why did I choose these particular poets? In Karen Mac Cormack’s case, I was particularly drawn to her remarkable project *Implexures* (1993–2007), which I first became aware of when I was a participant in a webcast of a poetry reading that Mac Cormack and Allen Fisher gave at the Kelly Writer’s House in Philadelphia in October 2001 as part of the Philly Talks series. I then followed the project’s development in various published extracts. As it turned out, the opening part of the interview with Mac Cormack took place in London in 2008 the day after the British launch of the first complete edition of *Implexures* at Birkbeck College, University of London. In the interview, Mac Cormack describes *Implexures* as her “transhistorical polybiography”. This complex term refers to the origins of the project as a response to a family biography published in the 1950s by her great Aunt, the novelist Susan Hicks Beach. This is augmented with letters to and from Mac Cormack’s parents and an impressive range of literary, philosophical, scientific and historical material from various periods: covering particle physics and postmodern architecture alongside the semiotics of the Japanese fan and readings of Aphra Behn. My own fascination with *Implexures* arose from its daring combinations of diverse materials, and its interest in presenting information within the context of an enquiry into time and identity—the kind of enquiry that was driving my own creative projects at the time, in my books *Momentum* and *Internal Rhyme*.6


Jennifer Moxley’s autobiography *The Middle Room* (Subpress, 2007) represented a very different approach to writing about identity. A kind of *biographia literaria*, the memoir describes her early poetic career growing up in San Diego, attending the University of California at San Diego (UCSD), and moving to Providence with her partner Steve Evans shortly before the death of her mother. Moxley attended UCSD at the time various prominent figures in the Language Poetry movement were teaching or visiting there, such as Stephen Rodefer, Rae Armantrout, Michael Davidson and Fanny Howe, and her memoir sketches intimate portraits of these figures, whilst also capturing the influence of their work on a younger writer. I found *The Middle Room* a fascinating enterprise because of its more direct exploration of the autobiographical themes otherwise present in Moxley’s poetry. Seeing the transfer of this kind of activity between poetry and prose suggested a possible mode for extending the range of my own autobiographically-driven poetry: a parallel means of transforming the material of experience. In this sense my interest in Moxley was related to Mac Cormack’s albeit very different approach to autobiographical material.

In terms of the technical challenges of wanting to extend the range of my own poetic production, Caroline Bergvall’s work came into view as one of the most plural practices in contemporary writing. Bergvall works across poetry, visual art, installations and performances and I wanted to try to understand what made this diversity possible, and what gave it its integrity. Much to my surprise, in the course of interviewing Bergvall I found her also to be engaged in autobiographical writing in two projects entitled *Cropper* and *Plessjør*, and, as our dialogue developed, I came to see the origins of her diverse practice in her pluri-lingual and cross-cultural identity. Bergvall was born in Norway and brought up in France before moving to the UK, and speaks Norwegian, French and English. This complex background very much informs her creative practice, and the fact that she was also exploring this inheritance through autobiographical as well as multi-media modes was an important discovery for me in suggesting further possible lines of development for my own writing.

The role of Andrea Brady’s work in the project was to provide a space for an ongoing thinking-through of the function and status of organised political critique in contemporary poetry in general, with a view to developing it in my own work in particular. Brady’s hypertext poem *Tracking Wildfire* was an entry point here (although political concerns are
apparent across her writing) in its response to the history of incendiary
devices in warfare: linking the mystery of the ancient weapon of Greek
fire—an early form of napalm—to the use of white phosphorous in the
United States’ assault on Fallujah in April 2004 during the Iraq War. I
wanted to understand something more about Brady’s commitment to
using lyric and other poetic forms to operate critiques of the foreign policy
of Western governments and the various forms of consumer capitalism in
the UK and elsewhere. As it was, another of the big surprises of the project
was finding out that Brady was also engaged in a new series of poems about
motherhood and child development, following the birth of her daughter
Ayla. Whilst not exactly autobiographical, I felt that this new work by
Brady in some way also presented an enquiry into the formation of identity
which put it in company with the other poets and with my own interests.

Aside from these quite personal modes of engagement, another
important question driving this project was that of the use and value of
the term innovative in relation to the practices of the poets chosen. This
in a sense was still a personal question, connected to my own creative
background and ongoing commitments as a poet, but it is also an issue
which is being debated more widely in British poetry and academia.
Innovation is certainly a fraught concept when used in relation to cultural
practices, but its adjectival use in terms such as formally innovative poetry,
or Linguistically Innovative Poetry, demonstrates its history of being used
to refer to British and Irish poetry which has otherwise been described
as avant-garde, experimental, neo-modernist, non-mainstream, post-
avant, postmodernist, and as constituting a “parallel tradition”. I have
argued in a piece of critical writing, following Ric Caddel and Peter
Quartermain’s argument in the introduction to their anthology Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970 (1998), that it is as important to recognise
the commitment of innovative poetries to a literary-historical tradition of
dissent (which might include such writers as Blake or Shelley, for example)
as their commitment to innovation in poetic form or what Caddel and
Quartermain call a “poetics of displacement”. As it was, in the interviews
I broached the theme of innovation in various ways—enquiring of Mac

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7 A term used by poet-publisher Ken Edwards in his article ‘The Two Poeti-

8 See Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain, eds., Other: British and Irish
xx. See also Scott Thurston, ‘Innovative Poetry in Britain Today’, Revista Ca-
naria de Estudios Ingleses 60 (April, 2010), 15–30.
Cormack why it was important, of Bergvall what she saw as the key issues facing innovative poets, of Moxley what was the function of innovation in her work and in contemporary writing, and of Brady simply what she made of the term. Whilst I don’t want to pre-empt their responses here, asking the question in these various ways elicited a rich range of responses which displayed quite striking continuities and discontinuities.

There were of course many other areas of enquiry explored in these conversations which are too numerous to itemise here, and which to do so would start to undermine the integrity of these dialogues as discursive and analytical texts in their own right. Instead it is hoped that readers of these interviews will enjoy drawing out their own connections between the poets and, at the same time, find fuel for their own creative speculations and further explorations of the extraordinary work of these writers. To this purpose the interviews are footnoted and there are extensive bibliographies provided for each poet.

In terms of the project’s effect on my own creative development, this is very much an ongoing process. Studying the work of these poets has led me to experiment with using more directly autobiographical material and more formally diverse structures in my writing, but perhaps one of the most significant outcomes has been a greater awareness of the importance of style in understanding poetry. Barrett Watten defines style as a “determinate pattern of differences” leading to “an autonomous idiosyncratic set of values”⁹ and, although his definition ultimately carries a more oppositional charge, it has been in the transitions from my total immersion in the work of one poet to the next that the patterns of each writer’s “gestural repertoire”¹⁰ became vividly apparent. It may be difficult to make an apprehension of a poet’s style available to critical analysis. To some extent it must simply be accepted as the means by which their poetry comes to us, and something which we may come to be more or less aware of, perhaps not unlike the rhythm of someone’s walk. However, style is not an absolute value behind a writer’s production. Where this heightened awareness of style has become useful to me is in creating the possibility of expanding my repertoire by more fully grasping the lineaments of my “default” approach to writing, so that I might start to move beyond it.

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Before bringing this introduction to a conclusion, it seems worth reflecting on the nature of the medium of the interview itself, beyond my characterisation of it above as a “halfway house” between academic writing and journalism. The interview’s unpredictability and reflexive nature makes it a mercurial form ideally suited to the discussion of creativity, yet it also has its opacities, its limitations, its failing to get to the truth which is symptomatic of much human communication. In a project of this kind however, there is also the paradox of tying down this mercuriality in prose—tidying it up, rewriting, restructuring, annotating—that suggests almost a kind of violence visited on the spoken text by the time it reaches the reader. Transcribing these interviews was an extraordinarily labour-intensive task. Having recorded around fourteen hours of conversation, the transcription process alone took over a hundred hours. There then followed two further revisions before the text was returned to the interviewee to make their own changes, following which a further revision would take place. This meticulous concentration on turning the mercury of speech into the lead of type was a sort of alchemy of meditation and reflection. As much as I was tempted at times to hand over the task to an audio typist, I felt that I would be missing out on the unique opportunity of re-living these ungraspable moments—tiny shifts, overtones, even background interventions—that, as I edited them out, or let them pass by unacknowledged, conveyed something of the human dimension of the contact: a mood passing through, a slight challenge received well or less well, a misconstrual, distraction, warmth and humour.

Although an earlier plan for this project envisaged accompanying chapters of critical writing on each poet, my decision instead to simply present the interviews by themselves reflects a hopeful belief in their intrinsic interest as collaborative works of poetics, that is, as conversations oriented around the creative process and its productions. Such an approach allows the poems and other writings to still have their day, ultimately uncorralled by their authors’ apparent intentions for them. Because, as all writers know, writings have their own secret life which escapes the writer, which eludes her or him, and without which the whole endless, sacrificial labour of writing would be worthless.

Scott Thurston
Talking Poetics