

## Lyric↔L/language. Essaying the poetics of contemporary women's poetry.

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"Can one illustrate opacity and confirm clarity at one and the same time? You'd better believe it" (Rachel Blau DuPlessis 2002: np).

### Abstract

Using the deliberately provocative strategies of 'essaying' and 'error' which have become central to the poetry and poetics of women experimental writers such as Kathleen Fraser, Lyn Hejinian and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, this essay charts the writer's slow understanding that lyric voice and linguistic-formal experimentalism in writing by women poets form a problematic, yet productive, interrelation. Lyric, suggests Kinnahan, is at once an apparently unmarked, naturalised poetic mode and, for women poets, a curiously over-marked, gendered category. At the same time, female experimental poets have not found a comfortable space within the avant-garde poetics loosely derived from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. The essay moves to explore the challenges of the lyric-language conjunction in relation to the writer's second collection, *open season* (2006), and suggests, through a method of trial and error, that a re-turn to lyric through the lens of international scholarship on contemporary experimental poetry by women writers can invigorate our take on the persistence of lyrical voice in poetry by South African women writers.

### Error

A growing number of women writers routing erratic connections between feminism, experimental poetry, poetics and scholarship advocates "a paradoxical line of thinking", namely, "the value of erring, of being disorientated" in thought and on the page. Kathleen Fraser. Caroline Bergvall. Lyn Hejinian. Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Me too, in my own clumsy way. I too. I er err, allowing "where error has taken me – its unreliable path – and what error has given me, in the act of writing, that the goal of 'perfection' cannot" (Fraser 2000:78). It is not easy, being mistaken. You don't know what to trust. But the idea is that 'error', "becoming lost, staying lost while looking for new directions" (Bergvall 2007: 8) allows one to "construct a great generative contradiction...from which" to "make a number of surmises and dialectical resolutions" (DuPlessis 2002: np)<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper, I use 'error' as a productive prompt to sketch something of the processes of thought and encounter which have allowed me to understand the workings of 'lyric' and 'language' as categories relevant to contemporary poetry by women, including my own second collection, *open season* (2006).

In the beginning, a woman entered a field and saw divided there the creatures called sheep and goats, those parts of grain known as wheat and chaff. *HOW(ever)*<sup>2</sup> there came a killer wind of noisy voices. Chaos reigned. Ears were eyes. She had no choice but to resort to re-sorting and found (as needs must) that lion might lie with lamb, lyric with L/language, expressive voicing with/as an experimental attempt at "writing 'otherhow'" (DuPlessis 2006: 3). Here ends the advertiser's message.

For some, the present paper might be considered misguided. An intransigent trespass on boundaries between critical distance and creative expression. An author's shameless apologia for her own praxis. Not so? Awkward silence, perhaps, since a South African academe is unused to quirky, non-normative genres. Yet very vocal responses in

defense of their own and their colleagues' poetics are offered by female poet-scholars in the US, Canada and England. Kathleen Fraser, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Denise Riley, Rae Amantrout, Erica Hunt and Erin Moure...each of these is "a woman poet 'producing' her own biography, rubrics, archive"; this is "a very significant enterprise, part of the controlling of reception that many poets negotiate as significant" interventionist gestures of "cultural production, cultural dissemination, and cultural reception" (DuPlessis 2002: np). Admittedly, this is never a comfortable undertaking. As Hejinian points out, "predicaments make a person apparent" (2000:1); evident subjectivity causes discomfort to conventionally 'objective' academic discourse, a situation exacerbated when the writer deliberately draws attention to the ways in which "I" is cast as a character in this text" (DuPlessis 2006: 8).

In the present essay<sup>3</sup>, "a method of the passionate, curious, multiple-vectored, personable, and invested discussion" (DuPlessis 2006: 3), I align authorial intention with women writers who have deliberately upped the ante by using and even creating diverse publication platforms to *stage* and direct debate about their poetry and written art. In addition to small presses and journals strategically in support of women's experimental writing, interventions include the auto-ethnographic aside; the glancing broadside; the collaged marginalia; scholarly comment arranged as cell structure or interlinked arcade; the hyperlinked e-zine; poetry *as* criticism...these have enabled women writers to circulate and defend forms of women's writing which sit awkwardly in both mainstream and avant-garde camps. It is notable that many of these female commentaries are characterised by "oscillation", "wobbling", "wavering" and "fluidity", "tacking between semi-contradictory positions", "both/and thinking", "Having A and not-A co-exist" (DuPlessis 2002: np).

Such ~ or / or : tensions seem apt markers for my own uncertain thinking about the claims, upon my collection, *open season*, of a 'lyrical' aesthetic in relation to experimental 'language'. While I appreciate that hybrid, cross-genre forms are the guerilla tactics of various 'minor literatures' and assailed groups, rather than unique to the poetics of women's writing, it still seems important to accept that the 'error' of both/and thought and practice may usefully be "gender-inflected" (DuPlessis 2006: 3), facilitating "dialogic writing" which is interested in "laying bare the device", being "playful-intense, moving into different registers, offering pluralities of readings, asking unanswerable questions" which "break the normalizing dichotomy between discursive and imaginative writing, between the analytic and the creative" thereby offering "a method of thought and an ethical attitude, not simply a style or a rhetorical choice" (DuPlessis 2006: 3 – 4).

Error is also a possible name for the formal eclecticism of *open season* (2006), which asks a reader to manage extremely varied styles, voices, subjects, forms, dictions. This sportively uneven, non-conformist range, straddling the expressive voice conventionally associated with lyric and yet also inclining towards innovative language experiment, asks to be read as the sign of a woman writer's ambivalence: for and against lyric in relation to the delights and opacities of outrageous linguistic opportunity. When working on the poems for *open season*, what we might call 'beauty' and 'machinery' exerted constant counter-claims. I felt the attractions of affective, personal expression in compressed, image- and voice-based poems of intense observation and insight. And yet there was also a torque towards poems almost as five-finger exercises, and towards

longer, discursive poems evidently tussling with ideas more than offering description. Such poems treat language not primarily as transparent medium of expression but as a rude material agent intent on showing its nuts and bolts in a space which is more properly poised, restrained. In a sense, *open season* addresses a series of challenges: What were the chances of reconciling a “linguistically investigative poetics” (Mark 2003:115) with a lyrical aesthetic? Would one need to be dumped in favour of the other? To ventriloquise through DuPlessis: “I think that the poem I want is the poet’s real struggle on the page inside language, inside poetic traditions, inside ideas, inside her time and place....In other words, a poetry which is “tested in the acts of language” (DuPlessis 2002:np).

And yet it is more than possible that my interest in the ‘women’s’ side of things will be considered wrong-headed. When it comes to women’s poetry in this country – notwithstanding increasing work on major figures such as Ingrid de Kok and Antjie Krog – there is scant attention to debates about lyric as possibility and/or constraint. Overall, too, little has been written about women’s poetry *as poetry by women*. There’s a gap. But (*obviously*) that’s because the issue is old hat. We all know the ‘old news’: that women’s writing “has from the start been profoundly embattled and troubled by the complexities and blindspots of cultural belonging when seen from the point of view of gender and sexuality” (Bergvall 2007: 1). So? But then there is a tricky little difficulty: the fact that the ostensibly old news retains a curious power to provoke contention, the matter of femaleness and form being provocatively touchy, as if merely to discuss writing by women as instances of *women’s* writing is somehow a mistake based on the mistaken assumption that genre is gendered, or that Women share an x-factor, or that form entails biological essence rather than conscious formal experiment, or even that women have long been admitted to a gender-blind canon...

(*Will I ever get through this?*) Like “a number of contemporary women...[who] explore the possibility of female speech in culture” (DuPlessis 1996: 33), I will have to essay. To make a way through my mire in the hope of coming clean, if never fully clear, conceding the importance of transitions tried in the making. In such a form, I may be she, she may shape shift, and the first person poet may be beside herself in the third person, assuming the position of critical distance that has become an academic norm. Fraser’s essaying of lyric in relation to language not only revealed to her “the ‘problem’ or potential meanings of error versus perfection”, but allowed her a way in which “consciously [to] stage and foreground the occasion of error – or otherness” (2000: 85) that she lived by being female. (More details may be obtained from the Department for Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities.)

For Fraser, the ‘essay’ is “a mercurial vector of thought” (2000:3), an exploratory form of “partial local coherence” (vii) useful in women writers’ exploration of the impulse to innovative necessity which stems from the fact that women’s writing does not fit neatly into “the inhibiting field of established precedent”(2000: 1), whether traditional or experimental. DuPlessis also points out, by the way, that the essay – rather like the lyric – “has been summed up by the term *feminine*” on account of its “rejection of mastery, the arrogant minority, the glimpses of intimate moments, the tracking of a wayward mind thinking”(1996: 33). The “poetic study, the study as poem, poetic criticism...all of these possibilities come together in the essay because of its enactment of a praxis”. The essay is “the genre of making, the genre showing how ‘making’ itself engages discourses as part of the medium,...a thinking that is of language in all its

density and snarls its associations, burrs, leaps, expostulations and fleshliness” (DuPlessis 1996: 22). No wonder the essay is so apt to reveal (for revealing) error.

Conventional lyric. Experimental Language. How did it come to *this*? In my tussling with the poetics of the poetry I was making, these categories initially settled into clumsy polarities, constantly threatening to cancel each other out. If I wanted lyric, I couldn't have dramatic linguistic experimentalism. If I wanted the innovative language end of things, well, tired old lyric would have to go. Lyric and Language seemed suckered to discomfiting assumptions about what was outmoded and what innovative, a scenario in which a vital experimental poetry scene only happened 'elsewhere' than in the parochial local; it left the local eating descriptive dust. (I know. I know I should have known better. But there you have it.) As it happens, only once *femaleness* was factored into the lyric↔language equation did things begin to split, and complicate. I learnt. Slowly. By wide, erratic example. By being wide-of-the-mark. I learnt that for many women poets, 'radical artifice' (Perloff 1991) was not synonymous with extravagant linguistic experiment; a poem could entail odd and repeated claw-backs of supposedly outré lyric modes, the situating of the personal in the social space in the various forms taken by language – from the specific intonations of regional idiom to the conceptual surrealisms of syntactical obscurity. In effect, searching for ways to tack lyric to L/language, I have come to think about *open season* as a poetry “lodged in a dilemma”, meaning “in that activity of mind which we term *doubt*”. This 'dubious' method, Hejinian suggests, need not be considered a failing, for doubt is a process “of our deepest reason” (2000: 351). Like Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her re-signing of the essay form<sup>4</sup>, my seeking to think through my uncertain feelings towards 'lyric' and 'language' “is in the essay a way of knowing. A path. In some old woods, in the middle of something....The digression *is* the subject” (DuPlessis 1996: 28), a form of necessary doubt that embodies a “moment of incipience” (Hejinian 2000: 343) between concepts which enables me to treat the otherwise abstract terms of 'lyric' and 'language' as an embodied “milieu of experience” (Hejinian 2000: 327).

### Lost lyric

Long ago (yonks), 'lyric' meant The Lyric Theatre in Durban. A magician who found the word hidden in the pocket of a child's imagination. A hypnotist who entranced a person into talking funny. A ventriloquist in luxe tux, throwing his voice into an outspoken wooden dummy. A choral eisteddfod – the set piece is Poe's tintinnabulating “Bells”. And the apogee: Four Jacks and a Jill, South Africa's World Famous superstars, with “I Love You Timothy”, the “Click Song”, and “Master Jack”. I sang my heart out. Sang out of myself. We all did. And then I trampled the collective will in order to sing on stage with Glenys Lynne. Me. I.

Even in this forgettable memory flash, lyric takes tricky shapes, at once pop song and local speech, Orphic and demotic, I and we and other.

It's taken long to understand that lyric is, and isn't. That a poet can play fast and loose, forming and sounding as lyric tradition, lyric/al voice and the short, artificial lyric poem. British poet Denise Riley knows it. Shows it in a poem called “A Misremembered Lyric”: “...then the rain lyrics fall./ I don't want absence to be this beautiful./ It shouldn't be; in fact I know it wasn't” (Caddel and Quartermain 1999: 211).

And, again, in “vii Disintegrate me”: “No single word of this is any more than decoration of an old self-magnifying wish” (214).

#### Pointedly A

lyric has been understood “as a genre authorizing the self’s primacy” (Kinnahan 2004: 9), the “traditional lyric ‘I’ shaping...language to evoke the epiphanies of an essential self” (Luck 2008: 357). The lyric poem is generally conceived as an emotionally invested autobiographical mode of expression marked by assumptions of “the unified lyric subject and notions of transparent...language” that serve the standard “conventions of interior revelation”. Proponents of lyric have upheld the lyric as a “literary genre in which language expresses the private experiences, sensations, and thoughts of the individual poet” (Kinnahan 2004: 43), in a language which is distinctively and originally particular to a poet’s voice.

#### Pointedly B

and for lyric’s detractors, the form is seen as a dead/ening, academic dominant, “the *default mode* for poetry” (McHale 2009: 14), a bland “aesthetic middle ground” (Beach 1997: 75) privileging coherent craft, distinctive voice, confessional writing, and personal experience. Many experimental women writers have remarked “the formal and ideological” limits of lyric as a “straight-up” mainstream which favours “straight-line narrative”, “a well-managed telos”, “an aggressive, coloristic sense of imagery” and a “reductive sense of the line” (DuPlessis and Heuving 2004: 412). They have voiced doubts about traditional lyric’s object/ifying “gender positionality of the female figure” (403), and impatience with associated features which comprise “part of a foundational cluster of the lyric” among them “beauty” and “sensuousness” (410). DuPlessis talks of her “resistance to the ‘pure lyric hit’ – that narrow, lovely thing” as being premised on “a feminist resistance that sees” such poems “as working with deeply imbedded ideas about female and feminine” (DuPlessis 2002: np).

#### Pointedly C: see

however, that if lyric is loaded, this hasn’t prevented female experimental poets (or female poets experimenting) from reworking solipsistic lyric wound and complaint through reflexive attention to language. As DuPlessis puts it: “I do not reject ‘lyricism’ or melody as one effect built among many in a poem (sound, segmentivities, charms) – though I do emphatically reject the charming, the decorative, the pretty” – “pretty poetry” and “little poetry”. Yes, “I have a principled resistance to ‘beauty’ as a maker of verse, a serious claim of dissent and resistance, but my creolizations are not ignorant of beauty....I use sentence *and* fragment, argument *and* disjunction, putting rapture next to rupture, so to speak” (2002: np). So the “apparent rejection of the lyric is a tendentious position and certainly very debatable; certain contemporary writers...get a lot from embracing the lyric”. After all, “I’m not trying to exclude ‘the lyric’ from poetry, because that would be a truly quixotic gesture”, but “I wanted to surround it, to build through it, and to rupture it” (DuPlessis and Heuving 2004: 403).

### **A (very) little on lyric and the local**

Lyric is a recurrent term in discussions of South African poetry, few as these are. In a rough-and-ready context where the dominant descriptive categories for poetry are probably ‘print’ and ‘performance’, rather than ‘mainstream’ or ‘alternative’, prominent English language poets tend to be described in terms of their notable lyric gifts. Yet it took me a while, in struggling with the belief that lyric was limited, to see that if there are numerous lyric poets of the easy heart-strings lining poems “designed to convey some sort of unique personal essence” (Perloff 1996: 183), the more sophisticated lyricism of notable poets such as Ingrid de Kok should easily have given me the lie, rebuffing inherited assumptions of lyric as equated with “an oppressive circle of self-presence” (183) or “a subject somehow *outside* language” (8).

For all its assumed slowness and lightness, lyric seems a pretty tough creature. Which ought to have told me something about sheep and goats. Recently, Michael Chapman has identified forms of lyric convention as among the most visible feature of poetry collections published in South Africa post 2000: “the verbal invention most of us associate with a poem, whether in shorter or longer form, leans towards lyricism” which “favours the personal, expressive register” and “ask[s] the reader...for imaginative participation” (2010:191). What might this lyric visibility mean? That page poets writing in English were holding fast to the comforts of self in situations of unease? That lyric was surprising adaptable to changed social circumstances? I didn’t know. But I did start to wonder, back in the early 2000s, whether a poet could retain the imagined felt authenticity of lyric address *and* show lyric, through the exposed workings of language, to be not unmediated self expression but “a consciously performative or “theatral” mode “disposed to enactment” (Moure 2009:262). And then: if a poet tried this tactic, would she be conventional or innovative? In *open season*, I ventured a series of uncertain responses to my own ill-formed challenge.

**open season o pen seas op(p)en sea son non open pon eas on:  
testing the measure of the times**

Reviewers recognised a distinctive voicing in *open season*, a “verbal magic” which makes this “a contemporary South African voice quite unlike any other” (Chapman 2009: 186). The poetry made experience “present and vivid”, “flower[ing] into words in such a way that [life]...appears direct and unmediated...Whether due to a musical sense, a rhythmic immediacy or liveliness of mind, Sally-Ann Murray has this quality more than almost anybody else writing here today” (Strauss 2007: 231). And yet if *open season* was considered “extremely accomplished”, “diverse”, “marvellously deft” and “very funny”, it was also understood to be a collection which “tests the measure of the times” (Dunton 2007: 18). The ‘testing’ was felt in the “audacity” of a voice which was “formidable, even pitiless” (18) rather than ‘concerned’ to be “emotionally sincere” (Heiss 2007: 64). It lay in the poet’s attempt to set the “criteria” of response beyond conventional identification: “poetic expression in lyrical or flaming phrases” is “few and far between in this volume”, for a “sense of separateness...pervades the consciousness” (64). As Heiss observed, *open season* is a collection in which the poet “wants to provoke, to stir up, to go against, rather than embrace, soothe, identify with” (2007: 65). This is a volatile poetry which could be understood as turning *from* lyrical language to something ‘other’ and yet also re-tu(r)ning lyric interests to imaginatively and linguistically uncertain purpose. The ‘testing’ quality of *open season* also applied to the rampantly eclectic co-

presencing of forms and modes: “the lyric, the anti-poem, the story or narrative poem, the anecdotal incident, the quasi epic, the balladic invention, the hip hopped ‘in your face’ intervention”, “[n]ostalgic eulogy” and “funky riposte”(Chapman 2006:1). “She hardly speaks about life’s crises or high points...; her business is with the everyday, and she brings an extraordinary relish to it” (Strauss 2007: 232). Even reviewers who preferred the lyrical moments of the collection over poems shaped by antsy anti-aesthetics, recognised the “interest in formal experimentation and verbal playfulness” (Robins 2006: 56). Clearly (that much *is* clear), this was a collection asking readers to participate in forms both within and beyond the conventional.

Writing *open season*, I was working hit and miss within spaces unfamiliar and therefore edgy (linguistic experiment) and those more well-known and thus liable to seem jaded, easy or overly-appealing (lyric). I was also grappling with the ill-formed thought that to write with linguistic interest ought not necessarily mean to white out, and write off, lyric. The method was muddle-headed madness. Often I felt plain wrong. It is only retrospectively that I better understand my motives. Like the experimental British poet Denise Riley, I was experiencing lyric as both an appeal and a constraint. Riley is a poet who, while writing experimentally, opted to *retain* forms of lyrically expressive ‘I’-ing in order to challenge the abstract, ostensibly genderless linguistic-conceptual signifiers which had come to typify an established avant-garde. As a result of this ‘archaism’ she has borne the burden of having her poetry considered by some to be overly arch, self-reflexive, even narcissistic (Kinnahan 1996). She suffers from ““this lyric forever error”” as Kinnahan calls it (2003: 281), quoting from one of Kathleen Fraser’s poems, a phrase which describes the push-pull situation of a woman poet who, in purposefully off-key lyric poems, consciously demonstrates the cultural-poetic ‘error’ of lyric voicing in order to innovate with language and form and yet her poetry is still regarded as somehow ‘too lyrical’. Riley “desires lyric” as possibility, as an unmarked poetic mode expressive of universalised voice (Kinnahan 1996); at the same time she “questions the conditions for lyric” (Haslam 1993: 100), responding to lyric as a troubling category for the woman writer, a form curiously over-marked with gendered value.

Through the voiced struggles of Riley (and Fraser and Moure and...), I have come to understand that ‘slighter’ versions of lyric form (as opposed to the elevated “philosophical high lyric”) have been considered apt for women poets’ putatively sentimental, minor, solipsistic, circumscribed, mundane, domestic domains. And then – hey presto! – *because* of the supposed “circumscription of subject matter, language and form” (Kinnahan 1996: 637), much lyric poetry by women has been considered less than properly aesthetic: “emotive, personal, descriptive, nonintellectual” (Kinnahan 2004: 2). A claustrophobic Catch 22. So the obvious question became: then what else? What could be made different, stretched and deformed in the service of an/other poet-ethical aesthetic? Could the answer (*an* answer) be found in Language poetry? I did wonder...

### **Language poetry?**

As Romana Huk makes clear, if there has been no consensus concerning the shape and range of the “experimental or radical or avant-garde or postmodern poetry” (2003: 5) that has been loosely grouped under the term ‘language poetry’, it is widely considered – despite more recent reminders of its buried links with earlier poetic experimentalisms – to derive from the 1970s American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry movement. Language

poetry is “a notoriously factionalized field” (Crown 1998: 644),<sup>5</sup> its proponents resistant to labels, but call it what you will, upper case or lower, language poetry as a diversely experimental poetic has been seen as “an antidote to the ubiquity” of a mainstream lyrical tradition (Retallack 1984: 244). How does this ‘language’ poetry look, and sound?

Many American language poets have aligned poetry with critical theory, intending to erase archaic signifiers (‘self’, ‘voice’, ‘representation’) through “forms of disruptive polyphony”(Fraser 2000: 206). These include writing in “the continuous present, stream of consciousness, [and] field composition”(206), along with typographical disruption, unusual orthography and layout, chance composition, concrete poetry, non-referential imagery, ‘typos’, un- or mistranslated words – a range of aggressively counter-lyrical turns that exploded poetic convention into deconstructive enactments, fore-grounding the materiality of language, and attesting to a process-orientated approach to writing interested in the page as an open form or field, an unfolding projective space, rather than fixating on the poem as perfectly achieved artifact. There was little like this in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> As Stephen Watson had rather tetchily found some years before, if there was a scattering of writers who examined “the linguistic” (Watson 1990:17), local poets had “overwhelmingly eschewed all notions of the indeterminate reference of language, instead “persist[ing] in” forms of mimetic “linguistic faith”, as “if Saussure and his followers had never been born” (1990:14). Overall, the experimental was “more the exception than the rule” (Watson 1990:18). Perhaps lyric verse written in English was obscure enough in the local context, page poetry already typecast as overly difficult, the personal voice as socially remote. So much for Language poetry. Linguistic experimentalism was irresponsible, dilettantish play. Non-sense. Liable to lengthen the already substantial South African charge sheet against poetry as an incomprehensible, inaccessible, elitist form.

A poem

as artifact

as agency

as “unitary” (61), “I” (65) or

as “deconstructive push” (65), self

“divided and

sub-div

I ded until

un

certainty

called

into question

any writing...

stuckkkkkkkkk

in the isolation of private anguish” or

“too narrowly focused on cleverness and polish”

(Fraser 2000: 61 – 62).

Oh danger at ev

a re



turn.

The danger of lyric:  
“sentimentalizing”, “simplifying”, “ornamentalising”  
bang bang bang  
experience (Allen-Randolph 1993: 13)

(Oh lovely rice. Green and good.)

The danger of language:  
gnomic or gibbous  
chip or chop  
anagrammatical  
and oblique and

(My shadow is ever further as me.)

So-so  
perfectly horrible

“writing on the side” (DuPlessis 1996:16),  
“frustrate[ing] the desire to get to the point” (Porter 1989:95-96),

(The birds speaking, why’s it always Zulu?)

The woman hugs the margins.

In commenting on such poetics, Fraser could explain that one of the problems for a woman writer was “to have always imagined the poem as something that could be written only inside perfect, uninterrupted time, an air-tight vacuum: quiet. Waiting for the day when this moment would finally arrive. But everything kept breaking-in on continuity; everyone wanted your attention,...<sup>7</sup>. Each person imagined he or she was the only one”, though you “could be carrying a dozen other lives inside you waiting to unfold” (2000: 21). Was it then surprising, she asks, that my “thoughts were blips and scrolls and departures”, “[u]nexpectedness, chaos, pressures and breaks”? She continues: “Everything seemed to tilt, to barely maintain itself. In spite of all effort. I thought, why not write that way? ...the beautiful, seamless poem stopped being relevant to my own way of working...[and] the open field of the page became more and more compelling” (2000: 22 - 23).

Such a poetics percolates into *open season*, with its improvised “mélanges of a variety of styles – conversational, surreal, and lyrical, abounding with fragments of rhyme and often bumpy, haphazard rhythm” through which the possibilities of voicing are explored (Heiss 2007:66).

### **Opening *open season***

In the beginning are concessions to convention; *open season* opens with a familiar lyric voice in “After Douglas,”, a poem which Roy Robins found “superb”, “sublime, really”, as it possesses “the generosity and formal grace of mature art” (2006: 52).

But wait. Isn't that a little too easy, even a complacently cheesy false consolation? Because it's no great challenge to respond to "After Douglas," as an intimate, elegiac turn on the traditional love lyric. The woman poet addresses and metaphorically re-embodies the dead Douglas Livingstone, a masterful poet of the South African literary tradition who is closely associated with her home city, Durban, and with the marine, scientific, and linguistic ecologies which feature in her own writing. The poem pays gentle respects, the female poet acknowledging an imaginative debt by layering her art over the male poet's "brilliant voice-print", its "definite authority and well-installed literary history" blurring her view of her "own barely visible version" (Fraser 2000:58). And yet the poem also attempts a laconic *de*-voicing, a wry performance of precisely the 'indisputable' poetic mastery supposedly essential to that mature literary art which warrants canonizing in literary tradition. If the collection begins by acknowledging the master, it also rather cheekily gets him out of the way. Over and done with? The unstable preposition ('After'), and the quirky punctuation embedded in the title, destabilise elegiac mood through what Fraser calls "fragmentary lurch" (2000:153), implying that even sincere homage, for the female poet, entails a degree of aside, abutting norms and expectations too-close-for-comfort against gendered unease. Time and again, *open season* tips individual lyric expression off-centre towards experimental language, and then back again to 'voicing', raising questions about gender in relation to language.

### **A woman's poetry, information and originality**

Consider the use of "deliberate artificiality" in *open season*, a poetics in which the "word is wedded ... to fact, knowledge, even reportage, rather than emotion" (Heiss 2007: 64). Information. The journalistic. The "unoriginal" (66). These are not familiar signals of lyric utterance and, as (Jessica) Luck would have it, the "theorists of lyric and Language poetics have...drawn the battle lines" between "inspiration or systematization, lyric 'I' or language function, voice or noise" (2008: 358). Individual voice. Social noise. What choice?

The question of verbal originality is a contentious issue for a woman poet writing in the uncertain space of lyric↔language. Glance at the following sketchy schematic:

If, deftly, she crafts a poised expression or observation emanating from self :

- she has a fair chance of being read as affectively authentic (if, on occasion, blandly predictable) and/or
- she might be panned as overly self-absorbed, even sentimental. (It happens. Still. Ask Riley.)

If she places 'self' under erasure:

- she might be recognised by some, uneasily, as experimenting with the ethics of rhetorical innovation and/or
- her poetics might be panned as conceptually 'noisy' rather than thoughtfully contemplative

Is it wrong – erring again - to suggest that the baseline in local page poetry continues to be personally-inflected utterance (held against the cultural or sub-cultural 'community' of various kinds of oral performance)? And that if such conditions prevail, an experimental

poetics which subjects individual voice and expression to scrutiny tends to be suppressed and othered as a viable writing possibility, never mind writing community?

And yet influential commentators on the contemporary international poetry scene have remarked that “poetic ‘uniqueness’ in our post-romantic age is less a matter of authenticity of individual *expression* than of sensitivity to the language pool on which the poet draws in re-creating and redefining the world”. Such “‘denotative’ poetry...may look improperly ‘poetic’” on account of its flattened or hyperbolic vocabulary and tone, or sound patternings and sentence structures which may be ungainly, awkward, marked by grammatical error (Perloff 1996:187). Such poetry is likely to be construed as ‘aesthetic’ error by exasperated readers more accustomed to intimate lyric voicing.

It *is* difficult to decide about such poetics. I agree, knowing that a critic as sophisticated as Perloff articulates contradictory responses. While every poet “now dwells in a world of media-speak”, this space is contradictory. She finds it “oppressively uniform in its locutions, idioms, phraseology, word choice, even...accent” (1996: 187) *and yet* her nuanced commentaries on the new poetics refute simple identicality, showing how denotative utterance may be invested by experimental poets with a “curious charge” (197) while “lyric paradigms”, in turn, also become “the occasion for parody and play” (200). Reading linguistically experimental poems, I am reminded that every poem, written in language, has a degree of “purposeful obtuseness”, a “muscular resistance to letting the reader fully ‘in’” (Hinton 2000: 186). So instead of opting for a sweeping Yea or Nay about the poetics of ‘lyric’ or ‘language’, I begin to accept that it is in the reading experience of the individual poem that I will make decisions about the success or otherwise of language experiment in relation to lyric voicing. How can it be otherwise, unless I want to fall into the very traps I am slowly trying to locate, and disarm?

So, once again: not lyric or Language, but ↔, which for Wills is a configuration especially important for the experimental energies explored by women poets. She points out that they are “engaging ...in a complex negotiation” between the possibilities of ‘rhetoric’ and ‘voice’, “between ideas and experiences of the individual” in relation to the erasure of self, individuality, and authentic personal experience in a technologised, commodified culture (1994: 41 – 2).

Relevant to the formation of poetic voice in this mediatised cultural context is the blur between exterior ‘culture noise’ and the “ventriloquy” of a persistent if erratic “inner speech” (Riley 2004: 72):

[i]nner speech is no limpid stream of consciousness, crystalline from its uncontaminated source in Mind, but a sludgy thing, thickened with reiterated quotation, choked with the rubble of the overheard, ...crammed with slogans and jingles, with mutterings of remembered accusations, irrepressible puns, insistent spirits of ancient exchanges, monotonous citation, the embarrassing detritus of advertising, archaic injunctions from hymns, and the pastel snatchings of old song lyrics. (73)

This implies extremely porous boundaries between a poet’s ‘self’ as originating creative agent and the cacophonous “stream of language coursing through” the “mind’s ear” (Luck 2008: 373). Fraser, too, speaks of a poetics influenced by a similar voicing, encompassing both perceptual and conceptual fields: she listens to “an interior

soundtrack”, to the aural “graffiti of inner drift and disruption”, “following its peculiar, often ‘irrational’ moves” in the confounding process of creating the ‘between’ of lyric and language (2000: 202 – 3).

The poems in *open season* variously sound a distinctive voice *and* experiment with what it means for a woman poet to submit to heteroglossia, finding her hard-won, distinctive art (to be) on the verge of sociolinguistic erasure by the clamour of the mundane. This both/and causes problems. For Robins, when “Murray describes Durban, the city in which she lives, her verse becomes incandescent” and “inspired” (2006: 53, 54), and he singles out a poem about the “Mbilo” river, which conjures both debased nature and fluid social communities by means of vivid images, idiomatic attribution, and the situating of self in history. However, in poems which turn poetry turtle, as in the messy streetwise salvage of “Durban poet making Durban do (it all)”, the reviewer baulks, and blanches... despite such a mean piece of work probably being more in keeping with urban citiness than lyrical artifice. This poem tackles head on questions about the ‘proper’ languages in which to write poetry. It references elevated poetic conventions alongside “very crude thought” (DuPlessis 2002: np), in the sense of basic, unsubtle, and unrefined, and the hurtling idiom evades the protocols of a SpellCheck (which anyway quibbles at ‘DuPlessis’, preferring Duple sis, Depresses, or Dulles’s. We have a problem. Again. Please be patient.)

Instead of a poet’s pure/ly distinctive voice in *open season*, there is evidence of voicing “as a testing and questioning of any final authority” in forms which are not concerned with “smoothing or editing away” (Fraser 2000: 86). There is medley, and multiple, and muddle. Many voices “sometimes in conversation, sometimes in debate, sometimes clashing, sometimes eerily dissonant or disturbing” (Gish 2003: 266). “Durban poet making Durban do (it all)” performs in English the limits of English as a language and a cultural horizon. There is a non-conformist’s “delight in the picaresque experience of textual errancy”, the poet “stray[ing] into the delirious experience of displacement and error”(Billitteri 1999: np). The idiom of the poem does not conceal the machinery; it is shown working to carry the poet’s thought processes, her sense that in the context of South African experiences ‘language poetry’ cannot be envisaged primarily as the innovations of a ‘Language poetics’, since linguistic experiment insistently butts up against local language debates and linguistic-experiential privileges and disadvantage: English as lingua franca. English as third, fourth, language. English as monolingual mother-tongue almost “mastered by the linguistic confound” (Luck 2008: 374). English (like ‘poetry’) almost come to signify ‘error’. And factored in there, too, is femaleness as garrulously outspoken imagination, and poetry so wide of the old fixed mark that it cannot recall ever having pretended to be a mute, globed fruit, lovely as that was.

### ***A feminist experimental poetics?***

This conjuncture of women, poetry and silence is an apt one at which to observe that yes, parts of *open season* intersect with a feminist poetics which has encouraged female poets to write accessible, empirical poems expressive of women’s various conditions and experiences. One reviewer found in *open season* a graphic female anger that was “Adrienne Rich-ish” (Robins 2006: 55), while others singled out the “exceptionally fine pieces on pregnancy and mothering” (Dunton 2007:18), the “wonderful poems about...child-bearing” (Strauss 2007: 232).

Yet for a poet who is interested in both femaleness *and* “in language as a material” and “mediating force”, “‘she’ can reside only within quotation marks” (Kinnahan 1996: 621). ‘She’ “becomes the context in which language is met and absorbed and deflected” (Wills 1994: 44, 46). That this ‘meeting’ of dissimilar poetics is difficult, even contentious, I won’t dispute; there’s good reason for the title of Marjorie Perloff’s 1990 essay “Canon and loaded gun: feminist poetics and the avant-garde”. Feminism was “skeptical of women [poets]...whose work investigated the assumptions of language’s access to truth and experience” (Kinnahan 2004: 52) – the early Adrienne Rich, for example, felt that “radical formal experimentation” denied “more urgent material realities (4). Linguistic experimentalists, in their turn, were inclined to dismiss such outré conventions as sincerity and voice. However, as recent scholarship on innovative women’s poetry is demonstrating, many women poets ‘post-language’ (Luck 2008) are not obedient to categories or modes; women’s re-turn to lyricism can foreground the latent linguistic capacities of ‘voice’ to expose, in experimental ways, a widespread avant-garde complacency about the supposedly genderless inflections of innovation.

So: *open season* also tries to re-situate so-called female subjects and their subject matters – indeed the very mode of representation – upon uneven, experimental ground.

As Strauss observes, *open season* “is the product of many experiments, by a poet constantly and deliberately working to enlarge her range” (Strauss 2007: 232). Several poems in *open season* overtly signal an interest in formal-linguistic experimentalism: “*Cosmopolitan un(w)rapped*”, for instance, and “*Smalls (mixed massages)*”. There are poems striated by theory, testing “enunciative limits” (Beach 1997: 59) rather than “transcribe[ing] or captur[ing] experience”; interacting “on a textual or metatextual level with that experience and the process of remembering and re-creating” (59). Additionally, there are exercises in the “practice of *mesostics* or the *writing-through* of other texts” (McHale 2000: 21) – fairly simple examples include “Doing the dictionary (re-viewing a *TLS* book review as a poem)” and “Narrative fragment (Side view of Henry James: after reading Colm Toibin’s *The Master*)”. More disconcerting, because it refuses not only lyric but narrative modes, is the chemical analysis of a strawberry milkshake in “*Regular*”. This poem blatantly announces its “mechanism” even as it retains a perplexing, confounding conceptual opacity at the level of meaning and process (McHale 2000: 18). And then right at the end, it offers the alienated reader a queasy ‘meaning’. (Drink; it’s delicious...)

If such poems test the limits and possibilities of voicing – through lyric, language, narrative and discourse,<sup>8</sup> the effect is not *necessarily* to flatten or erase self.

“Contemporary cabinet of curiosities”, for instance, subtitled “a cataloguing experiment after Perec”, may use the “lists, beloved of the surrealists” (Dunton 2007:18) – a whole “four pages of items” (Heiss 2007:68) – but the poem remains intriguing because innovative form is not emptied of powerful affective recognition. The “speaker’s individuality” (68) reaches far beyond lyric voice into a

Prosaic domestic habitat  
 educated SA middle class  
 bourgeois bohemian boere baroque  
*fin de siecle* household

living room 8x5x3m  
specimens listed from left to right

which “typifies contemporary, educated, middle class life...: the dependence on modern technology, the virtually unchecked transport of cultural artifacts across the globe, the obsession with material things almost as fetishes, the domestic sphere, the consumer shrine, the age in which information passes for significant. And...she does this with the touch of a female’s...feeling for home” (69). The experimental linguistic turn insistently re-locates ‘self’ and ‘home’ in dispersed conceptual contexts, and invites a reader ‘in’.

### **And on opening even more**

It’s true that the poetics of Language poetry *per se* do not constitute a crucial “ ‘nexus’ moment” (DuPlessis 2002: np) for contemporary local writers, but we need to be open to the possibility that a presently buried, or latent, avant-garde is nevertheless a consequential outlier instance of a more dominant South African interest in language as a medium of expression, an unusual, *off-trend* in-tendency towards which a few poets already incline, and which more might explore if they felt the form had cultural legitimacy. Less left of centre: my feeling is that by taking account of the tensions, contradictions and mistakes which have informed my own struggle, as a female poet and scholar, to understand the lyric↔language relation, the critical discourses operating on poetry in South Africa could be nudged in invigorating new directions. Through my own errors, it might be possible to see local women’s poetry a little differently, to formulate a vocabulary in which ‘innovation’ is not the prerogative of only dramatically visible linguistic or visual play. Similarly, the ways in which we approach ‘lyric’ and lyric voicing, might acquire valuable amplifications when placed alongside vocabularies inflected by those used to describe forms of language poetics.<sup>9</sup> In such a lyric↔language relation, both ‘lyric’ and ‘language’ become not pressing conditions but conditionals, activated now by possibility, now by limit.

In particular, this might assist us in developing newly-meaningful compositional scales for page poetry by South African women, creating a space of reception in which women’s poetry embodies a “this *and* that” (Fraser 2009: 156), lyric *and* language. Think about it, urges DuPlessis: are women’s poems taken as lyric and “as personal because women’s words must be ipso facto” lyrical and personal? “Is it because the risk of heteroglossia, of rank diction, may seem a personal boldness? Is it because one story about” the lyric “we all know calls” it “personal writing”, so that “reading is a self-fulfilling discovery of that idea? Is it because people reading the pronoun *I* forget that what they are reading is not life but a “‘biographeme’ – selected, made – a work of art” (1996: 31)? That’s an intimidating list of questions, without promise of immediate answer.<sup>10</sup>

But still. It has helped me to work through my mistaken imagining of lyric voice and regularised syntax as outmoded residues inimical to linguistic innovation. Only in this way could I arrive at the insight that particular local terrains inflect ‘newness’ differently, and that “in order to judge the degree to which work is ‘alternative’ or ‘innovative’, it must first be experienced within the context in which it has taken shape and meaning” (Joyce 2003: 156). Why subsume poetries under “either/or categories of ‘experimental’ or ‘mainstream’”, when the “categories have been structured in contexts”

which the poetries “do not share” (Gish 2003: 260)? Versions of this mistake can unwittingly *suppress* evidence of innovative practice, and relegate to the margins work which is radical on its own terms, perhaps “versions of English which are deliberately (or carelessly) impure and which open to new forms of linguistic-poetic community”. Such poems may be lyric, but not in the accepted sense of proceeding from a singular, coherent expressive subjectivity (262). Lyric poems in which lyric is subject to experimental language let voice expand onto the page, responding to the “spatial invitation to play with typographic relations of words and alphabets, as well as with their denotative meanings”, and this “has delivered visual-minded poets from the closed, airless containers of the well-behaved poem into a writing practice that foregrounds the investigation and pursuit of the unnamed” (Fraser 2000: 175). Lyric poems which open to language as material and idea, more than simply ‘expressive’ medium, enable “a paradigm based on the recognition that the poet’s most secret and profound emotions are expressed in a language that has always already belonged to the poet’s culture, society, and nation, the irony being that this ‘belonging’ need not make the poetry in question...any less moving” (Perloff 1996: 22).

In the unstable spaces of lyric↔ L/language, Romana Huk suggests that the “new poetries seem to suggest that *something* exceeds the old focus on language operations...and requires attending to” (2003: 7). She concedes that that ‘something’ is elusive, uncertain; by no means consensual. Yet the work of both Wills and Kinnahan implies that for women poets interested in the uneasy interface of language and female experience, that ‘something’ may be the old goad, gender, which through lyric *in/as* language is reasserting its power to thorn the side and pebble the shoe of poetic form and content.

After this paper, inspired by current international scholarship on the edgy associations of lyric and language, I’d like to re-view collections by influential South African women poets. What might I see, now, through the shared lens of lyric↔language? Perhaps poems with “a hard-edge, crystal language enveloped in lyricism, enunciating a ‘new’ language harnessed against the wreckage of female-associated (and Romantic-based) nature imagery” (Hinton 2000: 183)? Poems of “playful sequence...that confound[ ] the reader into experiencing an epistemological shift” (183)? Poems that demonstrate “an interest in the formal properties of language...intertwined with reflections upon the vicissitudes of gender” (183)? Even in much contemporary experimental poetry by women, I have come to see, an embodied subjectivity and “the connective force of identification with the lyric speaker, nonetheless remains as a persistent interstice in the readerly exchange” (Kinnahan 1996: 654).

Here, then, towards the end of my essaying, I’d like to give brief comment on the work of two local women poets as it bears on the lyric↔language torsion. To begin with Joan Metelerkamp. It’s clear that she has long been tilting line and language at the lilted loveliness of lyric form. (She and I were joint winners of the Sanlam Literary Award for our first collections, published in 1992 by Carrefour Press.) Over the years, she has turned lyric to declamatory account in discursive poems; long, recalcitrant casts which insist on the validity of emotion *and* idea, description *and* theory. This is not to everyone’s liking, and she has been criticised for being an experienced poet who produces work that feels unfinished, and lacks polish. However, as Sole appreciates, this is a poet of multiple “voices – philosophical, angry, critical, sensuous”, articulating “a

woman's attitudes and experiences in relation not only to men but also to the web of social and emotional bonds, ties of family and kinship, and intellectual and artistic traditions with which she lives as feminist and mother" (1996: 30). Metelerkamp's poetry is lyric, and not; Language, and not: a "contradictory richness" that is "ripped like the ragged piece of paper" (30). Building on the starts made by Kelwyn Sole and, more recently, Kobus Moolman (2010) in his conceptually insightful take on *Burnt Offering* (2009), I think it's time that we developed a vocabulary for Metelerkamp's poetics. The present clumsy essaying might go a little way towards pointing directions: how to tackle a poetic praxis which is impatient with the poem as iconic instance and veers off towards other, less clearly imagined shapes. The "fold" (DuPlessis and Heuving 2004: 404), "crease" (404), repeated "flash" (417) or, as in the case of DuPlessis's recursively generative serial poem, the draft. DuPlessis publishes her work as 'drafts', proceeding from the "metaphoric presumption of provisionality"; none of the poems is "perfect, iconic, static – something...that has a gender meaning for me". The poems intentionally "rupture[] the iconic", carrying the writer's "desire to create hybridity and mixed kinds of texts" (2002: np). Hers is poetry which "mitigates against the notion of the individual perfect work of art" (Tarlo 1999: 98). While Metelerkamp's are not (yet?) poems "stretching across book boundaries" (Tarlo 1999: 98), her use of the long poem is an expansive constant, an aesthetic (in)economy which, whether self-absorbed or self-reflexive, offers no immediate promise or reward for a reader attuned to lyric brevity. (It certainly has not attracted the critical attention of the black poets' epics of nation and identity.) We need to find ways in which to respond with understanding to what women are writing. Strange, grotesque, deformed poems. They aren't going away.<sup>11</sup>

The lyric↔language implication also leads me to the Karen Press of *Echo location: a guide to Sea Point for residents and visitors* (1998). When viewed through Wills's research into female experimentalism, this notable lyric poet comes more clearly into view as a poet of innovative form. In *Echo location*, there's the clamour of historical melee, the noisy, boisterous anti-poetry of the street which, loosely transcribed so as to resemble a poetics on foot, runs or crawls along the bottom of the contained page, wittily opening the space to concrete materiality, claiming a little right for all kinds of speech to co-exist. (And it's not such a great leap from the experimental aesthetic to the poem as sign of the longed-for community of an ethical democracy.) Place, in this collection, is rendered not solely through poetic description, but through found ephemera, such that the environment which forms the subject of the poem also seems to speak itself through the citation of everyday languages. All language, a reader is reminded, is the poet's matter. A poem is verbal. And visual. And *material*. Chapman, too, has understood that Press in the *Little Museum of Working Life* (2004) is a poet "almost rejecting the lyrical voice", pushing to the limits of "her poetic register" in searching for "a language – sometimes in the found poem – that ...accentuates, the burden of most people's daily lives" (2010:182). Again, such a 'search' could gather interest, purpose and possibility if it cut across my own long essaying into the shapes which may be taken by lyric as a form of experimental energy.

In short, I have come at length to understand – an intelligence gathered piecemeal from a path which necessarily wound the long way around – that lyric voice and linguistic experimentalism appear differently when scholarship on contemporary women poets enters the frame. Theirs is a gendered back-story which gives short shrift to a



poetics premised on an apparently neutral, abstract linguistic challenge. Here, lyrical voicing becomes an important mode of innovation. The experimental innovations of contemporary women poets are often markedly more lyrical than the conceptual experimentalism of a mainstream, primarily male, avant-garde. To re-cast DuPlessis: the women's voicing is often a lyrical 'essaying', a "location for identity taking shape within language as language, within form as form." This lyric↔language entails a textuality of "style, rhetoric, image, resistant diction, insouciant tone, weird page space, ploys opening out the book, visual text, [a] multiplex of genres" adheres "meaning to mode", idea and imagination to "passion in language", combining "all felt areas – ethical, intellectual, emotional, visceral" in a "mixed, unsortable" nexus (DuPlessis 1996:24 – 5). Lyric↔language poems may "hurl[ ] words" (Tarlo 1999: 97), "play" with diction and syntax (97), "flummox...linguistic expectation" (97); they may "expos[e] the associations of words" (104) and "interrupt[ ] norms" (105). And yet for every extravagantly experimental poem by a woman that makes the familiar a foreign language environment, there is a poem which, written just slightly 'otherwise', works from within given tradition to claim as necessary the empathetic affect of interiority. This, too, can be an innovatory move in social contexts dominated by disjuncture, disaffection and cynical distance (Wills 1994).

The lyric↔language relation, in which each element may at different moments in the writing advance or recede, make itself felt as lower- or upper-case, has been shaped by women poets into the flexible modality required to enable them to participate in experimental poetics on their own terms. Lyric↔L/language is a modality capable of encompassing "emotional valence" (Kinnahan 1996: 653) and critical distance, interiority and expressiveness as well as obscure linguistic exercise. Such poetry "complicate[s] these lyric/Language binaries"(Luck 2008: 358), "offering a poetics of both/and": "both experimental and black", for instance, as in the case of the American Harryette Mullen, "but also both procedural and inspired, both linguistic and embodied", the poetry forming "an alternative poetics that incorporates the vicissitudes of the language system and the embodied consciousness of the poet" (359). If we allow this contradictory 'mistake' – both/and – it becomes possible to see that women poets "are *partial* to an experimental poetics" precisely because it enables border crossings between the poetic traditions of lyric and L/language (Hinton 2000: 181), facilitating the development of "alternative[s] to aesthetic forms of enclosure" (Wills 1994: 40). A poetics of lyric↔L/language "reveal[s] not only a discursively constructed subject" (Luck 2008: 360) positioned through "language function and procedure" (380) but "also an embodied person...at work behind the poem", all the while "avoiding a return to an essentialized" notion of self (360). This is quite some achievement.

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<sup>1</sup> I willingly concede that being wrong is not solely a female prerogative. Think of Theodor Adorno's claims for an exploratory writing that "abrogates the ideal" and "indisputable certainty" in favour of writing "exposed to error" in the process of creating insight (1984: 161).

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<sup>2</sup> The title of a groundbreaking journal of women's experimental writing. It created a space for women to address the misrecognitions and marginalities to which their creativities were subject.

<sup>3</sup> See Emily Critchley's 2006 e-essay "Dilemmatic boundaries: constructing a poetics of thinking" for a discussion of essay and essaying in women's innovative writing. Published by Intercapillary Editions at [http://www.lulu.com/items/volume\\_34/533000/533882/2/print/533882.pdf](http://www.lulu.com/items/volume_34/533000/533882/2/print/533882.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> DuPlessis explains: "both what one knows and what one doesn't know can give one a voice. Trusting to be led into a new place is, for me, the meaning of essay...[F]or me identity is hardly the thing speaking; what speaks is something more fugitive. It is conflicting vulnerabilities fissioning within being" (1996:21).

<sup>5</sup> Among the challenges which Amy Robbins identifies, for instance, is the unexamined assumption among some Language poets "that identity conscious poetry," whether motivated by race and/or gender, necessarily "equates with lyric poetry, which equates...with simplistic or vacuous poetry" (Robbins 2010:350). Like black American Language poet Harryette Mullen, she considers this practice an "aesthetic apartheid" which "compartmentalize[s] literary works on the basis of either formal innovation or racial/ethnic representation, but rarely both at once". The implied correlative is "that 'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black', and that 'black' poetry, however singular its 'voice', is 'not formally innovative'" (Robbins 2010:350-351).

<sup>6</sup> Nosing rather blindly for something I envisaged as local 'Language poetry', I found a few poems by Fhazel Johannesburg and Essop Patel, quirky experimental poems scattered in *Wurm, Donga* and other small journals of the 1960s and 1970s. Also: the concrete poetry of Wopko Jensma in the curiously multilingual, formally fractured *I must show you my clippings* (1977), which Ivan Vladislavić emphasises is a most unusual collection in South African poetry, as it "invokes figures like...Marcel Duchamp and Tristan Tzara", the pattern poems, "sound poems and typographical experiments of the Dadaists" (2005: 22). But even for Jensma, the experimental was "an incidental focus", "his real achievement [l]ying in a uniquely accented, dynamic, witty lyrical verse" (Vladislavić 2005: 23). Beyond English language poetry, there was Willem Boshoff's *KykAfrikaans* (1980), which remained unprecedented "[m]ore than twenty years after it first appeared". The poetry "still looks unlike anything produced here", having "found no imitators" (Vladislavić 2005:22). Additionally, I found a few Sinclair Beiles' cut-ups, the poet's visual imagination effecting fantastical, surreal remixes of existing texts. And the "multi-lingual and multi-media publications and performances" of the Botsotso Jesters, whose poetry speaks to "the heightened sense of creative restlessness" of poets "trying to cast off received poetic paradigms and political outlooks" (Alvarez 2006). And extraordinary names like Aryan Kaganof/Ian Kerkhof. Ordinary names like Nadine Botha. Both writer-makers producing work which is still considered unusual, and sits on the critical margins.

<sup>7</sup> In keeping with preferred academic convention, I have deleted "if you were a mother".

<sup>8</sup> While I can mention this but in passing, accompanying the launch of *open season* at the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre in 2006 was my installation *Circumstanzas*. (See the Poetry Africa Programme of 2006.) This was an assemblage of found, re-worked items as well as purpose-made objects, words, images.... I used the five filled containers – a series of box frames, a grid of pallet wood, a vitrine, a hollow female display mannequin, and a printer's tray – as 'material questions' on the roles of crafted deliberation and fortuitous happenstance in relation to gender. What, for a woman poet, is designated decorative, what conceptual? Precision and possibility. The installation was a form extrapolating from "language construct" or "field composition" aimed at expanding "the regularized page". It was the extra-poetic making of a "visual-minded" female poet who was desperate to be delivered "from the closed, airless containers of the well-behaved poem" (Fraser 2000:178). In many respects, *Circumstanzas* did what I couldn't quite do with the page, in *open season*: "use the page as a four-sided document" open to "collage, extension, pictorial gesture and fragmentation" (Fraser 2000:175) which situated language as visualised material rather than communicative function. The small installation was a visualised performance of what Fraser terms a

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“suppressed writing impulse” (2000: 196), projected even beyond Olsen’s “PROJECTIVE VERSE” by a poet’s “immense necessity *to make* as well as to express” (177).

<sup>9</sup> A promising kernel is Rita Barnard’s contention that the Black Poetry of the 1970s was a local instance of ‘Language Poetry’. She notes the “political importance of [the] disarticulation” and “the radical inarticulacy” of a poetry which dissolves, breaks, fragments, explodes...the usual social-symbolic system ...into the materiality of noise”, citing Serote’s “Black Bells” with its “Meem wanna ge aou Fuc / Pschweee e ep booboodubooobodu blllll” (2001:164).

<sup>10</sup> It is only in perhaps the last ten years that women poet-scholars have begun to discover the unwitting ‘influence’ upon their work of the buried “postscript” (Fraser 2000: 93) of an imperfectly inherited modernism. Beyond even the fact that modernist experimentalism has tended to be enshrined in the Eliotian line, rather than in the poetics of Pound or Olsen or Oppen, there has been a marked reluctance to engage with “the difficult soundings of modernism’s female half” and aesthetic languages that chafe against “encapsulation & stratification, exposing...models of formal purity and unity as party-line poetics” (Fraser 2000: 95). Woolf, Stein, HD, Riding, Guest, Loy, all “must now be considered the contemporaries of the present” (DuPlessis and Heuving 2004: 419), yet one or two safe, exemplary texts aside, these names and their associated practices continue to have something of a “missing person” status in academic literary history (Fraser 2000: 121).

<sup>11</sup> And then the Soweto poets come to mind. David Attwell’s reminder. That “lyric was useful” to these black writers as a form coherently expressive of an otherwise fractured self denied by context. But that the poems also show “signs of discomfort” where the “vessel of the poem is too static to hold the subject’s volatility” (Attwell 2005: 151). Yes. I understand, finding a moment of convergence between dissimilar writing projects.