

# North of Invention

## Interview with Charles Bernstein and Sarah Dowling

**C**harles Bernstein and Sarah Dowling co-organized *North of Invention: A Festival of Canadian Poetry*. Taking place over four days in January 2011 at Kelly Writers House in Philadelphia and Poets House in New York City, the festival aimed “to initiate a new dialogue in North American poetics, addressing the hotly debated areas of ‘innovation’ and ‘conceptual writing,’ the history of sound poetry and contemporary performance, multilingualism and translation, and connections to activism” (“North of Invention”). Sarah Dowling, a poet and editor, is currently a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania. Charles Bernstein is Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of 40 books, ranging from large-scale collections of poetry and essays to pamphlets, libretti, translations, and collaborations.

*Charles and Sarah, thanks for sharing your thoughts with Canadian Literature. Let's start at the beginning. Where did the initial urge to put together the North of Invention festival come from?*

SD: *North of Invention* has its roots in discussions that Charles and I have been having since the spring of 2006, before I enrolled at Penn. In fact, Charles recruited me to the PhD program in English with promises that he and I would collaborate on a festival of Canadian poetry. Had I known at that time what such a festival would entail, I might have been more inclined to understand these enticing offers for what they really were—threats—and pursued my graduate work elsewhere. Fortunately, however, my naïveté got the better of me, and the result, ultimately, was *North of Invention*: four days of presentations and readings by eleven poets whose contributions

to contemporary writing are absolutely astounding: Lisa Robertson, M. NourbeSe Philip, Stephen Collis, Christian Bök, Nicole Brossard, Adeena Karasick, Jeff Derksen, Jordan Scott, a.rawlings and her collaborator Maja Jantar, who came to us from Belgium, and Fred Wah.

*Sarah, can you say a bit about your background, your poetic practice, and how you came to live and work in the States?*

SD: I'm originally from Regina, and I came to the US in 2004 after spending several years in Quebec and in the UK. Initially, I came to Philadelphia to do a Master's degree in English/Creative Writing at Temple University. Temple's program is academically oriented, and its curriculum emphasizes the Anglo-American modernist roots of contemporary experimental writing practices. At the same time, Temple students have a longstanding tradition of active participation in the poetry communities that operate in parallel to Philadelphia's academic institutions and their poetry scenes. My formation as a poet came about through the combined influences of intensive literary study and engagement with writers in the local area: Pattie McCarthy and Kevin Varrone, CAConrad and Frank Sherlock, Jenn and Chris McCreary, Ryan Eckes, Sueyeun Juliette Lee, Divya Victor (who is now in Buffalo), Julia Bloch, and many others.

*Charles, how would you describe your relationship to the idea of a Canadian avant-garde over the past three decades?*

CB: I don't have much of a relation to the idea but I like the poetry. I'd be a fool not to since so much of the "kind of poetry I want," to use a phrase of Hugh MacDiarmid's, is coming from Canada. Susan Bee and I are featured in the current issue of *The Capilano Review* (3:12, 2010), which focused on our time in Ruskin, BC, in 1973, just after we graduated from college. The issue includes Susan's early artwork, early and previously unpublished poems of mine, and an interview about our time there and my connection to Simon Fraser University (SFU) and meeting Robin Blaser.

*What's your working definition of "the cutting edge of contemporary poetic practice?" What do you need to see or not see?*

SD: I don't think that either Charles or I are particularly interested in making definitions about who or what constitutes the "cutting edge of contemporary poetic practice" (although I realize you're quoting us here). In fact, we had hoped to feature a good number of writers whose works and activism have

been especially foundational in Canada since the 1970s and 1980s, but remain relatively unknown in the US. In this sense, we wanted to emphasize practices that we see as historically significant as much as a current “cutting edge.” In particular, we had invited Miki and Marlatt, whose writing has been informative of so many contemporary poetic practices. Unfortunately, however, neither was able to attend for personal reasons.

Nevertheless, the presentations by Brossard, Wah, and Philip fulfilled this role quite beautifully: Wah, for example, spoke several times about how reading feminist works such as Brossard’s gave him the tools to explore his social location as a biracial Chinese-Canadian. Brossard spoke about continuities between her early works and her current works and explained how her feminism has changed, telling us that although she still has the same anger, she now has more information. Philip also spoke about her recent work, particularly *Zong!*, in the context of older works like *Looking for Livingstone* and *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Although these books are quite well known in Canada, they are really not known at all in the US. I think for Charles and I both, it was very important to present a long trajectory and a broad array of “cutting edge[s].” I think we are both ideologically opposed to the idea that there would only be one, or that the most recent one is the most important, the sharpest. Maybe instead of one cutting edge, we’re interested in pulling out all the utensils in the drawer.

*My impression is that Canadian (or rather, Toronto and Vancouver) collectivities are internationally understood to have played an important role in the establishment of the international poetic avant-garde. Do you agree? What kind of reputation do we enjoy in American conversations around avant-garde practice?*

SD: I would agree that communities in Toronto and Vancouver are seen as playing an important role in poetics on an international level. Canadians frequently come up in conversations on American avant-garde writing practices, but I wouldn’t say that Canadians frequently come up *as Canadians*. Rather, I think it is more common to see appeals to “North American” poetics. Often this means that someone merely wants to cite one Canadian among a list of American practitioners, but sometimes it is more nuanced and indicates a sense of coteries and practices that cross borders.

In my own academic writing I try to connect Canadian and American writing practices, but I place these within a broader, hemispheric context. My dissertation, “Remote Intimacies: Multilingualism in Contemporary Poetry,” argues that contemporary poetry turns to languages other than

English in order to explore attachments to difficult or even impossible objects: dead languages, defunct textual practices, murdered slaves, wartime childhoods, and bitter enemies. I see this kind of work happening in Canadian poetry—M. NourbeSe Philip's, Rachel Zolf's, Erin Moure's, to name a few examples—and what interests me are the commonalities this poetry shares with American poetries, Anglophone Caribbean poetries, certain South American practices. When these are viewed together, we get a rich sense of poetry not so much as a future-oriented avant-garde, but as a historiographic practice. So I'm interested in multilingual experimentation as a form uniquely suited to writing the histories of linguistic contact, collision, and extinction that have characterized the past several hundred years of life in this hemisphere. But I would point out that such poetries—not just the Canadian poetries, but all these multilingual works—are infrequently discussed in criticism, especially in the US, and also that they don't tend to fit into geographically or regionally identified scenes.

*Though originally from Britain, Steve McCaffery is still one of Canada's most internationally known avant-garde practitioners. Christian Bök is another. Does these poets' "Canadianness" become significant in understanding their aesthetic once they achieve recognition in the US?*

CB: Leonard Cohen is the best-known living Canadian poet in the US and probably internationally as well, though, tellingly, he is not known for his poetry. As far as recognition in the US goes, if you mean that McCaffery and Bök have currency within the poetry circles in/around, let's just say the expanded field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E for convenience, it should first be noted that this field is a far cry from the official literary culture of the US or indeed from its subset of official verse culture. Among the Canadian poets who do have this currency, in addition to McCaffery and Bök, I'd point to Brossard, Philip, Wah, Robertson, and Derksen, among our small group of *North of Invention* conferees, but also Moure, Karen Mac Cormack, Darren Wershler, Christopher Dewdney, Sina Queyras, Gail Scott, Zolf, Kevin Davies, and Alan Davies; and permit me to add the influential modernist and contemporary poetry scholar, Peter Quartermain. (This list is, I know, as striking for the names left out as for the ones included.) Having expanded your list, I've made the rhetorical point that you can't generalize. Brossard's connection to Quebec is hard to miss. Alan Davies' connection to growing up in Newfoundland (and other parts of Canada) may not be obvious since he has lived in New York for so long; but I never forget it,

partly because it's so different from my growing up in New York. At *North of Invention*, Derksen, Collis, and Robertson spoke adamantly of their relation to Vancouver and to specific issues of urban development related to the city; in the discussion period, Bruce Andrews noted this emphasis on place, on Vancouver, was more marked than when we first encountered these poets twenty years ago. At that time, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Derksen, and others in/around Vancouver's Kootenay School of Writing (ksw), wrote about how Canadian literature has been framed in such a way as to make the exportable cultural product "canned lit," not an activist poetics. So for any one familiar with this compelling critical work and the related poetry, national frames are explicit. For each of the other poets I mention here, the specific relation to Canada, to the US, and to other cultural, gender, ethnic, and racial frames would be different. I could write a book.

There are many languages of Canada, real and imaginary, including the Taelon language Bök declaimed at the festival, which, as I said in introducing him, is, so far as I know, taken from a local idiolect in the town just outside Toronto where he grew up. (He created the language for *Earth: The Final Conflict*, a sci-fi TV show created by Gene Roddenberry.) I should note here that our festival name comes from McCaffery's essay collection, *North of Intention*. McCaffery, a son of the West Riding of Yorkshire now living in Buffalo, must well be the most Canadian of all, or let's just say, north of nationality: "thuzzer boenergy-mister mouchin un botherin awl oer place."

*Thinking of Bök and McCaffery's transnationalism (if that term can cover a commitment to working and collaborating internationally, rather than living internationally), I also think of Blaser's move to Vancouver, and Sina Queyras' time in NYC and the conversations she has facilitated. . . do you suspect transnationality to be productive in thinking through questions of where to take innovation next? Does this festival signal a kind of return to nationalism as a useful category for understanding poetic innovation, or radicality, today?*

CB: . . . Or does it signal a turn away from nationalism? You can't live with it, you can't live without it; *it*—a word constantly invoked by Bök to suggest an "alien" threat—won't let you. To be a non- or anti-nationalist Canadian poet is all the more to be a Canadian poet. I'd say *North of Invention* also explores non-national poetics, poets connecting and in exchange across national lines, but not pretending those don't exist. The only way to have such a dialogue is to acknowledge the force of national literary cultures, like them or not. Philip noted her discomfort with the term *from*: from Toronto, from Tobago, from

Africa. When Wah speaks of the hyphen, of inhabiting the space between Chinese-Canadian, he acknowledges a condition many of us share (*on both sides / of the borderline*). In the Americas, with the considerable exception of indigenous people, we are always from somewhere else; this is most often a defining condition and often manifests itself as stigmatizing others as “aliens” (or internalizing the stigma) or protesting a bit too much about one’s nativist roots. And if we are not from somewhere else, we are usually mixed up with others who are. For some poets, myself for sure, our ties across nation-states may be stronger than our national affiliations. I count as my most immediate company in poetry, poets from Finland and Brazil and Canada and England and Argentina and France. The work for us at *North of Invention* has been to think in terms of the larger context of poetics of the Americas, South-North in orientation rather than in relation to Europe, which has bequeathed to us as our national languages in the Americas: Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English. The Americas percolate with languages, from the lost and living languages of those here before the Europeans came, to the many languages of Africa, Asia, and Europe that form our linguistic foundation as poets. I’m inclined to think we need recognize more, not less, lines of resistance and difference. In order to form a more perfect union, and we desperately need it to be more perfect, we need to go not just from many to one (*e pluribus unum*) but from one to many (*e unum pluribus*). From that point of view, we in the US might also hope to be north of invention.

*There does seem to be a bit of a split in ethos amongst conceptual poets’ enthusiasm for boredom and a kind of excess of insignificance and the more explicit drive to an activist ethic of the ksw, among others. Do you think this split is real, is generative? Is it a Canadian polarization, a North American east-west thing, other?*

- SD: I definitely see this split in the US; I don’t think it’s exclusively Canadian. I have seen it come up at plenty of other events, like the Rethinking Poetics conference that took place at Columbia in 2010. This split came up during *North of Invention*, where it took the form of a sustained set of discussions that primarily featured Bök, Collis, and Derksen. It was interesting to hear this conversation play out. Charles remarked that this issue does not often come up as a conversation; in other words, we are not typically treated to more than one side of the debate, or invited to listen and engage for extended periods of time. Then there was also Adeena Karasick’s paper reframing Kenneth Goldsmith’s writing practice as Kabbalistic trope. Rather than an excess of insignificance,

she read his work as a perhaps unwitting or even unwilling engagement with longstanding Jewish mystical traditions. I think this paper offered a rich opportunity for rethinking excess and insignificance in conceptual works.

*As long as Bök and Wershler remain influential figures in conceptual poetics, would you consider conceptual writing a practice that has its origins “in Canada,” perhaps with ‘pataphysical roots? Can Canadianist scholars stake that territory?*

CB: I can't prove it, but my impression is that Conceptual Poetry, in the sense of the trademark term, was invented by Bök in his lab, working with two imaginary friends. The mechanism by which he did this is not yet fully understood. The two imaginary friends thought they were in a Toronto bar. The work attributed to poets “south of invention” was likely teletexted from Toronto and then Calgary to the putative authors, unbeknownst to them, who were feasting off the sensation that they were creating original works.

SD: Derksen's presentation at the Kelly Writers House described writing after conceptual art. In this paper he explored the Vancouver art movement photoconceptualism, looking at the influence of photographers like Jeff Wall on the practices of writers such as Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, and exploring specific textual borrowings and exchanges between the two. This was a provocative, and indeed a very Canadian discussion of the relationship between conceptual art and writing, and one that very much expands the notion of what we mean in poetics when we say “conceptual,” what kinds of practices might fall under that umbrella. I think we'll see more discussions of the art-historical uses of that term. For example, one of our colleagues at Penn, Katie Price, is writing a dissertation in which she argues that current understandings of conceptual poetry are fairly limited and gloss over a variety of poetic practices that might be viewed as conceptual. There's also the forthcoming anthology from Les Fives Press, *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*. I think that these projects and others will significantly shift our understanding of what constitutes conceptual writing, and how we might understand the roots of this practice.

*Can you tell us a bit about how you built and maintained ties to Canadian writers during your time at SUNY-Buffalo and the importance of that program to building the current Canadian/American transnational poetic community?*

CB: Buffalo's proximity to Canada made an ongoing relation, especially with poets in Toronto, not only desirable, but also necessary. I was at Buffalo

from 1989 to 2003 and we started the Poetics Program in 1991, twenty years ago. Robert Creeley, who had come to Buffalo in the 1960s, had a strong connection to what might be called the new Canadian poetry and, during the brief time Charles Olson was at Buffalo, both Robert Hogg and Fred Wah came to study in the graduate program. When I arrived, Mike Baughm was there, working closely with Creeley. During my time in Buffalo, many Canadian poets came to read and talk, with Blaser and Brossard coming more than once and having a lasting impact. Both Bök and Peter Jaeger were Social Science Research [and Humanities] Council fellows at Buffalo and they both attended and organized events, spoke in the seminars, and brought in fellow Canadian poets. There was also a focus on exchanges between the younger poets in Toronto and Buffalo, with a carload of Toronto poets coming down to read and Poetics Program poets reading in Toronto. Christian, always a generous soul, was great about that as was Scott Pound, who got his PhD at Buffalo but commuted from Toronto. McCaffery and Mac Cormack, then living in Toronto, were also important presences. And this ended up with Steve getting his PhD at Buffalo, an extraordinary circumstance given that at the time he was more likely to have been on the Poetics faculty. So you could say the Poetics Program has had an ongoing, decades-long, Canadian poetry festival.

*Which Canadian institutions do you see as having created the strongest ties to poetic communities in the US?*

CB: I don't want to speak for anyone but myself, I would have a hard time doing that. The poets in/around/about the ksw, the Toronto-associated poets already mentioned, and in Quebec, Brossard, have transformed the relation between the US and Canadian poetry, creating a post- or 'pata-national set of exchanges via affinity that in some ways intensify our particular socio-cultural and national contexts but use that intensification as a site for dialogue. Some of these poets are very much part of my immediate company, as much as anyone in the US. Right now, too, there is Jay MillAr and BookThug in Toronto and of course now and before Coach House Books, Talonbooks, Snare, *West Coast Line*, *Rampike*. Colin Browne is less well known as a poet in the US but for me he has been a crucial companion and a significant force in/around ksw. And Frank Davey, both when he was at York and then at the University of Western Ontario, has been acutely active in building connections across the national literature divide. His *Open Letter* published the fourth volume of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1982



and the magazine continues to be a rich source for the development of an ongoing poetics that we share. Of course, early on, before I knew almost any American poets, I was at SFU, so that gives some specific grounding to my perspective. I first heard about Creeley and Spicer through Blaser, when I was in Vancouver. SFU still looks to be a central location for poetics, faculty and special collections both. McCaffery was a core part of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E project and collaborated on *LEGEND*—and we were in close exchange from the time I started to publish. I feel closer and closer to Fred Wah as the years pass and our intersections cross-connect in the swift currents of our thinking. Fred's work at Calgary surely put that on the North American poetic map. And with Bök now at Calgary, the tradition continues strong, with younger poets and publications.

*Can you say a bit about how you chose the poets you did for this festival?*

SD: Our initial idea in planning *North of Invention* was to feature mostly poets who had read in New York and Philadelphia not at all or only very rarely. As you can imagine, this evolved somewhat as the planning went on. Charles, Stephen Motika, and I all had particular folks in mind when we set that curatorial constraint, and I'm pleased to say that many from our initial imaginary cohort were indeed featured in the festival. However, we had to balance this ideal with the need to attract an audience, and therefore to have some figures more recognizable to US audiences on our roster. We also wanted to have a good balance of emerging and established writers, writers from across Canada, and writers representing various social and aesthetic contingencies. In the end, some of the poets we had initially wanted to feature also had to withdraw for personal reasons or because conflicts arose in their schedules.

CB: For years, I've been haunted by the fact that I never heard Barrie Nichol (bpNichol) read in New York. So there are some long-standing concerns, on my part, for a lack of reciprocity, especially with some of the *TISH* generation poets. But we wanted younger and older poets. Ten poets is tiny in number and of course we left out many more relevant poets than we were able to include this time around (I hope the series will continue). Still, in the end, for the idea we had in mind, our ensemble was pretty close to perfect.

One of the aims of *North of Invention*, and one of the reasons we got such strong support from the Canada Council, is that we were introducing a group of distinct, but interconnected Canadian poets. "A" Canadian Poetry Festival, eh? We wanted to raise the profiles not just of the individual poets

but also of this field of activity in Canada. As Sarah noted, it's easier in the US for individual Canadian poets to get absorbed as North American, or even just as American, than to be recognized in terms of being Canadian, because that frame, to quote Rodney Dangerfield, gets no respect, or it's respected but considered innocuous. As a practical matter, showcasing the quality and range of the Canadian poets (which is not to say *Canadian poetry*), our event was enormously successful. But we have many great lectures and readings at Penn and in New York. What was unique about *North of Invention* was the qualities of the ensemble. A group of people with different perspectives who listened to one another and responded with a care and engaged articulateness that is a model for us all, we who too often talk at, and not with one another, and whose pronouncements too often are motivated by personal positioning rather than toward a larger conversation. Or worse: engage in empty praise, as if poetry had nothing to contest, as if the prizes and contests were not a mark of the betrayal of poetry by those who value it too little. The four days spent with these poets were inspiring because of the way they talked with one another, the brilliance of what they said, and the slow unveiling of their interconnected poetic histories. I kept saying, *they are better than we are*. But then, as in *The Great Gatsby*, good to "remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

*Canada's racial politics and history of multiculturalist policy means its avant-garde maps a very different sense of the relation of race to radicality in poetics. How does race enter the conversation in a discussion of Canadian innovative practice happening in America? What questions are you asking?*

SD: I wouldn't say that we had our own set of questions that we wanted to ask. We thought it was really important to discuss various relationships among inscriptions of race and radical poetic form, and we thought it particularly important to create a structure within which the significance of texts like Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language" would be obvious. And actually, this structure was reversed in some ways, as Philip herself devoted a great part of her discussions in Philadelphia to explaining the significance of Jordan Scott's work on the poetics of stuttering for her own work in performing *Zong! Wah* and Philip also held an amazing conversation at Poets House in which they discussed a range of topics, and asked each other about the pressures and opportunities of being an innovative writer of colour. They both spoke about the policy of official multiculturalism and the violences that this policy has enacted and continues to enact; in particular,

Philip spoke about the ways in which “liberal” policies aimed at immigrants have been used to blunt the legitimate claims and complaints made by First Nations peoples.

*Is gender an important category in tracing the maps of associations and influences of avant-garde practice across borders? What questions do you hope to ask around gender?*

SD: Yes, absolutely. It is my belief that the legacy of the feminist 1970s in particular has too often been overlooked, especially in the US, where too many scholars of poetics understand feminism primarily as an identity or an activist orientation and not as a theoretical or philosophical tradition. In my view, the academic field of poetics imagines itself as a social-theoretical field based in Marxian theory, and tends to posit such theories as the basis of all experimental writing. In this way, feminist concepts and innovations tend to be considered only in relationship to the textual productions of self-identified feminist writers and communities. My pet polemic is that French feminist concepts are absolutely pervasive in contemporary experimental writing in Canada, the US and elsewhere, and that they form the theoretical ground for experiments with embodiment, vocality, and non-subjective affects, which I see as most common, and most theoretically significant projects being carried out in contemporary poetry. I suppose in this sense it is not so much that we wanted to “trac[e] maps of associations and influences” along the lines of gender, but rather that we wanted to prominently feature writers such as Brossard, Philip, and Robertson, whose feminist interventions have been absolutely foundational. We also wanted to bring their work into relationship with that of younger writers like Rawlings and her collaborator Jantar, whose works stand as truly exhilarating examples of contemporary feminist writing and performance.

*Is there anywhere you hope the North of Invention conversations don't go?*

SD: I hope that they don't go away! There were so many wonderful poets and critics present at the festival, both in Philadelphia and in New York, and I hope that the work of the presentations, conversations, and readings can continue. In Philadelphia we were lucky enough to have Christopher Nealon, A.L. Nielsen, Josephine Nock-hee Park, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Jena Osman, Mark Nowak, Al Filreis, Michelle Taransky, Tsitsi Ella Jaji, Julia Bloch, Frank Sherlock, Janet Neigh, Bob Perelman, and many others in the audience.

CB: And in New York, Bruce Andrews, Michael Golston, Kristin Prevallet, Lee

Ann Brown, Dorothy Wong, Thom Donovan, Laura Elrick, Rodrigo Toscano, Evie Shockley, Pierre Joris, Mimi Gross, Susan Bee, Tonya Foster, Brenda Iijima, Patricia Spears Jones, Anne Waldman, Lytle Shaw, and John Yau, among many others.

SD: And I know many people watched online as well through the KWH-TV webcast. So I hope that these conversations begun at *North of Invention* can continue.

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