

Mobilizing Affect and Intellect in Erotic Citizenship: or, The Becoming Lover of Erín Moure's Citizen Trilogy

Jessica MacEachern

Volume 46, Number 1, 2021

Special Issue: Queer Bodies
Numéro spécial : Corps Queers

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086615ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086615ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

MacEachern, J. (2021). Mobilizing Affect and Intellect in Erotic Citizenship: or, The Becoming Lover of Erín Moure's Citizen Trilogy. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 46(1), 166–188.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1086615ar>

Mobilizing Affect and Intellect in Erotic Citizenship: or, The Becoming Lover of Erín Moure's Citizen Trilogy

JESSICA MACEachern

Introduction: Civic and Erotic Being

I N HER CITIZEN TRILOGY, a project spanning seven years and three books, Canadian poet and translator Erín Moure transforms the practice of reading into an urgent theorization of the erotic and political potential of queer citizenship. In the three books, *Search Procedures* (1996), *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book* (1999), and *O Ciudadán* (2002), the poet-theorist builds a body of writing that foretells critical theory's *affective turn*,¹ such that both love poems and intellectual documents rewrite the physical borders that constitute identity. Throughout the three books, the love poem *moves* the theory, such that it is through the sensual contours of the lover's body that the reader discovers civic responsibility. Significantly, this movement is facilitated by the poet's hyper-attentive focus on the unit of the word, in particular on "the word as material, subject to abrasion, erasure" (Moure, *My Beloved Wager* 157). Moure employs this "language of inquiry" (to borrow a phrase from Lyn Hejinian) in order to puzzle out "what it is for a person (a human being-in-society) to be a citizen" (158). These material inquiries are explicitly linked to the queer love written on the pages of the trilogy: the bodies of women moved by and moving within the affective contours of lesbian being. As the reader progresses through the trilogy, the degree to which personal and political, local and global, love poem and intellectual document are interlocking and contaminating features of one another increasingly becomes the focus of the page, the phrase, and the syllable.

In her introduction to *Planetary Noise: Selected Poetry of Erín Moure*, in which the term "citizen trilogy" is used to denote the three books under analysis here, Shannon Maguire underlines the trilogy's examination of "the many practices that create our world, from our most intimate interfaces at our cellular and neurological limits to our cultural

and political exchanges" (xvii). Few other scholars have discussed the three books as a unit, though as Shirley McDonald acknowledges it is possible to trace a continuum of concerns related to "the realms of gender politics and language" (111) within Moure's oeuvre, from the early Governor General's Literary Award-winning poetry collection, *Furious* (1988), to the final and most complex collection of the citizen trilogy, *O Ciudadán*. In "Erin Moure and the Spirit of Intersubjectivity," Marie Carrière describes the first book in the trilogy, *Search Procedures*, as "probably Moure's most difficult collection" (67) — foretelling the increased difficulty of the remaining two books and the problem that it might pose for a discussion of their intertwined poetic and theoretical strategies. The book that routinely gets lost in the fold of critical attention is the second of the trilogy, *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*. For instance, Zoë Skoulding highlights the first and last of these books, *Search Procedures* and *O Ciudadán*, for their contribution "to a feminist articulation of frontiers, boundaries and the process of locating oneself" (130). Lianne Moyes considers the final book to be "of particular interest because it resists the codes that routinely produce the subjects we call 'citizens' and regulate the institutions of citizenship" (112). Similarly, Ryan Fitzpatrick and Susan Rudy focus their rhizomatic analysis on the ways in which the final book in particular enables Moure "to enact citizenship otherwise" (60). Fitzpatrick and Rudy do briefly acknowledge the second book in order to note the poet's increased attention to the material reality of the book as apparent in the collection's competing titles: *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*.

Moure's interrogation of gender, language, and citizenship is enacted in all three books of the citizen trilogy, beginning with the conceptual methods of *Search Procedures*, mutating into the material abrasions of *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*, and coalescing finally into the sensual topography of *O Ciudadán*. The project's transformative potential is apparent in the very organizing principles of the books. In *Search Procedures* and *Frame*, the tables of contents deliver a chronological list of titles, but in *O Ciudadán* we receive a series of "documents" or "papers" ("yorkshire papers," "montréal papers," "calendrome," "fleuve portal," etc.) as well as explicit catalogues of stasis and change: "Georgette" persists throughout the book, but the documents pile up until the number is completely undone ("document00") and the "Catalogue of the Harms" becomes nearly unrecognizable ("Twentieth

Century of the Festering of Harms”). Most notably, the writer of the book herself undergoes a change: in the publication of *O Ciudadán*, Erin Mouré becomes Erín Moure. Rachel Zolf teasingly addresses Moure’s accumulation of “associates, avatars, heteronyms,” discussing the problem of what to call this “sensory-poetic aggregate,” whom they briefly introduce as “E(i)r(i)n” and who has published under the names “Erin Moure, Eirin Moure, Elisa Sampedin, EM, ‘Erin Mouré’ and ‘Erín Moure.’” Maguire theorizes that these polynoms can be considered “sonic masks”: that is, “as language sounding through the writer’s body” (xix). Whether we read Erin, Eirin, or Erín, Mouré or Moure, EM or Elisa Sampedin, the sonic change at the molecular level of letter or syllable affects how one holds the name of the writer in her mouth.

In my analysis of the three books of Moure’s citizen trilogy, I explore the “bursting” dynamic of the relationship between the theorist’s intellectual documents and the poet’s affective love poems. This dynamic is founded, in part, on the crucial image of the fountain: a signpost of the architectural erotics by which the feminist poet constructs her fluid feminine subjects. Akin to the fountain that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick encounters in the fourth volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the feminist poet’s fountain “offers an emblem for the possibility of non-oppositional relations of many important kinds: between pattern and contingency; the eternal and the ephemeral; the universal soul and the soul of the individual” (2). The fountain proposes a model of “physical metamorphoses” (2) that, for my purposes, is a model of the feminist codex as it mutates under the noisy and haptic gaze — the “femur gaze” (Moure, *Frame* 8) — of the book’s poetic theorizing. The citizen’s body emerges from the pages of the book as a fluid feminine subject flooded with the relational power of the *autre* (other) and the *autrui* (others) who meet at the borders of the self. From the fountain of feminist poetics, Moure dares the reader to test the borders between self and other, page and body, so that the reconfigured citizen can redirect the spray of phallic power.

Reading *O Ciudadán*: Language as Inquiry or Passport

For the final book of the trilogy, *O Ciudadán*, Moure chooses a historically dangerous field of inquiry: nations and their borders. Throughout the book, she cites several incidents of the bodies destroyed by forbidden border crossings. In particular, she begins the book in homage “to

two young Africans who tried to call out to Europe, with the body (mortos) of writing (excrita nos sues petos): Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara" (1). These are the names of the teenage boys from Guinea who died of "hypothermia and oxygen shortage" (Bates) in the undercarriage of a plane. Their bodies were discovered in Brussels in 1999, up to ten days after their journey from Africa. A letter held by one of the boys preserved their attempt to call out to Europe: "Please excuse us very much for daring to write this letter" ("Please Excuse Us"). It is in the spirit of *daring* that Moure writes her book, though the gesture might seem to be woefully inadequate. No amount of daring, for instance, could ensure the safe passage of Koita and Tounkara.

In *O Ciudadán*, the poetic speaker is insistently a woman and a lesbian, and, as the feminist text demonstrates, such a position comes with great risk. Nonetheless, the speaker is also a woman "who carries a passport" (94) and is thus able to move freely. In her theorization of how the poetry enacts citizenship, Moyes writes that "Mouré's text seems to take for granted access to travel, ease of border crossing, and the possibility of transcending national ties, all of which have been associated with the privilege of the cosmopolitan subject" (121). This privilege simultaneously enables Moure to write the book, to respond to the call of Koita and Tounkara and register it in further circulations of print, and to bar her poetic subject from the material reality of the dangerous border crossings that affect, and effectively destroy, these lives. Knowing this, Moure calls not for a borderless world — such a vision, as Moyes points out, is "the illusion sustained by discourses of cosmopolitan privilege" — but for a "*making visible* of borders and the lives at stake at borders" (121).

Against this register of harms, Moure suggests that the love poem, in its repeated textual performance as "Georgette," is a crucial agent of potential change. The poem reoccurs with the same title across the collection, woven between the intellectual documents. Although its name registers as the *same* across the collection, its movement *alters* the other documents in the book and, in turn, has its textual body *altered*. In its crucial relationships with the *other* and *others*, the love poem is a model of the affective ways in which we may respond to the world. Primarily, as Moure indicates in an interview with Dawn McCance, in the love poem, as conventional generic qualifications would dictate, "the other = *autre* relation does predominate" — wherein *autre* refers to the

(singular) other. However, Moure hedges against this singular qualification and insists that these poems are also “inflected incredibly by the reverberations of other = *autrui*; they are not shut away from the civic thinking but are wound through it. For even as citizens we are sexual beings” (“Crossings”). These (multiple) others represent the many ways of being a citizen made visible for the reader. Their border crossings, importantly, comprise aspects not only of civic being but also of erotic being, for in Moure’s writing practice the *libidinal economy* (à la Jean-François Lyotard, whom Moure cites in the documents) is inextricable from the political economy.

In the interview with McCance, Moure defines *autrui* as “those-others-outside-me-whom-I-do-not-know-but-in-whose-company-I-am-alive” (“Crossings”). The *autrui* are not the other encountered in a face-to-face meeting or in a love exchange; that is the (singular) other (*autre*), with whom the self builds a relationship that Moure terms, following Emmanuel Levinas, “being-with.” Contrary to this, the *autrui* comprise a multiplicity of others with whom the self builds a relationship that Moure and Levinas term “being-among.” Significantly, Moure demonstrates that the self cannot exist without the *autrui*, without the dynamic of “being-among.” There is a radical contingency between the self and these others.

The first instance of *autrui* in *O Ciudadán* is in “document13 (porous to capital):” “That one’s own emergence as a subject is a turning in language or social discourse. Requiring not only *autrui* but *autrui* as metaphoric investment: let’s call it the social. As if sociality’s power comes from a turning back upon a self who already emerges only in the face of another, of others, emerges as ‘turn’” (37). Here Moure transforms the concept of “being-among” into a “metaphoric investment,” one that transforms every occurrence of “face” within the poems and documents into something other than a signifier of a single identity. The face of the lover, for Moure, is always already a “turn” toward one’s own selfhood. Given Julia Kristeva’s declaration² that the “foreigner” or “stranger” is always already within us, this “turn” is a double enactment of otherness; the “foreigner” or “stranger” is the *autrui* on which our selfhood is contingent. In “being-among,” the self becomes strange and is made anew. This transformative process begins with the face of the lover.

In “document28 (lectora-leitora),” Moure locates the possibility of becoming within the material body of the book itself: “As if ‘being-

among' is a kind of reading — for not everyone is 'now present' *sur place* in this 'among,' just as people in a book are not present. In 'being-with' [relation of amor] the other *is* present" (72). In further demonstrating the limits of *autrui* and *autre*, Moure draws a distinction between the acts of loving and reading. This is not the first instance in which she compares these enactments. The book's first love poem ends thus:

folio
 ::::::::::
 adore (3)

Here the arrangement of colons seems to signify that reading and loving are equal, but in "document28 (lectora-leitora)" the poet relegates *adore* to the category of "being-with," while *folio* has transcended to the category of "being-among." However, as soon as this distinction is made, Moure irreparably blurs the line between these categories. In the arrangement of arrows and text on the pages of "a chapter on reading" (67-73), Moure transforms the face of the lover so that the lover/reader is no longer merely a passive receptacle but a subversive agent within the text. Neighbour and stranger, lover and reader, are united in civic space. Moure is invested in the mobilization of affect along with intellect, and from this point the book progresses to disperse the radical contingency of "being-among" into the love relation as well.

Architectural Erotics and Public Fountains

The body, as an instrument of touch, is never outside Moure's theorization of citizenship. In the love poem occurring after "document28 (lectora-leitora)," the poet writes "to become architect endeavour's touch / is possible's fond connect" (92). The body, by incorporating what is considered the "outside" into the "inside," performs the "turn" on which recognition of self and other — never a separate or merely sequential process but a simultaneous one — is made possible. In "Person, Citizen: Some Cues from a Poetic Practice," Moure writes of her own body, the writer's body, "the organism holding the words" (*Wager* 153). Word, body, and world are deeply intertwined, "for to strike word upon word gives a shock to the body, to the ropes of its nerves that carry pulses and that are the brain's extension throughout the corpus which, though personal, is also the corpus, or touches the corpus, of the world" (153). The love poem forms not only an intimate but also a world-spanning

“we” of reader and lover, text and body, passing into a spatial and temporal field of self/other in which “we” are the “architects” of becoming and our tools for creation are instruments of touch: caressing the page, sexing the body.

Moure uses the concept of poet and citizen as architect to emphasize the potentiality of being-subject in time and space. As such, she engages in queering the architecture of public spaces in order to facilitate a minor becoming-subject in an insistently feminist key — a project shared by poets Angela Carr and Lisa Robertson. For instance, Carr similarly exploits this architectural event in *The Rose Concordance*, in which the book itself has been conceived as an unconventional structure (the mall) built by and housing the poet. Carr reveals this conceit in the book’s first appendix, “Gloss”: “Amid mass-produced goods and consumers, perched on the brim of the central fountain, sits the poet, otherwise known as Poverty, dipping her hand into the water to retrieve coins” (72). The fountain is central to Carr’s poetic project, being the site from which the events of the thinking narrative unfold. It is also the site from which we witness “green money exchanging hands across counters” (72), such that the liquid stream of a fountain’s circuitous folds comes to represent the marketplace in which becoming-subjects fight for survival and poets advertise their wares. The change (literal coins and figurative transformation) moves as a contagion through the site of reading. For both Moure and Carr, the fountain is the space from which the poet’s desire activates this change, both an external event and an internal mutation.

I see it, strokes of your hair upward in wind

fountains

(we put “fountains” here, unable to relax)

what if

A contagion*

(Moure, *O Ciudadán* 74)

The lover’s body is touched by the exterior world in the simultaneous event of being touched by the speaker’s language. The love poem, like a contagion itself, is a process of relating, an instance of touch that spreads.

Robertson, too, engages in this project of queering public space. She has “fountains that want us to act like knowledge” indexed in her book

Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture, a collection of poetic prose meditations on the city, its architecture, and its fashion, in which these exterior forces are felt by and enacted on the body of the feminist poet. The indexed item is found inside “The Fountain Transcript,” in which Robertson praises fountains for their “rising jets, downward falls, combinations, an oddly issuing spray, [which] divert attention from the great constant impersonal desires so that we may notice and enjoy the supple nap and receptivity of human thought” (54). Eva Darias-Beautell describes these fountains as texts themselves, as “countertexts to the corporate fantasies of the private enterprises that have donated them” (64). Their productive counteractions are made possible by Robertson’s “rhetoric in excess” (64), a textual strategy ensuring that identity always overflows its container of self and/or corporation. Darias-Beautell describes the affective register of these fountains as that of a “minor happiness” (65), thus invoking the becoming-minor of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It is through becoming-minor that new subjectification — of woman, of lesbian, of an alternative to capital — is possible. The fountain, as conceived by Moure, Carr, and Robertson, is the object by which the citizen can escape from the oppressive structures of a capitalist society and phallic economy. Its value is in its repeated and ungraspable redirections of fluid.

The Lover Is Becoming

The first line of *O Ciudadán*, “Georgette thou burstest my deafness” (3), names the loved woman as the agent of change. It is this bursting that prompts the alternating documents and harms. It is its sonic quality that enables the poet to write subversion from within the historically oppressive discourse on citizenship. In her editor’s introduction to Moure’s selected poetry, Maguire insists that Moure’s poetry “takes noise as an object of attention, even desire: noise acts as a threshold of relationality” (xii). Reading *noise* becomes an opportunity to read the bodies of women as deterritorialized, eroticized, and always-already becoming. This enables Moure to profess her love not only to the woman but also to language itself: “To solidify lyric flow / Those portable madresses syllables I loved them / (how I loved them)” (*O Ciudadán* 13). Most tellingly, the poet professes her love not for complete documents, phrases, or words but for syllables. These sonic building blocks are interchange-

able across the many languages of the book, accented differently but performing the same dynamic of libidinal and intellectual desire.

The final love poem of *O Ciudadán* furthers this attention to the molecular level of the word:

she arrests light to double “r”
to quake her
your mimesis, L, alight
whereas
mimesial (136)

Moure has transformed the reading practice into an intimate and affective relationship among the writer, reader, and syllables touching both textual bodies. The word *arrests* is employed not to diminish the light but to double the “r.” The word *mimesis* embodies its mimicry by taking the “L” of the light inside itself. But it is with the elusive and elliptical turn of this poem’s final lines, “laugh” and “*neigé*” (136), written in parentheses and set in light grey, that Moure transforms English into a minor language “in the Deleuzian sense” (Wager 164). Between two women, libidinal expressions become “potential agents of the major language’s entering into a becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 106). The “Georgette” poems are minor in the sense that they are “seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable moments and deterritorializations of the mean or majority” (106).

So what becoming is signalled by the final occurrence of “laugh” and “*neigé*”? The first of these two parentheticals is recognizable as the subversive feminist strategy of Hélène Cixous, who writes of “the laugh of the Medusa” as a disruption of the phallic economy. The laugh is a political strategy that halts the flow of the major language and provides an opening through which woman’s voice can be heard. The French that follows this laugh works to implement Moure’s insistence that her speaking “is not a territorialization but a localization without territory” (Wager 152). The girl *ciudadán* is energized by laughter and within a field of *neigé* midway between solidity and liquidity. The snow does not cover the field but makes it strange. The self and its siting (as well as its *citing* of others) are in a continuous process of being radically transformed in the midway covered field. Insistent not on static notions of belonging but on recreation and movement, Moure’s *moving* love poetry enters

the lover's body and from within that body discovers for itself the civic responsibility of "being-among."

Reading Search Procedures: Recombinatory Procedures on the Main

The process of becoming lover amid the *autrui* of citizenship begins in *Search Procedures*, in which the question of being, and that of being-with an *other*, are teased out in an early version of the documents and the love poems. "The Life of St. Teresa" is both the title of a poem and the title of a series of poems, consisting of "The Life of St. Teresa," "Weather," "Loons," "Wingtips," "Wetlands," "Devonian," and "Migratory Path, or Monarch Butterflies." This final poem recombines the lines of the first five poems in the series, presenting them in inverted order. Although Moure doesn't clarify the scene or the "meaning" of the poem with this recombining exercise, she does equip the reader with some techniques for retrieving possibility from the poem, such that we are the monarch butterflies tracing our way back over the landscapes of these reconfigured lines.

The landscape to which we return is "thick green cool" (7). But this is a departure from previous descriptions; the seasons have changed: "What we know of the word 'yellow' trembles" (7). The wetlands themselves are "long grass memory" (7), a swampy metaphor for our ways of remembrance. The landscapes over which the lines cross belong not simply to the terrain but also to the body of a woman: "of your shoulder beside your hair matted down by sleep you are still sleeping" (6). Here all is wet, for we are "just after the storm": Moure's attention to the body is unmistakably erotic, but so is her attention to the asphalt, "the trees still raining over us quietly" (or still *reigning* over the lovers), the "leaves torn down," and the "new bark wet" (5).

The equivalent textures of body and landscape are unmistakable: "the internal body a prairie the grasses flat where we lay you & I / your head close to my" (4). Moure's use of pronouns is dizzying; they are like so many trees visible in a landscape, each one distinct yet not clearly defined. Within this forest of eroticized women, misrecognition occurs: "A mistaken impression a woman with your walk last week on the / Main my gaze intensity cognizant O" (4). It is difficult for a reader familiar with Anglo-Québécois literature, and one who has read the inside inscription of the book ("*This book is for Gail Scott*"), not to associate this speaker with Lydia of Scott's *Main Brides: Against Ochre*

Pediment and Aztec Sky, the narrator who spends countless hours in a café on the Main inquisitively tracing the lives of women with her gaze. Misrecognition is a key aspect of Lydia's observing "I"; in one chapter, a Marilyn Monroe look-alike with the keenly coincidental name Norma Jean is overheard talking in the café, imagined in private scenarios to which the narrator could not have access, and glimpsed in the likeness of a drag queen, so that the look-alike appears at different times, inside the café and across the city, as multiple versions of herself. Scott's hallucinatory novel blurs reality and dream, honesty and imagination, and (most importantly) self and other, until Lydia's identity is inextricable from the identities of the women — or *brides* imagined populating the Victorian roofs across the street from the café — whom Lydia watches. The same blurred boundaries (reality/dream, honesty/imagination, self/other) are the subject of Moure's trilogy, and this book's dedication names the influence of the friend and colleague alongside whom her writing flourished in Montreal.

Material Ganglia

The poem that follows the trilogy's first recombinatory practices utilizes a conceptual procedure far more alienating than the easily (or visibly) sited/cited quotations of "Migratory Path, or Monarch Butterflies." Although "Memory Penitence/C o n t a m i n a t i o n É g l i s e" contains lines of Moure's characteristic parataxis, the second stanza, on the first four pages, is a block of what appears to be random text. This is the result, one conjectures, of arbitrarily hitting the computer keys.

jkl ;laksdf l k aklg kas ;i;o aei ;lkdsd hp` 8i94jklsd; j `;la d àsdj
 o`lk;dsdirowpeo;skf; o ; aodsu eç ç dk`; ;soe ri`k;seo l;l
 o`;esòu;l ;slkdf"sao;eù so;d;jv;jf"" ;l ;ls g`mosdi`r;si `; vsd;I;slkir`;
 a `;sir ;ir;l `;aesri ;dlsoewuier;klstu;erips;ld `woe `tuwa `tus;ldrol
 f eo; à (*Search Procedures* 10)³

Versions of this text occur four times in the poem. In its final appearance, there is the brief promise of sense making: "Readability a context raises leaf a clear holographiea impedi / ment holyoke, a crie donc aimable etruscan hole emmedial / ,imtrespt , obligate , perflux creede lff;wejk fea tueauriu`l a" (13). Teasingly, Moure literally begins with readability, stumbling only with "holographiea" — which the generous reader might assume to be an invented term. The enjambment that

impedes “impedi / ment” is cutely met, a literalization of the word’s denotation, before the line drifts first into French and then into unrecognizable territory. Lori Emerson suggests that the poem, particularly in “the empty spaces between the letters” of the title, “C o n t a m i n a t i o n É g l i s e,” directs “attention to the page as a plane of inscription rather than a transparent backdrop for meaning” (59). If so, then the emphasis has shifted from the materiality of the single letter or word to the materiality of the page, the book in the reader’s hand.

The first section of *Search Procedures* ends with the six-part poem “Amygdala,” subtitled “for Gail.” Below the dedication, against the right margin, is the italicized phrase “*To say what I am thinking . . .*” (15). On the final page of the poem, against the same margin, Moure concludes with “(*yours truly, Erin*)” (18). The titular cerebral structure is the “beautiful almond in the brain” (15), or “the almond light inside the brain” (18), with which Moure begins and ends the poem. This structure of the brain is central to “being a person” (15) in a general sense, but it is also unique to the subject of the poem (*Gail*), from whom the almond light rises: “It is purpose. / It is beautiful” (18). Despite the presence of the other woman, the poem is largely a meditation on the memories that the speaker possesses. Or, because of the presence of the other woman, the poem is largely a meditation on the porous borders of individual memory. As is the case in Scott’s *Main Brides*, here memory is not the possession of any singular subject. Does the memory of the father belong to the woman with the “beautiful almond in the brain” or to the speaker of the poem? Does it *belong* to anyone at all?

In my childhood, blue smoke rises slowly off of my father.
Those days I wanted him to come home & be

in the air force again, wearing the colour of smoke
that rose from him. (15)

These lines about childhood are strikingly straightforward in content and syntax. The memory is from childhood; it is of her father; and there are two instances of blue, in the smoke rising from him and the air force uniform that he once wore. Difficulty enters the remembrance, however, as the childhood self wrenches physical absence into being. A tooth is pulled from her mouth by “untying the rowboat of truth from the door

knob / & closing the door” (15). The result is “a trajectory of absence / the space between us increasing / a parabolic splendour” (15).

As the poem continues, the difficulty of transposing memory to poetry is described as the tricky boundary between what is true and what is imaginary: “All this is true, / ‘imaginary’” (16). The poet is suddenly figured as one of a pair of women in the garden “weeding a rough patch” (16). The previous imagery — the lyrical description of the father, a memory that might be “true” or “imaginary” — might be the obstruction against which their shovels are “yammering”:

Smoke rises off the fathers but they never do burn, do they.
Smoke rises into the drapes.
Smoke curls.

Attend to this. (16)

Now the fathers are plural; the memory is perhaps a collective one. The final line quoted above reads as a directive to the writing subject herself to sort out the exact trajectory of the smoke, to register its significance in the memory and in the text. As the poem continues, the speaker retreats to the familiar space of inside, in the oft-depicted scene in which a writer works by a window with coffee:

Coffee stains my cheek, my jaw
An age creeps up on me thru the window

I am trying to draw the line between cruelty & gentleness
What is inflicted on the self by the self

personhood

Where are we, the coves here are full of panicked horses (17)

The poet is no longer a gardener but a “panicked horse,” a sidelong metaphor for the subject’s fearful place in the world. This image of nervousness recalls an admission that will end the next section of the book: “I am a person, & I am afraid” (30) — a line smacking of vulnerability. But for now the poet is simply adjacent to the “panicked horses” and (seemingly) infatuated with the subject of her poem: “Your head & shoulders in the taxi at 6 a.m., the dome light / shining down on you” (18). In “Amygdala,” from memories of childhood and scenes of life with

a friend, lover, or colleague, Moure fashions a portrait of a contemporary saint — a mystic woman or an innovative prose writer.

**Reading *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*:
The Ontology of Human Responsibility**

In Leeds, England, in 1997, Moure was working through these ideas in a talk titled “On ‘A Frame of the Book.’” She began by situating her thinking in the ontological: “In my body of work over the years, I’ve pursued a kind of questioning: what does it mean to love, to exist, to communicate? How does the social framework influence us? Limit us? What are the limits of ‘the person,’ of tenderness, of grace, of honesty, of speech? How do we situate ourselves as beings in civil society?” (25). This concern with ontology placed Moure at the front of the pack of theorists pursuing the *affective turn* — what Marianne Liljeström defines as a resurgence of “discussions and reading of affect as emotive intensities, emotional affections, intuitive reactions, and life forces” that led to new thinking about “the dualism between body and mind” and the “critique of identity politics” and thus a rekindled interest in “questions of ontology” (16). *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book* was published in 1997, just two years after Wendy Brown published “Resisting Left Melancholy,” an early marker of the turn toward affect. According to the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, these years in the 1990s marked a “watershed moment for the most recent resurgence of interest and intrigue regarding affect and theories of affect” (qtd. in Liljeström 25-26). Moreover, in *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*, ontology appears in the poem as a subversive subject, as in “Astro’s House of Ripey Lyrick, or *the Features*”: “Ontology’s gesture oh sensation she is / wearing that strap again” (15). This manifestation of knowledge is insistently female and equipped with a false phallus.

Equipped with the strap, the speaker sets her sights on that external organ that constitutes so many of our loving or violent interactions with the self and others: the skin:

[W]hat is the place/role of the skin? Does the skin mark the body’s limit? How can one rethink the skin? Does the skin still demarcate the borders of identity when we work with a computer, when we no longer see our interlocuters? What is the effect of the distance on

the human body, on a woman's body, on relations between women? Is distance also an "inevitable effect," thus a "fact" of the text? Does the text act like a skin? Like a libidinal band (*after J.-F. Lyotard*)? ("On 'A Frame of the Book'" 26)

Is Moure's interest in affects, emotions, and feelings a matter of feminist affect theory or a psychoanalytic discussion of drives? Liljeström writes that these two ways of thinking need not be opposed; although psychoanalysis has been superseded by a "Deleuzian understanding of affect," it would be a great disservice to discount "the long history of feminist engagement with psychoanalysis" that itself is a matter of "working with affects" (30). By investing in Lyotard's libidinal economy, Moure not only takes part in the onrush of critics following the *affective turn* but also continues the charged body of work that makes space in psychoanalytic theory for the woman.

Within the libidinal economy, Moure deciphers the possibility of reconfiguring the distance between writer and reader. In the act of writing or reading — with the hand on the keyboard or the finger between the pages — text acts like skin: disrupting the space and time between writer and reader, between lover and beloved, between the bodies of the fluid feminine subjects that circulate in the corpus of the trilogy. In his rereading of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Lyotard "emphasizes the notion of a libidinal economy as a flow of force and affects within a human body, between bodies, and between objects and bodies" (Turim 97). Here we begin to understand the extent of Moure's interest in Lyotard. The body is both active and passive in the theorist's and the poet's formations, exerting force and receptive to force from both the inside and the outside. And, as the name libidinal economy implies, these forces are inextricable from the larger force of desire. In "On 'A Frame of the Book,'" the poet names desire as the driving impulse of the project: "This project is traversed by the urgency of desire. Because the skin in itself is a 'desiring integument,' and even the cartography of the skin in the cortex alters in response to tactile stimulation. But the 'libidinal economy' delineated in my work is always traced as well by political economy, by the economic forces that hold us in a present" (26). This insistence on a meaningful relationship between libidinal and political economies is rooted in Lyotard's own theory, as Maureen Turim explains:

Fundamental to the notion of libidinal economy is the premise that individuals are interconnected by libidinal drives, not only to each other, but to objects and to structures of political power. Libidinal theory aims to speculate not from a viewpoint of, or on, the individual, the organic body, but rather by mobilizing an abstraction, a metaphor, of a continuous flow of libidinal drives. It provides a critique of the ways these drives are channeled within capitalism for profit, enforcing myths of individuality and organic unity. (99)

Liotard's emphasis on the interconnectedness of individuals, "not only to each other, but to objects and to structures of political power," forms the basis of Moure's exuberant insistence that we — as subjects, especially as female and/or lesbian subjects — are "shimmers, coalescences, coalition" ("On 'A Frame of the Book'" 27). She explains that

The creation of ourselves as subjects is done continually, is part of a continual actactact. When what was known as a "fragment" turns out to have no whole to compare it to, no "idealized" whole that is not exclusionary or corrupted, the word "fragment" itself ceases to bear meaning. What "was" a "fragment" may prove to be *sufficient* to open us up to another space, an altered coalition of conditions. (28)

Alluding to the history of literary criticism that discusses women's writing in terms of the fragment (from the material fragments of Sappho to the material erasures of contemporary feminist writers such as Moure herself), the poet calls not simply for a movement beyond the fragment but in fact a movement beyond the limiting conception of the whole. As subjects-in-relation, we have the potential to be *more* than whole: that is, to be more than a singular being defined by the physical and societal borders dividing self, *autre*, and *autrui*. In Moure's poetry and Liotard's theory, the body of the (writing) subject-in-relation is propelled by desire — by "a continual actactact." The (loving) subject-in-relation moves the theory, decentring the conceptual difference between the love poem and the intellectual document in order to open the page on the architectural feat of queer and embodied feminist poetics.

The Noisy Gaze

In *O Ciudadán*, Moure suggests that Liotard's libidinal band might be "a twist of surfaces and not simply a 'turn'" (37). Such a twisting — a

contortion of “strict identity” (37) — is already evident in *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*. The first series of the book engages with this problematic, the porousness and flexibility of one’s skin, in its title: “An abrasion Series.” Disrupting the distance between writer and reader, the embodied text of these difficult poems becomes the skin between the lovers. What follows is an investigation of the effect on the human body of letters, syllables, and words as well as the territories, melodies, and blunders over which this vocabulary skirts. In the first poem, “Thrum,” Moure asks what it would be like to be *without* skin: “the dreamed dog soft in my arms / skinless red, a meat curmudgeon” (4). This nightmare image is strikingly vivid; the skinless dog is unable to feel the possible compassion of the dreamer; it is merely “meat curmudgeon.” This ghastly vision is immediately contrasted with a desirous one:

To dream a face is to
mesmerize infinitely
Whose curious soft eyes everywhere

thrum (4)

The “soft eyes” of the “face” are “curious”; they “thrum” as though emitting noise so that the “sensory aggregate” (*Wager* 157) of the human body is variously interconnected. The dream’s dead animal and many-eyed lover are the embodiments of a vulnerable and porous skin open to the excessive noise of a shimmering world-in-becoming. These frail bodies and the excess relationality inherent in their porous beings are the reason that at the end of *Search Procedures*, and in the pages of *Frame* and *O Ciudadán*, Moure ends up with “a sound, a particular set of letters” (*Wager* 157). In the “actactact” of the noisy gaze, the body is the text on which the poem is written: skin lifted to reveal the thrum of a subject-in-relation with the *autrui* of the citizen corpus.

In Moure’s ontological inquiries, the heart “has been dispensed with” — “or not,” Moure teases us a line later (*Frame* 5) — reminding us that both blood and affect circulate in these poems. The speaker is attempting to uncover the fact of the body. In “Gust,” the poet writes that

After the fins were eaten or laid down, the tablecloth gently
billowing

& our knees beneath that

was serenity a

vocabulary or doubt (7)

Moure's description of the dinner as "fins" further underscores the physicality of the subjects in the poem: the fish and the diners. As the scene is surveyed, the speaker considers the comparative status of "the tablecloth gently / billowing" and the diners' "knees beneath that." Do these physical objects — the fins, the tablecloth, the knees — constitute a vocabulary? How would that vocabulary appear on the page? How would it sound? Would it thrum? Or do these physical objects instead constitute doubt? Is this an honest — a *real* — portrayal of a dining scene? Should the reality of the scene be a concern of the poet's?

As the poem continues, the speaker enacts a "femur gaze" (8). This construction appears twice as an alternative possibility marked by the hinge "or": "a silence wept here / it was so tentative / or femur gaze" and "or femur gaze a lamp above my hair does shine / would that its treble named me" (8). How does the femur gaze? Must the thigh bone be in motion in order to enact its vision? Does it *touch* the objects on which it gazes? Or does it speak to them? "[W]here I touched yr shoulder spoke into the bone // A ship rose there / We steered by it" (8). Moure builds a new body in these poems — one capable of aligning its senses beyond their ordinary organs. "As if ontology could be let to wonder & would not reach / beyond, to disobey" (59). Being, in the text, is bound to mutate; feminist and lesbian being will land on uncertain ground and enter the closed borders in order to "reach / beyond." Circulating in space and time alongside the queer textual bodies of this trilogy, the writing and reading subject recognizes the civic responsibility of "being-among" (*autrui*) rather than simply "being-with" (*autre*).

Conclusion: Rereading the Civic Trilogy: Or, A Daring Ontology

Both Maguire and Jamie Dopp, poets and critics, insist that a generous reading of Erín Moure's work would treat it as theory in practice. This is nowhere more evident than in her civic trilogy, in which Moure demonstrates her keen attention to the swift movements of critical fields of affect and psychoanalytical theory. The timeline of her citizen trilogy

(1992, 1997, 2002) corresponds with the timeline of the affective turn. Both Moure and the host of affect theorists understand affects “as formative for subjects, social relations, politics, and political mobilization” (Liljeström 18). Arguably, Moure’s mix of love poems and intellectual documents is far more suited to the practice of discerning the “deeply embedded moments” (Liljeström 18) that constitute the affective subject than any major critical text in the field. Her combination of modes of writing (lyric, conceptual, transrelative) relies both on textual metaphor and on frictive material (body, landscape, artifact). In the erotic reach of her citizen trilogy, with its fluid appropriations of intellect and affect, Moure demonstrates that the body of the book is (like) the body of the woman. Both touch the surrounding world and are touched by its forces and drives.

Search Procedures throws light on the place of woman in writing in its first poem, “The Life of St. Teresa,” by foregrounding two affective drives: spiritual and erotic. The “other” woman in this poem decreates the landscape — as “seen/scene” (3) — in order to celebrate the lesbian love circulating between the women. The lines of flight by which the loons of the poem circle are the concretized relations of spiritual and erotic becoming courted by the parataxis. In these first gestures of the trilogy’s first poem, the “seen/scene” lifts off the ground and into the air, where the boundaries between self and other and the borders between nations are always at risk of wisping away. Moure’s striking deterritorializations of language and being demonstrate the radical pleasure inherent in this dare to decreate *here* and discover *elsewhere*.

Moure’s elsewheres are partly constituted by her irregular experimentation with syntax and grammar. Her strangely punctuated lines “demand a special kind of readerly attention, one that seeks not so much to decipher the absent connections but to inhabit the productive confusion that the lack of connectives invites” (Dopp). How do what Dopp describes as the “apparent politics” of Moure’s poetics interact with the subject of this first poem? To what degree does Moure critically engage with the productive myth of St. Teresa, and to what degree does it orient the becoming minortarian of the trilogy that follows? Is the poem a translation or Teresa Ávila’s autobiography, bearing the same title as Moure’s poem, *The Life of St. Teresa*? Is the poem a transposition of the woman and saint herself from the scene of prayerful penance to the yellow landscape of a love poem? The answer is unclear, but this uncer-

tainty is (as always) the most productive possible place from which to examine our understanding of spiritual and/or worldly life.

A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book maintains Moure's circuitous examination of saintly life. An essay on the book before it became a book appears in volume 27 of *Tessera* (1999) alongside an essay by Méira Cook on Lacan. Within the feminist journal, these two essays had the opportunity to touch, and evidently the effect was a movement from indefinite mysticism to definite *jouissance*. In "The Missionary Position: A Reading of the Mystic Woman in Lacan's Seminar XX," Cook examines Lacan's "notorious statement" that ~~the~~ woman does not exist, as demonstrated in the crossed-out article in the title of his seminar, "God and the *Jouissance* of ~~the~~ Woman." Cook explains that "this less than/more than woman who both lacks yet exists in excess of any lack is in fact the mystic woman, St. Teresa" (83). For Cook, the problem with Lacan's seminar is the absence of the mystic woman's *body*: the face is the corporeal object representative of St. Teresa's "unrepresentable pleasures" to the point that "we are denied the body" (87). In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray also takes up the problem of the feminine mystic in order to dispute the psychoanalytic discourse that prescribes "the feminine [that] occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects" (86). Such a logic of truth "implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one" (86). Woman becomes not-woman. For Irigaray, the problem with Lacan's seminar is the absence of the mystic woman's *writing*: "For where the pleasure of the Theresa in question is concerned, her own writings are perhaps more telling" (91). Body and writing are inextricable in the theory of Irigaray and the poetics of Moure; to "get rid of the body" is also to imply that female sexuality is "incapable of articulation" (90, 91).

What psychoanalytic discourse suggests is this: "The geography of feminine pleasure is not worth listening to" (Irigaray 90). As becomes evident in the title of the second collection of the trilogy, *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*, the poet-theorist no longer crosses out the article ~~the~~ when it comes to interrogating women's sexuality but doubles it, pushes the definite to its limit against the indefinite article α . What Moure's poetic theorizing unveils is that the *writing* and the *body* of woman's love is in fact too *noisy* to ignore.

In the final collection of the trilogy, *O Ciudadán*, Moure provides the reader with a map of the scene/seen from which the *noise* of queer love

is generated. This is not the heart but the lung. The organ is central to Moure's conceptualization of the subject and the citizen. The lung is demonstrative of the moving borders between self and other, inside and outside: "One's emergence as a subject is itself a fraught porosity" (60). The lung's "fraught porosity" ensures that the organ is a border interested not in keeping persons out but in letting persons in. It is constitutive of the person as being-in-the-world: breathing in oxygen, breathing out carbon dioxide. The lung is a precious object in Moure's poetic investigation. It occupies as much space as the heart if not more. This is an unusual occurrence for poetry that takes (romantic, erotic) love as at least one of its subjects, but it is reconciled by Moure's extension of the libidinal economy to zones beyond the scope of traditional lyric anatomy: the *haptic* centres of the hand, the *intellectual* fervour of the brain, as well as the *noisy* expansions of the lung.

The body's porosity becomes the writing's porosity, such that the *erotic* impulses of the loving writer become the *materialist* obstructions within the page. Consider, for instance, Moure's instruction in *O Ciudadán* to take up *joyful destruction*,⁴ to "fold here, tear along seam, and remove from book" (85). Fitzpatrick and Rudy write of the effect on the book of following this instruction: "It has gained a roaming page, which, though still numbered, can move to different locations in the book or to a different book altogether. It can also disappear completely, be excised from the book as waste, relegated to the trash, or recycled" (67). Moure's "daring invitation" is to test the limits of the borders governing the body of writing, to move inside and outside the fraught porosity of our relationships with the love poems and intellectual documents of the book. The materialist impulse of the book has reached beyond both the body and the writing in order to envision new ways of becoming: queer, noisy, and feminist.

NOTES

¹ Marianne Liljeström describes the "so-called affective turn" as a "lively and productive research area" that surfaced in the 1990s when feminist scholars "turned to questions of affect and topics of affectivity in search of a new critical vocabulary for investigating and conceptualizing the subject of feminism as embodied, located, worldly, contextualized, and relational" (16). Of course, as Paul Hoggett and Simon Thompson demonstrate in *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, renewed interest in the embodied nature of human feeling dominated new research in a wide variety

of fields of study, such as continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, mainstream psychology, and sociology.

² “Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself” (1).

³ In reproducing this on a keyboard, the critic imagines that she will intuit some rhyme or reason in this mad verse, but the only semblance of a recognizable word that appears is the apt “woe” in the penultimate line.

⁴ Brian M. Reed uses the phrase “joyfully destructive” in his exploration of twenty-first-century experimental poetics. See MacEachern for an account of this impulse in the poetry of Lisa Robertson and Rachel Zolf.

WORKS CITED

- Bates, Stephen. “Africans’ Last Plea Shames Belgium.” *The Guardian*, 8 Aug. 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/aug/08/stephenbates.theobserve>.
- Carr, Angela. *The Rose Concordance*. Book*Hug, 2009.
- Carrière, Marie. “Erin Moure and the Spirit of Intersubjectivity.” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 70, 2000, pp. 64-80.
- Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-93.
- Cook, Méira. “The Missionary Position: A Reading of the Mystic Woman in Lacan’s Seminar XX.” *Tessera*, vol. 27, 1999, pp. 82-89.
- Darias-Beautell, Eva. “The Softness of Theory: A T(r)opological Reading of Lisa Robertson’s *Soft Architecture*.” *Mosaic*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2016, pp. 53-70.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi, U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Dopp, Jamie. “‘A Field of Potentialities’: Reading Erin Moure.” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 67, 1999, pp. 261-87.
- Emerson, Lori. “Materiality, Intentionality, and the Computer-Generated Poem: Reading Walter Benn Michaels with Erin Mouré’s *Pillage Laud*.” *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2008, pp. 45-69.
- Fitzpatrick, Ryan, and Susan Rudy. “‘These Marked Spaces Lie beneath / the Alphabet’: Readers, Borders, and Citizens in Erin Moure’s Recent Work.” *Canadian Literature*, vols. 210-11, 2011, pp. 60-74.
- Hejninian, Lyn. *The Language of Inquiry*. U of California P, 2000.
- Hoggett, Paul, and Simon Thompson, editors. *Politics and Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*. Continuum, 2012.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, Cornell UP, 1985.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1991.
- Liljeström, Marianne. “Affect.” *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 16-38.
- MacEachern, Jessica. “The Feminist Poet Re-Creates the Soundscape: The Excessive Noise of Lisa Robertson and Rachel Zolf.” *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2017), pp. 281-98.
- Maguire, Shannon. “Erín Moure: Poetry as Planetary Noise.” *Planetary Noise: Selected Poetry of Erin Moure*, edited by Shannon Maguire, Wesleyan UP, 2017, pp. ix-xxiii.

- McDonald, Shirley. "Find Common Ground: Purposeful Disarticulation in the Poetry of Erin Mouré." *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 41, nos. 2-3, 2015, pp. 109-31.
- Moure, Erín. "Crossings: An Interview with Erín Mouré." Interview by Dawn McCance, *Mosaic*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2003, pp. 147-61.
- . *A Frame of the Book/The Frame of a Book*. Anansi, 1999.
- . *My Beloved Wager: Essays from a Writing Practice*. NeWest, 2009.
- . *O Ciudadán*. Anansi, 2002.
- . "On 'A Frame of the Book': A Talk on a Work-in-Progress." *Tessera*, vol. 27, 1999, pp. 25-31.
- . *Search Procedures*. Anansi, 1996.
- Moyes, Lianne. "Acts of Citizenship: Erin Mouré's *O Ciudadán* and the Limits of Worldliness." *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*, edited by Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007, pp. 111-28.
- "Please Excuse Us Very Much for Daring. . . ." *New Internationalist*, 5 Oct. 2002, newint.org/features/2002/10/05/excuse.
- Reed, Brian M. *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics*. Cornell UP, 2013.
- Robertson, Lisa. *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. Coach House, 2006.
- Scott, Gail. *Main Brides: Against Ochre Pediment and Aztec Sky*. Coach House, 1993.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Weather in Proust*. Edited by Jonathan Goldberg, Duke UP, 2011.
- Skoulding, Zoë. "Erín Mouré's Irruptive Citizenship." *Contemporary Women's Poetry and Urban Space: Experimental Cities*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 129-51.
- Turim, Maureen. "Desire in Art and Politics: The Theories of Jean-François Lyotard." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1984, pp. 89-106.
- Zolf, Rachel. "'Like Plugging into an Electric Circuit': Fingering Out Erín Mouré's Lesbo-Digit-O! Smut Poems." *Canadian Literature*, vols. 210-11, 2011, pp. 230-41.