Meanwhile, in Canadian Poetry…

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- Adam Dickinson, *The Polymers*. House of Anansi Press, 2013.
- Nicole Brossard, *White Piano*. Translated by Robert Majzels and Erín Moure. Coach House Books, 2013
- Elizabeth Bachinsky, *The Hottest Summer in Recorded History*. Nightwood Editions, 2013.

Part science project, part linguistic experiment, part culture jam, Adam Dickinson's *The Polymers* should be read by anyone interested in poetry that makes raids not only on the inarticulate but on the artificially synthetic—namely: industrially produced and culturally consumed plastics.

Plastics, as Dickinson explains in his introduction, are made of long chains of polymers which are themselves "giant molecules composed of numerous repeating parts." This is important, as many of the poems and the book itself take on and even mimic these structural dynamics. Revealing the book's conceptual bent, Dickinson goes on to state that "plastic marks both the presence and the absence of natural objects, embodying tension between the literal and the metaphorical, as it recreates the world as

an alternate or translated reality." Moreover, the 'book' itself is an interstitial object. The introductory page, for instance, is part sculptural, signifying on the level of its materiality which consists of a thin see-through sheet of plastic. (The text is printed on recto and verso sides so that depending on which side of the page you are looking at, one of the paragraphs will be backwards.) Beyond these slippages between categories, what's at issue in *The Polymers*, what's both hidden and on display, are the tensions that exist between disparate and often quarrelling discourses—especially between science and art, both of which have claims to what and how we know of the real.

The book extends the logic of the polymer on many levels—often to skull-cracking absurdity. Molecular diagrams appear as the book's section breaks, although the models' typical function has been replaced: instead of the names of chemical elements, the titles of upcoming poems are mapped out. Implicit in these visual texts is the claim that the book's poems can be mentally ordered, 'read' together, and comprehended as a synthetic whole just as monomers can be seen to combine and repeat to constitute plastic molecules. While such visual metaphors provide an elaborate and novel framework for understanding the poems, they also threaten to contain us within this "translated reality" of an aesthetic derivative of the plastics themselves. Better living through chemistry? *The Polymers* is perhaps, in part, an environmental warning.

Even as individual poems flaunt their artificial exteriors, their methods and procedures— often bizarrely constraint-based—are obscure or at times entirely

clandestine. Much hilarity ensues as cultural and scientific contexts resist, subvert, and interpenetrate one another. Conversations overheard in line-ups, Google map directions, and American State license plates are all reconstituted as linguistic polymer chains. A "silicon based polymer" is construed as the basis for The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and other human rights documents. The chemical model for tetraiodoallene enjoys a new status in its visual resemblance of a "first-person singular normative case personal pronoun." There are poems about syntactical, grammatical, and punctuative mix-ups, including a mini-treatise on the use of hyphens where "laughing-gas/makes it clear the gas/is not laughing." Another joke involves mathematical variables recast in a bad romance where "*X* and *Y* have decided to see other people." Misreadings, code-switchings, catachreses, malapropisms, and even puns abound—all of which work to foreground differing contexts and means of signification while testing and interrogating the familiar boundaries between 'literal' and 'metaphorical;' 'natural' and 'artificial;' 'living' and 'nonliving;' 'poetic' and 'scientific.'

The potential implications and applications—artistic, philosophical, industrial—contained within *The Polymers* are as varied as the polymers themselves. This is an important cross-over work, a veritable hybrid poetry, and as such a must-read for chemists interested in the plastic limits of culture; for poets interested in the cultural limits of plastics; for environmentalists keen on linguistics; for lovers of the weirdly incongruous; and for all of us denizens of the not so distant future—whether it be utopian or dystopian, real or hyperreal.

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Although she is one of Canada's most prolific and acclaimed poets, perhaps there are still some who are a little afraid of Nicole Brossard. Her *oeuvre*, which includes more than thirty book of poetry, ten novels, and four books of essays, is coterminous with visions and themes such as Québécoise identity and independence, the political underpinnings of language, the limits and possibilities of translation, feminist consciousness, and lesbian utopia. Revolutionary, theory-conscious, and erotically transgressive, Brossard's texts instantiate the moral imperative to refuse patriarchal modes of oppression, while re-visioning how words mediate our relationship with reality. Those uneasy with descriptors such as *avant-garde*, *feminist*, *lesbian*, or even *Québécoise*, might turn away from Brossard's work in search of something a little safer, easier, or more familiar. Those unwilling to see the politics in aesthetics or the aesthetics in politics might deny themselves an uncanny experience of the nature of how language operates.

Brossard's recent collection, *White Piano*, dexterously translated into English by Robert Majzels and Erin Moure, is both disobedient in its forms and operations, and generous in its capacity to collude with its readers in the processes of generating meaning and beauty. Poems circulate through and among various pronouns, persons,

feelings, ideas, stories, and locations in an aesthetic of 'repetition with variation' which privileges the Eros of tautology over the linearity of teleology.

In "Eyelids2," a fragment from a series called "Piano frontera," the recurrence of the word "eye" in different contexts presents the disfiguration of this "eye" as a stable signifier:

> the eye's no longer shaped like an eye
> neither yours nor hers
> her eye moves like an eye
> as soon as you compare
> it's no longer an eye

Metaphorically construed, the eye is not "like an eye" in shape, but it *is* when individuated as belonging to "her" and described in movement: "her eye moves like an eye." Abetting and complicating these ambivalences, the two disembodied yet intimately/sensuously linked pronouns seem to be nothing other than divergent consequences of the sight organ itself, of 'seeing.' Yet under the pressure of assessment, of seeing with the 'mind's eye'—"as soon as you compare"—the two pronominal figures, as well as the eye itself, dissolve into the singular negation: "it's no longer an eye."

The ambiguity of articles and pronouns and the shifty semantic play makes it impossible to extract any specific truth-kernel from this fragment. Rather, each subsequent exploration of the text yields new ways of seeing. As the "eye" of the poem

breaks down, the 'eye' of the reader must intervene and partake of the poem's altering certainties.

This small text—in a mode typical in Brossard's poetry, which simultaneously allows graphemes, words, phrases, and whole lines to exist as autonomous units of meaning, and to recombine and fluidly reconfigure—this text, by transgressing the certitudes typically embodied in rules of rhetoric, syntax, and punctuation—this text activates the reader's creative agency: participation is necessary in both the production and reception of its materials. Notice too how the use of the second person 'you' dares to breach the two-dimensional surface of the page, drawing the reader's literal eye down into the figurative "eye's" various transformations.

Brossard's poems open up generously, and her language, even in translation, is replete with anxious pleasures which are a joy to discover. Yet when the poems are read with careful attention we discover there are significant responsibilities that go along with the production and reception of linguistic meaning. If this kind of poetry is fraught with indeterminacy and paradox, it is a generative kind of indeterminacy and paradox, one that tricks language into revealing its conventional limits, thereby delineating the frontiers of new expressive possibilities. Readers of *White Piano*, particularly readers new to Brossard's work, are likely to find themselves on this very frontier, where they must renegotiate their role as language consumers, and refigure their understanding of poetry's relation to subjectivity, beauty, and especially truth.

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It is fair to say that Elizabeth Bachinsky knows a lot of poets and is herself known by a number of poets, as in evinced in her latest collection, *The Hottest Summer in Recorded History*. Although what is on display isn't merely a penchant for name-dropping. Instead it resembles a further foray into "personism," reprising that whimsically transcendent Frank O'Hara mode which places the poem "squarely between two persons instead of two pages." Let's agree that in the right hands such a poem, though its ostensible function is to act as an intermediary between two friends or lovers, can affect a wider readership.

For a younger poet, Bachinsky has achieved some well-deserved success, and as her star has risen so her connections to other artists seem to have extended and deepened to the degree that her most recent poems are saturated with their presence. In a lesser poet, this obsession with obscure personages could easily turn into a kind of narcissistic menagerie. Thankfully, Bachinsky's poems are archly constructed to generate a mood of intimacy consonant not only with the addressees and dedicatees of her poems, but with her readers as well.

It's risky to publish a poem titled "I Drop Your Names" wherein the names of two poets are not only dropped, but the speaker ironically beseeches: "I am moved /to tell you please stop/ putting our names in poems." Yet this seemingly fatuous memorandum actually gestures towards a fascinating conundrum vis-à-vis poetry and

its enduring nature as Bachinsky theorizes a reader outside the insular company of poets and the feedback loop of poetic practice: "What do you think it will be like/reading this, or those, years from now/when you and I are gone,/or all but gone?" It's an old theme: confronted with the inescapable passage of time, these friends' tender—yet expressly fleeting—concern for one another is subsumed and recuperated by the poem's potential for persistence. Indeed, if a name is placeholder in a poem, what remains or arises long after those named have disappeared? Perhaps only absence itself—and it is this absence, with its disquieting sense of loss—"your faces... fading/ from my memory like the periodic/ table of elements or the/ lyrics to some song I learned /while driving the Island Highway /one month I can't remember"—which the poem ultimately invites us to explore. As readers we are asked not only to witness this loss but to redeem it by imaginatively participating in poetry's power to transfigure "gone" into "almost gone." As our empathy succeeds this sense of absence, so the poem is renewed—that is, it is imbued with a new presence: our own. So the poem, like all good poems, must genuflect before the caring attention of its readers, who, along with the poet, can recall past affections and attachments "well enough/ to feel their absence and know/ what's already gone."

The book as a whole is similarly adept at charting this troubled course between the poet's personal relationships and her poetry, and between the necessary self-absorptions of the writing life and the self-effacement required to present one's writing to the public. As if energized by this challenge, the collection swerves through a

virtuosic variety of moods, perspectives, modes of address, and received forms, just as individual poems move quickly and fluently through registers of irony and wit. One of many poems dedicated to another poet begins with the inverted, and vaguely indelicate, echo of Whitman: "To dislike this poem, to dislike me." At first the tone and the level of self-mockery is hard to gauge. However, the speaker soon pivots, adroitly shifting tactics, clarifying "I would like this poem to be present," and upon closer inspection the poem *is* present. It is present in its cunning rhyme play, and in its contrast of the ego's insistence—"*I* like this word. I'll use it again. Astonishing!"—with the final conflation of this egotistical "I" with something the speaker calls detachedly "this thing," insinuating the poem itself. The ambivalence is palpable, the subject matter complex, yet the performance is seamless. Like many of Bachinsky's best poems, this one discloses even while the speaker enacts her own disappearance, judiciously giving way to art rather than sentiment.

Throughout *The Hottest Summer in Recorded History,* it is this continual devotion and attention to the presence of the *poem*—even as the lives and loves of the poet and her circle of friends are on display—that Bachinsky privileges and performs with artful attention. Although the book is inscribed with the dedication "To Friends," these poems will speak to almost anyone.