“If We Dare To”: Border Crossings in Erin Mouré’s *O Ciudadán*

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Abstract: This essay explores the space of contact between languages—particularly that of French and English—within Erin Mouré’s recent collection of poetry, *O Ciudadán*. The following discussion demonstrates the manner in which a tangible place for each language, without appropriating one into another, is created on the page. Drawing on the writings of Mary Louise Pratt and Jacques Derrida, I argue that instead of defining the language interaction, or translating one language into another, Mouré constructs a “contact zone” where deferring/differing spaces of language intersect and are made “visible” and are “touched.”

Poetry at this time, I believe, has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness, and in a complex sense, best captured in another Greek word, *xenos*. It, too, means “stranger,” or “foreigner.”.. In using the metaphor of a border, I do not mean to suggest that poetry relegate itself to the margins. The border is not an edge along the fringe of society and experience but rather their very middle—their between; it names the condition of doubt and encounter which being foreign to a situation (which may be life itself) provokes—a condition which is simultaneously an impasse and a passage, limbo and transit zone...

Lyn Hejinian¹

Erin Mouré’s 2002 collection *O Ciudadán* offers the reader precisely this “middle” space that Hejinian talks about in the above quotation—exposing what Jean-Luc Nancy, borrowing from Derrida, calls the “absolute difference and an absolute *différance*”² of contact between two or more objects. In the case of *O Ciudadán*, the “objects” brought into contact are the various languages—English, French, Castilian, Galician, Latin and Portuguese—that intersect within it, “objectified” by the very process of their intersection, and serving to produce, between them, the explorable space of “an absolute *différance*” of language.

Even (or perhaps especially) *O Ciudadán*’s “major” language, English, is rendered by the text, in Mouré’s own words, “strange unto itself”—enacted as a “minor” language in the Deleuzian sense of the word: constantly “invaded or traversed...most visibly by other tongues.”³ It is, I argue, Mouré’s specifically *visible* rendering of this traversal—the construction of a network of deferring/differing spaces of language in the endless possibility of their “contiguities and tangential contacts”—that enables a tangible space of contact between languages on the page.⁴ Writes Mouré: “To nurture languages is to create localization not in soil but in events, for it is, strangely, events that enact localities, no site can pre-exist some event’s *act*.”⁵ Accordingly, the language(s) in *O Ciudadán* are

“nurtured” and brought into contact not in order that they be localized—established in a fixed position, with a fixed meaning and relation to one another on the page—but that they *act*. “And acts,” Mouré goes on to write, “are relational, permeable. The becoming-space of language or gesture, its localization, necessarily occurs in relation to *autrui*, to other as a radical and plural outside.”⁶

It is along this border, within the “becoming-space” of language, that Mouré’s *O Ciudadán* is constructed, emphasizing the continuous, active relation between one language and another, between thought and speech, speech and writing, and ultimately, self and other. Echoing Levinas, Mouré explains: “I, facing you, whom I do not know, admit that *you* have some prior claim on me, one that preceded and enables the creation of my *self*...And one of us can never be subsumed in the other, colonized, explained. Our relationship is gestural. Genuflectual. Proximal. The paradox of the construction of the self (which is, as Judith Butler says, performative) is a microcosm of the paradox of the construction of a nation, of *nacionalidade*.”⁷ And the paradox of the construction of language is a microcosm of both.

The play of Mouré’s text (elongated rectangles cover sections of a text, shadowing some words and leaving others exposed; gaps are left between words in a single line; graphs chart the relationships between words; arrows directing the reader’s attention to previously or not-yet-read areas of the text) interrupt any fixed, linear, understanding. This interruption is further effected by the intersection of “other” texts—the philosophical writings of Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Augustine, among others—with the speaker’s own thoughts, and the Spanish, Galician, and French words, which are often left untranslated “beside,” to use Mouré’s own term, the English.⁸ Everywhere the (ongoing) process of the poem’s thinking is made visible—to the extent that the author’s notes for potential, future revisions seem to remain within the text, as for example the penultimate line of “document 29,” which reads, “(add pp.120-121 Nancy here).”⁹

The result of this gesture toward inclusion is a tangible space of omission, of absence, on the page. It is the revelation of precisely this sort of gap at the “microcosmic” level of the text that allows Mouré the space to explore the “contiguities and tangential contacts”¹⁰ at the level of the self, and nation.

Confrontation with a border zone at either of these levels is inseparable from confrontation with the structure of power. This is exemplified by Mary Pratt’s 1990 article “Arts of the Contact Zone,” in which the story of Guaman Pomo, an Indigenous Andean whose 17th century *Nueva Corónica* provided a re-written account of Christian history in which Amerindians played an important role, is used to illustrate the spaces in which cultures “meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”¹¹ In *Nueva Corónica*, writes Pratt, “depictions resemble European manners and customs descriptions, but also reproduce the meticulous detail with which knowledge in Inca society was stored on *quipus* and in the oral memories of elders.”¹² The work acts, therefore, as an *autoethnographic* text—that is, a text in which a person or people “undertake(s) to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them.”¹³ The act of *re-writing* allows a slight reallocation of power as it engages in “*response to* or in *dialogue with*” ethnographic texts, but the problem of the dialogue’s ultimate one-sidedness remains.¹⁴ As Pratt makes clear with her example of Pomo’s text, which has remained virtually unread, “miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning—these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone.”¹⁵

Mouré’s *O Ciudadán* works within the “contact zone” not only of language, but of language philosophy, positioning itself in dialogue with texts produced by dominant language philosophers, and creating a “zone” in which she is able to explore these texts in her own terms. Within this space of contact Mouré is neither called upon to adopt nor reject the philosophies she expounds. Indeed, just as it was not within Pomo’s power to fully reject or fully incorporate himself into the Christian

tradition, it is not within her power to do so. There is, and always has been—before Mouré, before Pomo—“already a world” replete with an “impalpable reticulation of contiguities and tangential contacts.”¹⁶ It is Mouré’s project, then, not to position herself within that world, but—and at the risk of “miscomprehension, incomprehension”¹⁷—to take up what Nancy points to as the “one chance for sense” by moving “beyond the appropriation of signifiers” into a possible “opening” of that world.¹⁸

This move—beyond the signifier—is often rendered through literal “openings” in Mouré’s text (“Horticulture in a pear her constraint is ‘pearls’ to preen...”) or by a consistent reminder throughout the text of the multiple layering of language, ideas, and experiences. The “Substitution of Harms” series positions word series as fractions on the page. Here is one example, taken from “Second Catalogue of the Substitution of Harms”:

Harm	harm	harm	harm	harm
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Forms	term	devices	units	count ¹⁹

Mouré establishes in this series a sense of the continuous and shifting *relation* between words and meaning, thus suggesting an endless division and multiplication process that results in endless *possible meaning*. That she refers to the series as “catalogues” emphasizes the endlessness of the project that has been embarked upon. The enumerated system of classification, in its evident inability to accommodate the infinite project at hand, further underscores the fact that there can be no final or conclusive accounting for things and no possible or ultimate substitution for the word or the idea of “harm”—or any other word or idea for that matter. What matters here is not the prospect of a potentially exhaustive catalogue of relations, but the *relations themselves*. The catalogue is simply the suggestion of the way the words interact, the way they touch each other and change one another, and yet remain at some distance to one another on the page. In “document 2,” citing Nancy’s description of sense as a “touching at the confines of the world,”²⁰ Mouré asks, “How to write the sense of the world?”²¹ and then expounds upon Nancy’s idea of “resistance to the closure of worlds within the world.”²² As already pointed out, Nancy perceives an infinite and continuous interaction between the borders of individual bodies. Sense is created through this necessary interaction, which opens the object “in itself” so that it is able to exist in a state of “being-toward” the world, as well as “toward itself”—and so remains merely “in itself” no longer. However, this state of being can only be considered abstractly, as nothing in our world is able to exist as such: “*you*,” for example, always precedes and enables “the creation of my *self*.”²³ In Nancy’s words: “The *différance* of the toward-itself, in accordance with which sense opens, is inscribed *along the edge of* the ‘in itself.’ *Corpus*: all bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of the sense.”²⁴ “Body,” for Nancy, is intended variously, sometimes in the sense of the physical human body, sometimes to denote a solid object of any description, and sometimes metaphorically, in order to explore a theoretic interaction in corporeal terms, as demonstrated by the use of “touch” in the following passage: “Our gaze touches its limits on all sides. That is, it touches also—indistinctly and undecidably—the finitude of the universe thereby exposed and the infinite intangibility of the external border of the limit.”²⁵

This triple relationship to the word “body” exists equally in Mouré’s work. “The *ciudadán* stands in time as the person stands in space, liquid/edge before or beyond the other she craves, the she she craves also a she,/ and this is space that opens time...”²⁶ Here we see the triple shift—first from the theoretic body (“The *ciudadán*,” who is here portrayed as highly abstract (“nothing to do

with country or/origin”²⁷), then to the impersonal physical body (“the person,” “the other”), and finally to the personal physical body (“the she she craves also a she”)—all in a single sentence. In this context, the emphasis on the “she she craves” being “also a she” seems to have less to do with identification with a particular gender or sexual orientation than it does with a more literal *self-identification* process. Describing the “she she craves” as “also a she” emphasizes the realization on the part of the original “she” that *she, too*, can be identified not only from the inside (as herself; as “I”) but from the outside as well—that is, as someone else’s “she”—which is also, then, necessarily, a “you.” In “document 7” the idea of what constitutes “outside” and “inside” is addressed in terms of a contemplation on the act of reading. Having determined that “the origin of any particular condensation of meaning is thus outside the body,” the speaker reflects on the fact that such a determination “beckons the whole notion of ‘outside’ into the field of inquiry and/ unseats it. For ... what is ‘inside’? What is ‘in’ that must be kept ‘in’/ so badly that ‘outside’ must be denominated as function?”²⁸ In an essay titled “Reading Never Ceases to Amaze Me,” Mouré writes: “reading is where thought risks. And more: reading is where thought risks concatenation with that which is exterior to it.”²⁹ The confrontation between the self of the reader and the other of the resistant text is “indispensable” to the act of reading because, Mouré explains, that resistance is not only a structural feature of the text, but also of the way that the reader herself has been “structured by society”³⁰. “Challenging the self,” by accepting both the inherent limitations and the immanent possibility of reading, leads “to seeing where self is constructed, recognizing where thought’s wires act as stop signs. Challenging the self is learning to walk past those wires, learning that the borders in one’s thought are but seams.”³¹ Here, “seams” should be understood not only in the sense of a “concatenation” between two or more sections of cloth (a weave, a text), but also as the “seems” that speaks to the structuring power of our imaginations, necessarily shaped by society.

“To exist...is to be in a community,” Todd May reminds us, in his insightful book *Reconsidering Difference*, because “individuals, while alive, can never completely close themselves off.”³² Therefore, being in a community (being alive) is “a matter of exposure to others who are similarly exposed, a sharing of exposure in which the borders of the individual are neither clearly drawn nor completely effaced. If the borders were clearly drawn, there would be no exposure, and thus no community; if the borders were completely effaced, there would be a common substance in which all were immersed.”³³ Often, Mouré illustrates this paradox through the exploration of the physical description of the border—for example a dotted line in the shape of a box that is drawn on the page *in order that the text might exceed it*, the lines of the poem running past the limits of the frame on the page.³⁴ The breach of this tangible border contributes in this case directly to the theoretic content of the “excessive” text, with its reference to the complicated border politics of “two Spains” and “Quebec citizenship.”

Mouré’s writing of literal, as well as theoretic, “excess” has been elaborated upon by Susan Rudy, who comments that as early as the 1988 Governor General’s Award-winning *Furious* Mouré recognized that it was not the “weight and force of English” that needed to be changed in order to “make women’s speaking possible”; what was needed, instead, was to “move the force in any language, create a slippage, even for a moment...to decentre the ‘thing,’ unmask the relation.”³⁵ According to Rudy, Mouré thus writes “in excess of signification; refuses conventional word order and usage; redeploys grammar, punctuation, syntax and spelling ...”³⁶ This “slippage,” this breach of borders, can be—as Mouré herself admits in “the Public Relation,” speaking specifically of *O Ciudadán*—“only occupied for a moment. Still, once we’ve crossed a border, we can’t expect the border to remain the same. It is marked by our passage.”³⁷ *O Ciudadán* can be understood as a mapping of this movement. But: “All this talk of movement,” Mouré continues, “[when a nation] as commonly understood, is not about moving but about a collective *here*, in a *place*.”³⁸ How is this, in theoretical let alone practical terms, to be understood and accounted for? As Lianne Moyes reminds

us, *O Ciudadán* is “not a call for a borderless world” and “the *ciudadán*’s bond” is “more a question of recognizing the heterogeneity of national borders than of transcending them.”³⁹ The border, to quote—along with Moyes—from *O Ciudadán* itself, marks “a disruptive and unruly edge” without which there would be no passage. I want to understand this here in terms not only of the passage of citizens, experience, conceptions of identity, and languages, but also in terms of the passage of writing itself. Without borders, the delimitation of the signifier, and the confrontation between the double intention of “seams” (that is, between the physical and psychical processes of denotation and connotation) there would be, *could* be, no text at all. “To me,” writes Mouré in reference to the structure of a poem, “absolute structure is motion. Being is always in excess of this structure; it endures while motion is already past. Shock of that. Here we are.”⁴⁰ Mouré’s text demonstrates this inevitable “excessiveness” of language and in doing so marks the passage between signifier, its *Being* (“already past”), and the “absolute structure” of motion from which it is always engaged in a process of *arriving*. But in order to create the “slippage” she desires, Mouré, as Rudy points out, requires us to read “as excessively as she does.”⁴¹ There is always the risk, therefore, that her readers will not be able, or willing, to meet her “high expectations,” and that the work will remain unread, deemed—in the words of one reviewer—“too obscure, too difficult—ultimately too dangerous.”⁴² It has always been, and no doubt will continue to be, “dangerous” to question the boundaries of person and nationhood, but embracing this danger is necessary in order to “unleash possibilities, kinds of rigour impossible in analysis alone.”⁴³ As Mouré points out in “The Public Relation”, it is the “desire for constancy” that can cause analyses to “fail to notice and read the movement of paradox.”⁴⁴ Missing this “paradox” on the level of Mouré’s text is one thing, but far more dangerous, sometimes even disastrous, is missing it at the level of political decision and government (“[i]n thinking about citizenship in global terms, does it make sense to think only in terms of inclusion? Inclusion in what?”⁴⁵ “Danger” in the sense that Mouré posits in her meditation on reading—“where thought risks”⁴⁶—can be, as it was for Hölderlin, also understood as our “saving power.”⁴⁷

In “The Art of the Contact Zone,” Pratt confronts the paradox of citizenship from a slightly different angle by relating an anecdote about her son’s reaction to his first few days at a new elementary school, one with what Pratt calls more “flexible curricula”: “A few days into term,” recounts Pratt, “we asked him what it was like at the new school. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘they’re a lot nicer and they have a lot less rules. But you know why they’re nicer?’ ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘So you’ll obey all the rules they don’t have.’”⁴⁸ Borders, Pratt suggests, may be felt, although they are neither articulated nor seen. This is often, of course, the case for minority literatures that struggle at the edges of an invisible border—albeit one difficult to define—that separate them from majority recognition and exposure. The border becomes even more invisible when it comes to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “minor literature” (“that which a minority constructs in a major language”⁴⁹), because the pressures and borders that the literature runs up against and exceeds, or fails to exceed, are much less tangible.

I am not going to argue that Mouré’s work constitutes a “minor literature,” though I believe that given the definition postured by Deleuze and Guattari, a case could be made based on Mouré’s position outside of the majority culture of the communities from which, and of which, she writes (Galicia, Spain, and Montreal, Quebec, for example), and based as well on her concerns with the “deterritorialization” of language.⁵⁰ Like Kafka, who serves as Deleuze’s prime example of a practitioner of minor literature, Mouré (I could argue) manages in *O Ciudadán* to create, as Reda Bensmaïa writes in her introduction to *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, “a machine of expression that is capable of disorganizing its own forms, of disorganizing the forms of content, so as to free up an intense material of expression that is then made of pure content that can no longer be separated from its expression.”⁵¹ My objection to classifying Mouré’s work as “minor literature” does not stem from any resistance on my part to considering Mouré as a “minority” or her work as sufficiently

“deterritorializing.” It results instead from a resistance to a falsely hierarchical notion that the concepts “major” and “minor” lend to the interplay between languages in Mouré’s work. What we have in *O Cidádan* is not so much an opposition between language experiences in temporal terms, in which the language achieves “a circuit of states that forms a mutual becoming”⁵² (a *becoming* that presumes a constant “metamorphosis” from one thing to another, and so is never—based on this temporal logic—able to exist as more than one body, one thing, at a time), but rather a meeting in spatial terms, in “zones that can overlap.”⁵³ Rather than “obeying the rules they don’t have,” Mouré *disobeys* the rules that *we didn’t know we had*. How often, for example, prior to reading “Twentieth Century of the Festering of Harms,” might a reader actually reflect upon the fact that she observes the “rule” that text should not exceed the limits of the frame? Mouré, like Pratt’s school-age son, draws attention to the borders that we may find it difficult to acknowledge or define (either because we forget that they actually exist or because they are too complicated to explain). She literalizes them on the page—not just metaphorically but *literally* exceeding the boundaries she has drawn—and thus calls into question the notion of exteriority and interiority in terms of both social and personal constraints that define what must be “kept ‘in’” and what should remain “outside.”⁵⁴

Although “splits” that are illustrated within the collection, such as the fractal “splits” depicted in the “Harms” series, ultimately point to the insolubility of language functions, the idea of the *original* (into which an “other” is divided) is necessarily introduced through the “split” relation. At the bottom of “Second Catalogue of the Substitution of Harms,” a note reads: “*in the form of ~~functions~~ ^{fractions}.” This crossing out of the original text and substitution with the second word exemplifies a Heideggarian *sous-rature*, or “under-erasure”—a strategy that Derrida suggests, in *Writing and Difference*, offers the possibility “of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself.”⁵⁵ In this way Mouré is seen to borrow from a heritage of deconstructionist philosophy—a move that cannot be considered *autoethnographic* but could, perhaps, be considered *autosophographic* in that it, too, is an attempt for a “so-defined other” to “engage with the representations others have made of them.”⁵⁶ This impulse on Mouré’s part toward a deconstruction of her own deconstructive methods acts in itself as a sort of *sous-rature*. However, the important thing to remember about this process, especially as exemplified by the work of Mouré, is that the erasure is never an *actual erasure*, resulting in a lack. To be “under-erasure” literally means to exist beneath, to “overlap” with what can be understood as the body of “erasure” (a presence), rather than to have been “erased” (a lack). For this reason both words—“functions” and “fractions”—necessarily remain on the page so that we are able to see both the original word as well as the word that has not *replaced* but instead been *imposed upon* the original word. In a similar way, the fractions illustrated in the poem also show both figures: the “original” word as well as the word that has (or will) impose upon or displace the significance (value) of that “original” word.

It is this ability of “figures” or “shapes” to exist simultaneously, to “overlap,” that makes the illustrative figures in Mouré’s work indispensable to her project. They not only allow us to perceive literally the ways bodies (here, read “bodies” in both the literal and figurative senses that Mouré intends) “touch,” but also to call into question—by this superimposition of figures “under” and “over” one another—the notion of “origin.” “What is being split from what here?” Mouré asks.⁵⁷ It is useful at this juncture to think of Nancy’s “plural” or “multiple singularity,” which occurs as “many instances of ‘coming’ into presence without presence ever presenting itself as the essence of presence.”⁵⁸ There can never be, according to Nancy, any state in which a body remains only “in itself,” and so it is constantly incorporated into a process of “touching”—both itself and others. According to Derrida’s reading of Nancy’s *Being Singular Plural*, “touching is the very experience of ‘origin’ as ‘plural singularity.’”⁵⁹ “Origin” then is intrinsically linked to contact with oneself and others; it is a “coming” into being in the moment of “touching” upon itself and the world. It cannot exist “in itself” because it is, in the moment of “coming” into presence through touch, already

necessarily in relation to itself and the world, already “multiple.” This means, in Nancy’s own words, “since the origin is not another thing...it is neither ‘missable’ nor appropriable (penetrable, absorbable),”⁶⁰ just as, Mouré suggests, the poetic document, in its attempts to communicate, remains as physical bodies remain: “contiguous without absorption.”⁶¹

It is no doubt this perception of the endless contiguity of relations, both in language and in life, which gives rise to Mouré’s deep concern with moving away from the idea of “origin” in her poetry. In “document 6 (originary),” for example, she reflects: “Is there an originary marking? If there were, would we be able to “read” it/ at all? Or does such a ‘trait’ receive its function as mark only from our/ reading, our imposition of acculturated being that takes place in reading’s/ gesture. And is thereby not originary.”⁶² Later on in the same poem this conclusion is arrived at once more: “already my reading is what creates/ it as ‘trait,’ no? / Therefore, ‘not originary.’”⁶³

Here, although Mouré echoes the manner in which Nancy and other deconstructionists problematize the notion of “origin,” she seems to desire an even further remove: a debunking of even the “abstract” value of the idea. Such a project is perhaps particularly pertinent to Mouré due to her concern with the relationship between languages. The question of language interaction, and especially of translation, is of course necessarily tied up with this notion of “origin.” What is an “original language”? And how does it—will it—relate to the languages into which it is translated or within which it interacts?

The interaction between French and English in Mouré’s work can best be grasped by thinking again of a spatial “overlay” rather than any temporal shift, which the terms “origin” as well as the Deleuzian “becoming” bring to mind. “document 29 (French thinking)” describes this spatial quality of the interaction well: “To enable a language (returning) is also to allow intrusion, and to enable/ intrusions or their possibility as part of the cultural order. An overlay (micro)/ into a zone.”⁶⁴ Later on in the same poem she reflects, “My thinking, because of (necessary) zone disequilibrium, may be/ ‘French’ thinking, even in English.”⁶⁵ Derrida provides us with an interesting insight into this notion of “French and English thinking” and a suggestion of why this “overlay” might be valuable to Mouré’s project. “French grammar,” he writes in *On Touching*, “tolerates reflexivity as much as flexing irreflexiveness, in the singular as in the plural....Moreover, fortuitously or not...there is also a French tradition—an original one—of a certain problematic of touch.”⁶⁶

In “document 29 (French thinking)” Mouré asks the reader explicitly to consider the possibility of the simultaneity of language experiences: of being able to “think” in French using English, an interaction, she reminds us, “which (necessarily) changes English. / not ‘dualistic’ but ‘mesial.’”⁶⁷ Mouré, in this way, does not make herself so much “a stranger” in her own language but a traveller in a border area whose borders are often left invisible or undefined. “Sometimes only the “overlap” makes borders of a zone visible,” she reminds us in “document 29 (French thinking),” which is just what she is able to do in this poem.⁶⁸ By identifying for the reader the “overlap,” by asserting for herself a contiguous relationship with French and English, our attention is called to the borders between these languages, borders that might otherwise have been ignored. But why is it *important* to Mouré that we consider the borders between these languages? Doesn’t this only serve to reinforce the notion of languages as being “dualistic”? Doesn’t it serve only to re-present the “original” versus “derivative” debate that Mouré seems, in every other sense, to want to get away from?

I would argue, no. In Mouré’s work the *visibility* of the contact zone is imperative, because it is that visibility that allows us to “touch our limits on all sides” and come to know ourselves and others through an awareness of how we touch and are touched, and how that touching changes us.⁶⁹ Mouré’s exposure to and experience of French thinking, with which she “displaces” English (“because of [necessary] zone disequilibrium”⁷⁰), “changes English.”⁷¹ She is here involved in the

fractal process out-laid in the “Harms” series, and though there is no sense of an ultimate solution to the endless division, to the endless cataloguing, there is a sense of the necessity of acknowledging the relation and interaction between these endlessly divisible and combinational “figures” or “bodies”, and of understanding the ways they “touch” one another. Nancy says, “Today, if something like a ‘philosophy of nature’ is possible in a new way, it is as a philosophy of confines. We are at the confines of a multi-directional, plurilocal, reticulated, spacious space in which we take place. We do not occupy the originary point of a perspective, or the overhanging point of an axonometry, but we touch our limits on all sides...”⁷² Mouré, like Nancy, positions the speaker of “document 29 (French thinking)” within a multi-directional spaciousness in which she *takes place*. This “taking place” is meant both in terms of *experience*—that is, the manner in which the speaker “comes” into experience as she continuously touches her limits on all sides through a necessary exposure to them—as well as in terms of actually *taking up space*. It is due to this process of “touching the limits on all sides” that the subject is never at risk of engaging in a dualistic system. “While alive” we exist in a continual state of exposure and thus can never “completely close ourselves off.”⁷³ Mouré reminds us of this: “Not ‘dualistic’ but ‘mesial’” she says.⁷⁴ The word “mesial,” which denotes a location toward the centre of a body, complicates the “philosophy of confines” in that it requires us to imagine the experience of touching at the “confines” as one that takes place from a “mesial” position—that is, from an “interior” rather than from an “exterior” limit of any kind. Although the body may indeed “touch (the) limits on all sides,” it can never *exist at that limit*. Think again of “document 7 (outside)”: “if the trait falls *outside* of the body or bodies of both, what is ‘inside?’”⁷⁵ This question is repeated frequently and variously throughout Mouré’s poetry. “What is ‘inside?’” We may think of the text that crosses the border by which it is circumscribed in “Twentieth Century Festering of the Harms,”⁷⁶ of the superimposition of an elongated rectangle over the text of “Fifteenth Calumny at the Heart of Harms,”⁷⁷ of the interruption of the text of “document 21 (a chuva no peito)” with an illustration of a set of lungs,⁷⁸ of the text that has been written and crossed out “Sweet catalpa, Frederico” over and over again in “My Volition’s Faint Trill”⁷⁹—and this is only a scattering of examples of the ways this question of “interiority” and “exteriority” is enacted spatially (“takes place”) within the text. We may think also of the last two lines of “document 29 (French thinking)”: “(add pp.120-1 Nancy here)” is followed by a note at the bottom of the page that reads: “This piece ends with a list of email addresses of friends in Chile and Spain.”⁸⁰

What lies inside and outside of the poem? Does including a reference to a text that is absent constitute its inclusion? Is the gesture, the idea of the inclusion, enough to constitute its having “taken place”? If so, is it a different sort of place that is then taken up? As Moyes reminds us, “Concepts such as ‘zones that can overlap’ [Mouré 62] or the citizen as border or permeable seam [Mouré 42] are helpful in thinking about global citizenship but they do not address the complexity of global power relations or the history of colonialism that subtends modernity.”⁸¹ Mouré’s *ciudadán* (the Catalan translation for “citizen”) has “nothing to do with country or origin,” and “stands in time as the person stands in space...”⁸² In this way Mouré clearly distinguishes not only between the “person” and the “ciudadán,” but also between time and space. The *ciudadán* is depicted as primarily fictive—or at least seen to exist *outside* of the text and as though in a different genre (as “email addresses” are to poetry, the “ciudadán” is to the “person”: *functional*, but at the same time almost imaginary). The fact that this fictive, intangible body is described as existing in *time*, while the “person,” who is our touchstone, our consistent guide through the territory of these poems, exists in *space*, establishes “space” as solid and to some degree measurable, whereas “time,” like the *ciudadán*, remains immeasurable, intangible. The *ciudadán* exists not in corporeal form, but, as the speaker in “document 1” suggests, as “a prosthetic gesture (across ‘languages’).”⁸³ In “document 36 (hermao)” we see: “Citizenship as enactment =to cross a border,” and thereby understand the multiple implications of this possible “border crossing.”⁸⁴ If the *ciudadán* is not embodied but “prosthetic,” it

is still, and necessarily, controlled by the body. It is also able to “enact” the desires of the body—desires the body itself would be unable to enact. It offers an extension, a link between the body proper and that which the body proper is unable to “touch” or “manipulate” without aid. As Nancy says: “The citizen is, first of all, *one, someone, everyone*, while the subject is, first of all self...The citizenship comprises numerous unicities, subjecthood comprises an identificatory unity.”⁸⁵ Mouré’s *ciudadán* is likewise “*one, someone, everyone*,” it resists unicity, it “crosses boundaries” (albeit prosthetically), it “touches” worlds that would not otherwise be touched. By establishing a space in which to think the *ciudadán* “beside” and against linear-temporal models of origin and history, Mouré once again moves “beyond the appropriation of signifiers” into the possible “opening” of a concept far too often understood in fixed, reductive terms that “fail to notice and read the movement of paradox.”⁸⁶

If there is a desire to communicate “across languages” within *O Ciudadán*, I would argue that the language divide is not between French or English, Spanish or Galician, but between the language of the “subject” and the language of the “citizen.” This conflict is seen clearly in “Eleventh Impermeable of the Carthage of Harms,” where not only the tension between subject and citizen is felt, but also the tension between minority and majority culture and language: “I who have made myself strange in the arena of county and, here, come to/ Québec where I bear a strange tongue (yet hegemonic), allowed to be foreign.”⁸⁷ This relationship to self and culture, which is described as an experience of “foreignness” from a hegemonic position, emphasizes again the fact that “sometimes only the ‘overlap’ makes borders of a zone visible. The situation is not unlike that of the self to the world, where the self (the ‘subject’) exists in a state of (hegemonic) ‘identificatory unity’”⁸⁸ and “(makes itself) strange”⁸⁹ at the moment that it “touches” the world and itself. Mouré establishes a dialogue between the “citizen” and “subject,” which directs the reader to read, in “excess” of this dialogue, to a larger dialogue between notions of time and space. The work is not so much illustrative of a process of “becoming” in Deleuze and Guattari’s temporal sense of the term, as it is a process of “existing” in Nancy’s spatial sense. He explains: “The *there is* is signed or signs (itself)...This signature is indissociable from a being-*there*, that is to say, a being-*here*...being a ‘fragment’ of a world whose matter is the very fraying [frayage] or fractality of fragments, places, and taking place...This is what we mean by existing. Unhiding [expeausition]: signature along the surface of the hide, the hide of being. Existence tans its own hide.”⁹⁰ Nancy’s play on the word “exposition” by incorporating the word *peau*, “skin,” further accents the importance of the spatial and physical aspect of sense and of existence. This overlay of concepts—as well as the use of words within words—demonstrates the necessary “overlap” of experience that “makes the borders of a zone visible” and also “touchable”—an overlap which Mouré works to enact within *O Ciudadán*.⁹¹ “Existence tans its own hide,” writes Nancy, with these words brilliantly elucidating the concept of the self that necessarily “touches” upon itself through its very exposure to, therefore experience of, the world—thereby simultaneously being both created from, and in resistance to, its surroundings. The “subject” is necessarily then the “citizen” (there is no way to “close off” from that role) just as the “citizen” is the “subject,”⁹² and the city itself “has no identity other than the space in which citizens cross each other’s paths.”⁹³ This space of continual movement and intersection is precisely the space of Mouré’s *O Ciudadán*, in which she establishes for the reader a “contact zone” where not just disparate languages and cultures, but our disparate *experiences* of language and culture, our disparate “comings” into language and into culture both as “subjects” and “citizens,” are able to intersect and—in the places where they “overlap”—be made visible, be “touched.”

In her essay, “Barbarism,” Lyn Hejinian reflects upon Adorno’s oft-quoted pronouncement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism,”⁹⁴ reminding us that—as always—it is within our power to interpret and re-interpret; to create our own meanings, to *open* possibility, to *enact* our own world. Adorno’s statement is “true,” writes Hejinian, in the sense that, indeed, “what

happened at “Auschwitz” (taken both literally and metonymically, standing for itself, for the other death camps, and also for what has occurred at numerous other atrocity sites throughout this century) is (and must remain) incomprehensible (literally unthinkable) and therefore, in the most vicious way, “meaningless.”⁹⁵ But it is also true, and can be interpreted, in another sense: not as a “condemnation” of the writing of poetry “after Auschwitz” but instead as “a challenge and a behest to do so.” “The word ‘barbarism,’” Hejinian reminds us, “as it comes to us from the Greek *barbaros*, means ‘foreign’—that is, ‘not speaking the same language’ (barbarous being an onomatopoeic imitation of babbling)—and such is precisely the task of poetry: not to speak the same language as Auschwitz. Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities.”⁹⁶

Mouré’s text rises to Hejinian’s challenge. She writes in a border landscape, which, “like a dream landscape ... is unstable and perpetually incomplete” but which is also—and precisely because of its instability, its constant state of “doubt and encounter”—capable of “unleash(ing)” new possibilities for imagining our communities.⁹⁷ “Poetry,” Mouré reminds us, “is a limitless genre. Its borders are only in ourselves and we can move them, in our lifetimes, if we dare to.”⁹⁸

Notes

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- ¹ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 326.
- ² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, translated by Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 61.
- ³ Erin Mouré, *My Beloved Wager* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2009), 164.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* 61.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* 168.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* 168.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* 168-69.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* 163.
- ⁹ Erin Mouré, *O Ciudadán* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2002), 75.
- ¹⁰ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 61.
- ¹¹ Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone" *Profession 91* (New York: MLA 1991): 38.
- ¹² *Ibid.* 43.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 43.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 43.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 37.
- ¹⁶ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 61.
- ¹⁷ Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 37.
- ¹⁸ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 3.
- ¹⁹ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 11.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²² Quoted in Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 9.
- ²³ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 168.
- ²⁴ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 63.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ²⁶ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 11.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ²⁹ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 13.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ³² Todd May, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997), 29.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- ³⁴ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 135.
- ³⁵ Quoted in Susan Rudy "what can atmospheres with/vocabularies delight?": Excessively Reading Erin Mouré," In *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957-2003)*, edited by Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 205-216.
- ³⁶ Rudy, "what can atmospheres with/vocabularies delight?": Excessively Reading Erin Mouré", 205.
- ³⁷ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 166.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* 166.
- ³⁹ Lianne Moyes. "Questioning Cosmopolitanism: Erin Mouré's *O Ciudadán*." University of Guelph and Simon Fraser University. <http://www.transcanadas.ca/transcanada1/moyes.shtml>. 8.
- ⁴⁰ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 18.
- ⁴¹ Rudy, "what can atmospheres with/vocabularies delight?": Excessively Reading Erin Mouré", 208.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 206.
- ⁴³ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 2009, 164.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.
- ⁴⁵ Moyes, "Questioning Cosmopolitanism: Erin Mouré's *O Ciudadán*", 2.
- ⁴⁶ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 13.
- ⁴⁷ Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing* (Peru, Illinois: Open Court, 2007), 116.
- ⁴⁸ Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 38.

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- ⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xvii.
- ⁵² Deleuze, *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, 22.
- ⁵³ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 63.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁵⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 416.
- ⁵⁶ Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 43.
- ⁵⁷ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 21.
- ⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, translated by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 114.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ⁶⁰ Quoted in Derrida *On Touching*, 115.
- ⁶¹ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 19.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 20.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁶⁶ Derrida *On Touching*, 115.
- ⁶⁷ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 75.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁶⁹ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 40.
- ⁷⁰ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 75.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁷² Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 40.
- ⁷³ May, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze*, 29.
- ⁷⁴ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 75.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁸¹ Moyes, "Questioning Cosmopolitanism: Erin Mouré's *O Ciudadán*," 10.
- ⁸² Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 9.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ⁸⁵ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 104.
- ⁸⁶ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 164.
- ⁸⁷ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 82.
- ⁸⁸ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 104.
- ⁸⁹ Mouré, *O Ciudadán*, 82.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁹² Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 106.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ⁹⁴ Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry*, 325.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.
- ⁹⁸ Mouré, *My Beloved Wager*, 18.

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