'Let's Do a Gertrude Stein on It'
Caroline Bergvall and Iterative Poetics

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ABSTRACT

Caroline Bergvall's practice addresses what I call the *iterative* turn in contemporary culture. This turn encompasses poets' use of pre-existing material and theorists' treatment of gender, culture, and text as constituted by repeated acts. Bergvall extends Stein's iterative writing into other forms of iteration, including performance; translation; presentations in multiple media or versions; archival, serial and conceptual forms; and, the rewriting of historical texts. By placing bodily gesture at the intersection of multiple linguistic and technological mediations, Bergvall offers an alternative to existing iterative theories – one that recognizes not just the infinite possibilities of iteration but also each singularly embodied instantiation.

KEYWORDS

British poetry • contemporary art • embodiment • French poetry • multimedia • Norwegian poetry • performance • poetics • repetition • translation

This article began as a talk at the Cross-Genre Festival held at Greenwich University in London in July 2010, in which Caroline Bergvall herself participated. The occasion contributed to my consciousness of the need to address questions of embodiment: I began with the problem of how to speak about Bergvall after having seen and listened to her perform in the flesh. This not only marked my own trepidation at talking about a writer and artist who speaks so eloquently through and about her own work but also raised the more general problem of how to relate theory, concept, and system to embodied instantiation.

Bergvall's foregrounding of the body offers a novel approach to this problem, which is central to a set of developments in poetry and literary

and cultural theory that I term *iterative poetics*. I use the term *iterative poetics* to describe the trend towards the use of pre-existing material in poetry, and the tendency in a broad range of feminist, cultural, and literary theory to treat gender, text, and culture not as original or derivative but as the product of repeated acts. Forms of iterative poetics appear in early twentieth-century avant-garde poetry (Holbrook, 1999: 752) and the iterative practices of contemporary poetry, including sampling (McHale, 2004: 254–56), performance, versioning (Sherwood, 2006), plagiarism (e.g. Johnson, 2009), copying (Goldsmith, 2002–3; Perloff, 2010), translation (Perloff, 2010: 123–45; Spahr, 2004), and reiterations across multiple media (Perloff, 2006). Iterative models of identity have emerged over the last century partly in response to the challenges to individuality, agency, authority, cultural identity, and difference posed by new technologies of reproducibility and globalization, from Gertrude Stein's emphasis on entity over identity (see Perelman, 1994: 154), to Derrida's, Butler's, and Bhabha's emphasis on identity as produced through repeated but alterable performances; and Bakhtin's understanding of the possibilities for the 're-accentuation' of existing discursive material, given the historically contingent and individually embodied relation of speech acts to systems of discourse (Bakhtin, 1981: 419–22; Bakhtin, 1986: 80; Bakhtin, 1994: 143; Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1993; Derrida, 1988).

Iterative poetics represents not just a theoretical framework for understanding Bergvall's work but an approach that, as her work emphasizes, unsettles the very relation of theory to practice, concept to insanitation, language to flesh. Bergvall deploys iteration as a practice involving writing, performance, translation, archiving, and conceptual structure from early works such as *Strange Passage* (1993) to more recent and widely discussed pieces such as 'Via', 'About Face' (2005: 63–71, 31–47), and her most recent major project that includes *Middling English* (2010) and *Meddle English* (2011). Like other practitioners of iterative poetics, Bergvall uses iterative strategies to stage the relationship between individual, embodied instantiation and system: between original and copy, variation, translation, adaptation. Yet she does so in a way that emphasizes the embodied gesture of each instantiation or performance, of each pronounced word – its physical presence in the mouth – as much as its place in a system of signification. This has led critics to stress either her systematic repetitions (Goldstein, 2009; Reed, 2007) or the embodied instantiations and materiality of her work (Brown, 2009; Kaplan, 2009). More than just oscillating between *langue* and *parole*, system and object or body, however, Bergvall's practice highlights the individual physically embodied and historically located moments where the two sides of these dichotomies meet. What is at stake in Bergvall's work is the notion of the 'heart' (a word that recurs frequently in her work; e.g. 2000a, 2001a) of

the matter, of location, of agency, of the body, which cannot be imagined outside a discursive system but likewise can never be reduced to it. Bergvall emphasizes the hybridity and interlingual encounter produced by globalization and the 'intense mediatization' of new technologies as a bulwark against monolingual, monocultural hegemony. But she also insists on the equally important place of what she calls the 'untranslatable hiatus of identity' (Bergvall and Allsopp, 2002: 2). Hence systematic structure and mediation are inseparable from embodied instantiation.

Bergvall's practice underscores that 'the experience of recombination can itself produce kinesthetic knowledge; the subject not only recombines existing elements of programs (enunciative positions) but also experiences the elements of these programs on the order of movement' (Noland, 2009: 184). That is, for Bergvall, the unique instantiation of various vectors of iteration always takes place in and through the body: it is gestural – oral, aural, performed. Her gestural approach suggests a more satisfactory notion of agency than the emphasis on iterability as producing gender and identity in Butler and in the models Butler employs from Derrida and Foucault. In these models, innovative and dispersed subjectivity appears only in the system of discursive formation (Foucault, 2002) or language (Derrida, 1988), begging the question of where agency can be located (Noland, 2009: 190). Bergvall offers an embodied, gestural alternative to models of purely discursive or linguistic iteration. She locates agency not just in the slippages of the sign within a system of language or convention but also in the moment where multiple systems meet in embodied gestural acts. Bergvall investigates various forms of iteration and gesture in writing and performance, especially through the gestural physicality of speech. Through her iterative practice, Bergvall reveals the systems of clichés and conventions, from dolls to pornography to pronunciations, from English to French, writing to performance, that govern our social lives but also the physical particularity of the body as a locus of individual agency and resistance at the intersection of these systems.

Bergvall builds on earlier examples of iterative writing including perhaps most notably Stein's iterative practice and conception of iteration not as repetition but as always unique 'insistence' (Stein, 1998: 288; on Stein's influence on Bergvall, see also Reed, 2007). Bergvall has repeatedly acknowledged her debt to Stein. In her talk and essay on 'Performance Writing', she explicitly does 'a Gertrude Stein' on the concept at hand, adopting an insistent iterative approach that takes place through an encounter between writing and performance:

what is Performance Writing not?

Is Performance Writing not writing?

Is it writing which performs not writes?

Is it not performance which writes?

But then does writing not perform?

And when does writing not perform? And what kind of not performance are we talking about? Is it not performance to write or is it not writing to not perform? (Bergvall, 1996)

For Bergvall, these interrogative iterations do not 'stabilise any answer particularly but […] hopefully guarantee that it doesn't get looped into itself prior to the question being fully asked'. Iteration becomes a way to avoid repetition and homogenization. It functions as insistence, transformation, a demonstration of how a system that seems to entrap might be a source of endless permutation and so difference.

Bergvall frequently employs such formal structures of Steinian repetition and variation—as in 'More Pets':

a more—cat

a more—dog dog

a more—horse

a more—rat (Bergvall, 2005: 86)

The Steinian emphasis on comparison and distinction is developed as the piece proceeds: 'a less—hair—less—horse—more rat canary' (Bergvall, 2005: 87). The structure performs a similar non-defining definition to Bergvall's comments on performance writing. But Bergvall also here extends iteration into performance and translation. Performed, 'a more' sounds like 'and more' and so could be assimilated into a more conventional text but it also suggests one of Bergvall's characteristic interlingual shifts to French, to 'amour'.

As her introduction to the poem in *Fig* (Bergvall, 2005: 84–85) makes clear, 'More Pets', in the version I have just quoted, is just one of a number of iterations, produced over several years and including page-based versions, performances, and recordings with and without accompanying music. The work also stresses iteration through translation: 'a more' not only hints at a pun with the French near homophone 'amour' but is also translated into French as 'a plus'. Space here is critical, especially when the iterations are read for their intersections: the words 'a more' create a column of vertical repetition which then intersects with the various horizontally extending lines. The version 'More Pets Less Girls' emphasizes entrapping vertical lines: 'drawing a line at being a girl | being / like a girl | being like a girl being / a girl'. These vertical bars contrast with the dashes of 'More Pets' through which escape, not enclosure, is stressed:

'dash runs for it'. Bergvall (2005: 84) emphasizes, however, that those dashing away can also become 'meat eyed-up by scavengers'. Here the material word is also threatening: the dashes on the page become like the 'girl' who is trapped in a conventional identity, the object of a consuming male gaze. The 'girl' disappears entirely in 'More Pets', but the play on amour/a more – with its stuttering, gasping 'a' and repeated, moan-like 'more' – produces a similarly sexualized objectification. This is further emphasized by the driving rhythm of the version Bergvall produced in collaboration with DJ/Rupture and Matt Shadetek (2009).

Bergvall expands Steinian iteration into performance and translation in many of her works. Staging the encounter between multiple iterative systems, she stresses the embodied instance of encounter and, as in 'Ambient Fish', the ambivalent form such embodiment takes:

Ambient fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth	will choke your troubles away
Ambient fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth	will choke your troubles away
Ambient fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth	will choke your troubles away
Ambient fish fuck flowers bloom in your mouth	will shock your double away
Ambient fish fuck flowers loom in your mouth	will soak your dwelling away
Alien fish fuck fodder loose in your ouch	suck rubble along the way

(Bergvall, 2011: 116–17)

'Ambient Fish' underscores the embodied position of the performer and iteration as embodied performance. Not only are the strange 'Ambient fish fuckflowers [. . .] in your mouth', but in saying these lines I allow my mouth to be taken over by those words, even as my New Zealand vowels inflect them differently. The rose is made red again not simply – as in Stein – through insistence but because the words I read become the red of my mouth, language becomes tongue in a troubling textual/sexual enmeshment. The word made flesh 'bloom[s] in your mouth'.

As in Stein's early portraits, Bergvall highlights variation through repetition so that small differences become perceptible. In Bergvall's practice, such variations also serve to highlight the uniqueness of each performance or instantiation of the text. The iterations of writing extend into the iterations of variations: each live or recorded performance, print or online publication constitutes another version. Like most of

Bergvall's pieces, 'Ambient Fish' exists in multiple versions including in *Goan Atom 1*: *Doll* (2001a) and *Meddle English* (2011), in an online version on the Electronic Poetry Centre website (1999), in an audio version in *Frequency Audio Journal* (2004) and in another Rockdrill audio version, and in various live performances. These shifts between media here add another vector to the intersections at play and so stress the embodied, 'media specific' (Hayles, 2004) instantiation of each version.

These multiple versions highlight how the repetition and variation structure of the piece, which riffs on a single refrain, extends beyond any single version. The structure allows for variation or reordering in performance, so that the work becomes a potentially infinitely expandable iterative text. Instead of the two verses in each individual performance, the three versions, when read together, give us a larger text of six versions, or variations on a theme. The *Frequency Audio Journal* version, for instance, includes the line 'bloom in your door', which does not appear in the printed versions in *Goan Atom 1* and *Meddle English*. Also, 'a door a door' is followed by 'bloom in your mouth' rather than the 'fuckflowers' in the print versions. 'Seal' begins two lines in each verse replacing the 'phoque' of the printed version.

These repetitions and variations stress the singularity of each embodied instantiation at the intersection of multiple vectors of iteration, what Bergvall (2011: 5) elsewhere calls 'a series of intersecting lines or tissues of lines'. Where these lines meet, there is always meat, flesh, 'tissues'. The replacement of 'bloom in your mouth' with 'fuckflowers' equates the two so highlighting the conflation of the verbal, oral, and sexual in the poem. The encounter between languages stresses structures of entrapping repetition and embodied instantiation, not dialectically (there is no resolution) but in a simultaneous emptying out and assertion of embodiment: opening and closure. Orifices and openings are emphasized by 'mouth', 'bouche' – with its suggestion of the English 'bush' and so, in the sexualized context of the poem, pubic hair – but they are also 'seal[ed]', closed off. 'In the mouth' also means in the mouth of the performer-author Bergvall: voice and identity are asserted in the reliance on the particularities of her accent in moving between French and English and of her lesbian identity. Yet they are also erased through the depersonalizing come-on clichés of body objectification, as elsewhere in Bergvall's *Doll* (2001a) – of which 'Ambient Fish' is a part – and as stressed in the online version of 'Ambient Fish' by the breast-shaped green button that one must click to read, watch, and listen to the poem (Bergvall, 1999).

As the variation between 'phoque' and 'seal' suggests, 'Ambient Fish' not only deploys iteration in writing and performances, but also, like much of Bergvall's work, stresses translation as another critical form of itera-

tion that moves between embodied instantiation and system. The piece oscillates between the predominant English words and various French substitutions including 'oubli' ('forgotten'), which replaces 'troubles' and 'double', and 'touche' doubled with 'touch'. The closeness between these pairs of words (marked by the similar – but not identical – way the tongue touches the mouth to enunciate each word) suggests the touch of embodied encounter, further extending Bergvall's embodied iterative practice from writing and performance to translation. Here embodied performance takes place in the encounters between multiple iterative systems. The iteration of 'mouth' as 'bouche' suggests the interplay between the physical instantiation in performance and the interpersonal system of language in which the mouth partakes in speech. The encounter between the two takes place in the translations between French and English. The physicality of embodied speech 'in your mouth' is at once distanced – this is not a mouth qua mouth but merely an arbitrary signifier that changes from one language to another – and accentuated – the mouth of the author/performer has a particular relation to French and English and so her mouth and pronunciation are distinctively suited to the interplay between the two languages, between the two mouths. The pun on the English 'bush' that comes through this interplay produces an even more bodily, sexualized image: the pun's amalgam of sexual organs and mouth instantiates the line 'fuckflowers bloom in your mouth'. Bergvall presents identity neither as unmediated nor as locatable only in the slippages between language, in the play of signifiers. Rather than just playing lip service to identity, identity really is all in the lips, in the mouth, and in the body – in the embodied performance, translation, instantiation, insistence that takes place at the intersection of multiple, repeating systems.

Bergvall's work repeatedly highlights the embodied process of reading as physically consuming words in the mouth/bouche/bush. Words are made flesh, like the words in Bergvall's *Flèsh a Coeur* (2000a), a book with a fleshy pink exterior enveloping a garish yellow skin-like interior that must be literally cut open to be read. Caroline Bergvall's name encloses the names of four other writers (St. Teresa of Avila, Unica Zürn, Hannah Wiener, and Kathy Acker), whose words then constitute the inner text, the 'heart' of the book, so that the author is presented as having consumed the texts she redeploys. The word here is made flesh-like, yet it is still subject to system. Iteration highlights both. The artist physically embodies the words in taking them into her oeuvre – but also presents writing as the reproduction of words that are never just her own. Likewise, the physicality of the work is subject to systems, to restrictions, standardization. When I consulted the work in the British Library, I was told that the conservators would not cut it open to reveal its inner words because