Canadian Poetry 68

Viciousness in the Powder Room: Misogyny, Camp, and the Erotics of Gay Male Collaboration in *Phoebe 2002*

by Christopher Schmidt

"Camp is in essence tragedy" (366).—*Phoebe 2002*

"A caught woman is something the movies want to believe in" (67).
—Anne Carson

Lynn Crosbie is a writer drawn to violent collaborations. This attraction is most evident in her controversial 1997 book *Paul's Case: The Kingston Letters.* The jacket copy bills the book as an epistolary novel, but *Paul's Case* is perhaps better described as a lyric dossier, with quotations, poems, letters, and artwork apostrophizing serial killer Paul Bernardo. (With Karla Homoloka, his wife and collaborator, Bernardo sexually assaulted a number of young women, murdering three of them, before his arrest in 1993.) *Paul's Case* is not the sole instance of Crosbie's affinity for violent couplings. Her novel *Dorothy L'Amour* takes as inspiration the story of Playboy bunny Dorothy Stratten, who died at the hands of her svengali and lover, Paul Snider. And her 1997 collection *Pearl* includes a number of quasi-dramatic monologues by notorious killers such as Jack the Ripper and Kenneth Halliwell.

If Crosbie is unusually sensitive to the dangerous erotics of collaboration, how interesting, then, that she should fill her career with a remarkable number of co-authored and co-edited literary projects. In 1995 Crosbie teamed up with Michael Holmes to edit *Plush,* an anthology of gay men's poetry that includes American writers Jeffery Conway and David Trinidad, and Canadian poets Courtney McFarlane, Sky Gilbert, and R.M. Vaughan (with whom Crosbie would later collaborate in the anthology *Geeks, Misfits, and Outlaws*). In 2000 Crosbie joined Conway and Trinidad to co-write a chapbook-length poem, *Chain Chain Chain,* written in the style of

Japanese Renga. But Crosbie's yen for collaboration may have reached its fulfillment in *Phoebe 2002*, a 615-page "Essay in Verse," written by Crosbie, Conway, and Trinidad. *Phoebe*, as I'll subsequently refer to the poem, begins as an erudite and scholarly exegesis of the film *All About Eve* and metamorphoses into a confessional, self-referential mock-epic. Not unlike William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, *Phoebe* is an elaborate structure that holds many disparate texts in suspension: individual lyrics, letters from the authors and their correspondents, and myriad cultural digressions. Unlike its Modernist forebears, *Phoebe* is a monument not of seriousness, but of camp. True to that sensibility, it records its makers' cultural fixations, both high (Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton) and low (*Valley of the Dolls, Showgirls*)[1]—a list united by its preoccupation with, in Conway's words, "these excessive women we instinctively identify with as gay men" (459).

The identificatory violence of that "we"—where Conway's statement positions the female, putatively heterosexual Crosbie—is the subject of this essay. Collaborations, as Crosbie herself has suggested, are often marked by power struggle, violent break, and erotic charge. *Phoebe* is no exception. Near the end of the poem, Conway, Crosbie, and Trinidad devote a lengthy, bilious section attacking careerist poets. But it is the subtle internal agon *between* the poets to bring *Phoebe* to fruition that is perhaps the more interesting and revealing drama of the poem. In this metanarrative, Crosbie becomes increasingly alienated from the poem's composition as Conway and Trinidad grow more dominant, more prolific, and closer both in sensibility and geography, often composing their lines together. Two is company, three is a crowd. In this essay I will argue that Conway and Trinidad's increasing compositional intimacy betrays a suppressed erotic interest, consonant with Bette London's observation that "the eroticization of the writing process would seem to be one of literary collaborations' most consistent legacies" (72).[2] London's work, like my own here, follows Wayne Koestenbaum's bold position, in *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration*, that literary collaborations between men figure the text as a metaphoric "child" the collaborator's union would otherwise be unable to produce; the poem mediates and focuses the male authors' erotic tension. In this paper I will contend that Crosbie herself, in addition to the female-coded text of *Phoebe*, facilitates and lends a platonic pretense to Conway and Trinidad's collaborative-cum-erotic energies.

Complicating the implicit misogyny of the theoretical schema I outline above is Crosbie's all-but-declared attraction to the dangerous crosscur-

rents that energize gay male collaboration. Eerily proleptic of the problems dramatized in *Phoebe* is "Nine Hammer Blows," Crosbie's early dramatic monologue on the relationship between lovers Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell. I want to linger for a moment on "Nine Hammer Blows," as it offers a kind of lyric rosetta stone of Crosbie's later literary concerns: the fascination with the dynamics of homosexual desire,[3] and an ambivalence about the conflicts that often mar collaboration. Crosbie prefaces "Nine Hammer Blows"—the poem's title refers to Halliwell's method of murdering Orton—with epigraphs from Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell that seem almost to address the figures in Crosbie's poem: "John, we used the language as if we made it" (6), writes Lowell. (John was Orton's given name.) Crosbie gives voice to Halliwell's grievances in long doubled-up lines that echo Sylvia Plath in their gothic lyricism. For example, "I… pause at the spiked-black entrance gate, / drawing its points across my throat" (6) recalls the black-spiked gorse of Plath's "The Rabbit-Catcher." Throughout, "Nine Hammer Blows" thrills with the remarkable vividness Crosbie brings to the foreign territory of homosexual desire. The following passage, drawn the poem's middle, arrestingly conflates the literary and erotic:

> I was the first
>
> to explain tragedy to him (*not wisely but too well*), to lubricate
> my fingers and
> open him, tenderly easing the petals of the rosette, my tongue in his
> urethra, a taste of honey
>
> much sweeter than wine, music, slipping between our single beds to kiss
> and the slow sedative
> caress. The poppy is the first bloom I place on the walls, radiant, it
> pollinates the field
>
> I attend with my paste and scissors. I do not have his facility with
> words, the orderly entries, dated,
> detailed. The scent of cherry, urinal stones, the cup of a stranger's hand
> on his balls,
>
> my orchids. (7)

The sexualized flower imagery reflects the hothouse intensity of Halliwell's affair with Orton, before the younger man's success stole him from the couple's hermetic coexistence (Lahr 7-8). The lingual phonemes in the

passage above (wise**l**y, we**ll**, **l**ubricate, wa**ll**s, po**ll**inate, fie**l**d) emphasize a sensuality that is slowly transformed by insinuating sibilants (**s**weeter, **s**ingle, **s**lipping, **s**ingle bed**s**, ki**ss**, **s**low, **s**edative care**ss**). This hissing adds an ominous note to Halliwell's desire, as if an asp lay in wait at the foot of his bed. Also of interest is the movement from floral imagery as a metaphor for sexuality (rosette/anus; honeyed-stamen/urethra; orchids/testicles) to the flower as simply the flat image of collage (Halliwell's chosen artistic medium in the wake of Orton's writing success)—an art of juxtaposition and metonymy.

"Nine Hammer Blows" shows Crosbie keenly alert to how artistic agon between men can carry both erotic charge and poisonous consequence. Perhaps most fascinating is what Crosbie does *not* include, namely, any mention of Halliwell and Orton's artistic collaborations. It's an odd and telling omission. In the first decade of their acquaintance, Halliwell and Orton wrote several novels together that failed to attract a publisher (Lahr 103-112).[4] Yet one collaboration did garner the couple an undesirable degree of fame: a brilliant and doomed caper as vigilante book artists. Orton and Halliwell stole public library books, which they defaced with humorous collages, then returned to the library in hopes of scandalizing unsuspecting patrons. The couple was finally caught, sentenced to six months in jail, and forced to pay severe fines that left them in dire poverty (Lahr 89-90). Considering Crosbie's decision to elide mention of the couple's coauthored works, it is all the more intriguing that she should herself make a collaborative gesture in the composition of "Nine Hammer Blows." To illustrate Halliwell's preference for his and Orton's relationship prior to Orton's breakaway success, Crosbie includes a quote— "*sometimes I love poverty*" (7)—that she reveals, in the book's endnotes, to be excerpted from a letter by Conway. The phrase is not exceptionally eloquent or insightful; its presence seems intended only to pull Conway into the poem. Since "Nine Hammer Blows" already bristles with the energy of Crosbie's own mining of Halliwell, her insertion of Conway—a gay man, a fellow writer, and a future collaborator—adds another level of complexity. Crosbie and Conway become, like Halliwell and Orton, literary partners in crime, dangerous in their transgressive identifications. The real question that Crosbie's gesture raises—a question that animates the poets' later collaboration, *Phoebe*—is which collaborator does Crosbie see as Orton, and which as Halliwell? Whose writerly imagination dominates? And who is merely the tagalong collaborator?

Phoebe begins decorously, with injunctions to the muse and a scene-by-scene explication of its putative subject, *All About Eve*. But the poem,

which the poets concede has strong resemblances to the mock-epic (like the "Essay in Verse," a Popean genre), grows baggier and more monstrous with each page. The strict Renga-style tercets of book one loosen to include a dazzling array of individual poetic forms: sonnets, calligrams, ottava rima. Finally in book 13 (there are 16 books, the last three longer than the previous 12 combined), the poets drop any pretense of a single, unitary narrative voice and emerge from behind their composition curtain: "The whole thing is breaking down, it's barely about the movie now, it's confessional and stalled, and I hope it's not boring," writes Conway (540). Immediately gained by the cleavage of the unitary voice is insight into the poets' identification with the characters of *All About Eve.* The movie examines the Oedipal dynamics of three women—Margo Channing (Bette Davis), Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter), and Karen Richards (Celeste Holm)—as they face the specters of competition, age, and sexual obsolescence in their pursuits of success. The poets connect the film to their own lives by projecting Eve's much-vilified ambition onto a number of unnamed—though often identifiable—persons in the poetry world:

> D. just called. He got a harrowing message on his machine by an Eve, [name blacked out], that he wanted to play for me. ALSO—said "poet" from above story (one who was interested/not interested in this job) called D. twice to demand: 1st message—"I want to be in *The Paris Review,* can you give me the name of somebody to send poems to?" 2nd: "I want to be in *The New Yorker*—how do I go about it?" Can you believe? D. didn't respond. (498, brackets in original)

What was, at the beginning of the poem, an unspoken identification between the poets and the characters in *All About Eve* becomes, by the poem's end, its very subject. Yet it remains unclear is whether the poets' adoption of *All About Eve*'s narrative as their own is a staged performance, a kind of camp masquerade—*I'm Margo, you're Karen*—or a more complex performativity, by which the poets realize themselves through the most resonant models available to them: the Hollywood stories and myths of these emotionally excessive star icons.

The spectacular, profligate female, both reviled and celebrated, is a familiar topos of camp aesthetics. "Camp entails an excess of consumption, a wasted production that is literalized by/on female bodies," writes Carol Flinn (443). But *Phoebe* problematizes the critical commonplaces about camp and misogyny in a few important ways. The first is generic: that the poem smuggles into what has traditionally been regarded as the "highest" cultural forum—poetry—the "low" subject matter of movies and

pop-cultural trivia, tells us something about poetry's increasingly marginal position in literary culture. If, according to Andrew Ross, camp occurs when "when the products…of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to produce and dominate cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste" (312), then in *Phoebe*, poetry itself becomes a camp locus. Second, the participation of a woman collaborator complicates the conception of camp as misogynist. (Feminists may wonder of Crosbie's involvement in this project if Crosbie is still one of "us," or if she, like French women who bedded Nazis during the occupation, is a *collaborator*?) Finally, I will argue that Crosbie, positioned awkwardly between two gay male collaborators, serves a similar function as *Phoebe*'s camp icons: she mediates their desire.

It is a critical commonplace that camp often appears to harbor malevolence towards women; gay men are "parasites" who suck the life out of the glamorous females who obsess them. The involvement of Crosbie, a self-identified straight woman, in *Phoebe* would seem to complicate these charges without ultimately disarming them. On the one hand, Crosbie's multiple and promiscuous collaborations with homosexual men have produced a body of work that participates in the camp sensibility without the (sole) authorship of gay men. Crosbie's participation makes less tenable the minoritizing assumption in, say, Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" that camp sensibility is commensurate with the homosexual gaze. In addressing these challenges, *Phoebe* in some cases calls into question the very boundaries of gender and sexuality. "Lynn, FYI, D. and I decided a long time ago that you are an honorary gay man" (459), writes Conway. The statement indicates the permeability of gender even as it insists on the continued importance of the categories (to say nothing of who adjudicates them—notice that it is Conway and Trinidad who decide that Crosbie qualifies as gay).

The *Phoebe* poets embrace the feminine in their identifications with American studio-era stars like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, but also, importantly, in their initial erasure of their individual voices—the male poets' willingness to write under a female signature. It's a kind of bastardized *écriture féminine* that other readers have identified in *Phoebe*. Poet Susan Wheeler, an early reader of the book, notes in a letter to Trinidad (about lines that are later identified as Conway's):

> The blending of your sections is amazing—knowing your work so well I was sometimes really hard-pressed to tell if pieces were yours or not. (Is it yours

> or Lynn's line(s), "Suburban sprawl, identical malls, mass production of / Stevie Nick's shawls"?!) (324) [5]

By commingling their voices, and particularly in assuming what is initially a more "academic" than "poetic" tone—Crosbie self-identifies as a "half-baked (former) scholar" (365)—Trinidad and Conway effect a kind of literary drag, writing about women *as* women.

Yet in other ways, *Phoebe* seems to manifest the misogyny that camp artifacts are often alleged to harbor. We don't have to read against the grain to identify the following passage, part of a lengthy account of Eve Harrington's betrayal of Margo Channing, as trafficking in the rhetoric of misogyny:

> *The evil that men do*—Margo cannot remember the
>
> rest of the quotation, and grooms Bill for the words . . . .
>
> Women will—
>
> Cheat and lie, degrade and mock you, fuck your lovers,
>
> steal from you, worse,
>
> all originating in replication, dressing like you, talking like you,
>
> *studying you*.
>
> Satan leaping through Eden in the body of a toad before
>
> alighting,
>
> lucent and powerful.
>
> The sentence like pendant, corrupted at the start.
>
> It is the evil that women do,
>
> that torments Karen.
>
> —The hiss in the bower, as she comes undone. (345-46)

That the passage above is written by Crosbie makes its tone all the more disturbing, ironic, facetious. Crosbie has edited two collections of women's writing, *Click* and *The Girl Wants To*, and can hardly be deemed tone-deaf to the passage's ideological implications. Yet no matter how disingenuous, the lines alarm, even within the context of the larger poem; ripped out of context, it is easy to see how they could be construed to nefarious, misogynist uses.

Yet there exists the real possibility that the spleen the poets exhibit towards women, towards the "Eves" who by turns torment and delight them, liberates Crosbie, in way a drag performance can subvert, through parody, our patriarchal sex–gender system. As Leo Bersani has noted:

> The gay male parody of a certain femininity, which, as others have argued, may itself be an elaborate social construct, is both a way of giving vent to the hostility toward women that probably afflicts every male (and which male heterosexuals have of course expressed in infinitely nastier and more effective ways) and could paradoxically be thought of as **helping to deconstruct that image for women themselves**. A certain type of homosexual camp speaks the truth of that femininity as mindless, asexual, and hysterically bitchy, **thereby provoking,** it would seem to me, **a violently antimimetic reaction in any female spectator.** (208; emphasis added)

Crosbie's rejection of this version of femininity is evinced in book 13 when she rebels against Trinidad and Conway's lengthy powder-room disquisition, a point that I will discuss in detail below.

Other feminist, or antifeminist, implications of the project's camp impetus include the use of a woman's name as the poem's title.[6] The title *Phoebe 2002* underlines and perhaps ironizes the historically female gendering of male-authored texts; the poem is a container into which the poet injects his essence, hoping it will outlast him (e.g., Shakespeare's sonnets; Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). If texts are figured female, *Phoebe* is excessively so—in size, in its abundant materiality. The poem's length is a measure of its hubris, an ambition determined to fail, which Sontag defines as a precondition of camp:

> In Camp there is often something *démesuré* in the quality of the ambition, not only in the style of the work itself. Gaudí's lurid and beautiful buildings in Barcelona are Camp not only because of their style but because they reveal—most notably in the Cathedral of the Sagrada Familia—the ambition on the part of one man to do what it takes a generation, a whole culture to accomplish. (59)

To Robert Frost's question—what to make of a diminished thing?—Conway, Crosbie and Trinidad have responded with something akin to Norma Desmond's famous defense of grandeur in *Sunset Boulevard*: "I *am* big! It's the pictures that got small!" The monumental excess of this production is addressed with the poem itself (ironically, adding further to its bulk). Wheeler, in the same letter to Trinidad excerpted above, provides the most salient example of this tendency, a feminine anthropomorphization:

> *Phoebe* is like a hydra spawned by an alien flick. A weird, monstrous text I kept thinking was alive, gnarled by its stubby shoots ventured and then dropped. The books give it thorax, limbs, etc., or rather a leaf and a stem structure, a kind of order that conveys *organism of nature*. I love this effect, the wildness of it overgrowing but not obscuring the regular plots which make up the acreage.... An old boyfriend called my cat *le monstre*. And I really feel this way about the book/enterprise/way of being-in-the-movie/ world. Like an elaborate garden *folle*.... The experience of being inside this text...is one of being inside an amazing, living structure—with a (nearly dangerous) life of its own. (324)

This metaphoric linking of *Phoebe* with the many damaging clichés of female sexuality ("monstrous," chthonic, "alien," wild, alive, overgrown, aligned with nature, feline) is, again, more remarkable when expressed by a woman. After Wheeler's letter, which comes at the book's halfway point, the poets themselves begin to marvel at their own logorrhea. Crosbie wonders at the poem's midpoint, "I can't wait to see a hard copy of Phoebe [*sic*] now. It must be phone book size" (332). The poets subsequently camp their own loquaciousness: "[D]ear reader, a small apology, // as it was about 1600 lines ago when we begged / your patience, stated that, Calliope willing, / we'd soon be out of the powder room" (333).

Phoebe finally swells to such a degree, and with such a vast polyphony of voices, that a key intertext suggests itself: James Merrill*'s The Changing Light at Sandover*. The *Phoebe* poets acknowledge and parody this mother-text, "A CONTEMPORARY OPUS COMPARABLE AT LEAST IN LENGTH 2 PHOEBE" (402), in an appropriately camp session at the Ouija board. There a spirit named Zorba (analogue to *Sandover*'s Ephraim) "dictates" to Trinidad gratifying messages from the beyond, reproduced in capital letters, as Merrill typeset his Ouija board sessions. This message from Anne Sexton to Crosbie is typical of the passage: "U WILL PREVAIL NEVER DOUBT THAT YR WORK WILL BE READ AND APPRECIATED BY MULTITUDES TEENAGE GIRLS HOMOSEXUALS TATTOOED LOVE BOYS AND OTHERS MANY OTHERS" (402). In a

poem full of delicious camp set pieces, the Ouija board passage distinguishes itself as the most hilarious and biting:

> DAVID YR OUIJA BOARD IS LOUSY WITH POETS THEY R GIVING PLANCHETTE A WORKOUT THEY R RISING FROM THEIR BLACK FATHOMS 2 QUOTE SYLVIA PLATH…E BISHOP HAS A MESSAGE 4 HER LITERARY ESTATE STOP PUTTING MY POEMS IN WOMENS ANTHOLOGIES" (403)

The section works so well because, like many great camp effects, it functions simultaneously as homage, parody, and critique—a critique not only of Merrill's grand ambitions, but of the arguably self-serving nature of his project. When Trinidad has Sexton, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler deliver compliments to the *Phoebe* poets from the afterlife, they are to be enjoyed as impossible wish-fulfillments, mere folly. But the masquerade pinpoints and parodies Merrill's more serious self-flattery, when, for example, he solicits opinions on his work-in-progress from canonical poets: "POPE SAYS THAT WHILE BITS / STILL WANT POLISHING THE WHOLES A RITZ / BIG AS A DIAMOND" (72). The full measure of Merrill's self-regard is felt in his dismissal of Pope's accolade: "I would rather hear / Mr Stevens on the subject" (72).

Lingering further on the similarities between *Phoebe* and *The Changing Light at Sandover* can tell us much about the nature of collaboration. The two poems were in some sense composed collaboratively but both occult, as it were, the messier implications of mutual authorship. It is indeed unusual even to speak of *Sandover* as collaborative: the poem was written by Merrill, the dazzling Parnassian; his lover, David Jackson was merely "the hand" (142), the "magic wand" (211) that attracted the spirits. Merrill transcribed the Ouija sessions and composed the poem; Jackson participated, generously offering his presence as a kind of metaphysical bait. Yet their efforts were collaborative enough to prompt Thom Gunn to describe the poem as "the most convincing description I know of a gay marriage" (157).

Their partnership, however, is marred by an inequity that goes beyond the privileges of authorship. When Ephraim and the poem's spirit guides begin to place the couple in *Sandover*'s elaborate celestial hierarchies, it is more often than not Merrill who turns out to have the spiritual and earthly advantage. Merrill will not be reincarnated, thanks to the intervention of a patron (24); yet Jackson's "previous thirty-four / Lives ended either in the cradle or / By violence, the gallows or the knife" (24), and will require three more reincarnations before he can hope to reach the level that Merrill

will achieve immediately. In terms of art-making, poetry ranks, with music, as the highest art; fiction, which Jackson wrote without much recognition, is presumably grouped among the "LESSER ARTS" (156)—I say presumably because fiction does not merit mention. Metallurgically, Merrill is defined as "unalloyed" silver, while Jackson is "A NICE MIX OF SILVER & TIN," a declaration that prompts Jackson to exclaim, "You see? There's no hope. I can't win" (142).

The authorship of *Phoebe* is more democratic, at least in design. The poets' names appear on the book cover in alphabetical order, with Conway, the least well-known of the three poets, listed first. Before the book's univocality disintegrates at the end of book 13, it is nearly impossible to say who contributes which lines—or indeed whether the lines themselves are composed together or individually. In this, we can read a sense of mutual self-sacrifice for the sake of authorial consistency. If the dissolution of this unity is a rebellion—against the tyranny of authorial composure, against literary hegemony—it is telling that Crosbie is the writer to break that bond, and does so to express failure: "Computer crashed over a week, just back now sorry for delay will try to get going soon, but am backlogged with work and stress and it's too fucking hot and on and on" (315). Just a few lines below this, Crosbie contributes a full-length missive in which she identifies herself as a feminist, as if fraternizing too long with the men had driven her to claim personal, as well as gender, independence:

> Dear David and Jeffery,
>
> I watched *Diner* last night, a film I was trained to hate after being drafted as a feminist. Loved it this time, and am thinking about its obscurantist strategies. What it does not know, does not want to know about women's lives outside of the presence of men. I then thought of our ladies, trapped in that powder room, how even we cannot bear to consider the entire sensorium there, what sounds and smells are lurking like Satan's telltale fumes in Eden. I think that's why you two wanted to stay so long, and I, like Karen, was frantic to leave. I don't think it crossed your minds. (315-16)

"Obscurantist strategies" might describe the compositional tack of *Phoebe*, at least during its first half: what the authors do not want the reader to know about which poet writes which passage. But the mystery ends the moment Crosbie realizes she's an unhappy passenger on this ride: "I…was frantic to leave. I don't think it crossed your minds." It's a diva turn worthy of Margo Channing. Fasten your seat belts.

79

Crosbie's rupture of collaborative unity amid the powder-room disquisition is a clear repudiation of Trinidad and Conway's digressions on female inner space, what they do not, cannot know of women's lives. We might read this break, following Bersani, as Crosbie's rejection of the kind of claustral roles women were once assigned: powder-room bitches to whom Crosbie has a "violently antimimetic reaction." After this crucial juncture, Crosbie's influence on the poem cleaves in two, somewhat contradictory, directions. On the one hand, the form of *Phoebe* becomes more Crosbian. As in Crosbie's novel *Paul's Case*, *Phoebe*'s sturdy structure accommodates a carnival of genres and textual play: letters, emails, lists; calligrams, ghazals, acrostics; gossip, self-exegesis. (Trinidad and Conway's previous work has been more restrained and classically lyric, at least in form.)

But while *Phoebe* grows to emulate the compositional model Crosbie evolved in her earlier work, Crosbie herself performs a disappearing act from the poem. As *Phoebe* moves through book 13 and onward, it becomes evident how scant and, indeed, marginal, are Crosbie's contributions compared to the male poets'. So rampant is Trinidad and Conway's marginalization of Crosbie, she at times must request inclusion. Before the poets finish book 13, Trinidad asks Crosbie, "Do you want me and JC to finish this book?" (330). Crosbie timidly responds: "Maybe I could have the last few lines in the powder room?" (331). But no, Trinidad has "one idea" of how to finish the scene. The poets decide that Crosbie will write "a short bit" incorporating the "Queen of the Night" aria from *The Magic Flute*—"I feel we need your voice again at the end of the scene, as JC and I have been such hogs" (331), admits Trinidad. Conway then interrupts Crosbie a mere 18 lines into her contribution, to hail, of all ironies, the muse.

In book 14, Crosbie addresses her effacement outright:

> I am afraid of our own rigidity, how easily
>
> we adapt to one role or another.
>
> I am now the terse, half-baked (former) scholar,
>
> condensing ideas into false verse when I would love to attenuate stretch out
> and multiply the way that David does, Jeffery's fearlessness also intrigues…
> (365)

I am struck by the echo, in Crosbie's wistfulness, of a passage she published seven years earlier: "I do not have his facility with / words, the

orderly entries, dated, / detailed" ("Nine Hammer Blows" 39-41). In an act of self-prophesy, Crosbie has become, like Halliwell before her, the unhappy, laconic collaborator.

Crosbie, unlike Halliwell, does not respond to her erasure with physical violence. But she does, at this point in the poem, introduce a *thematics* of violence. Crosbie often brackets her contributions with boxing-ring rhetoric, such as "Round 4" (365). And when Conway and Trinidad spin endless tales of female celebrity excess, Crosbie counterpunches with an imagined dialogue between boxers Muhammed Ali and George Foreman (378-79). Violently antimimetic indeed. Then Crosbie punctuates a masculine discourse on the crimes of Gary Gilmore and the predatory habits of cheetahs with an interpolation reflecting her own subject position as writer: "Maybe not self-effacing as much as invisible I am the footprints on the ceiling" (379). In Crosbie's literary imagination, violent rupture and dissolution of the self are close cousins, especially when proximate to male-male coupling (Foreman-Ali, Halliwell-Orton, Trinidad-Conway).

Trinidad and Conway are not sparring partners; nor do they at any point in the poem reveal themselves to be romantically linked. I contend, however, that the same dynamics that marginalize Crosbie from the text operate to bind Conway and Trinidad more tightly together, if not sexually, than at the very least in the congruity of their desiring gazes. In *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterizes the camp impulse as "the moment at which a consumer of culture makes the wild surmise, 'What if whoever made this was gay too?' What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*?… And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same 'perverse' angle?" (156). Camp is a kind of reader relation, a way for gay men to recognize and relate to each other, not necessarily in the presence of the camp object's creator, but through his (or her) signature. This absence/presence binary importantly informs the composition of *Phoebe*, as its creators are often geographically disparate and relate through their shared literary collaboration. *All About Eve,* "Bad Anne" Sexton, and the misbehaving antics of Joan, Bette, et al act as cultural cynosures fixing a *Phoebe*an sensibility. Defining themselves around camp objects is a way for the "Trilogy of Terror" (651) to organize themselves against the "Eve"s of their professional milieu.

Strong fences may make good neighbors, but the *Phoebe* poets' fences are barbed. Writes Conway: "It's odd how I've surrounded myself with people who have absolutely no interest in Poetry. I guess my Eve episodes in the Poetry world really turned me. You and D. are it. And that's the way I like it" (498). The three poets comprise a nonce-family, and in this clan

the oedipal fissures split along the congruent lines of gender and geography. Canadian, distant, female, Crosbie is often depicted as the odd woman out, the interloper, the foreign correspondent. Writes Trinidad:

> Two years ago we were writing *Chain Chain Chain.* I remember Jeffery and I working on stanzas in the country (where we are now), hysterical with laughter at 2 a.m. We were sending upside-down Bad Anne messages to Lynn: "sooq hueW 'sooq hueW." (372)

Later, Trinidad reminds Crosbie of the two yellow roses she bought her male collaborators when visiting Trinidad's apartment in New York City. Crosbie explains:

> I do remember the roses and it is odd that there are two, not three, something self-effacing there, *I have wanted to efface myself* (here I am Sivvy, wandering through New York in a daze, lunging onto David's Soho balcony with a filthy armful of my black rags, ready to rain the streets with this dark detritus also a cowgirl also like the night of the diamond, happy to be laced between such beautiful men, even though…). (378)

Roses, even platonic yellow ones, help to perfume the airs of romance. But it is the intertext of "Nine Hammer Blows" that gives the passage above its full sexual resonance. Recall how in that poem flower imagery came to symbolize homosexuality—the "rosette," stamen, and "orchids" of the desired male body—but also functioned as a metonym of Halliwell's art-making. Eroticism and literary collaboration, in Crosbie's imagination, are fused. Does her gift to Trinidad and Conway graft the Halliwell/Orton affair onto their ostensibly platonic relationship? Or does it stem from a recognition that the intensity of Trinidad and Conway's collaboration, the excessive volubility on Eves both celestial and base, compensates for an erotic bond sublimated into, or projected onto, art-making?

In his book *Double Talk,* Koestenbaum draws on the models of mediated desire pioneered by Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard, Gayle Rubin, and especially Sedgwick, who in her groundbreaking study, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, pushed formal and feminist considerations of the erotic triangle towards "homosocial" ones. Koestenbaum employs Sedgwick to more specific ends, in tracking the homoerotics between men who collaborate over a text figured as female. Koestenbaum claims that "men who collaborate engage in metaphorical sexual intercourse, and…the text they balance between them is alternately the child of their sexual union, and a shared union" (3).[7] Koestenbaum's

schema, applied to *Phoebe*, illuminates the poems' desiring machinery, in which a panoply of females, on various diegetic levels of the text—Eve and Margo, Davis and Baxter, Sexton and Plath, Wheeler and Crosbie, finally, and most importantly, *Phoebe* her/itself—mediate the camp-cum-erotic dilations of Conway and Trinidad. At least two imbricated erotic triangles (man–man–women; man–man–text) suggest themselves. Or, perhaps more accurately: a threesome (man–man–woman) becomes a foursome (man–man–woman–text), until the two men prune their *ménage* to a more manageable *trois* (man–man–text).

Koestenbaum takes as his focus the long nineteenth century, from Romanticism to Modernism, a period that saw the rise of the homosexual as a distinct group to which membership was anathema, and later, criminal. Behind Koestenbaum's thesis, then, lies an assumption that homosocial/homosexual traffic in women is historically contingent, a symptom of repression (Koestenbaum's first chapter examines Freud and Fleiss). But if so, why would such a triangulation continue to thrive in *Phoebe*, during a period of relative liberty? With Foucault, I am dubious of an oversimplification of Victorian repression. Yet I find, because the Phoebe poets compose under the sign of Freud, a psychological Oedipal model remains useful. If *Phoebe* owes its genesis to Trinidad and Conway's repressed desire, societal homophobia may be less to blame than a more mundane barrier: Conway's coupled status until the poem's end. "David and Ira broke up when we began, / then Michael and I, / now Jeffery and Ron" (607), writes Crosbie.

It would be speculative to pin the blame for the poets' breakups on the binding erotics of *Phoebe* (though Crosbie imputes as much). And I do not wish to overplay the role of psychobiographer, speculating whether his collaboration with Conway was a factor in Trinidad's split with his longtime partner, Ira Silverberg. But what is felt by an attentive reader of Trinidad's work is how Conway, in the latter sections of *Phoebe,* supplants Silverberg in the symbolic world of Trinidad's verse. Silverberg was a frequent subject of Trinidad's autobiographical poems in *Answer Song* and *Plasticville*. "*Every* Night, Byron!", from the latter volume, is a lengthy portrait of Trinidad and Silverberg's domestic life from the perspective of their dog, Byron: "At last! Footsteps / on the stairs! . . . I hope it's / Ira—he takes me / for better walks. / I'm so excited I'm / shaking myself, / shaking myself" (75). Yet by the midpoint of *Phoebe*, Conway has supplanted Silverberg in this domestic tableau:

> I got back from D's a little while ago. I'm exhausted. We worked on *Phoebe* notes for about nine hours. What a work. We spent like a whole hour looking

> online for info about one of L.'s lines: "the fatal cigarette grisette."…D. took over the helm at the computer, and I sat in the armchair and tossed Byron's ball down the hallway. He ran to fetch it every time, back and forth, never tiring, never bored. (351)

Note how Conway's repetition, "never tiring, never bored," echoes the ending of "*Every* Night, Byron!": "mostly they / say Byron: 'We love / you—every morning / …*every* night, Byron!'" (81). Never tiring, every night. The two collaborators spend so much time together, emailing Crosbie at 2 a.m—is it any wonder their relationships end? Though the poets make scant reference to their romantic splits, the following scene, in which Trinidad describes to Crosbie a Thanksgiving spent with Conway and his partner, Ron, may give us some clues:

> I'm sitting on what Jeffery calls the "poetry porch"…typing on Jeffery's laptop. A bowl of green and red apples to my right; notebook, pen, and copy of *Chain Chain Chain* (which Ron accidentally spattered with scrambled egg a few moments ago) to my left…. Jeffery is in the kitchen making stuffing. When the chopped onions made him cry, I quoted Adrienne Rich: "Only to have a grief equal to all these tears." I just heard him say to Ron: "Who in hell are you?" [*sic*] À la Helen Lawson in *V.O.D.* (372)

Trinidad's affect in the passage above is ostensibly warm appreciation for the minutiae of domestic life. But I also read agon between the poets and Conway's boyfriend, Ron, who has sullied their collaborative work with scrambled egg (a throttled feminine product). Also note the rapport between Conway and Trinidad, who cites the poetry of Rich—must women mediate all significant interactions between the men?—in contrast to the (facetious) ire Conway casts at the now foreign boyfriend: "Who in hell are you?"—a sentiment again expressed through female role-playing.

I would like to end the essay with a look at the authors' photograph, a casual group portrait that the poets generously include on the final page of *Phoebe*. In the photo, the three poets sit around a table in what appears to be Trinidad's apartment (the caption reads, "Trilogy of Terror, NYC, September 2000"). Trinidad and Conway occupy opposite edges of the composition. Crosbie, in the foreground, sits perched on Conway's lap. The similarity in Conway and Trinidad's postures is remarkable. Both men extend their arms rigidly, defensively; confronted by the camera, they grow sheepish. Each clutches his forearm with the opposite hand. The only difference in their positions is that Conway grasps Crosbie, while Trinidad holds in his hand what appears to be a chapbook (*Chain Chain Chain*, the

poets' first collaboration?); its gently fanning pages rhyme with Crosbie's crossed legs, opposite. Note the equivalence: one man holds a poem, the other, a woman.

Finally, I dilate on Crosbie herself. She is the spectacular focus of the photograph, thrust forward uncomfortably—a sacrifice to the camera's hungry eye—trapped in the grip of Conway's muscular arms. Is Conway's hug a loving embrace? An evasion of intimacy with Trinidad? A stranglehold? Eclipsing the man holding her, Crosbie resembles nothing so much as a ventriloquist's dummy—the female body through which, and about which, the aligned males can speak.

Notes

1 Camp taste often relies on a dissolution of, or a confusion within, the high/low binary. Andy Warhol was particularly acute on this flattening of high and low onto one plane: "It was fun to see the Museum of Modern Art people next to the teeny-boppers next to the amphetamine queens next to the fashion editors" (162).

2 Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope—collaborators and lovers—raise the ante by positing that collaboration is not just a sexual practice, but a queer one:

> As a term that assimilates a variety of unconventional practices, desires, and social positions, queer seemed to us an apt label for collaborative writing. Given that such writing is marginal and that the conventional majority doesn't quite know what to do with it (and has historically been quite hostile to it), collaborative writing is queerly related to—and is the queer relative of—single-authored scholarship." (633)

3 Crosbie's interest in homosexuality as a trope for malevolent desires extends even to her writings with heterosexual protagonists. Note how Crosbie lends Paul Bernardo a queer cast by titling her book *Paul's Case*, after the Willa Cather short story.

4 Halliwell's collage practice—to which Crosbie refers to in the lines, "the field / I attend with my paste and scissors"—occupied him in the wake of a failed writing career.

5 Wheeler's interest in identifying which collaborator writes which lines is a common critical tendency (one to which this critic must also plead guilty). Bette London writes, "[C]ritical responses to the fact of a collaboration suggest that the practice can be tolerated only if demystified—i.e., only if rendered representable. Hence the relentless trotting out of a requisite set of distinguishing features: hierarchical orderings (Edith was the "senior partner," Martin was the true artist); temperamental and aesthetic discriminations…and predictable divisions of labor…." (73).

6 The title of *Phoebe 2002* derives from the character in *All About Eve*, Phoebe, who stalks Eve at the movie's end—an echo of Eve's own emulation of Margo at the film's beginning. 2002 refers to the hotel suite number where Eve finds Phoebe. It is also the year of the poem's completion, as the poets are careful to note in the book's front matter. Thus the writers implicate their own writing in the pattern of imitation and appropriation that both movie and poem critique; Eve usurps Margo, but Eve in turn attracts usurping replicants of her own, like Phoebe. And *Phoebe*.

7 While *Phoebe* seems to function for its authors as a "shared union," to borrow Koesten-

baum's schema, Merrill likens *Sandover* to his and Jackson's surrogate child: "Somewhere a Father Figure shakes his rod // At sons who have not sired a child?" (30).

Works Cited

All About Eve. Dir. Joseph L Mankiewicz. With Bette Davis, Anne Baxter, Celeste Holm, and George Sanders. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002.

Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter, 1987): 197-222.

Carson, Anne. *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*. New York: Knopf, 2005.

Cleto, Fabio. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader.* Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1999.

Conway, Jeffery, Lynn Crosbie, and David Trinidad. *Chain Chain Chain.* Brooklyn, N.Y.: Ignition, Inc., 2000.

——. *Phoebe 2002.* New York: Turtle Point, 2003.

Crosbie, Lynn, ed. *Plush: Selected Poems of Sky Gilbert, Courtnay McFarlane, Jeffery Conway, R.M. Vaughan & David Trinidad.* Toronto: Coach House, 1995.

Crosbie, Lynn. *Pearl: Poems.* Concord, Ont.: Anansi, 1996.

——. *Paul's Case: the Kingston Letters.* Toronto: Insomniac, 1997.

——. *Dorothy L'Amour.* Toronto : HarperPerennial Canada, 2000.

Flinn, Caryl. "The Deaths of Camp." Cleto, ed. 433-457.

Gunn, Thom. "A Heroic Enterprise." *A Reader's Guide to James Merrill's* The Changing Light at Sandover. Ed. Robert Polito. Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1994. 153-157.

Lahr, John. Prick Up Your Ears: *The Biography of Joe Orton.* 2nd Ed. New York: Limelight Editions, 1991.

Leonardi, Susan J. and Rebecca A. Pope. "(Co)Labored Li(v)es; Or, Love's Labors Queered." PMLA 116.3 (May 2001): 631-637.

——. *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1996.

London, Bette. *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships*. Ithaca: Cornell, 1999.

Koestenbaum, Wayne. *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration.* New York: Routledge, 1989.

Merrill, James. *The Changing Light at Sandover.* New York: Knopf, 1995.

Ross, Andrew. "Uses of Camp." Cleto, ed. 308-329.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire.* New York: Columbia, 1985.

——. *Epistemology of the Closet.* Berkeley: California, 1990.

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp." Cleto, ed. 53-65.

Trinidad, David. *Answer Song.* New York : Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books, 1994.

——. *Plasticville: Poems.* New York: Turtle Point, 2000.

Warhol, Andy and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980.

Whittal, Zoe, ed. *Geeks, Misfits and Outlaws.* Toronto: McGilligan, 2003.