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[See table of contents](#)

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Slippery and Plural: Collaborative Writing in Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland's "Subject to Change" and "Reading and Writing Between the Lines"

BENJAMIN AUTHERS AND ANDREA BEVERLEY

IN THIS ESSAY, WE READ THE IDEA OF SLIPPAGE in Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland's collaborative poems "Subject to Change" and "Reading and Writing Between the Lines" as a concept that brings together and investigates the complex relations between lesbian feminist reworkings of writing, reading, and collaboration.¹ Slippage describes a collaborative poetic praxis embedded in lesbian, feminist erotics in these poems, wherein both the technique of slippage and the centering of erotics are constitutive of the poems' content. The poetic methodologies underpinning the poems, and portrayed in the poems, draw readers into co-creative relations with the poets, even as they witness the intimacy, tension, and co-writing of the poems' speakers. Slippage forms the theoretical and methodological basis for Warland and Marlatt's exploration of collaboration's challenges and conflicts, its contestations of desire and difference. Our close reading aims to trace these poetics and metaphors, with particular attention to where and how their poetic processes are portrayed in language that also centres lesbian erotics. Beginning with an explanation of slippage as it relates to the poems' syntax, we explain the poets' methodology of slippage as play, before turning to the slippery and evocative lesbian erotics of these co-written works. Noting the recurring intimacy between the poet-speakers leads into a discussion of the intimate creative and interpersonal tensions the poems depict, even as their poetic portrayal of tension circles back to desire and the erotic. Finally, we consider readers' implication in these collaborative poetics.

Scholarship on literary collaborations provides one backdrop to our discussions, especially scholarship that has turned its attention to same-sex collaborators and examined metaphors for collaborative acts. We also incorporate reflections on literary creation from Marlatt's

and Warland's individual writings on writing, particularly Warland's *Breathing the Page: Reading the Act of Writing* and Marlatt's *Readings from the Labyrinth*. Our intention is not to locate interpretive keys in their non-fiction, nor do we seek to "ossify" or dogmatize their musings on writing, a critical move that Marlatt denounces in the preface to her collected essays (*Reading* ii). Rather, we highlight moments in their writings on writing that echo moments in their collaborative poetry. Because their poetry explicitly endorses methodologies of conversation, intertextuality, and plurality, it seems appropriate to read their varying voices in dialogue. In this essay, we seek to contribute to critical discussions of women's collaboration by reading the multivalent forms of slippage in these poems as concepts through which the poets theorize collaborative methodologies relating to writing and play. Through these, they foreground feminist, lesbian erotics as a means to rethink patriarchal ideas of sexuality, collaboration, creation, and language.

"Subject to Change" and "Reading and Writing Between the Lines" provide some of Marlatt and Warland's most explicit and evocative writing on collaborative poetics. Though they have received less critical attention than their co-written "Double Negative," these poems perform collaborative poetics even as they theorize them. These two collaboratively written long poems were published, along with three other poems, in their volume *Two Women in a Birth* (1994). The first two poems in this collection are individually authored: Marlatt's "Touch to My Tongue" and Warland's "Open Is Broken" were both published as separate books a decade earlier. The remaining three texts are co-authored, with "Double Negative" originally coming out in book form in 1988, "Reading and Writing Between the Lines" first published in a 1988 issue of *Tessera*, and "Subject to Change" appearing in 1991 in *The Capilano Review* and *Trivia*. The latter two pieces are free verse long poems divided into mostly titled subsections, some of which could be read as stand-alone short poems, with divergent spacing and use of bold and italic fonts. "Reading and Writing Between the Lines" is a thirteen-page poetic exploration of the experience of collaborative writing. The longer "Subject to Change" undertakes a similar exploration, but is subtitled with dates spanning March fourth to nineteenth so that it acts as a documentary of a particular collaborative moment while also, as we argue, theorizing that process.

Our reading of "Subject to Change" and "Reading and Writing

Between the Lines” is cognizant of these poems’ autobiographical context. Both works incorporate images of romantic involvement and shared domestic space, echoing Marlatt and Warland’s relationship at the time. Marlatt notes the importance of this when discussing their collaboration, stating that “It was very interesting to collaborate that closely with Betsy, I mean we were lovers, we lived together, so this was simply a deeper level of intimacy — well, not ‘simply.’ It was never simple, actually it was very complex. You really get into somebody else’s head when you’re collaborating to the degree we were” (Russell 5). Biographical information such as this is, of course, not determinative of an analysis of the poetry. However, it bears mentioning, especially in the context of the frequent eroticization of collaborative writing by critics and readers — a discourse around women’s collaboration that Bette London notes is often synonymous with voyeurism (London 73). Marlatt and Warland’s own eroticization of and in their work, the frequent depiction of intimate settings and situations, and both poets’ allusions to their personal history in subsequent publications, directly engage with this voyeuristic tendency (Russell 4-5; Marlatt, *Readings* 84; Warland, *Oscar* 55, 211). In the process, their relationship becomes poetic material through which their collaborative practice is portrayed, and, indeed, Warland and Marlatt make extensive use of the personal and tease readers into wondering about its veracity. “Are you trying to avoid the autobiographical?” asks one voice (*Two Women* 142) and “what gets written on the page” is contrasted with “the page . . . a lit room read from outside while we go on doubling behind the scene” (140). London cautions against assuming that any writerly collaboration really happened in the way that the collaborators choose to describe it (27). Her caution is noted here, and we refrain from concluding that either their intimate relationship or their working relationship is naturalistically depicted in their poetry, using the term “poet-speakers” for “Marlatt” and “Warland” in the poems themselves. Nonetheless, this foregrounding of their relationship as both political and textual context informs the following discussion and our reading of Marlatt and Warland’s idea of slippage as a theorization of collaborative writing.

Warland and Marlatt’s most sustained concept for representing both a collaborative literary technique and an image of lesbian erotics occurs in “Subject to Change” and “Reading and Writing Between the Lines” through a praxis and portrayal of slippage. What does it mean to say

that Marlatt and Warland figure their collaboration as slippage? On a formal level, their poetic technique allows words (and the sounds and etymological roots of those words) to evoke other similar-sounding or related words, exploring a concept by gliding from one word or expression to the next, the slippage amplified as the two poets respond with different associations. In her collected essays, *Readings from the Labyrinth*, Marlatt notes the “different dance of association a single word may call up for each [writer]” because of the “meaning-slippage” or “meaning-link” of words (117). Alessandra Capperdoni describes this technique as a “play of letters (through alliterations and assonances) [that] destabilizes the referentiality of the sign” (103), while Susan Billingham defines it as “paragrammatic wordplay” which introduces a generative and sophisticated “undecidability and polyvalency into a text” (6). These word slippages are slippages between ideas, where the gap between the two is both what connects them (because it is not a complete gap) and what distinguishes them from each other (because they are not identical). This technique or movement features prominently in the poetry, as when “the moon” shifts to “mooning” then “spooning” (*Two Women* 137) or “euphemism” is broken down as “eu-, good + phēmē, speech” and then moves to “u-feminisms” (143).

Of course, wordplay of this sort is a technique available to any writer; it is not intrinsic or exclusive to collaborations. Warland describes the concept of “semantic-streams” in *Breathing the Page*, a term foreshadowed as “semantic shifts” in “Reading and Writing Between the Lines” (139, 140) and similar to Marlatt’s “semantic play” (*Readings* 117). Warland’s “semantic-streams” include multiple ideas of slippage of meaning, from the personal and collective to “linguistic streams, which reveal the etymological lineage of a word, its word relatives, and its historical context” (*Breathing* 109). In her conception, it is in the nature of words to always evoke other words, dependent on each other for varied, contextualized meanings (108-09). Marlatt describes something similar in “Musing with Mothertongue”: “words call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance” (*Readings* 10). As Marlatt points out with specific reference to her collaborations with Warland, this quality of words and language is intensified when two writers co-create (*Readings* 116). “Collaborative writing,” she asserts in a subsection entitled “Collaboration as Slippage,” “is a more intense experience of reciprocity, of mutual exchange between two minds with

two distinctive ways of moving in and through language" (*Readings* 116). Yet because of the contingent nature of words and language, even a sharp distinction between solitary writing and collaborative writing is problematized, to the point that Marlatt and Warland assert, in their collaborative poetry: "here we acknowledge that all writing is collaboration" (*Two Women* 141) and even "thought is collaboration" (136). Collaboration, they affirm, also takes place with future readers, a point to which we will return in conclusion. Interestingly, the idea that solitary writing and thought are still somehow collaborative is explicitly rendered in the intertextualities of their own writings on writing. Marlatt, for example, quotes Warland's poem "proper deafinitions" to illustrate the "lyric strategy" of slippage that aims to "subvert [words'] negative meaning, trace an other linguistic history that generates affirmative ones" (*Readings* 167). In turn, Warland references Marlatt when describing the embodied nature of words and the productive power of their sensuous movement (*Breathing the Page* 30). This embodied emission and its embodied response speak to a dialogic physicality that is sensational and, as such, slippery and productive. Words, Warland writes, "are fluid, stiff, soft, sharp, opaque, hard, sticky, smooth, radiant, transparent, raw, polished, rough, reflective, *slippery*, cold, wet, hot, dry, murky, hollow, dense, resounding" (*Breathing the Page* 110; emphasis ours).

In their collaborative long poems, the poet-speakers marvel at the generative word slippages that result from the back and forth between them, the "*breathhtaking*" connections "*when thought leaps the gap between two idiosyncratic fields of association*" (*Two Women* 165), even if the "semantic shifts" are "not ours as language never is" (140). By naming it "slippage" and moving to connect "slippage" with lesbian erotics, they signal that integral to this conception of poetic practice is the feminist, lesbian reimagining thereof, as when they speak of "our spiraling dominoing wandering she-speech in the talking we do between the sheets between the lines between the writing that intertwines" (141). Even the word "slip" itself is subject to this slippery technique of slippage. In "Let Me Slip" (part of "Reading and Writing Between the Lines"), the poet-speakers begin with: "let me slip into something more comfortable" moving to "*labour, belabour, collaborate, elaborate*," to "The Hebrews named their letters, some guttural . . . some dental . . . and so they call others, labial, that is letter of the lips" (135). "Slip"

slips from context to context as they play with the images of slips of the tongue, slipping notes in class, and slippery lines. Reiterating variations on “labial,” they reference “slippage in the text / you & me *collābi*, (*to slip together*) / in labialization!” (136), playfully slipping eroticized meaning into their description of their writing. As they explain it, collaboration itself slips a third party into their erotic and artistic relationship, a metaphor of collaborative production by “not two mouths but three!” (136). “Let Me Slip” also morphs in its visuality, the poems changing between italicized and un-italicized text indicating at times the distinct poets composing the poem (something that becomes a major structural trope in “Subject to Change”) while also emphasizing the meaning-slippages between words linked aurally and etymologically. Their poetry is full of movement as one word evokes another and as the poet-speakers collaborate back and forth, “riding the currents of one another’s associative and symbolic thought” (158).

It is not at all surprising to see Warland and Marlatt portray collaboration using an extended metaphor like slippage. Even within literary criticism, scholars often turn to metaphor to explain the complexities of collaboration. Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson, for example, note the frequency with which figurative language is deployed in discussions of collaborative practice, stating that “metaphors and analogues often replace or complement definitions in studies of literary couples and collaboration” (24). Writing of their own collaborative academic work as lesbian feminists, Angela Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant also speak to this turn to figuration by asking: “what is lesbian collaboration? What does it do? How does it work? The best answers, the most satisfying, to such questions are provided by analogy” (160). Estes and Lant develop the image of lesbian collaboration as choreography and dance; in turn, Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope survey a variety of metaphoric descriptors, from quilting to stewing to part-singing in order to interrogate their appropriateness in describing the collaborative work of lesbian and other women writers (262, 266, 269). Lorraine York suggests that this proliferation of metaphor frames our expectations of collaboration itself, “a cautionary . . . reminder that collaborative writing relationships (like all others) are not static, austere, classifiable objects” (5). York’s cautionary note suggests that collaborative relationships carry with them echoes of other relationships, but also that metaphor is itself a slippery concept, one that shifts meanings both productively and elusively.

With slippage as praxis, Marlatt and Warland explore an array of metaphors to render their collaborative authorship: coin tossing, card playing, grafting, dancing, and flying all highlight the diverse dynamics of writing together. Their depictions of play are particularly resonant for our exploration of slippage because the methodology of slippage depends heavily on word *play*. Indeed, “play” occurs frequently as both a noun and a verb in our description of slippage above. We might say that Marlatt and Warland work at — or play with — an extended metaphor until it reveals different, seemingly contradictory, facets of collaboration. Neither our use of “play” to describe their poetic work nor their own depictions of game playing, are meant to suggest that there is anything juvenile or naïve about these metaphorical explorations. In fact, the metaphor of the game can reveal the darker sides of collaborative work. For instance, in “Reading and Writing Between the Lines” the poets repeatedly evoke the image of playing cards to connote their collaborative methodologies (*Two Women* 141, 144, 145). In referring to “this game of double *solitaire*” (141), they suggest the multiple, collective, and at points contradictory nature of collaborative writing, a doubling that is shaped by “the talking we do that underlies the underwriting” but that also knows “the risks the mutual responsibilities” (141).

This awareness of what is at stake in collaborative writing, as a source of both risk and responsibility, implies the more serious consequences of collaboration that might otherwise be hidden by its ostensible playfulness, and the metaphor of card playing likewise moves through language from play to something more ominous: “the doubling of the chance of language the cards up our sleeves power play of our idiosyncratic synapses” (141). The idea of each poet-speaker having a card up her sleeve as they play into the collective collaborative pot emphasizes that collaboration can sometimes turn competitive and that there are power dynamics at play, something to which we return later in this essay. But this segment also alludes to the power the collaborators have to debunk the myth of the solitary author by letting their distinctive styles highlight that there are two authors here, not just one. By revealing their dual voices, they are engaged in a “game of chance exposing the writer’s sleight of hand which tricks the reader into believing in a voice in the wilderness singularly inspired” (141). Considerations of literary collaboration often address the hegemonic presence of the solitary author in Western literature, as well as critical moves that seek to

decentre it (Laird 203; London 3; Stone and Thompson 8-9). Marlatt and Warland acknowledge those conventions in their writings on writing as well (Marlatt, *Readings* 109; Warland, *Breathing* 152). Here in the passage about the “game of chance,” Marlatt and Warland refer to that tradition and to their collaborative capacity to undermine it. The card-playing metaphors continue throughout “Reading and Writing Between the Lines,” again evoking both the uniqueness of personal voice (“it’s all in the cards each deck a voice distinct to its own tones its rhythms its own feel its quirky selectivity” [141]) and the interdependence of collaborative voices (“the card’s meaning particular to the relationship of the others” [141]). Later, they refer to the impossibility of playing “without a full deck” because of “all our u/s essential” (144).

Warland and Marlatt thus employ images of play (card playing) in what we read as an essentially playful mode (slipping around and between, playing with clichéd expressions, playing on different meanings) in order to suggest the playfulness of their collaborative writing. Because they engage with the metaphor in a variety of ways, they deliberately undermine any attempt at a single reading: in one passage the deck of cards refers to the individuality of each author, but the reader has to keep up with the way the metaphor slips, as in another passage the deck of cards implies a whole community of collaborators. Susan Billingham writes of “Double Negative” that “the complex network of imagery accumulates associations as the text progresses, often appealing to more than one frame of reference simultaneously” (21), and a similar cumulative and multivalent figuration operates in “Subject to Change” and “Reading and Writing Between the Lines.” Thus the same metaphor calls to mind, and affirms, different aspects of collaborative work — in this case, that joint writing does involve two distinct individuals, as well as a sense of conversation and fusion. When Marlatt and Warland repeat metaphors to explain these tensions, they are asserting how intrinsic these aspects of collaboration are to the whole of the collaborative process. Nonetheless, they also invoke and intimate the presence of the less playful tensions, personal and artistic (insofar as the representations of these can be disentangled), that are such an important part of the poems. Collaboration as card playing thus provides an instructive example of a technique that Marlatt and Warland employ throughout their poetry. That is, the *vehicles* of their metaphors relate to play, exchange, and pleasure, but their playful treatment of the vehicles

reveals that the metaphors' *tenor* (i.e., collaborative writing) is more multi-faceted than carefree playful togetherness.

Although play and playfulness are not overtly gendered metaphors, critics and writers have often found gendered metaphors to be valuable ways of describing women's collaborative practice. Leonardi and Pope, for example, engage with the model of collaboration as quilting because it is "more explicitly allied with women and women's work" and, indeed, evocative of queer politics through the Names Project Quilt (262). The numerous, interconnected metaphors that populate Warland and Marlatt's co-authored poetry also speak from these political perspectives to the critical questions found at the intersection of collaboration, creation, gender, and sexuality. As alluded to in our description of slippage above, the poet-speakers render collaboration in sexual terms that operate figuratively to emphasize connections between artistic and sexual practice, conjuring the erotic in "she-speech . . . between the sheets" (141), "let me slip into something more comfortable" (135), the word-play on "labia" (135-36), and potentially the idea of slipperiness itself (133, 144). Even without the connection to collaborative writing, these passages perform the crucial intervention of representing "the concrete experiences of the lesbian body," as Billingham points out in relation to "Double Negative" (15). Such an intervention relates to questions that Marlatt considers in her musings on the legacy of the classic figure of Eros, asking, "Where does that leave women's desire and especially women's desire for women? What images do we have for a woman-based erotic?" (*Readings* 47). Billingham notes that representational strategies meant to render visible embodied experiences of lesbian sexuality carry risks, and not simply because of the marginalization of women's collaborations: "Marlatt and Warland's intensely sensuous lesbian love poetry risked censure. The project of making lesbian lives visible was still clearly needed in 1988 [the year that "Double Negative" was re-published in book form] in Canada" (20). Despite these risks, in their individual writings on writing, both poets name the need to create space for the articulation of lesbian erotics in contemporary literature and culture. For instance, Warland's narrator in *Oscar of Between: A Memoir of Identity and Ideas* recalls the publication of her book *open is broken* "in relation to creating a public space for lesbian erotic love poems" (211) and asserts that "Daphne and Oscar crossed a taboo line

with their books of erotic love poems — deep tremors of response — No two women writers in English Canada had ever done this before” (55).

Slippage, then, is not only a metaphor to convey the writerly techniques of slipping between words and meanings, but also grounds that creativity in erotic energy even as the very depiction of lesbian erotics performs a powerful intervention. Creativity here is rooted in the erotic — Marlatt describes sex and writing as two kinds of “surging” (*Readings* 46-47) — in a way that recalls Audre Lorde’s ground-breaking 1978 “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Lorde asserts that the erotic can be a source of power and information (53) and can nourish the pursuit of change and social justice (58-59). Citing these insights in “Lesbera” (“Getting in touch with our desire as lesbians can be a source of power, as Audrey [sic] Lorde has pointed out”), Marlatt connects the immediate, transforming, anti-authoritarian energy of the erotic with poetic experimentation, called “the erotics of language” (*Readings* 46-48). Over and over, Marlatt and Warland use the creative power rooted in erotic energy to portray their co-writing through lesbian erotic imagery, centering lesbian desire and reconceiving collaboration and creation. The poets speak of how in writing they “leak meaning we splash each other with, not so much working as playing in all this super-fluity, wetting ourselves with delight even, whetting our tongues, a mutual stimulation” (*Two Women* 134). In evoking this playful sensuality, their collaborative writing is figured as sexual not only in a procreative manner (the title of their collection is, after all, *Two Women in a Birth*) but especially as pleasure and play, connecting to our reading of play and card games. The erotic is emphasized and functions as an interpretive key that gives meaning to their poetry and the means by which it is written. Serving as conduits, these figurative movements undermine ready readings and meanings, and, in their inflection by the erotic, enable and facilitate the otherwise effaced presence of lesbian sexuality to be central to how meaning is re-written.

Our reading of this centring of lesbian erotics in Warland and Marlatt’s collaborative poetry takes place against a critical backdrop that frequently foregrounds questions of sex and desire. In her study of turn-of-the-century women’s collaborations, London notes how speculations about writers’ sexualities often overshadow analyses of their literary process and product. She declares that “the eroticization of the writing process would seem to be one of literary collaborations’ most

consistent legacies" (London 72). Wayne Koestenbaum's *Double Talk*, one of the most influential monographs on literary collaboration in recent decades, expresses itself in explicitly sexualized terms, reading collaborative practice in the context of cultural anxieties over relationships between men. He argues that "men who collaborate engage in a metaphorical sexual intercourse" wherein "the text that they balance between them is alternately the child of their sexual union, and a shared woman" (3). Important as Koestenbaum's monograph has been, a number of critics have sought to distinguish his figurative explanations of male collaboration from collaboration by women. Koestenbaum, as he readily acknowledges, is focusing almost exclusively on male writers, although he does deal briefly, out of "touristic curiosity" (173), with the work of the female collaborative authors Michael Field and Somerville and Ross. Stone and Thompson, while acknowledging the "impact" of Koestenbaum's study, suggest that his focus produces its own set of limitations (10). They find Koestenbaum "disturbingly dismissive" of the female members of mixed-sex literary partnerships, while he reproduces what is to Stone and Thompson a "hierarchical model" for his male subjects of "the dominant (masculinized) and submissive (feminized) partner . . . thereby recuperating a binary heterosexist dynamic that is itself reductive" (18). Criticisms like this point to the limitations of trying to generalize Koestenbaum's theories. Leonardi and Pope, while also expressing their admiration of Koestenbaum's text, speak explicitly to its inadequacy as a study or description of lesbian collaboration. Pope argues that his model "doesn't transfer" to lesbian sexuality, and Leonardi asserts that "there is no . . . clear sign that marks female homosexual experience on a literal level . . . so there's no way we could use one sexual act to speak metaphorically about female collaboration" (261). Her comment is intriguing when placed alongside Marlatt and Warland's extended metaphor of slippage. While their conception of slippage certainly does not "use one sexual act to speak metaphorically about female collaboration," it does set up evocations of lesbian erotics that are inseparable from portrayals of collaborative praxis. This may ultimately correspond with the "ambiguous and diffuse" sexualization of lesbian collaboration that Leonardi and Pope posit as less problematic than Koestenbaum's (Leonardi and Pope 261). Marlatt and Warland's powerful foregrounding of a lesbian poetics of slippage is, in any case,

far removed from the writers of Koestenbaum's corpus, who "rapidly patter to obscure their erotic burden" (Koestenbaum 3).

In her own consideration of the critiques of Koestenbaum's framework, York notes that "his notion of collaboration as an eroticized space" remains suggestive (17). A critical conversation that focuses too narrowly on sex metaphors or sexualized relationships between real life collaborators might miss the breadth of what is possible in this "eroticized space" of collaboration. In her subsequent discussion of Marlatt and Warland's collaborative poetry, York turns to their grappling with the word "collaboration" itself as an illustration of the power of "eroticization" (154-55). After all, this is the passage in their poetry where Marlatt and Warland explicitly use the verb "eroticized" to describe what they accomplish through their collaborative poetic descriptions of collaboration itself (*Two Women* 142). For Marlatt and Warland, deliberately "eroticizing" collaboration is a way to identify their texts as dissenting reimaginings of collaboration and language, and particularly of the word *collaboration's* masculinist baggage. At the beginning of "Reading and Writing Between the Lines" they write of being uncomfortable with the term "collaboration," arguing that it is a "specious" description for their work together and seeking to resist its martial connotations (133). Disturbed by "the word collaboration with its military censure," Marlatt and Warland echo Koestenbaum's reminder that "In wartime, collaborators are traitors who join the enemy. The very word 'collaboration' connotes moral bankruptcy, stratagems exercised in the face of national defeat. Double writers bear the stain of the word's political meaning" (8). The term "moral bankruptcy" here refers to those who betray the nation-state, just as the financial resonances of "bankruptcy" link with the cluster of coin images that Warland and Marlatt sprinkle throughout their long poems. In addition to the negative militaristic associations of betrayal (and the coins of Judas additionally coming to mind as the quintessential metonym of betrayal), Marlatt and Warland also note the gendered connotations of the military reference here: "the Father appears here with his defining gaze, his language of the law" (133).

Nonetheless, the poets want to reclaim from the militaristic definition of collaboration a resistant and anti-authoritarian idea of co-writing through a rhetorical, metaphoric wordplay that is cognizant of literary collaboration's gendered, parochial, and otherwise demonized connotations. In seeking to reimagine the commonly understood

militaristic meaning of collaboration, they are undertaking a political project that draws on the term's multiple negative meanings and reframes them through their methodology of slipperiness. So they note that "when i see us as working together reciprocally, then what i see us working at is this subversion of the definitive" (133). In defiance of the military definition of collaboration (and all that that suggests to them of patriarchy and entrenched modes of power and oppression), they present an eroticized image of subversive collaboration. "[E]roticizing collaboration," they write, "we've moved from treason into trust" (142), enacting "a mutual stimulation we aid and abet (entice) in each other" (134). The phrase "aid and abet" certainly rings with military overtones. There is treason, on the one hand, militaristic and condemned. On the other hand, they posit "mutual stimulation" and trust, with one of the final images of the poems being "how we sleep deep in trust" (166). As Marlatt explains in her essay "Lesbera," this trust — or what they refer to as the reciprocity of their collaborative writing — is what enables them to counter the particular valences of political power embedded in the militaristic understanding of collaboration (*Readings* 47). The erotic connotations of "mutual stimulation" and the shared bed are integral to this strategy.

In this example, to eroticize collaboration is to rebel against the patriarchal connotations of an idea, recuperate and remobilize what is desirable therein, and counter with an image of lesbian intimacy. Throughout "Subject to Change" and "Reading and Writing Between the Lines," the poet-speakers repeatedly call attention to the intimacy off/in their co-writing, an intimacy that includes not just intimate acts between bodies, but also intimate shared space and the closeness of life together. We are privy to their conversations "at the bathroom sink / 'so, do you think the collaboration is working' / 'yes, do you?'" (*Two Women* 143) and see them negotiating shared domestic space: "you know how i feel about being watched," "[the waiting, restlessness of your clothes shifting on your body]" (151). Some of the intimations of intimacy overlap with the clearly erotic, as in the allusions to "early this morning . . . / your taste," "i can still smell you," and "*rapture*" (152, 153). Others are more explicitly about composing poetry, as when the opening lines of "Reading and Writing Between the Lines" reference the "hovering between third person and second person pronoun, to choose second with its intimacy seems to me indicative of how i write with and to you"

(133). The poet-speakers proclaim the “generative power of our intimacy — this too must have a life on the page” (168). Yet even as evocations of intimacy play on the voyeuristic curiosity of their readers, a curiosity that is particularly acute vis-à-vis collaborative writing (London 73), the autobiographical ultimately slips into a play of signifiers — as per the slippages of their writing technique (Laird 214). That which seems so concrete and personal (brushing teeth, mentioning their cat, alluding to shared sexual pleasure) is revelatory of the nature of their collaborative poetics. When the poet-speakers move away from their co-writing, the intimacy can be guarded: “*our day off together a gap in the text. intimate, to intimate, a movement inwards from publish*” (*Two Women* 167).

The intimacy depicted in the poems includes instances of what might be read as interpersonal conflict between collaborators, hearkening back to Marlatt’s comment on the complexity of collaborating with a lover. The poet-speakers question and accuse each other: “‘where are you going with this?’ / ‘you didn’t go deep enough’” (139). In their typical slippery fashion, the “third body” that is words that they gleefully tongue becomes a “third body” that they pursue in competition with each other, occasioning jealousy and anxiety about their individual poetic voices: “collaboration then as power play where we breaks down into you and i and i’m tired of defining these feints of desire, us desiring yes this third body we go chasing after and jealousy moves in, hey what are you really after?” (137). With “Reading and Writing Between the Lines” in particular, the poem comes to be represented as the object of the poet-speakers’ desire in addition to, and at times in competition with, their desire for each other. Thus the “erotic zones of a word we’re both attracted to” (139) becomes a source of jealousy, an “enigmatic ménage à trois one nearly always on the outside edge of two” (139), rather than a more maternal and less contestatory product of their writing (“no baby she,” the reader is told [142]). There are also moments of outright disagreement: “*we talk angrily. you accuse me of leaving the collaboration because it isn’t going the way i want it to. i accuse you of judgement*” (159).²

Remarkably, the poets take on their disagreements and negotiations not only as subject matter for their poem, but also as indications of the form that their writings should take on the blank page. For instance, in “Subject to Change,” the sections dated March 4-7 (150-57) read like back-and-forth conversations with one voice italicized and one not.

Generally speaking, we read each left-hand page as poetic experimentation and each right-hand page as a voice-over (or rather, voices-over) commenting on the writing process, with the lines (and there are literally lines drawn on the pages' inner margins) blurring in terms of voice and content. The first two pages titled March 7 follow this general format but they are followed by two more pages dated March 7 that are written in paragraph-like blocks, with the left-hand page entirely non-italicized and the right-hand page entirely italicized. In other words, the fonts, spacing, and page formats echo the break that has occurred in the poetic process, even as the poem continues to be constituted by narrating the break. The unitalicized voice clearly references "fight" and says "missing each other's signals" and "i felt betrayed as your impatience increased" (158), while the opposing italicized voice says, "*we didn't talk about this before we started*" and "*can we agree? or do we have to?*" (159). Furthermore, they disagree on the implications of the format that we have identified as left-hand page poetic experimentation and right-hand voices-over: "*i thought we were writing a poem together with documentary asides in the margin. you thought we were documenting our writing together. the question of which takes precedence — & can we agree?*" (159). A final page dated March 7 is subtitled "afterthoughts" ("*we've had to give up individual control*" . . . "*we are still engaged*" [160]) and ostensibly represents the resolution of the conflict; the following page (March 9) shows a return to sparse co-written lines of poetry (161).

In addition to this extended example, Marlatt and Warland make repeated reference elsewhere in the poems to the difficulties of two individuals attempting to meld their creative processes. Indeed, the bulk of the poem "Subject to Change" depicts this discomfiture. In "Reading and Writing Between the Lines" they also refer to the "dark side" (138) of collaborative work, to the "power play of our idiosyncratic synapses" that emerges personally and stylistically (141). They go on to speak of "the in-juries of our *individuality*" (144), of break down (138), of this being "a difficult season" (142). As York notes of "Double Negative," this is an acknowledgment rather than a reconciliation of difference (145). The poets' inhabiting of separate pages is a recognition that difference is not idealistically transcended in collaboration and an acknowledgment that they are not the same. Even when they do share the page, the conversation (or argument) continues: "do we have to be consistent? / well, i feel intimidated about it now / *i feel intimidated by you*" (*Two*

Women 163). This mention of intimidation, along with the reference to the “power play of our idiosyncratic synapses” (141), is one of the rare moments that refer directly to whatever power dynamics may be at play between the two poets as they write together. Their text readily admits and explores interpersonal tension, but it is most often presented as tension between two equal players in an egalitarian partnership; reciprocity is their ideal mode (133-34).

Our intention here is not to diagnose or assess the collaborative relationship but rather to notice the extent to which the poetic depiction of collaborative tension is constitutive of the poetry itself. This strategy, in other words, is generative; documenting it produces the poetic content, though the poet-speakers may disagree on the extent to which the behind-the-scenes should be admitted (158-59). Just as we arrived at this brief discussion of conflict through noticing the poems’ intimacies, so we read conflict’s generative power as a connection back to the intimate, desire, and the erotic. Here is another slippage. The tension that leads the poet-speakers to abandon the co-writing featured at the beginning of “Subject to Change” (150-57) and to write in separate rooms instead (169) results from the same “not the sameness” that also sparks desire. From across facing pages, they write not of the seamlessness of their writing, but of eroticized distinctiveness, one noting that “‘to sit down before’ each other’s writing presence is to risk each other’s inherent chaos — for here the erotic is endlessly born” (168), while the other asserts that this is “*not the same as sitting at the same table, writing on the one page. we are not the same, not one, sitting side by side, sam, together. not is where desire enters . . .*” (169). Marlatt expresses something similar in a journal entry reprised in *Readings from the Labyrinth* in which she describes “writing as that which moves between self & other — as the erotic does (the pull of lesbian desire: the different in the ‘same’)” (215).

In her review of *Two Women in a Birth*, Erin Mouré notes the admission of fighting, reading it against the prevailing ideal of the singular author (manifest in dual authorship and the text itself), to recognize where “the fused author, is broken, brakes, breaks, wobbles, tears” (70). Marlatt and Warland foreground the important ingredient that this difference forms in their collaborative work, and ultimately connect this back to the erotics of their collaborative work. Commenting on their collaboration in an interview, Warland notes that their co-writing is “sharpened” because it happens to some extent in resistance to the other

(Williamson 196). Marlatt describes realizing the “actual differences in the ways we think and move in language” as one of the most “fascinating” takeaways of their collaborative writing process (Russell 5). For the poet-speakers, their work is sharpened by a dialogue that is “not the same so much as reciprocal, moving back and forth between our sameness and differences” (*Two Women* 133). There is also an on-going sense of movement, fluidity, and negotiation as constitutive of the poetry: “*knotting it together, as something different (to collaborate) in a body (of work), seductive, and resistant. currents at play*” (169). They write of the discord between “i” and “we” when “*i fears being misread*” whereas “*we desires connection*” while “*i . . . fears losing her way*” (*Two Women* 165). Part of the pleasure of their poetry is consequently produced through risk, one that relies both on an arousing, novel experience, and a reaffirmation of the distinction between poetic voices.

Though we have focused on the collaborative praxis of the two poets and poet-speakers, their conceptions of collaboration and creation move well beyond the idea of a couple: they evoke an inclusive “plural” as much as a “dual.” Expanding their assertions (discussed above) that thought and intertextuality are already intrinsically collaborative, the poet-speakers imagine future readers as integral to the creative process as well (142). Their practice of slippage lays the groundwork for incorporating reading into writing because they are each other’s first readers at the moment of creation, as one poet reads what the other has written and slips off in a slightly different direction. This is not a hermetic back and forth between two individuals, but a more expansive multi-directional dynamic of plural selves: “you my co-writer and co-reader, the one up close i address as you and you others i cannot foresee but imagine ‘you’ reading in for. and then there’s the you in me, the you’s you address in me, writing too” (133; see also 142). The reading “you’s” imagined during the co-writing process are those who will co-create the poems by reading them into meaning in endless future moments — one of those being, of course, now, here in this essay. In her writing on writing, Warland uses the idea of “reactivation” to describe what reading accomplishes, where “the written word is our declarative mark left for others” and “the reader’s eyes focus on the word, reactivating the written message” (108). Just as the gap between difference and overlap is generative (of poetry, tension, desire), different readers produce meaning differently, different from each other’s and from the writers’ understand-

ing, even with the same words. Slippage, again, is generative. The poet-speakers acknowledge this toward the end of “Subject to Change,” connecting it to the poem’s title: “*everything entered subject to change, subject to transformation in the reader’s imaginary, the reader being she, after all, who constructs meaning*” (165). Marlatt describes this in her non-fiction as well: “Difference is where the words turn depending on who reads them and how we bring who we are to that reading” (*Reading* 133).

The poet-speakers’ musings on future readers also grapple with the possibility of misreadings, in their playful, inquisitive mode, with slippages between words and ideas. They reference their potential misreadings of each other (“*we still argue about the pronunciation of certain words — not the same as mis-reading **reed** or **lead**. and is **mis**-reading the word?*”), moments when “*meaning, the elusive bird, dies into dust only to rise again in a further line aflame with connections*” (165). The writer–reader connection is not, therefore, idealized. As Warland reminds aspiring writers in *Breathing the Page*, the triangular relationship between writers, readers, and narratives can break down “and the collaboration between the writer and the reader becomes discontinuous” (15). More broadly, the poet-speakers are careful not to idealize their theorizations of collaborative praxis, addressing its tensions even amidst euphoric celebrations of their “paired flight” (*Two Women* 164). Vis-à-vis the reader as well, they seek “not to idealize. something in between lesbian pulp romance and politically correct silence (each puritanical in impulse). the reader needs more” (168). Yet they are enlivened by what they call the subversive (133) potential of their project, a project that includes readers and writers in a reimagining of writing grounded in lesbian erotics portrayed through, and nourished by, collaborative slippages: “coming out / of our shells. the writer lesbian, the reader lesbian shell shocked? sexing the page lesbian. in our profound plurality” (168). “Reading away with” the poet-speakers (142), our reading of these poems asserts the generative potential of slippages, gaps, and differences (what Marlatt calls the “in-between” [*Reading* 115]) without aiming to idealize these ideas or techniques. Like the poet-speakers, we readily admit the potential of misreadings even as we affirm with Marlatt that reading is an “act of the plural, of the more than one, of the one in relation to others” (*Reading* 34).

In the context of Warland and Marlatt’s collaborative poetry, slippage is a broad, spacious, and resonant concept that has allowed us to

discuss slippage of words, slippage between collaborative writers, slippage between poets and speakers, and slippage between readers, writers, and text. The poetic language that portrays these slippages always slips toward the evocation of the erotic, centring lesbian desire and positing erotic energy at the roots of creativity. To a critical conversation that has been preoccupied with the metaphors and sex lives of collaborators, Marlatt and Warland contribute lesbian feminist poetic reimaginations of the inner workings of the collaborative process. Even their portrayals of the more difficult aspects of writing together are within the recurrent imagery of intimacy, and circle back to the idea of desire through difference: "*not is where desire enters*" (169). Marlatt posits that feminist writing that is conscious of itself as writing is always already in conversation, always intertextual, plural, relational, and eager to elicit a response (*Readings* 110-11). "Close up, touching and being touched, approaching silenced or unwritten areas of experience, it is desirous of response, of mutuality with its readers, its listeners-in" (*Reading* 111). Our aim, then, has been to articulate a portion of this "listening-in" through a focus on the poetics of these buoyant, clever, and disruptive collaborative poems.

NOTES

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² It is interesting to note that despite these avowals of jealousy and anger, Marlatt and Warland's co-written poetry has been criticized for being overly diplomatic and non-conflictual. York thinks of "Double Negative" that they can be too "gentle" in their conflicts, and some of the early reviews of *Two Women in a Birth* made the same criticism (148). A review appearing in the *Ottawa Citizen*, for example, asserted that "[m]ore cautious and less inventive, the two writers seem anxious not to step on one another's images" (Brown B4).

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