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An interview with Anne Carson and Robert Currie

Megan Berkobien



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Megan Berkobien is a translator pursuing a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Michigan. She holds a B.A. in Comparative Literature from the same university, where she founded the school's undergraduate translation journal, *Canon Translation Review*. Her translations have been published in *Words without Borders* and are forthcoming from *Ezra: An Online Journal of Translation*. Her first book-length translation—Cristina Peri Rossi's radiant short story collection *Cosmoagonias*—is forthcoming in 2014.

*The images in this slideshow were created by photographer and filmmaker Kim Anno as part of a collaboration with Anne Carson. They are based on Carson's 59-part poem called "The Albertine Workout" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofR3Qd2E_Ao)." It focuses on Alfred Agostinelli, who is thought to be the basis for the character of Albertine Simonet in Proust's novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*. The collaboration, Anno says, is based loosely on "some ideas about Albertine, being for one a transposed gender person."*

"Anne and I swore on pain of death not to be illustrative but to be metaphorical in these images," Anno says. "We are interested in having an open reading that readers and viewers can make on their own."

*Anne Carson (b. 1950) is one of the most celebrated poets and translators in the English-speaking world. Her most recent book is *Red Doc*, a follow-up to *The Autobiography of Red*, her acclaimed retelling of the Greek legend of Geryon. A Classics professor, Carson's robust publication history includes celebrated translations of Euripides, Sappho, and Sophocles, as well as experimental texts merging poetry with essay or opera, including *The Beauty of the Husband*, *An Ortesia*, and *Eros the Bittersweet*. Her body of work has earned her a devoted following and major accolades: Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellowships, the T.S. Eliot Prize, a Lannan Literary Award, and a Pushcart Prize, among others.*

Carson's stature as an artist is based in part on the success of her more risky collaborative performance pieces with a range of artists, from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and avant-garde great Laurie Anderson and her rocker husband Lou Reed, to a current project with visual artist Kim Anno. These collaborations begin most often with Carson's texts and are developed in stages with her partner, Robert Currie, who is referred to as "the Randomizer" during the creative process.

I first met the pair in their class "Egocircus" at the University of Michigan (an incarnation of the course on collaboration first offered at New York University). The seminar began with a series of curiosities: for example, Currie's favorite shoes worn days prior were now suddenly relocated on Anne's feet, and she allowed herself just a slight smile when he noticed. The way Carson and Currie moved about one another looked to me like a dance where each refused to lead.

This past June, five years after our first encounter, Carson and Currie invited me into their home for an interview on their evolving collaboration. I entered through the front door, following their voices upstairs to find Carson sitting on the couch. Currie chose a seat on the floor next to me; he seemed more comfortable there. Carson placed her feet on my bag, which made me laugh.

When I said I knew that I was officially allowed only five questions, Currie playfully scolded Carson. But it became clear she had forgotten she'd set this limit, and they did respond to follow-up questions by email later on.

Before we began, Carson asked the meaning of the word "asymptote" and I gave her my usual definition. She reached for her heavy volume of the OED—"They stopped printing them you know, this is one of the last hardbound copies"—and read the definition aloud, tracing the word back to its Greek origins and through several historical epochs. "A very tragic adjective," she decided. Currie agreed that it "sounds like Hobbes." Their voices seemed to mingle a bit before giving way to a more profound silence—short-lived, of course.

Collaboration, as their answers show in this interview, is like carefully gathering downed power lines to harness and redirect energy. In Carson and Currie's work, it forms a composition marked as much by silence as by utterance, given that their preferred materials (Carson is fond of the handwritten) and spaces (Currie prefers theaters) differ so vastly. Carson has fashioned poetry from the grave goods of her past—the accordion-like pages of Nox began as a scrapbook to help reconcile her to the death of her brother—yet even this unlocking of self into text was transmuted elegantly into dance.

But one cannot enter into such negotiations without risk, the material volleying between the was and the will be. Collaboration, in this sense, is contingent upon movement, leading inevitably to large and small moments of confrontation between those involved. Carson and Currie are no different—they must give over to the rush of time and one another's ideas. "It's all just a blast," as Currie says. "The hardship of getting there doesn't really matter."

—Megan Berkobien

How do you know when a project is ripe for collaboration or when it might resist certain aspects of collaboration?

Currie: We approach people because we like them.

Carson: It's not really about the project, it's about the people.

Currie: It's about the people we're with and then you think of something fun you could do together and in Anne's case, it always starts with a text, doesn't it?

Carson: Yes, usually with the writing because I'm not very flexible. (Laughs).

Currie: It has more to do with hanging around the people you like than searching out an exact thing.

Carson: Out of being interested in what they're doing. Because we already have a sense of what we do.

Carson: And we're usually bored of that.

Currie: We're bored with what we do.

(They laugh.)

Carson: But it depends on liking the people and trusting the people. You have to assume that whatever they do will be as good as you want the thing to be and just go ahead with that.

And what happens when a collaboration is entered into? What comes first?

Carson: The spatial aspect.

Currie: The next question is what form it should take. Should it be a book or a performance? And often it becomes all of these things eventually. With *Cassandra* (an essay on translation) the initial form was a performance. *Nox* was a book that became a performance.

Yes, a dance.

Carson: But generally it goes out from the text to some idea of a form, then usually from free-associating in the car when we're driving somewhere. Currie comes up with a whole spatial concept, which he calls a "score." That becomes the skeleton of the thing.

Currie: Then we either make something or get other people to help us make it.

Carson: From there, I think the problem is keeping people from being literal or

didactic about the score—to keep them intent on making their own layer.

What happens when a project resists collaboration? Surely you've encountered problems with the process. What kind of discussion ensues to get around doubts and obstacles in the group? Is it possible to manipulate these ruptures into becoming a stronger part of the project?

Carson: Simply do something else and return to it later to find the problem wasn't a problem at all. Ruptures almost always lead to a stronger project.

It seems as though during collaboration you are creating a history; the nature of your work often involves a very personal history as well. Is it simply your own history you're trying to capture or a larger sense of history and structure that the books will carry on?

Carson: No, something that I can put down.

Currie: It's to get rid of it—

Carson: —It's to get rid of it and do the next thing. To forget it.

Currie: There's actually a terrible story of my insensitivity about that. When *Antigonick* came out there was kind of a party for it in New York and Bianca Stone (a former student we collaborated with) was sitting across from me and I realized that I was already talking about what we were going to do next. I hadn't bothered to say, "Oh, geez. Congratulations for *Antigonick*." I was already saying, "Well, here's what we're thinking about doing. Here's what was wrong with that." So I think we're both into finishing so we can move on to the next thing.

In developing a stage performance how do you decide about the roles you want and your involvement? Currie, in a performance of *Antigonick* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark you played Nick, a role that you always seem to play. The entire time I watched you, there seemed to be an underlying feeling of warmth,

like you were nearly smiling at every point. How do you feel about your performance as the mute?

Currie: Usually I'm just the director, the one "being" there.

Carson: Currie is a problem-solver.

Currie: Spatially, that is.

Carson: Really in every way. Driving—

Currie: —Well, that's only because I'm the only one who can stay up late enough to drive at night. I'm a favorite of all my friends.

Carson, you say Currie is a problem-solver but your writing often tends to emphasize an unresolved nature where things can never simply end. How do you two negotiate this difference between content and actually having to produce a finished work?

Carson: By never finishing the work, by altering it in performance or medium, making a book a dance, or a dance a sculpture.

For the both of you, it seems as though working together is more of a daily practice, not just a repeated accident. Do you cultivate a sort of artistic intimacy, outside of your personal relationship, in order to collaborate? And what about teaching together, as that too seems like a form of collaboration?

Currie: I don't think we do, do we?

Carson: Cultivate it? No, not directly.

Currie: I think we talk all the time and every so often we ask, "Well, what's all this talking about?" and then we come up with some idea to do something.

Carson: Yes, I think so.

Currie: Part of it is that there just isn't that great of a division because we like

talking to each other. So I don't see a whole lot of difference between talking about going to the lake and having a swim and talking about a large piece. But what we will do once we have an idea is make a schedule. Once we decide to talk about something more formally we see if it will be collaborative or a project to do on our own.

Let's talk about translation, which is also perhaps a form of collaboration.

Carson: Sure. Collaboration.

Currie: Would you really say that?

Carson: A collaboration with the original piece. It's a useful metaphor.

How do you think time operates in a translation? Does collaboration help form a bridge?

Carson: A bridge from where to where?

Between traditions. How do you weave them in? Is it an innately personal choice to decide which traditions to include?

Carson: Sure. It's a very personal choice. I suppose whatever is interesting. Hegel is interesting. Plus, I love saying his name, as opposed to Althusser, which you never want to pronounce. I think it's just finding little nodes of interest in the original. Also, as in the case of Hegel, it's something you can't get around because everyone who writes about *Antigone* has something to say about Hegel's analysis—it's a very polarizing piece. It seems respectful to work that in, but that's a minor consideration. More important is how fascinating it helps the text to be.

Currie: But how do you fit it in metrically?

Carson: There's no method for that—just mushing around with the line.

Currie: Because you always do. You try to keep faithful to that aspect.

Carson: I wouldn't say there's metrical fidelity to the original meters, which isn't reproducible, but there's a new rhythmic design to take in the English sounds and the shifting content.

Would you consider yourself a translator, Currie?

Currie: No. I don't think so.

Carson: He's not really into metaphors for what he does. (Laughs). Randomizer is not a metaphor—it is so literal.

Currie: So you're agreed that I'm not a translator.

Carson: I don't think I would describe it that way. I mean, highfalutin' terminology is not your thing in general.

I want to ask if you have any favorite collaborators. I know when I took your class it was Marina Abramović and Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) for me.

Currie: Well, John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

Carson: Yes, they represent the ideal form of it. They interacted so little with each other in the process, which made it so magical. But also Ragnar Kjartansson.

Currie: He's a performance artist from Iceland. A few years ago, he did a segment for Performa [the visual art performance biennial]. He brought singers from Iceland and hired a chamber group from New York and built this funky little set and did the last few minutes of the *Marriage of Figaro* for twelve hours over and over and over again. It was unbelievable. He just recently did a gallery piece that was—

Carson: —It was a room with eight video screens all around, and on the screens were people performing all within the same house, the same song, which gradually rises for about a half hour to a climax. And by the end they're all

wailing—like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. On one screen is Ragnar himself singing along. During the video it shows people shifting and then there are others trying to start off a cannon on the front lawn. But it's just surprisingly inspiring, and if you stay for a long time you become emotionally involved as it rises to this crescendo and we're all just singing away—

Carson: —The stars are all exploding.

Carson: So it's a collaboration with him, this house, and of course the viewers, as all the people in the room gradually come to understand what's happening because there is no explanation, and they are carried into this emotion together until it goes dark and starts over.

Currie: Something I didn't get across is that it's all just a blast—the hardship of getting there really doesn't matter when you get to making that thing or having that conversation. We did these sonnets one time with [dancer and choreographer] Rashaun Mitchell and we usually score it rather strictly, or at least give them parameters for what they do while we read on stage. But we never saw the result until they sent the DVD of it. Just prior to the performance Merce Cunningham passed away and of course all three dancers were from the Cunningham Company. There's this great moment during the Merce sonnet when Marcie [Munnerlyn] goes back to the edge—way upstage—and she dances one of his solos completely out of the score. It was simply beautiful.

Currie, you mentioned the hardship of collaboration. Can you recall any particulars from that early period working together that assured you that collaborating regularly might be a good idea in the long run? Your roles must have then evolved, I assume, especially Currie's as "the Randomizer."

Carson: It was pretty much immediately a good idea and hardship actually becomes a pleasure, a sort of distraction.

Currie: As for Randomizer, a few years ago in San Francisco we were asked how we worked together and Anne said something like, "I have a limited number of arrows in my quiver, so I must take very careful aim and hit the target. Currie has an unlimited number of arrows and has never hit anything."

Carson: I think that kind of sums it up. ✦