

WRITING THE GAP:  
THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY IN TEXTS  
BY FOUR CANADIAN WOMEN

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**Writing the gap:  
The performance of identity in texts by four Canadian women**

by  
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School of Graduate Studies  
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## Abstract

This examination of the writing by four Canadian women takes common notions of identity to task. Investigating the strategies that Lee Maracle, Joy Kogawa, Dionne Brand and Gail Scott use in their texts, this work builds an argument for a positing of identity as a kind of assemblage. Re-configuring identity as an activity or performance rather than an inborn immutable trait empowers typically-disadvantaged groups to re-make their worlds by re-making their identity.

The importance of language as shaper of culture emerges as the examined texts manifest women characters who creatively seize control of their lives. They become agents of change by entering language and wrestling with its ambiguities. These writers insert markers, codes and signs of identity into gaps and spaces in traditional forms, breaking open codified patterns. Deft, flexible, adaptive and determined, women in these texts form a *bricolage* of signifiers and imbue them with the potency of identity.

Language as a bodily act, the reclamation of sexual power, an exploration of the effects of hate speech, and interrogation of racist, sexist and classist paradigms all work in these selections to support the necessity for a new understanding of identity. Specific techniques such as the trace, the transverse, the *genotext*, and the deployment of certain positivist values enable the writing to re-invent the nature of identity.

I dedicate this work to my friend  
Bridget Mary Shiel  
September 14, 1960 -- June 24, 1997

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## Introduction: Identity as Performance

"That constant veil over the eyes, the blood-stained  
blind of race and sex"  
(Brand *No Language Is Neutral* 27).

"I really hope I keep the elite awake at night" (*Maracle  
I Am Woman* 103).

"L'écriture n'est pas l'expression d'une identité pré-existante,  
pré-discursive; elle est au contraire le dévoilement et le travail  
des difficultés identitaires" (Simon and Leahy 394).

"It would seem all too obvious that racism constitutes the very  
metaphorical and conceptual apparatus on which feminist  
knowledge turns" (Emberley "Introduction" 24).

*The New Shorter Oxford* explains the roots of identity from the Latin, with *idem* meaning same and *entitas* meaning entity (1304). *The Oxford* also names a probable association with the form *identidem* (meaning repeatedly). The first definition for identity refers to sameness, or being identical to something else. The second definition draws on the quality that makes a person or thing individual and unique, and requires this quality, and the characteristics that determine it, to be constant and unchanging over time. An example given is from Hannah Arendt (German political philosopher 1906-75) and reads: "The Jews ... had been able to keep their identity through the centuries." In explaining the term, "identity crisis," *The Oxford* offers: "a period of emotional disturbance in which a person has difficulty in determining his or her identity and role in relation to society, esp. as part of the maturing process."

Now that reverence for authenticity as a standard has been abandoned with other humanist legacies such as “the universal,” “the transcendent” and “the essential,” fastening onto a working definition of identity has become increasingly difficult. Both the idea of determining exact likeness and the assumption that one possesses one trait that makes one oneself and not another are vexed by post-humanist challenges to constancy of any kind. In the example from Arendt the assumption is that there is something unique to Jews, in other words a “Jewishness,” that is constant and unchanging over time. The description of the term “identity crisis,” which *The Oxford* says is jargon borrowed from the discipline of psychology, yokes identity with society, suggesting that there is a relative relationship.

“Who am I?” This question opens Winifred Gallagher’s book *I.D.: How Heredity and Experience Make You Who You Are* (1996) (xiii). When asked what is meant by identity, this is what the average citizen would probably say. What is it about me that you would have to replicate exactly to make another identical to me? What is it about me that makes me uniquely me? What is my role, purpose and place of meaning in relation to society? These questions, framed colloquially, encompass the three aspects cited in *The Oxford Dictionary*, on which I have remarked, and also move towards answering the question, “Who am I?”

As for the thorny problem of constancy through time, I point to the roots of identity in Latin. *Identidem*, meaning repeatedly, provides an opening for the treatment of identity without drawing on some form of essentialism. As Judith Butler suggests in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), and explores more

thoroughly in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), what one comes to think of as the identity of a person is actually the unique compilation and combination of signs performed at certain moments, iteratively, over time. So rather than a quality one possesses that remains unchanged through time, real identity markers are the signals of performativity that are chosen and expressed at intermittent instances. If certain markers are presented in a similar way time after time, the impression of identity will be perceived as more or less consistent. So the repetitive component of identity accounts for the false notion of its immutability.

The idea of identity as performance is a bequest of the post-structuralist age. Only because allegiance to the essential has been corrupted can we entertain the contrived nature of identity. Consider what Homi Bhabha has to say about identity:

Identity is an inter-subjective, performative act that refuses the division of public/private, psyche/social. It is not a self *given* to consciousness, but a 'coming-to-consciousness' of the self through the realm of symbolic otherness – language, the social system, the unconscious. (Bhabha "Unpacking my library ...again" 206)

In this study of the writing of Lee Maracle, Joy Kogawa, Dionne Brand and Gail Scott I consider how their texts shed light on identity as a 'coming-to-consciousness' of the self through the realm of symbolic otherness.

Bhabha's definition of identity has the advantage of freedom from the inheritance of identity as a pre-determined quality conferred by birth or by a set of environmental conditions. Inasmuch as identity is a self-fabricated ongoing *bricolage* of various signs,

and thus a potentially empowering activity, it can elude containment in categories that might otherwise restrict or diminish it.

Many feminists complain about using identity as the assumed unifying connection between members of a political group. For example, Judith Butler writes, “ ‘identity’ as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary” (“Contingent Foundations” 15-16.) And Denise Riley writes,

My own feeling is that ‘identity’ is an acutely double-edged weapon – not useless, but dependent on the context, sometimes risky – and that the closeness between an identity and a derogatory identification may, again always in specific contexts, resemble that between being a subject and the process of subjectification. (“A Short History of Some Preoccupations” 122)

However, reconfiguring identity as a process rather than a quality may take care of these misgivings. Consider how Kate Bornstein talks about gender: “[G]ender is neither natural nor essential, but rather the performance of self-expression within any dynamic relationship” (21). The same can be said about other categories of identity. “[G]ender isn’t the only identity one can bend” (Bornstein 64).

It is sometimes useful, however, to be perceived as a unified group, more or less based on a common identity. Many civil rights battles have been waged on behalf of a people who share something considered to be identity-based, such as visible differences in skin colour, heritage, and others. In looking at the writing of Joy Kogawa, for example,

I argue that she makes strategic use of essentialist principles in order to posit Japanese-Canadians as a cultural group, fictionally-unified for the purposes of imbuing her narrative with the potency of political polemic. However, the principles that underlie the performance of identity on the part of her main characters are more inkeeping with Homi Bhabha's understanding of identity than any essentialist paradigm.

Lawrence Grossberg explains how essentialist notions of identity can exacerbate the tangle of identity politics:

Politics of identity are synecdochal, taking the part (the individual) to be representative of the whole (the social group defined by a common identity). Such a logic not only too easily equates political and cultural identities, it makes politics into a matter of representation (or its absence).

(Grossberg 169)

How can the one speak for the whole? How, in fact, can the whole speak for itself? On the other hand, in our society, political and social lobbying for change depends on a synecdochal relationship. What kind of a social structure would recognize conditions for political change not based on representation? These are the kinds of questions the women writers in this study explore. In assembling the props, costumes, sets and lines for the ongoing performance of identity in their texts, these writers have adopted certain strategies and techniques which all combine to accomplish what I call "writing the gap."

By writing the gap, these writers all manage to treat identity in ways that recover it from essentialist stasis and preserve it from deconstructionist reduction. Bhabha writes,

Identity becomes the problem of negotiating and articulating photo – the lightening likeness of the image, the shutter speed of recognition – with graph: the deciphering of the inscriptive, the diachrony of narrative and historicity, the alterity of the sign. The gaze and the grapheme come together – are articulated – in an ambivalence and splitting of the subject that enables identity to be strategic and effective because of its structure as a contingent, ‘double’ consciousness. (“Unpacking” 206)

The negotiation between the likeness of the image and the alterity of the sign can only happen in ambivalence. Bhabha posits a subject that enables identity to be “strategic and effective,” and so do these women writers. They deploy identity’s contingent structure, profiting from the site of enunciation always involving a doubling of time and space, always depending on the temporal conditionality of social discourse.

#### Writing the gap.

The gap in Dionne Brand’s texts is the transverse between the immigrant’s homeland and the newly-adopted home country. Brand’s particular style engages dialectics between socialism, lesbianism, feminism and colour. The combination of her aggressive, creative use of language and her intense depiction of the politics of the female body makes for stunningly beautiful writing. The confabulation of identity emerging in Brand’s work is a powerful indicator of the contingent nature of any enunciation. Interestingly, one of several historians who reviewed Dionne Brand’s non-fiction collection, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s - 1950s*, talks about “the importance of history to one’s sense of identity, pride and place in

society" (Sangster 121). Bhabha asks the question: "Have our fables of identity ever been unmediated by another?" (*Location of Culture* 57).

Gail Scott's writing locates a gap in the space between the signifier and the signified, where traces of the pre-linguistic life of infants emerge in the form of pressure on the symbolic order. She uses an adaptation of the classical heroine to produce textual occasions for the presencing of woman's body and re-works sexual and natural images to refresh historic sites of powerlessness. French feminism, an exploration of the relationship with mother, and a re-structuring of meaning-making associations enable Scott's experimentation with linguistic power to flower in some exquisite performances of identity.

Joy Kogawa explores the gap inherent in the hyphen of the Canadian born to immigrant parents and the implications of racist rhetoric produced by institutions of power. She uses a mixture of quiet, understated poetry and historiography to show how the racially-biased implementation of the War Measures Act during World War II constituted hate speech. Her writing deftly confers agency on the named others and re-works language to enable a persecuted minority group to enter the discursive community of the perpetrators and bring about social change.

Lee Maracle writes the gap that exists where indigenous peoples remain unseen by the dominant culture, positing the trace of identity that flickers across the frame like an after-image on the retina. She utilizes a self-interrogating voice, an engagement of the mythic Trickster figure, images of spirals and arcs and the ambivalence of twinning to persuade her reader to look for the unlikely places where identity is construed.



The writing I examine in this work makes clear the undeniable link between language and the body. Gender and race are generally determined by assessing the body. Trinh Minh-Ha speaks of the importance of reclaiming the body:

The literary and the art world, for example, have been taken to task for having used the term 'political' too loosely. As some who are eager to guard the territory for themselves would argue, 'political' should be attributed to investigations of specific historical contradictions. Well, the body *is* a site of particularity and specificity, at the same time as it is a site marked by historical 'contradictions'. As such, it is as intimately personal as it is impersonally social. ... [T]hinking and writing is a very physical process that constantly speaks of and speaks to the body of the person writing. Again, that body does not simply point to an individual terrain; it is the site where the individual and society meet. And it is by working on this relationship that the tension between the personal and the political is maintained. (Minh-Ha 14, her italics)

The body of woman in these texts has been written as a site of historical contradictions. Colour has been etched on the skin of narrative in a cobbled relief of exploitation and subjugation. These writers point out the ways that white First World feminism has failed them. A gendered and racialized subject becomes real.

Lee Maracle invents the shame-based political body of the Native woman and she renders poignantly the continual effacement of her sexual being. Brand depicts the black female body politic in the context of slavery, poverty and back-breaking labour. The

women characters' struggle to countermand invisibility haunts the edges of the narratives that ultimately empower them. Exploring the trajectory towards other women, Brand and Scott manifest the body as a site of political and social subversion. Engaging the bodies of her interned citizens in relation to figurations of space, Kogawa massages the prospect of healing.

"Language is a tailor's shop where nothing fits" (Rumi 21). These four Canadian women, Scott, Maracle, Brand and Kogawa, appropriate language to facilitate the performance of identity. In so doing, they force the reader to think again about signifiers such as "Canadian," "sex," "race," "colour," and "gender."

## “Impossible images”: trace and iteration in Lee Maracle’s writing

“The robbery of our lives has been thorough. It is a complex thing, this colonization. On the one hand, nothing good can come of the enemy’s money, on the other hand, they stole everything we ever had” (Maracle *Bobbi Lee* 238).

“Racism has de-humanized us all” (Maracle *Bobbi Lee* 240).

“Cultural imperialism means altering a colonized people’s cultural expression without consideration for the aspirations of the people” (Maracle *I Am Woman* 110).

“We are the keepers of time. We must know the places of invasion in our histories and in ourselves so that we may illumine the paths of those who cannot see or who do not know” (Emma LaRocque xxvii).

“In North America Native peoples possess the luxury of not having to resist colonialism – we resist each other” (122 *I Am Woman*).

Texts expressing pride in culture and wisdom originating before imperial interference have seen a marked increase in recent decades as a large number of nations establish independence from the British commonwealth. As the colonies detach themselves one by one from colonial rule, many see the current global character in what might be called post-colonial terms. One thinks naturally of the literature of African nations<sup>1</sup>, but we have only to look within our own nation for texts that evidence a similar struggle toward de-colonization.

The last two decades in Canada have seen a robust growth in political awareness

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1. *National Geographic World Atlas* (1998) reports: “Africa has seen more change in this century than any other continent. Just 50 years ago, almost every country belonged to a European power. Today, all but three have won independence” (104).

of the conditions created by colonial influence on Native<sup>2</sup> peoples. Repercussions of abuses at residential schools are emerging like the dark tip of a horrific iceberg; treaty struggles are taking shape beyond the courts in public protests over treatment of sacred lands, traditional hunting grounds and natural resources. Media coverage of events such as the blockade at Oka, the filibuster by Elijah Harper, the protest against NATO low-level bomber testing in Labrador and the resettlement of Davis Inlet residents has brought "Native" issues to the forefront of the Canadian psyche. But the quantity of published written work by First Nations authors is relatively modest.

Basil Johnston<sup>3</sup>, an Ojibway writer in Canada, was one of the earliest who chose to use the written form to tell the stories of his culture. While Mr. Johnston is still alive and writing, it is interesting to consider how new to the tradition Native writers actually are. Emma LaRocque, in an introduction to *Writing the Circle*, asserts: "Native peoples ... are still making the transition from oral to written literatures, from aboriginal to foreign languages. This is both a gift and a challenge" (xxvi). The displacement of aboriginal languages by English through the forced attendance of residential schools has virtually obliterated First Nations peoples' original tongues. As is the case with many

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<sup>2</sup> There is still considerable division in sentiment over whether capitalization of the first letter in the word "native" is politically-correct. Some feel the capitalization transforms the word into a kind of exotic racial marker, serving to further marginalize and "other" First Nations people. They argue that it no more needs to be capitalized than do the words "white" or "black." Others feel that capitalizing the "n" draws importance to the word and accords dignity to the nouns it describes. Where I have quoted writers who use the lower case "n" I have left it as is. I, however, have chosen to capitalize the first letter of the word "native" in this work. I have allowed the writing of Lee Maracle be my guide, and since she uses the capitalization practise, out of respect for her work, I have decided to do so as well.

<sup>3</sup> Basil Johnston is a storyteller and author of eleven books including *Ojibway Heritage*, *Ojibway Ceremonies*, *Ojibway Tales*, *Indian School Days* and *The Manitous*.

African writers, producing literature in the language of the colonizers is an ambiguous, political act.

What is at work is the power struggle between the oral and the written, between the Native in us and the English. ... [P]erhaps the height of cheekiness in a colonizer is to steal your language, withhold his from you as long as he can, then turn around and demand that you speak and write better than he does. (LaRocque xx-xxi)

To write at all is to take on a "foreign code of conduct;" to write in English is to submit and subvert at the same time. Adopting this cultural process, colonized nations can write against the dominant culture while giving the appearance of assimilating.

Like the transmutation from oral to written, the movement into another language involves confronting many invisible snares: "To a Native woman, English is like an ideological onion whose stinging layers of racism and sexism must be peeled away before it can be fully enjoyed" (LaRocque xx). Language works to maintain cultural imperatives even as it is constantly re-created by the culture and in this way, the loss of one's own language spells certain cultural devastation. Making room for the frames and values of white culture embodied in English meant sacrificing many aboriginal beliefs. "English does not express the process of ceremony" (Maracle "Another Side of Me" *I Am Woman* 115). On the other hand, many Native writers believe they have an obligation to write their stories in order to counter the damage done by non-Natives who have written about Natives in ways that support deleterious stereotypes. As LaRocque has noted:

There are not enough superlatives in the English language to say how deeply Aboriginal people's worlds have been falsified in white North American literary traditions and popular culture. (xxiii-xxiv)

Terry Goldie remarks in the "Preface" to his 1992 *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, he compiled with Daniel David Moses, "One reason why Native literature is so interesting is that while it is based on very old traditions, as a literature it is quite young. As are the authors. A high percentage of the writers that we've included are under fifty, many under forty" (xiv).

But if the transition from oral to written expression presents a difficulty, it is merely one of the many that account for the relatively few published works by First Nations writers. According to LaRocque: "Literature is political in that its linguistic and ideological transmission is defined and determined by those in power" (xvi). Greg Young-ing, a Manitoban Cree writes,

The unique contribution the Aboriginal Voice could make to world literature is in many ways potentially more valuable and unique than the contribution of Canadian literature. In spite of this (as is the case with most sectors of Canadian industry, economy, and society) Aboriginal peoples have historically been blocked from equitable participation in the publishing industry. (181)

The dynamic network of colonial conditions that problematizes other facets of Native life also contributes to the limited access to publishing. LaRocque writes:

To discuss Native literature is to tangle with a myriad of issues:

voicelessness, accessibility, stereotypes, appropriation, ghettoization, linguistic cultural, sexual, and colonial roots of experience, and, therefore, of self-expression – all issues that bang at the door of conventional notions about Canada and about literature. (“Preface” xv)

It is a sad irony that the very idea of Native literature challenges accepted standards of literature and what it means to be Canadian.

The Native story has been transmuted (and transgressed) in its incarnation as written word. Moses says, “It’s a strange technology we’re dealing with, this writing our words down on paper and alienating the best parts of ourselves into books. ... [T]hat’s one of the actual physical ways the alienation, the separation between the person and their thought, happens” (xviii). That the Native story is shared communally is a tempting assumption to make considering that “most Native writers are ... speaking first to their own community” (Moses xxi), but Moses asserts otherwise: “in Native traditions of storytelling, if you make the story it belongs to you. Stories can also be given away or traded for” (xx).<sup>4</sup>

This idea explains Anne Cameron’s wording in the preface to her book, *Daughters of Copper Woman* (1981), “the style I have chosen most clearly approaches

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4. In fact, Maracle argues, in the preface to her collection *Sojourner’s Truth and Other Stories*, that “the word story-teller is inappropriate here: *to tell, to explain*. When our orators get up to tell a story, there is no explanation, no set-up to guide the listener – just the poetic terseness of the dilemma is presented” (12). Aboriginal people generally use story differently than do white Europeans. The native association of story with truth subverts a non-aboriginal’s association of story with fiction or invention. Story is used for instruction in native communities; for example, Maracle explains the responses of her two teachers:

As a young person, I asked both my European instructor and my Native instructor the same question; the answer was radically different. The one a lecture, essay-style response, the other a story, a riddle I would have to figure out. (“Ramparts” 169)

the style in which the stories were given to me" (7), as if the stories were literally given to her as a gift. She says of the book, which is based on stories told to her by Native women of Vancouver Island, "*Daughters of Copper Woman* is not **my** work, it is not a collection of **my** stories ... [W]hen those old women tell me something I have an obligation to listen, and to do what I am requested to do" ("The Operative Principle is Trust" 69 Cameron's emphasis).

Jeanette Armstrong tells Victoria Freeman in an interview,

There is great difficulty in bridging the two cultures where legal matters are concerned. The expression of copyright law for the protection of intellectual ownership is always defined in relation to the individual whose creativity is expressed in that work. It precludes the idea that a cultural group can express one mind and one creative thought, which is the case in some of the creative arts of Native peoples. In a sense the law says that a cultural group cannot have its own idea, its own expression, and cannot have the right to determine the use of that creative configuration. If that cannot be expressed and protected and be perpetuated in terms of legal practices, then we have a serious problem with multiculturalism in Canada. ("The Body of Our People" 11)

The surge in recent decades of efforts to resurrect and reclaim Native heritage has resulted in many non-Native writers taking to researching and recording Native life and history. For some, this activity has spelled an unwelcome intrusion, the re-telling of Native myths and stories seen as yet another colonial humiliation. Young-ing maintains



that,

In some regards [that Aboriginal peoples have been blocked from the publishing industry] has been more damaging than marginalization in other sectors because it has had the effect of silencing the Aboriginal Voice and paving the way for a rash of non-Aboriginal writers to profit from the creation of a body of literature focusing on Aboriginal peoples that is based on ethnocentric, racist and largely incorrect presumptions. This has led to a situation where incorrect images, ridiculous stereotypes and highly problematic academic paradigms have created perceptions of Aboriginal peoples that are entirely based outside any reality or truth. (181)

Consequently, Native writers are faced with the challenge of not only filling in the gap where Native works are missing in the field of literary production, but also displacing the work that is out there purporting to be "Native" in content. Young-ing tells us that (as of 1993) "[n]ot one Aboriginal author has been published by a large Canadian publishing house; while over a hundred books *about* Aboriginal peoples have been published by large Canadian houses already in the 1900s" (185, his emphasis). That texts about Native life are being written and consumed by the non-Native population is a grave concern.

Moses writes:

I think the concern with appropriation has more to do with the fact that most people aren't sensitive listeners, so they are not sensitive transmitters of stories, partly because the cultures have different values. When someone from another culture hears a story I tell, they perceive only the

things that relate to their values. If they try to retell my story they are going to emphasize those things that are important to them. That only makes sense. (xx)

Unfamiliar and alien as writing may be, Native people are doing it and perhaps fear of further colonial disempowerment is the impetus. Julia V. Emberley writes,

The entry of Native storytelling into print culture, in particular during the last twenty years, is part of this process of negotiation in which Native artists and writers are demanding the incorporation of Native cultural production into industrial media, which also includes film. Such demands and subsequent actions exemplify the notion of hybridity so much in use in current cultural criticism. ... [I]t is a struggle to overcome the violence of epistemological enforcement that has ignored, yet 'freely' appropriated, the cultural contributions of those people whose history and culture have been relegated to a wasteland of stereotypical by-products. ("Introduction" 19)

Cameron writes of the meeting that she had with Lee Maracle in which they both agreed "it is Time" (68) for non-Natives to stop telling Native stories. Emberley claims, rightly I think, that "[t]he Third International Feminist Book Fair / Troisième Foire internationale du livre féministe, held in Montreal during June 1988, has become a watershed in Canadian feminist cultural politics" ("(De)constructing Affinities" 79), because at this event responses to cultural appropriation came to the fore. At this meeting,

Lee Maracle delivered a paper entitled 'Moving Over,' in which she

addressed the productive yet debilitating discord between Native and English-Canadian women, particularly with reference to non-Native publication of Indian stories, such as Anne Cameron's *Daughters of Copper Women* [sic]" (Emberley 94).

Maracle quotes some of the comments made at the conference: writer Jeannette Armstrong objects, "We are not monkey grunters in need of anyone telling our stories;" and editor Viola Thomas urges, "Don't buy books about us, buy books by us" ("Native Myths" 185). Lenore Keeshig-Tobias states, "Literature about Native people by non-Natives is not Native literature" (175). She portends: "There comes a time when ... white supporters of native causes, will have to step back in the true spirit of respect for self-determination and equality, and let the real Native voices be heard" (177)<sup>5</sup>. Maracle records her own response to non-Natives' appropriation of Native stories: "creeping around libraries full of nonsensical anthropocentric drivel, imbuing these findings with falsehood in the name of imagination, then peddling the nonsense as 'Indian Mythology' is literary dishonesty" ("Native Myths" 185). Emberley maintains that because of that "watershed" conference, feminists are now "called upon to rethink the concept of gender through competing historiographic narratives and diverse cultural experiences" ("(De)constructing Affinities" 80).

At the meeting of the Learned Societies in 1995 at UQAM in Montreal, Quebec, Emma LaRocque, noted Native speaker, writer and activist, reminded listeners that Lee

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5. See page 185 of Maracle's essay "Native Myths: Trickster Alive and Crowing," in *Language in Her Eye*, and her notes on page 187.

Maracle is not the only Native woman writing in Canada. That an audience would have to be reminded of this fact testifies to the overwhelming presence Maracle has created for herself in recent years. Her voice has been among the most insistent in Native groups' ongoing struggles for self-determination and autonomy.

When Maracle spoke at the "Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures" conference held in Vancouver in 1988, she had already spoken over three hundred times on "the same subject"; the subject to which she refers is her "own personal struggle against racist and patriarchal dogma" ("Ramparts" 162). Maracle's public persona is that of an outspoken, dedicated political activist. She says, "I take it on. I have never been short of courage" ("Ramparts" 162). She has spoken, written and demonstrated against racism, sexism and classism.

Though a self-declared heterosexual, Maracle vehemently denounces homophobia, seeing it as another hatred, as damaging as racism, sexism and others. She writes, "[w]e, as heterosexually oriented women, may have difficulty accepting that other women have no sexual desire for men. Following this realization should come the realization that the journey of exploring attitudes will broaden humanity. By rejecting lesbians we close the door to our own journey" ("My Love" *I Am Woman* 35). She also argues, "[t]o be raped is to be sexually violated. For society to force someone, through shame and ostracism, to comply with love and sex that it defines, is nothing but organized rape. That is what homophobia is about. Organized rape." ("Isn't Love a Given?" *I Am Woman* 30).

She has been particularly critical of other women: "The condition of white

privilege delineates the nature of the cultural resistance of women of colour and demarcates the lines of authority, the hierarchy between women" (Maracle "Afterword" 174). She has criticized, in particular, white academic women for the damage done by First World feminism and (what she sees as) the alienating language of literary theory. Maracle reports: "I have heard white women utter in speeches that universal suffrage, women's suffrage is some sixty years old. That is not our reality" ("Ramparts" 165). She cautions readers: "That the white women of North America are racist and that they define the movement in accordance with their own narrow perspective should not surprise us. White people define everything in terms of their own people, and then magnanimously open the door to a select number of others" (*I Am Woman* 137). Emberley explains:

In Canada during the 1980s Native women, struggling for self-determination from Canadian colonial interests, challenged the validity of feminist theories and practices. Not only was that challenge directed towards the double blindnesses to racism and ethnocentrism within the tradition of Anglo-American feminism, but Native women also confronted feminisms with the very terms and definitions of gender on which their theoretical knowledge was constructed. (xv)

Like other writers of colour, Maracle challenges the assumptions of white European history that would contain her according to either gender or colour. She urges: "we must stop being shocked when our comrades, our potential fighting partners, exhibit manifestations of race, sex, and class bias" ("Afterword" 173-4).

She has come to be seen as one of the primary spokespeople (along with others

including Dionne Brand, whom I also treat in this study) for groups lobbying against appropriation of voice and culture. She has been involved in just about every highly-charged political demonstration to do with Native rights in the last two decades. She writes: "The logic of the colonizer for the last five centuries has been and continues to be: 'How can I turn this to my advantage?' The logic of the colonized is 'How can we turn this around so that we can regain our lost sense of humanity?'" (*I Am Woman* 101).

Barbara Godard writes: "The response of oppressed groups to hegemonic culture is complex and frequently contradictory: accepted, forcefully perhaps, in some ways, it is resisted in others" ("The Politics of Representation" 195). The manifestation of cultural resistance and political subversion in *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, *Sundogs*, *Ravensong*, and *Sojourner's Truth* presents the creation of Native subjects in a way that involves the reader. The characters' continuing struggles to see themselves and be seen with humanity, dignity and respect may seem exaggerated and relentless to a white reader. Helen Hoy in a recent paper talks about how the white reader is marginalized in Maracle's writing. This othering or alienating of the reader, which makes him/her feel outside the centre, Hoy suggests, ostensibly mirrors the experience of First Nations people in a predominantly white society.

Native characters form arcs and circles around a vacant centre in Maracle's work, and the white characters, like the white reader, play cameos, making small appearances on the margins of Native existence. The white characters that appear in the stories are carefully-chosen tokens (James in *Sundogs*, German Judy, Steve and Carol in *Ravensong*), accomplishing what Gayatri Spivak says of tokenism: "the putative centre

welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin. And it is the centre that offers the official explanation; or, the centre is defined and reproduced by the explanation that it can express" ("Explanation and Culture: Marginalia" *In Other Words* 107).

Maracle's stories deflect a narrative centre in such a way that neither the dominant culture nor Native culture can find a stable space in which to inscribe itself; instead, the absence in place of a centre becomes the displacement whereby the reader's focus is directed elsewhere. LaRocque writes,

much of Native writing, whether blunt or subtle, is protest literature in that it speaks to the processes of our colonization: dispossession, objectification, marginalization, and that constant struggle for cultural survival expressed in the movement for structural and psychological self-determination. (xviii)

The space of representation is re-framed in Maracle's work as vacancy so that the *bricolage* of Native identity must appear in places outside of and in between these sites of absence. The cultural identities of the characters (both white and Native) assemble themselves interstitially in the gaps occurring in between the enunciative moments that elude the frame. Bhabha explains that the elision of identity in the tropes of " 'the secret art of Invisibleness' ... is not an ontology of lack. ... It is the uncanny space and time *between* those two moments of being, their incommensurable differences — if such a place can be imagined — signified in the process of repetition" (*Location of Culture* 53, Bhabha's italics).

Maracle's texts re-write the other, clouding the lens of the objectifying perceiver.

The opacity of the lens functions to disempower the oppositions that inhere in any perception of difference. With oppositions rendered powerless, the textual other emerges in Maracle's works as a resistant stain on the backdrop of the perceiver's retina.

Persistent, yet elusive, Maracle's ingenious re-writing of the place of the other in text insists on deploying an enunciative moment whose axes of time and space axes constantly change. Her textual strategies undermine fixity, and scrutinize the contingency of both centredness and marginality.

Maracle's texts create a vision of a historical cultural moment that is only ever partially-known. Metonymic substitution takes the place of and denies the rigidity of stereotypes, operating "without being seen" (Bhabha *Location* 55) in a liminal space that constantly eludes the frame. Maracle's (dissolving) other eclipses the edges of the subject position to re-write notions of self and community outside traditional paradigms. The subject position inscribed in the textual other re-configures the space of enunciation to allow for this very possibility. This re-configuration allows for heterogeneity and multivalence and asserts itself provocatively, demanding a re-thinking of identity itself.

In Bhabha's idea of the "splitting of the subject" in the colonial text (*Location of Culture* 46-7), the seeing eye-objectifying gaze of the dominant culture is blanked out when the other takes up the subject position. In a similar way, the inscription of identity as performance enacted in Lee Maracle's writing interrupts the objectifying gaze of the observer by directing it to unusual time-space interstices. Identity is re-written as a conscious and considered act; the repeated enunciation of the other in chinks and gaps



leaves traces of identity's production.

As Bhabha explains, once the seeing eye contemplates what is missing, it must by necessity also see that the frame of representation does not allow for the creation of a subject other than itself; the frame of representation most readers in western civilization are familiar with posits the colonial one, and locates it in a centred subject position, rendering all others relative to this position. When encountering a subject articulated in other locations and through other techniques, the reader realizes, as Bhabha claims, "the impossibility of claiming an origin for the Self (or Other) within a tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision" (*Location of Culture* 46).

Maracle's novels both utilise and resist discursive rules to interpose hegemonic discourse with what bell hooks calls "counter hegemonic 'race talk'" (*killing rage* 5). Godard maintains, "resistance writing draws attention to itself and to literature in general as a political and politicized activity" ("Politics of Representation" 198). All of Maracle's texts, including the autobiographical *Bobbi Lee*, create subjects which operate in contingent intervening gaps where discourse has been broken open and where traces of resistant identity surface intermittently. In this way Maracle is like the resistance writer Godard describes who "write[s] from opposing discursive formations and aesthetics" ("Politics of Representation" 199). Maracle's resistance writing subverts and undermines the discourses of the dominant culture and the othered culture by radicalizing the method of articulating cultural identity in this colonial enunciative moment. Emberley avers "[i]t is this resistance to totalization that can be read in the discursive praxis of Native

literatures" ("Introduction" 19). *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel, Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories, I Am Woman, Sundogs and Ravensong* erode positionality within and without the cultures by using but at the same time challenging, resisting and re-writing the discourses of each.

In *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist critique, Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory* Julia Emberley investigates the efficacy of theorizing the writing of Native Canadian women through both materialist feminist and postcolonial perspectives. She argues that postcolonial theory applies to Native literature in Canada even though the writers are situated geographically outside the Third World ("Introduction" 17). Drawing on the work of Peter Kulchyski, she cites "ethnicity" and "internal colonialism" as two terms commonly used to identify Native Canadians' place in the Canadian literary landscape ("Introduction" 18). Finding both these notions inadequate, Emberley agrees with Kulchyski that it is more useful to regard Native people's position in terms of their ongoing negotiation of subject-positions with relation to the state ("Introduction" 18).

Emberley's analysis of the feminism of Teresa de Lauretis and the "anti-colonialism" of Gayatri Spivak leads her to conclude that

The position of Native women in Canada compares to that of the third worlding of women in Arab countries: similar to sub-proletarian women in their marginalization and dispossession; but different in that this process of marginality takes place in a country which is not simply dominated by a representation of itself as constitutive of the 'First World,' but which is a major First World consumer and producer. ("Engendering Textual

Violence" 74)<sup>6</sup>

By and large the reception of Maracle's work by critics has been less than favourable. Take, for instance, what reviewers said about *Ravensong*, arguably Maracle's best work yet. Phil Hall, reviewing it for *Books in Canada*, claims that this "dreadfully written book" lacks stringent editing. He reads Maracle's narrative techniques as "crude failings" and criticizes the iterative, reflective nature of the prose, saying, "the director/author won't get off the stage" (45). Candace Fertile, in *The Calgary Herald*, reports that *Ravensong* is "utterly lacking in subtlety" and suggests that Maracle "has tried to cram too many issues into her novel" (C12). *The Vancouver Sun* publishes a review by

Linda Rogers who sees the book as a variation on the male quest motif where women go on a "holy journey that takes them home to Mother." She posits a "confusion of mythologies" in the text and emphasizes the text's attention to women's "intuitive response to creation" (D16). Maggie Dwyer's review, in *The Winnipeg Free Press*, categorizes *Ravensong* as a "coming of age novel" and then ticks off the conventions found in the novel typical of that genre. Dwyer sees "difficulties with the narrative structure" and fastens onto "instances of awkward diction;" like Phil Hall, she calls for "judicious editing" (D18).

The comments of these reviewers reflect familiar responses to Native texts.

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<sup>6</sup> The works that Emberley uses for her analysis are de Lauretis' "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender," and Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography."

Unflaggingly, works produced by Canadians who do not belong to the Eurocentric majority disrupt conventional forms. Barbara Godard says that “native women’s narratives have adopted entirely different formal strategies, discontinuous tales rather than coherently plotted quests” (“Politics of Representation” 190). Emberley argues, “to posit a feminism of decolonization, ... involves examining the contradictions and clashes between indigenous women’s struggle for decolonization and Anglo-American feminist theory” (“(De)constructing Affinities” 80). Measuring these texts against an Anglo-American literary tradition is sure to render them faulty. Maracle says, “Critics don’t search for meaning, ... I think at some point, though, there’s going to have to be a literary revolution in the approach to literature” (“Interview with Lutz” 177). Maracle’s writing does not employ a traditional hero/heroine figure, does not utilize linear plots, does not legitimize white imperialist mythologies of the indigene — for example, European notions of the Earth-mother, and what Godard calls “white woman’s long expressed dream of ‘going squaw’” (“Politics of Representation” 189), does not adhere stringently to the vision-quest narrative line, and does not stay contained within a European-based coming-of-age genre.

Maracle writes about her view of literary theory:

There are a number of words in the English language with no appreciable definition. Argument is defined as evidence; proof or evidence is defined as demonstration or proof; and theory as a proposition proven by demonstrable evidence. None of these words exists outside of its interconnectedness. Each is defined by the other. (“Oratory” 7)

The joy with which Maracle points out this circularity is reenacted throughout her works as her texts simultaneously create and subvert meaning. The pattern evoked in Maracle's mocking of the circularity of English word definitions follows the ever-turning process that shapes her thinking, writing and activism: "My understanding of the process of colonization and decolonization of Native women is rooted in my theoretical perception of social reality, and it is tested in the crucible of human social practice" ("Oratory" 10).

While Maracle's political-textual journeys take her repeatedly back to sites of lived experience, or human social practice, they do not ever bring her back to the exact same moment. Her circles inscribe a moving space with no fixed centre. Each loop travels further and leaves the earlier loop behind. Canadian feminist thinker Nicole Brossard has made extensive use of the image of the spiral to describe women's writing and to create a changing, soaring, opening, moving figure within which gaps and spaces can allow for the presencing of lesbian existence and *jouissance*. Susan Knutson, in her article "Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard: Writing Metanarrative in the Feminine," points out that "[b]oth Brossard and Marlatt use the image of the spiral to suggest the fluid and living form of women's stories, counterposed to the rigidity of stone" (34).<sup>7</sup>

Maracle herself relies on the image of the spiral to describe the construction of the self in her book *I Am Woman*, saying "it is a spiralling in on the self ... More. The book spirals out from the self" ("Oratory" 10). Talking about how Brossard links the paradox of origin to the image of the spiral in *La Lettre Aérienne*, Knutson suggests, "[t]he spiral

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<sup>7</sup> In this article Knutson looks at Marlatt's *How Hug a Stone* and Brossard's *Picture Theory*.

is, among other things, an image of women's writing, a writing of the *dérive* (or drift), which manifests what has been unthinkable and unexpressed" ("Writing Metanarrative" 35). The creation of the subject in Maracle's works as both a spiralling in and spiralling out of a perceived notion of "self" is integral to her conception of meaning-production in any colonial enunciative moment.

Writing for Maracle inscribes self into being, and this act prohibits invisibility. As Susie O'Brien has noted: "By thematically representing the condition of liminality, Maracle is able both to expose the arbitrariness of official discourses of race and to stage the performance of an identity that refuses to be contained by them" (91). Refusal to be contained is what Maracle's texts speak the most loudly. All her writing constitutes enunciations of identity as conditional and provisional, presencing on the liminal edges of culture. Using iteration Maracle creates small incursions, or chinks as I will call them, to signal the in-between spaces where the identity of the cultural other is articulated.

In the preface to her book of short stories, *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories*, Maracle imparts, "the silent language of physical metaphor is a story in itself" (13). She says she has "tried very hard to draw the reader into the centre of the story" because the reader "must remain central to the working out of the drama of life presented" (13); her reader is not allowed to be a passive recipient of the narrative, but rather is challenged to become a co-creator of meaning. She instructs her reader: "As listener/ reader, you become the trickster, the architect of great social transformation at whatever level you choose" (13). In the story "Sojourner's Truth," the narrator implores the reader, "Can you imagine, there you are watching some maniac jerk his wife or kids around, pulling

arms out of their rightful places in sockets and you walk on minding your own business” (121). The tone of the passage is wry, fraternal, the speaker forcing you to put yourself in his place and admit to the complicit denial that maintains patterns of abuse. Yet, like the recovering alcoholic’s speech at an open meeting that regales the audience with pithy anecdotes from his drinking days, the ultimate goal of the text is to condemn the abusive behaviour and compel fellow A.A. members to denounce acting out their addiction. Maracle creates a narrator in “Sojourner’s Truth” with whom she hopes the reader can identify, because as the story goes on to make clear, this abuser, from the perspective of death, admits to just the kind of wrongs she feels have been visited upon Native peoples by whites. In offering Emma’s dead husband as the construct with whom the reader can co-create meaning, Maracle invites readers to become architects of social transformation in the ways that will advance de-colonization of aboriginal peoples.

Necessarily, though, the nature of a reader’s engagement with text is conditioned by numerous factors in any one temporal-spatial instant. Reactions to and assessments of texts are dependent on biases and assumptions that persist even in the most liberal minds. The knowledge, literary paradigms and cultural codes that we import to a text as readers and co-producers of meaning are determined by our own positionality and are subject to all the markers of identity that converge with and contradict one another. Maracle’s works, her later novels especially, posit the constructed nature of identity and recognize that terms of meaning are always contingent, and negotiated and produced in a particular moment of enunciation.

Susie O’Brien says that for Maracle,

meaning ... is created not so much through an unequivocal language ... as through a contract between writer and audience. The meaning of such a contract cannot be guaranteed by the sacred power of its words; rather it must be negotiated within the historical space in which the functions of reader, writer and text are produced. (89)

Feminist writer Annette Kolodny asked us, several years ago, to re-examine not only our view of literary history but also the very assumptions and values through which we evaluate literature (157). Such a re-examination would question standards which erase or ignore literature by writers of racial, linguistic and meaning-producing communities "other" than those represented by the dominant culture. Maracle points out that "our words, our sense and use of language are not judged by the standards set by the poetry and stories we create. They are judged by the standards set by others" ("Post-Colonial" 13).

Interestingly, Maracle's later novels engage the reader proportionately to the extent they make use of the trickster figure. While Helen Hoy<sup>8</sup> has argued eloquently for the alienation of the white reader in books like *Ravensong*, I believe that the appearance of the trickster figure comes to signify spaces where the reader is asked to produce

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8. Helen Hoy was, until 1996, Associate Professor in the departments of English and Women's Studies at the University of Minnesota. She has published *Modern English-Canadian Prose: A Guide to Information Source*; she has co-edited with Thomas King *The Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives*. She has published articles on Hugh MacLennan, Gabrielle Roy, Robertson Davies, Henry James and Alice Munro. She has also published articles on native writers Jeanette Armstrong, Maria Campbell, Ruby Slipperjack, Beatrice Culleton and Beverly Hungry Wolf. She is now teaching at the University of Guelph.



meaning through the assemblage of cultural identity markers.

The trickster appears hardly at all in *Bobbi Lee*, its presence nudged out by the voice of Don Barnett or perhaps by the tentativeness of Maracle's own writing persona. It surfaces intermittently in *Sundogs*, performs the odd cameo in *Sojourner's Truth* and takes on a decidedly important role in the character of Raven in *Ravensong*.

Susie O'Brien explains that "to 'be the Trickster' is not just to celebrate the dissolution of discursive boundaries, but to engage, as Maracle does, with the complexities and contradictions of history" (94). The main character in Maracle's story "Polka Partners" assesses the meshing of cultural contradictions in the character "Polka Boy": "He's European enough to imagine he was getting somewhere, but Indian enough to know he's blown it" (*Sojourner's Truth* 83). Based on O'Brien's reading of what it means to be a trickster, the act of becoming the "trickster-reader" in a Lee Maracle novel is strangely similar to becoming one of Gail Scott's new heroines<sup>9</sup>. The reader is asked to engage with the multiple factors that impinge on the historical moment and must work, with the author, to find interstices in which to plot instances of cultural identification.

Maracle's texts play out and play with the ongoing battles of resistance against the

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<sup>9</sup> In her essay "A Feminist at the Carnival" in *Spaces Like Stairs*, Gail Scott explores the creation of a new heroine: "No, my heroine imagines a new heroine closer to an earlier meaning of the word: *At Delphi a[n] ... ascension ceremony conducted wholly by women was called Herois, or 'feast of the heroine.'* And this ascension represented Persephone's cyclical rise from Hades, not to "heaven," but to wander *about on the earth with Demeter (her mother) until the time came for her to return to the Underworld.* It is the notion of cyclical ascension and descent (in contrast to the dominant pattern of linear rise to climax in patriarchal drama), that appeals to my heroine as she tries to work this all out on her computer screen. For this notion would permit her heroine (her set of heroines) to be both grandiose and humble, miserable and angry, not to mention any other imaginable contradiction, without shame ..." (123-24) [The italicised portions indicate where Scott is quoting from Robert Graves' *Greek Myths* London: Cassell, 1965: 110-11.]

insidious forces at work in a colonial society like Canada. All three of Maracle's novels focus on a Native woman as a young adult, in the midst of her years of change, formation, maturation and discovery. Maracle's choice of this particular time in her character's life can be seen as part of her reading of Canada's particular historical moment in the 1990s. Does she see the presencing of cultural identity in Canada as fraught with tension, impeded by racism, sexism, classism and other hatreds? This particular moment in Canada's ideological/cultural history could be compared to the emotional and hormonal upheaval typical of the years of teenagehood and early adulthood.

Maracle's texts call for our sense of identity to be renewed by change through the recognition that the parameters of traditional discursive spaces allotted for identity-negotiation are inefficacious. The age of the narrator in Maracle's stories, taken as a metaphor for the actual colonial moment in Canada, indicates that this historico-political time-space has grown beyond infancy but has not yet reached adulthood. She says in *Sundogs* through the character of Marianne, "Pubescence is itself a horror show ... Adrenalin rushes going in a million directions and nowhere at all creates its own madness" (86). The narrator of "Dear Daddy" starts out her letter, "I am going to be fourteen next month. I am almost grown up now, so I thought you might like to know what kind of child I am before I am not one anymore" (*Sojourner's Truth* 73). Perhaps Maracle, in writing these texts, wants to let the world know the realities of Native life in Canada before it disappears forever.

All three works, by virtue of using the teenager as narrator, experiment with the unfinished subject. A teen in the subject position testifies to the state of late twentieth-

century identity politics: hyper-sensitized, volatile, emotionally-charged, conflicting, changing. The teenager as metaphor for the historical moment in Canada can also be extended to the metaphor for the state of the subject in writing. Susie O'Brien talks about how the engagement of the white reader as trickster works to break down systems: "Trickster's very nature seems to sanction that freedom to ignore or transcend cultural boundaries" (84). Consider the story by Beth Brant "Coyote Learns New Trick" in which Coyote joyfully transgresses the gender boundary; "Coyote knows truth is only what she makes it" (148). From Bobbi Lee to Marianne and Stacey, Maracle seems to attain an increasingly richer understanding of her own power to traverse boundaries in the performance of identity and in the construction of meaning in texts.

From the perspective of a teenage Native woman in *Ravensong* and a university-age woman in *Sundogs*, Maracle explores the complications created by the intersecting and contesting forces in the colonial-shaped culture of contemporary First Nations people. Drawing on critical historical moments (such as the Oka blockade and Elijah Harper's prevention of the passing of the Meech Lake Accord), often absent from the received historical record, these texts use the iteration of opening images such as half-circles<sup>10</sup>, spirals, and triangles to examine spaces that eclipse the frame, where identity eludes and inscribes itself. Maracle's insistence that the reader become a co-producer or co-negotiator of meaning demands that s/he recognize his/her positionality: the reader is responsible and must account for assumptions, biases and paradigms that work against

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the image of the two half-circles that come together at the end of the war between the animal and the bird people in "World War I" in *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories* (142).

the cultural - historical enunciative moment of the stories.

One might argue that the most interesting part of *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* is the epilogue which re-visits the process of the construction of self in the text. In chapter four I will be looking at Gail Scott's writing, including *Spaces Like Stairs*, which reviews "the sign posts of a certain period (the late 70s and 80s)" (11). *Bobbi Lee*'s epilogue, with a similar self-examining, self-critiquing reflective gaze, seeks to "fill in the missing pieces that came alive through the long process of unravelling that began in 1975 — the year I realized I was too young to write *Volume Two* with any accuracy" (201). While Scott's collection of essays traces a growing awareness and development of theorizing the writing of self and the world, Maracle's *Bobbi Lee* points to the recognition after-the-fact of problems contained in the genre of autobiography and the subject position of the "other." Both Scott and Maracle revisit, re-write and re-read prior versions of their notions of textual self and recognize the myriad forces that have shaped and continue to shape them. Even in this age of rapid change, when communication can take place in a micro-second, sameness is the hallmark of culture, and is perpetuated through the machinery of media as text, video and audio assault our consciousnesses every day.

Foregrounding the pressures of a white male Eurocentric ideology, Lee Maracle's self-reflexive epilogue, questions the voices of *Bobbi Lee* in ways that her later works eventually do within the texts themselves. The epilogue voice is a mature, clear, politicized yet no less troubled voice that speaks with some distance and perspective about the events in *Bobbi Lee* and those that followed. It is this voice that speaks in Maracle's later stories and novels. As her writing subjects become more and more meta-

textual and self-interrogating, her writing reveals a greater and more increasingly complex awareness of the contradictory forces that stymie an investigation into the performance of one's cultural identity.

Maracle in her writing urges the reader to "face the trappings ...and account for them" (*Bobbi Lee* 200) which is what she herself undertakes as she re-examines her first published work *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1990), the book she says is about her "misspent youth" (199). Although, as Helen Buss asserts, "Personal confession seems to be a luxury not many women can allow themselves to indulge in in their autobiographies. They shy away from its implied solipsism, its implied privileging of the singular self" (*Mapping Our Selves* 137), this autobiographical text tells the story of a child's wandering encased in the "craziness of internalized racism" (199): the politicization of a life, the confessional conversion story, an account of how self-hatred and self-erasure come to be. The trappings with which Maracle wrestles, and invites the reader to face, are the hatreds, racism and sexism. She cautions against self-loathing, self-erasure, and the temptation to succumb to the comfort of stereotypes and definitions that oppress; all of this she sums up in the expression, the wearing of a "foreign code of conduct" (200).

Facing the trappings and accounting for them is the first step in the efforts of radical feminists and anti-racists to change the world: "Racism is layered between the sexism of this society and is connected to sexism" (Maracle "Afterword" 174). In her chapter called "Rusty" in *I Am Woman*, Maracle writes: "I have withstood quite well the insult to my womanliness that racism naturally gives rise to. It is common practice for white and non-white boys to acquire their first taste of sex at our expense. It is not

required that anyone love us – we are by definition incapable of womanly love” (61).

Maracle writes an epilogue in *Bobbi Lee* to re-negotiate and disarm her earlier personal demons not only because she realizes with surprise “how unreliable a child’s memory can be” (199), but also because the freeing recognition of the fluidity of history and all story empowers her to re-write the world through text. Jeannette Winterson believes “The writer is an instrument of transformation” (“Writer, Reader, Words” *Art Objects* 25). Maracle says she believes that “hope is no longer a phantom” (“Ramparts” 161) and that books by revolutionaries can change society (*Bobbi Lee* 205). Maracle’s own books, candid, humorous, and invigorating, their unashamed political agenda blatant, are remarkable explorations of identity. Her resistance-writing embodies the urgency of the need to self-determine the expression of identity through text: “I know, if I remain silent I will erase myself” (Maracle “Ramparts” 167).

Maracle recounts that as a child she did not enjoy Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*, a 1930s novel about the indomitable spirit of Chinese peasants and their allegiance to the earth, because she was trying to “bury the self that felt that way about the earth” (203). In many ways *Bobbi Lee* is an exercise in the burial of self — not just in the story it tells but also in its voice and in its telling. The lost little girl who dies (because no one goes to look for her in the place where the wise woman knows she is) is the textual child-self whose life is told in *Bobbi Lee*. The voice of the wise woman is the mature textual voice Maracle creates in her later novels. These textual selves interrogate each other. The child-self in *Bobbi Lee* seems to deride the mature self for her inattention, as if she knew where to find the child all along but did not possess the resources to convince herself it

was worth the trouble (“Epilogue” *Bobbi Lee* 204).

Like the erasure of the lives of Native people in the books in libraries she visits as a child (203), and the abnegation of Native humanity in popular western novels like Louis L’Amour’s, the death of the little girl signifies the deep-seeded colonial legacy of self-erasure that Maracle works to resist in her writings, talks and activism. Resistance in its many forms emerges in Maracle’s writing as a basic requirement of survival for the indigenous writer. Its inscription in her texts mirrors ways that the cultural identity of “the other” is assembled, commodified and produced in a racist society.

Maracle’s character Bobbi Lee does not win in the battle against “the craziness of internalized racism” in the novel, but the characters Maracle creates in her later works, in the tradition of the new heroine, do. She remarks that as a young girl she was attracted to the literary classics because they featured characters who were “tragic, courageous and indomitable” (205). Tellingly, she imbues her characters with these qualities in her later novels. No less troubled by the complexities and contradictions of their respective historical moments, but like Gail Scott’s new heroine<sup>11</sup>, Maracle’s later heroines are able to face the colonial conditions and account for them without shame.

Maggie is one such character. Full of “Raven,” she is constantly admonished for her “impudence” (“Maggie” *Sojourner’s Truth and other stories* 50) and “rebellious ways” (52); she “refuse[s] to do her homework” (49), and her own sister calls her “cheeky” (51). Even though the narrator in the story “Maggie” insists that “no one in our

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<sup>11</sup> See note 9.

community dared used the word 'white' when talking about the others" (43), Maggie "viewed all white people as some sort of blight sent over by some wicked demon to plague. There was not a single white person in the world whose company she would ever appreciate" (50). She maintained that "[w]hite people are a plague of locusts sent to torment us" (50). The courageous Maggie opts to walk home from a detention rather than ask to use the phone, and like Charlie ("Charlie" *Sojourner's Truth* 99-107), succumbs to a frozen death.

The lost child in *Bobbi Lee* is eventually abandoned for the courageous, intelligent, questioning (if naïve, self-absorbed and tactless) young women of the later novels like Stacey of *Ravensong* and Marianne of *Sundogs*.<sup>12</sup>

Maracle's foray into the politics of naming in *Bobbi Lee* conjures many of the challenges facing life-writers. By using her own first name for her main character's last name Maracle asks the reader to reflect on her version of the writing-speaking subject. But she also foregrounds that subject as a textual construction by pairing her own name with the fictional name Bobbi (as if to acknowledge the fictionality of a created self in life-writing.) This gesture exposes the act of veiling, even as one purports to reveal, one's identity in autobiography. The names in *Bobbi Lee* serve to problematize notions of both an invented self and a 'true' self. And while Maracle admits to believing she was writing

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12. The lost child in *Bobbi Lee* is, in fact, a lot like the lost young native in a number of works by other writers. See, for example, Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* (Penticton: Theytus Books, 1992), Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* (Winnipeg: Peguis, 1992), Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed* (Halifax: Formac, 1973) and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko (New York: Penguin, 1977).



her own history when she wrote *Bobbi Lee*, the text also thematizes the uneasy yoking together of the act of writing in a traditional European form and the inquiry into an identity replete with contradictions and difficulties proceeding from the experience of the colonizing effects of that very form.

Not surprisingly, other women of colour writing in Canada today grace the covers of *Bobbi Lee*: Dionne Brand, Beth Brant and Joy Harjo write blurbs on the back cover of the 1990 Women's Press publication of this text; Jeannette Armstrong writes the foreword. The presencing of the voices of other women writers of colour around and inside the text of Maracle's first Euro-fashioned cultural document serves to concretize the contradictions embodied in the story of *Bobbi Lee* itself. Maracle skilfully evokes the metonymic sublimation of Native ideology and culture under dominant white culture in her invocation of the experience of being given an internal exam by a doctor, "some white man probing the secret insides of me" (206), and in her description of the frisking and internal search conducted by white women cops (84-85). However, the artefact of *Bobbi Lee* the novel itself stands in direct repudiation of this metonymy by creating an outer skin of the words of women of colour around the body of the writing of *Bobbi Lee* which is, by Maracle's own admission, clothed in a foreign tongue. This work utilizes not only the European written genre of autobiography but also a voice not Maracle's own — the white male voice of her colleague, Don Barnett.

*Bobbi Lee* sows the literary seeds that will grow to fruition in Maracle's later works in that attention to race is complemented by attention to other social colonizers

such as gender and class. Marianne, in *Sundogs*, iterates Elijah Harper<sup>13</sup>, saying: “our rights, the denial of them, is intimately bound to the mistreatment of the aged, the handicapped, women, and the abuse and neglect of children and poor and working people” (22). In the epilogue of *Bobbi Lee*, Maracle speaks gently but firmly about the socio-economic forces that buoy up Western culture. She sardonically compares tip-hustling (207) to the dynamics that sustain power relationships in North American capitalist society, citing capitalism and democracy as elements intrinsic to white male Euro-centred supremacy: “Capitalism is a masterful order in which the poor, the labourers, are reduced to embracing the very culture that keeps them on the bottom” (207). Trapped in systems that force them to be complicitous in their own oppression, Native people in Maracle’s works constantly face the self-denying images and stereotypes that interlink to substitute a sense of hopelessness for the will to achieve self-determination. In this way, the dominant culture produces the conditions that sustain Native invisibility: “We live on the periphery of style ... No one really ever looks at us” (*Sundogs* 88).

In *Sundogs* Maracle explores, through Marianne’s musings on her interactions with university professors, how institutions de-humanize the other: “I have been hauling ass across foreign terrain carrying two additional burdens on my back: racism and

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<sup>13</sup> Elijah Harper, Manitoban member of Parliament, objected to the Meech Lake Accord (bill proposed to “unify” Canada by quelling political restlessness in Quebec) because it made no mention of indigenous peoples and staged a blockade to hold up the passing of the bill in Parliament. “Every day he stands alone, guarding our heritage, validating our entire history as men and women. ... His message to us was profoundly simple; we are worth fighting for, we are worth caring for, we are worthy. No more mea culpa. We, as men, as women, as poor people, as Native people, as working people, we are all worthy.” (Maracle *Sundogs* 77).

patriarchy ... I have been a Native, generic and sexless, for twenty years" (76). In *Bobbi Lee*, the epilogue brings to Maracle's re-examination of the novel an awareness of the complicating role that socio-economic class plays in the lives of a colonized people.

I have never had much faith in capitalist democracy. All my kin and I have lived under the dubious benefits of this democracy for over a hundred years and we are more impoverished and less able to survive than ever. Capitalist democracy requires a few on top and the rest disinherited.

(Maracle *Bobbi Lee* 226-27)

Attention to the structures that keep western society afloat reveals Maracle's recognition that de-colonization can never be simply or easily accomplished.

In all of Maracle's works urbanization emerges as one of the death-haunts for Native people. Rather than blaming "progress" or technology for the ill-effect of cities on her people, Maracle sees the intermixing of contending factors, such as racism in conjunction with urbanization (or what Bhabha would call "metropolitan racism" *Location of Culture* 53), as the complicated and insidious processes to be resisted: "I had felt so inept at resisting the dehumanizing process that urbanization in a racist society means for us" (229).

While all of Lee Maracle's writing wrestles with the creation of meaning, ("to distort meaning ... is the worst kind of violence" *Bobbi Lee* 7), her first book, the autobiographical *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, creates a haven in which Maracle negotiates with her own cultural-identico-demons. This work successfully problematizes the act of resistance writing. bell hooks says that "it is the telling of our history that enables

political self-recovery” (“Whiteness in the Black Imagination” *killing rage* 47). For this reason *Bobbi Lee* is important. “Poetry and the comfort of my diaries — my books of madness I called them — were rolled out of my inner self, began to re-shape me” (Maracle *Bobbi Lee* 230). The seeds of the *bricolage* of cultural identity that emerge in Maracle’s later works are sewn here in a personal history that is told — however stiltedly — in *Bobbi Lee*.

In the Prologue, Maracle talks about how the book came to be:

There are two voices in the pages of this book, mine and Don Barnett’s. As-told-tos between whites and Natives rarely work, when they do, it’s wonderful, when they don’t it’s a disaster for the Native. Don never intended it to be a disaster for me. The first *Bobbi Lee* was the reduction of some two hundred pages of manuscript to a little book. What began as a class to learn how to do other people’s life history, turned into a project to do my own. We had disagreements over what to include and what to exclude, disagreements over wording, voice. In the end, the voice that reached the page was Don’s, the information alone was mine. (19)

In the epilogue we hear a faint echo of this contestation of voices. Autobiographical scholars, such as Helen Buss, have made the argument that one must create a “self” to tell one’s life story, and that often a variety of different selves compete and vie for expression. This is thought to be especially true for women who are socialized to perform so many caretaking roles that their lives, and consequently life stories, are typically more about otherness than about self.

Helen Buss, in her essay "Canadian Women's Autobiography: some critical directions," says she finds in women's autobiographies "a need to abandon egocentric and developmental definitions of self in favor of a sense of self based on relatedness and on accumulation and integration of identities" (157). Buss draws on the work of Mary Mason who concludes that "all women's life-writing can be said to be one form or another of identity by way of alterity" (159). Quoting Shirley Neuman's work, Buss asserts that Gertrude Stein's theory of autobiography goes "beyond the egocentric and developmental autobiography begun by Rousseau ... in favor of a form that denies a consistent continuity of self, ... that insists that relationships between people are more important than the individual in isolation" (162).

Estelle Jelinek, in her introduction to *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, says that what women's life stories "reveal is a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding" (15). Through her Epilogue in *Bobbi Lee*, Maracle appears to be doing just that: sifting through her early writing life for explanation and understanding. Jelinek also maintains that "the multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies" (17).

Maracle's description of the dilemma that faced Red Power Youth in 1972 over what should be reported back to the government in return for the seventy thousand dollar grant they received acts as an apt analogy for the diffusion and diversity that surfaces in *Bobbi Lee*. The contestation of voices in the Youth group are analogous to the conflicting impulses in the telling of a life: "some wanted to tell the 'truth', some wanted to tell them

what they wanted to hear, others didn't think we ought to say anything" (218). Even as she recognizes the process of negotiation she undertook with Don Barnett with regards to what voice would tell the story of Bobbi Lee, Maracle herself sees that she had taken on a foreign voice and a foreign code of conduct. Maracle says that Bobbi Lee is proof that she had "breathed the ideology and aspirations of Europe into my soul" (228). She says "the words I uttered were loyal to my own but the emotional meaning, the character of them, was so painfully European ... I had picked up the arrogant voice of Europe not as a language but as a way of being" (228).

The voice that comes through is not only different in its colour, so to speak, but also in its gender. This text would be classified as a "as-told-to" autobiography. Maracle explains, "It was part of a course I was taking on how to do life histories. We did each other's. I did my partner's, he did mine, and I helped transcribe them" ("Interview by Hartmut Lutz" 169). Maracle's partner was both white and male, and it is predominantly his voice that tells her story in *Bobbi Lee*. Unfortunately, this type of discrepancy in voice is symptomatic of the complex mixture of race and gender bias that plagues power relationships in a white sexist society. Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Writing a Woman's Life*, asks, "how can women create stories of women's lives if they have only male language with which to do it?" (40). Further, she argues, "there will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men" (47). It is not surprising that the woman who was to become so closely aligned with the furor over the politics of voice appropriation should make such a searching examination of the utilization of voice in her first literary work.

In many ways *Bobbi Lee* can be seen as juvenilia: a work produced by the author in her youth: "I was a child when this book hit the press" (200). The tone of *Bobbi Lee* resounds with self-hatred. Self-loathing and abuse become the touchstones for establishing textual identity in the narrative in every sphere: sexuality, gender, race, class. *Bobbi Lee*'s epilogue confesses "I thought I hated white people when in fact, I did not love my own" (229-30). The textual life of *Bobbi Lee* recounts the deepening colonial affliction of internalized racism. Paul Gilroy cites Richard Wright's assertion that "the fact of having been victimised by racism did not render those who suffered it immune from the lure of racist thinking" (26).

In the story "Yin Chin," a character walks into a cafeteria looking for a place to sit and eat lunch and decides that there is "no place to sit — no place meaning there aren't any Indians in the room." Maracle argues that not seeing the non-Indians is not the same thing as whites not seeing Indians because "it is not their humanity I'm calling into question. It is mine" (*Sojourner's Truth* 66). This mindset, so prevalent in *Bobbi Lee*, is explored in the story "Yin Chin" when the narrator thinks about how her attitude has changed: she reports that "invariably, when people of colour get together they discuss white people. They are the butt of our jokes, the fountain of our bitterness and pain and the infinite well-spring of every dilemma life ever presented to us" ("Yin Chin" *Sojourner's Truth* 67). But fifteen years later when she sees herself sitting with other writers of colour: "it just seemed too incredible that a dozen Hans and Natives could sit and discuss all things under heaven, including racism, and not talk about white people" (67-68). Internalized racism made the immature narrator in "Yin Chin" cancel out the

Asian faces in the cafeteria along with the white ones, but the later, more mature narrator knows “we had crossed a millennium of bridges over rivers swollen with the floodwaters of dark humanity’s tenacious struggle to extricate ourselves from oppression, and we knew it. ... We could laugh because we were no longer a joke” (68).

Along with the challenge of what the writer of the Epilogue sees as internalized racism, there exists also the struggle to overcome misogynist prejudice: “In my diary I faced my womanhood, indigenous womanhood. I faced my inner hate, my anger and the desertion of myself from our way of being ... I became a woman through my words” (*Bobbi Lee* 230). This valorization of the inscription of self through writing relies on the premise that decolonization of the mind must occur in order to recognize oneself as a racialized gendered subject. Maracle explains:

Colonization for Native women signifies the absence of beauty, the negation of our sexuality. We are the females of our species: ‘Native,’ undesirable, non-sensuous beings that never go away. Our wombs bear fruit but are not sweet. For us intercourse is not masked by white, middle-class, patriarchal dominant-submissive tenderness. It is more a physical release from the pressure and pain of colonialism – mutual rape. Sex becomes one of the horrors of enslavement, driving us to celibacy. (“Isn’t Love a Given?” *I Am Woman* 20-1)

The narrative of *Bobbi Lee* is Maracle’s testament to her belief that the colonized, self-hating subject necessarily perpetuates the erasure of one’s sex, race and gender: “Not once in my twenty-nine years had I ever relaxed in the body of me, content with its form,



its colour or its shape” (235). Contemporary culture has lulled most readers into a state of comfort with the notion of having an identity crisis and the bourgeois luxury of “finding oneself.” But Bobbi Lee’s journey alerts us to the complex intersection of parameters that condition an individual’s construction of space, identity, and way of being in the world when one’s class, colour and gender are other than that of the dominant majority.

*Bobbi Lee* delineates the starting point of the transformation from self-erasure and self-loathing to self-acceptance, self-assertion and self-determinacy which Maracle sees as entailing a ceaseless battle of resistance. In the character of Bobbi Lee, Maracle writes her first ‘trace.’ Maracle says: “the value of resistance is the reclaiming of the sacred and significant self” (“Oratory” 11). *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, marks the entrance of Maracle’s resisting post-colonial (dissolving) subject.

In the epilogue Maracle suggests that *Bobbi Lee* is about the individual’s discovery that “we had minds; we could think” (209). In the same epilogue Maracle decides in retrospect that the compilation of events recounted in *Bobbi Lee* “sounds a bit pathetic now” (209). Susie O’Brien notes that Maracle’s narrative strategies foreground tension and struggle: “For Maracle the choice of whether to adopt a rhetorical position of interstitiality is eclipsed by her concern mimetically to render the historical conditions by which marginality is not chosen but conferred on the native subject” (90). Clearly Maracle paints a gripping portrait of her younger self benighted in “confusion, subjectivism and scepticism” (197) but the rendering of “historical conditions by which marginality was not chosen but conferred on the native subject” takes the forefront in *Bobbi Lee*, creating instances where mimetic realism is belaboured, resulting in

hackneyed banalities: “dad kept beating me up and mom didn’t like it” (23); “there was a lot of talk in the neighbourhood about my mom — how she used to run around and all that” (25); “Donna and I were real close” (49); “So I split with Doug” (104); “It was really getting bad after a while and I didn’t like it at all” (139); “it was still a subjective thing with me ... about honkies, Indians, and personal experience” (196). What Maracle actually finds pathetic about the novel is unclear, but triteness in expression caused by the contestation between voice and story is one possibility.

The struggle that is at work between the lines of this text accounts for much more than various sites of stale rhetoric; it acts, also, and more importantly, as a metonymy for the problems riddling the activity of writing and the lived experience of members of othered groups. The complex interplay of socio-cultural forces at work in the text of the original novel is also evident in the epilogue, the prologue and in the short piece about the Oka crisis at the beginning of the Women’s Press edition. Neither Maracle’s critique of the book nor her sense of the story sounding pathetic is protected from the same encroaching conditions of white hegemonic cultural production that act upon the novel itself. Tension in perspective, point of view, voice and language persists in interfering with any attempt at mimetic realism Maracle has tried to imbue in the text. Though O’Brien concludes that Maracle’s use of interstitial rhetoric is eclipsed by her desire to render historical conditions realistically, the iteration and contingency of the spaces where identity is created and inscribed demand that her mimesis be partial, simplistic: “I didn’t like white people” (19); “white people really did not like us” (224). The dynamic tension brewing in the formal aspects of the novel amplifies the themes of struggle,

resistance and displacement played out in the storyline of Bobbi Lee's life.

Maracle's later novels show diminished use of clichés and a more mature recognition of the contradictions enmeshed in cultural difference. Maracle makes sure her characters come to learn that contradictions can co-exist without destroying each other. For example in "Polka Partners," the main character reflects, "It was too hard to tell him that white people cannot deal with the beauty in some of us and the crass ugliness in others. They can't know why we are silent about serious truth and so noisy about nonsense" (*Sojourner's Truth* 90). Bobbi Lee's naïve belief that "you could not be a colony and a colonizer at the same time" (209), typifies the observing frame of the struggles depicted in this first work. The characters in her later novels know that "the world needs a combined wisdom" (*Ravensong* 67), and Stacey, in *Ravensong*, emerges with a sensitivity that allows her to recognize her own confabulation of a subject in terms of what Gail Scott calls the new heroine: one comfortable with her multivalent historicity and capable of embracing contradictions without shame<sup>14</sup>.

*Ravensong* uses raven to interrogate boundaries wrought from racist ideology that separate people from themselves, life from death, absence from presence. When Stacey tells Momma that she told the school principal, "I have decided I won't serve any late detentions for a while" (66), her mother laughs proudly and capsulizes her daughter's audacity by saying, "Too much Raven" (107). Rena tells Stacey that Martha thinks she and Judy are "too crazy to mother [the children] with the proper sense of discipline — too

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<sup>14</sup> See note 9.

much Raven, she says" (114). When Stacey's audacity compels her to "pick medicine" with Rena and Judy in the mountains "unchaperoned" (121), she rationalizes her mother's anger with her by conceding that she indeed has "Too much Raven" which she defines as "disregard for propriety and authority" (125).

Raven's pugnacious ability to affront authority is what Emma exhibits in the story "Sojourner's Truth" when she stands up to the courts of law. The use of raven in Maracle's writing usually indicates an irreverent disregard for boundaries in the interest of what Dominic calls "human oneness" (67). Stacey stands up to the principal, as Emma stands up to the judge, ignoring the understood separateness of their positions: "the stripping of Mr. Johnson's authority made Stacey his equal" (67). Dominic's notion of "human oneness" is not possible while contrived divisions endure: "all knowledge should be joined" (67). When efforts fail to make incursions across boundaries, as when the community respects the authorities' ruling that it cannot have its own school, Maracle's characters intone: "not enough Raven" (198, 199).

Raven, the trickster, the totem of folly, wisdom, courage, and change, embodies the dissolution of boundaries, singing to characters like Celia who has a sixth sense (*Ravensong* 10,19,41,55,198), and appearing to Stacey who takes herself too seriously at times (*Ravensong* 16,38-39,75), looking on, presiding over human affairs even when no one else (save Cedar) knows she is there (*Ravensong* 13-14,22-23,43-44,54). She worries over "how to get the people to awaken" (23) and concocts a plan to "drive them out, bring them across the bridge" (43-44). Raven wants to allay the division between the Indian village and "white town:"

Change is serious business — gut-wrenching, really. With humans it is important to approach it with great intensity. Great storms alter earth, mature life, rid the world of the old, ushering in the new. Humans call it catastrophe. Just birth, Raven crowed. Human catastrophe is accompanied by tears and grief, exactly like the earth's, only the earth is less likely to be embittered by grief. Still, Raven was convinced that this catastrophe she planned to execute would finally wake up the people, drive them to white town to fix the mess over there. (14)

But the division is enforced by both sides: "segregation between the others and her own people had as much to do with how her own felt about the others, as it had to do with how the others felt about the villagers" (43).

Maracle strives to articulate a subject that will destroy boundaries in a similar way. She points out that the perceived wholeness of the colonial subject is a totality to which the other has no access. Identity for the other can never be in relation to the traditional one, for even inasmuch as identity is itself in process, the wholeness to which colonial identity ascribes itself relative does not exist for the other. Bhabha suggests, identification, identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality ... For the image — as point of identification — marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split — it makes *present* something *absent* — and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition. (*Location of Culture* 51, emphasis

## Bhabha's)

Maracle's subjects, then, are iterations, as images are; but unlike images which are repeated in lieu of something else, as representation, as substitution, Maracle's subjects are iterated in relation to themselves as opposed to relative to the one, demonstrating what Bhabha calls the "impossibility of claiming an origin for the Self (or Other) within a tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision" (46).

Maracle's moments of enunciation disregard the importance of wholeness for the colonial subject, freeing them to be constituted outside of the rules of traditional discursive practice. They do not cohere in any kind of totality; in fact the way they are constituted allows them to be dissolving, heterogeneous, uncontained, disunified. The refusal to be contained by boundaries devised and upheld by non-Natives suspends the power of those boundaries in Maracle's texts.

Maracle's use of Raven as gate-crasher (in the sense that she disrespects barriers) resonates with her own disdain for arbitrary divisions:

Post-colonialism presumes we have resolved the colonial condition, at least in the field of literature.... We are the grandchildren of an abusive industrial British parent, and in fact are nowhere near a post-colonial literature. (Maracle "Post-colonial" 13-14)

While in *Bobbi Lee* the trickster-reader does not find many openings through which s/he can enter the text and embrace contradictions without shame, in *Ravensong* the reader penetrates the narrative through the uncontained spaces created by shapes like

arcs and spirals<sup>15</sup>. The dissolution of discursive boundaries that O'Brien mentions is one strategy that enables *Ravensong* to open up such inviting gaps for the admission of the reader-trickster. For example, consider the layering and spiralling achieved in the first paragraph of the novel:

From the depths of the sound Raven sang a deep wind song, melancholy green. Above, the water layered itself in stacks of still green, dark to light. The sound of Raven spiralled out from its small beginning in larger and larger concentric circles, gaining volume as it passed each successive layer of green. The song echoed the rolling motion of the earth's centre, filtering itself through the last layer to reach outward to earth's shoreline above the deep. Wind changed direction, blowing the song toward cedar. Cedar picked up the tune, repeated the refrain, each lacey branch bending to echo ravensong. Cloud, seduced by the rustling of cedar, moved sensually to shore. The depth of the song intensified with the high-pitched refrain of cedar. Cloud rushed faster to the sound's centre. Cloud crashed on the hillside while Raven began to weep. (9)

The words "sound," "song," "centre," "green," and "depth," are iterated strategically throughout this passage, creating a sense of movement that integrates natural elements in a spiralling eddy. Words such as "layer," "refrain" and "echo" reinforce the iteration. While this description has the appearance of doubling back on itself through the heavy

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, pages 74-75 in *Ravensong* for a variety of arcs.

use of repetition, in fact, it moves forward, rather than back, in a spiral, propelled forward by the crescendo effect of the growing intensity of appeals to the sense of hearing. Sound adjectives are linked to active verbs to create a gradual sense of enlarging and quickening.

“Sound” in the first sentence is used as a noun meaning strait of water and is associated with the layers of water “still green.” “Sound” in the third sentence now means sensation caused in the ear by vibration of surrounding air — the vibrations made by Raven’s song — and is aligned with the verb “spiralled.” In the same sentence the word “volume” is in the same phrase as the verb “passed;” while “spiral” and “pass” are indications of rather gentle motion, stillness has evolved into movement. “Song” in the fourth sentence is attached to the “rolling motion” of the earth and is said to “reach outward;” these verbs point to an increased power of movement, as the forces that propel the earth to spin and orbit are cosmic, and the act of reaching forward seems intentional, almost human.

In the next sentence “song” is blown by the wind and though song is not the active agent here, being blown by the wind conjures an image of rapid, involuntary movement — like leaves in the wind, clothes on the line, hair whipped and tossed by gusts. Still moving, the song is “picked up” and “repeated” by cedar, whose branches bend to “echo” the song. Even when the sound is treated passively, as in blown by wind or echoed by cedar branches, the movement evoked continues to gain strength. The onomatopoeia “rustling” in the following sentence is coupled with both the passive construction using “seduced,” and the active verb “moved.” The verbs are becoming



stronger as in the next sentence “song” is “intensified” and repeated once again by cedar. The movement of the cloud is now accelerated to “rushed” and is linked with “sound’s centre” — sound here meaning either the strait of water or the vibrations of the air. The paragraph culminates with the “crash” of cloud on the hillside while Raven’s song turns to weeping. The power of the spiralling motion associated with sound collides with the land like a wave on the shore. In fact, both the “rolling motion” and the metaphoric reaching toward shore that the sound makes in the fifth sentence summon the image of ocean waves.

Repetition, movement and open circles in this passage are evidence of strategies in *Ravensong*, opening up chinks or interstices in the discourse that allow the reader ingress into the text. Repetition, especially, deriving probably from the oral tradition, serves to open up the text, because, as Godard has shown in her examination of myths and feminism, and feminism as myth, “repetition is a fact of language from which meaning is produced” (“Feminism And/As Myth” 17). This disturbance in traditional constructions of meaning in text allows the reader to partake in the disruption of discursive othering. The reader plays the trickster and creates meaning in the gaps between the broken lines of the narrative whose boundaries are continually shifting, extending and moving out from under themselves. As *Ravensong* gently seduces the reader in, just as cedar seduces cloud to come nearer in the novel’s opening paragraph, the activity of co-producing meaning that the text demands challenges the reader to abdicate traditional standards of literary value and sense, and bear witness to the dissolving of the traditional subject. This experience may result in what some readers will

feel as the metaphoric impact of cloud crashing into the hillside.

*Ravensong*'s Stacey wanders, questions and puzzles: she wants to know the why of things (107, 111, 123, 154). While her questions are not always resolved, she dissolves boundaries in order to create a space where she can envision a de-colonization that avoids brutalizing either the colonizers or the colonized. This novel figures the dissolute or dissolving subject as a moment of epistemological and discursive contestation rather than as a site of subjection or oppression. The subject position intermittently visited by the new heroine is in flux, bearing out what Gayatri Spivak answers when asked about authenticity: "there are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing" (60). Stacey's position as subject in the text is unstable; she often dissolves into the background, allowing Raven to take turns at the performance of identity. Raven jumps in and out of the unstable subject position, sometimes doubling with Stacey and sometimes separate, taunting her.

Raven's aim is the integration of the two worlds: "Change is serious business" (14); "Death is transformative" (85), and, through her attempts to achieve integration through repeated disaster, she becomes the symbol of outspoken courage as well as of folly. Even after Raven virtually disappears from the latter half of the text, she exists as palimpsest in the memories and references of others. When the women speculate as to why they pay attention to the "others" who would not let them build a school, they respond, "Not enough Raven" (*Ravensong* 198).

Stacey's fluid subject position and fluctuating power-status in the text are unsettling for readers who want representation and linear narrative, but are clearly

indicative of the experience of a non-white writer who recognizes the complex problems of defining a space from which to speak. When asked “how is it possible to write against the grain of one’s space?” Gayatri Spivak answers: “No one can quite articulate the space she herself inhabits” (68).

Maracle’s texts insist that the reader venture into new territory and participate in the production of meaning that often defies conventions and established norms of the dominant Euro-centric culture. By evoking conventions of the oral tradition, Maracle confers participatory status on the reader. In a traditional written text, the components of oral storytelling that are missing include “the circumstances of enunciation and the paralinguistic elements of the telling: gestures, intonations, etc. that are important in the organization and aesthetic effect of the oral tale in performance” (Godard *Talking About Ourselves* 8). Maracle says in an interview with Hartmut Lutz,

Well, in the Big House, you are standing in the middle of the road and if you are going to talk for a long time, which usually happens, you better be interesting. That’s one.

Second, for us, the words and meaning are more important than structure.

And third, the voice you use should reflect the subject. ...

The other thing is that the beauty of language has to come out.

(171)

In the same interview, she describes responses to *I Am Woman*:

some people think it’s a novel, or an attempt at a novel. Some people think

it's a collection or some sort of anthropological presentation. Some people don't know what to think about it. Some people think it's an uneven voice, or just a number of things, but in fact it isn't any of those things. It's theory coming through story. That is what it is! Colonization, decolonization, very, very simply. (171-2)

Because she invokes the conventions of orality (and oratory), Maracle creates a text that invites "the dynamic collaboration of audience and teller weaving together the elements of traditional narrative into a new tale and *cooperatively* constructing meaning" (Godard *Talking About Ourselves* 8, Godard's emphasis).

The writing of Lee Maracle and others who resist colonial conditions demands that the reader break and enter what may be considered non-sense (insofar as it exists outside the realm of white history and privilege) in ways similar to that of certain feminist writers who demand a re-thinking and re-inventing of language and culture that allows for the presencing of woman. One such Canadian feminist thinker and writer, Nicole Brossard, describes pictorially how she sees woman's culture evolving with the stages of feminist practice.

In *The Aerial Letter*, Nicole Brossard maps out what she calls "Aerial Vision: The SPIRAL's sequences in its energy and movement towards a female culture" (116-17)<sup>16</sup>. Over two pages she depicts with diagrams the progression she feels feminism has made in

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16. For a full exploration of this idea see Brossard's essay "From Radical to Integral" in *The Aerial Letter* (Trans. Marlene Wildeman. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1988. 103-19), and also the chapter "Screen Skin" in *Picture Theory* (Trans. Barbara Godard. Montreal: Guernica, 1991. 112-28.)

its efforts to re-vision language and expression. Sequence one shows women's voices outside of a circle labelled "sense." She calls this "women's invisibility/ The great darkness;" a female culture is considered non-sense. In the second sequence a little circle appears within the circle called "sense" and this is labelled "new sense." Brossard aligns this sequence with the contribution to feminism of works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*.

The third diagram represents feminism in the 1960s through to the 1980s, and shows the small circle inside beginning to move — no longer a circle but a spiral; she calls this "new sense *in movement* within sense" (Brossard's italics). The fourth picture depicts the inner spiral moving towards and touching the outer rim of the circle of sense; Brossard labels this sequence "Radical feminism, political, economic, cultural, social, ecological, and technological feminism." What exists beyond the circle of sense, as we see in the first diagram, is non-sense; so here the spiral representing woman's culture is bordering on "madness, delirium, or genius." The fifth and penultimate rendering consists of the spiral moving outside and back inside the circle of sense. Brossard describes these forays into "non-sense" as "questing sense," and the re-entry sites as "sense renewed." The spiral feeds back on itself and renews the portion that remains inside "sense" bringing with it "new perspectives: new configurations of woman-as-being-in-the-world of what's real, of reality, and of fiction." The final sequence portrays the ongoing movement of the spiral within and without the circle of sense; Brossard comments: "female culture, whose existence essentially depends on our incursions into the territory until today held by non-sense. Without sequences 5 and 6, the spiral, repressed in the

borderlines of sense, would end up closing in on itself" (117).

This model is of use in understanding the ways that Lee Maracle is asking her readers to puncture the skin of Euro-colonial dominance and think beyond traditional notions of truth, reality and identity. Maracle makes tricksters of her readers, urging them to look in the chinks, using them to compose cultural identity iteratively in gap after gap, novel after novel, speech after speech: in reader after reader. This kind of subversive activity of infiltrating lived experience through the meaning-producing activity of a reader's engagement with text is comparable, but by no means identical, to many feminist strategies.

Maracle revises the racialised subject, in the same way that feminists revision the gendered subject, by writing against the male-written canon. Her stories are what Barbara Godard calls "discontinuous tales" (190); their disruption of linearity questions the validity of phallo-centric notions of truth and reality which are the basis for traditional standards. The strategies in these tales undermine received knowledge sanctified in master narratives and celebrate the dissolution of discursive boundaries. Inviting the reader to become a co-producer of meaning assures the erasure of at least one boundary: the one between reader and text. As the reader-trickster works with the text to interfere with boundaries, the selfsame reader becomes a complicit participant in the discovery of interstices through which identity can be iteratively fashioned. History is re-visioned so that, like a gendered racialised subject, it can comfortably embrace contradictions.

Maracle's strategies, including summoning the reader to look through evocative textual kaleidoscopes and interrogate the effects of colonialism on Native people, work

well in the collection of fiction, *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories*, where gaps and chinks in the writing function to erode stereotypes and introduce humour and humanity into tales of grief, loss, death and frustration.

For example, the story "Sojourner's Truth" opens thus: "From inside my box, an ugly thought occurs to me" (121). One might guess that this is the voice of Sojourner Truth, the woman alluded to in the title of the story. However, Maracle delays revealing the exact perspective of the story. The end of the first paragraph hints enigmatically: "from the clean and honest perspective of the spirit." The second paragraph switches the point of view to second person and alludes to a previous state, "when your soul was housed in living meat" (121). The reader recognizes in the third paragraph a phrase conventionally used for referring to the dead: "in its final resting pose," but the point of view is still in the second person: "your soul knows that all the maxims that guided your hypocrisy are just so much balderdash." Suspending the perspective of the tale's narrative voice, coupled with the abrupt drawing in of the reader through the second person point of view disrupts the expected continuous line of narrative.

Once the origin of the voice is divulged as that of a corpse: "in my newly dead state" (121), the reader settles into complacency (possibly believing that the story is told by the dead Sojourner Truth) until expectations are again baffled with the introduction of racist rhetoric. The dead person counts those gathered around the coffin and says, "At least there aren't any Chinamen" and later "There aren't any Indians or Blacks. *Oh God, there aren't even many white people here*" (122, Maracle's italics). The story's voice configured as coming from a dead white person surprises the reader who knows that the

author is a First Nations woman. But the reader is not allowed to digest this knowledge very long before s/he is surprised again to learn that the speaker is male; one of the mourners says "he wasn't that old" (122). The mention of the historical black female figure, Sojourner Truth<sup>17</sup>, at the outset sets the reader up to be shocked by the revelation that the narrator is a dead white male. Maracle has completely unsettled the reader's typical anticipation of text and to console him/her (or perhaps to fluster further him/her) she quips: "Life does look a little different from the vantage point of death" (122).

The story then goes on to weave an intricate network of images that link the dead man's violence against his wife "*Oh God, the living body of me scarred and twisted the very soul of Emma*" (123, Maracle's italics) with ecological destruction: "the vast expanse of weeping earth and choking fauna" (123). With wit and metaphor, Maracle touches on issues such as waste treatment, clear-cut logging, apartheid, poverty, wife-battering "the thud of human meat battered by the hammer that can be a man's hand" (128), and murder. She playfully interrupts Euro-centric myths; when asked why Lenin was allowed in even though he was an atheist, God answers: "heaven is the one place that does not discriminate" (130). The text continues to tamper with traditional beliefs,

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<sup>17</sup> The entry on Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* includes descriptions of her as, "the stuff of anti-slavery legend," "a leading exponent of liberty in both the abolitionist and feminist movements," "extraordinarily self-possessed," and having "unusual strength." Born in New York, Truth spent forty years in slavery, bearing five children and gaining freedom one year before legal emancipation. She worked as a domestic in New York City until she felt compelled to go forth preaching God's word, at which time she took the name Sojourner Truth. A charismatic, compelling speaker, she joined antislavery activists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass in the fight for human rights. She was drawn to the women's movement of the 1850s and was seen to represent "a brand of female, communitarian, vernacular African American leadership." She is perhaps most famous for her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, made at a women's rights convention in Akron (1851) which challenges both gender and racial stereotypes. (196-8 *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay, Eds. New York: Norton, 1997.)



opening, at last, a space for the presencing of the racialised, gendered subject in the title of the story: "the tall reedy body of an old Black woman waltzes and sways to the music of her own words ... 'I'm Sojourner Truth'" (131).

The story winds up gently, associating Sojourner Truth, not with the narrator after all, but with Emma, the wife that survived him. "Sojourner's Truth" mystifies conventional expectations by leaving a blank space where the subject is imagined to be — that is, the historical figure in the title is absent from the position of storyteller — and filling that place with an unlikely subject — unlikely in that it is in no respect similar to either the author of the story or the woman in the title.

The story that unfolds is not really the narrator's story, at all, but rather the story of Emma, who undergoes a renewal of spirit and rebels against the violence in her life. Emma represents the silenced "other." Her story is told by a dead white male whose voice occupies the position of textual agency. But the story this voice recounts, like the story of *Bobbi Lee*, is one that erodes the exigencies of the literary tradition maintaining white male power. This is a story of the other. The title woman does not appear until Emma has vindicated herself in action and becomes part of the ranks of "rebels" (131) who look on from heaven. The presence of freedom-fighter and feminist Truth becomes manifest only when the "other" (represented by Emma) becomes empowered and heard. Emma's voice is heard at her murder trial, and consequently the laws that govern the "United States" are revoked in favour of another law. Emma, like Sojourner Truth, stands up for the "possibilities that lay ahead for woman and earth" (132) and so is able to bring about a disruption in the hegemony of the most stringently white-, male-dominated extant

institution: the justice system.

The disruption of this societal institution is accomplished, technically, not by the usurping of the subject position by the other, but instead by the displacement of the primary traditional subject by a dissolving subject. The absence of stability and the chinks and gaps in the narrative that are opened up by humour, imagery, ambiguity and metonymy introduce sufficient interference in language practise to make possible the envisioning of identity as performance. Playing with voice, point of view, narrative expectations and stereotypes allows Maracle the freedom to enlist the reader's help in conceiving of new ways to shape identity which abandon the European notion of identification as a totalizing activity.

The 1990 Press Gang publication of *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories* has an image on the cover from a black and white photograph by Glenda J. Guilmet called "Shadow Dance #9." The shadow of the person dancing depicted on what might be a rock wall is a metaphor for the way that Lee Maracle creates a dissolute subject to enact the performativity of identity in text. As Plato so eloquently argued, when we see a shadow we are not looking at the thing itself. The fictionalized other has often been like the person dancing, unseen. The shadow of a person presents itself only when a light is behind the subject. However, given this restriction, the shadow is surprisingly flexible. It can appear on any surface in any number of incarnations; it can be any size; it cannot be touched, caught, trapped, contained or frozen; it moves freely unhindered by obstacles. Maracle's writing seems to regard the production of cultural identity as similar to the shadow on the wall. Her othered subjects do not try to occupy the same position as

traditional heroes and heroines in text. Instead they move swiftly and flexibly in and out of the chinks and openings where the traditional subject is not.

Imagine watching a play in which the body of an actor on stage cast a faint shadow on a wall or set piece behind him or her. The actor's body is framed by the stage to focalize it; but if you were to look, briefly, instead, at the shadow you would behold the trace of the subject therein. Fleeting and insubstantial, the shadow appears slightly off-centre, outside of the frame of focus. If you were to gaze too long at the shadow you might miss some crucial expression or gesture performed by the actor. Were the eye to leave the shadow to look again at the actor, the shadow would disappear from the field of vision and haunt the liminal spaces.

The shadow image resonates with Bhabha's idea of the resistant stain:

Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and — most important — leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance. (*Location of Culture* 49)

The other, like the shadow, does not try to arrogate the traditional subject position; s/he inscribes him/herself through text in ways that only a dissolute subject can: through dissolving boundaries, fashioning identities that cannot be contained. Consider how different our view of the shadow is in, say, a shadow play. Suddenly the shadow takes centre stage and the object casting the shadow is rendered invisible.

By engaging the reader in the negotiation of meaning Maracle's work allows

him/her to help create soft edges around the production of identity in lieu of rigid frontiers. The reader's participation enacts the interanimation of the discursive communities the texts explore and elides boundaries both literary and cultural to suggest the presence of liminal spaces where the identity of Native characters elude the frame. Maracle's heroines are not female versions of questing heroes but, rather, closer to what Gail Scott envisions when she describes the new heroine as one who wanders, participates in cycles of ascension and descent and embodies contradictions without shame (*Spaces Like Stairs* 123-24).

In *Ravensong* the character, Stacey, operates within the narrative in circles, spirals, and arcs, back and forth across the bridge between "white town" and the Indian village. She functions between and within both spaces; she participates in the discourses of both worlds and is ideologically implicated in both worlds. Marianne, in *Sundogs*, lives within the urban environment of modern-day Vancouver and although she does not have to cross the river, she does have to negotiate daily not only the discrepancies between her white-dominated studies at UBC and the dynamics of her Native family but also the politics of relationships between men and women and the importance of social activism. Maracle creates both these female characters to embrace the contradictions of their complex national-historical-cultural moments without shame, imbuing in them the power to change their worlds with sensitivity, courage, humour and wisdom, and in doing so she provides them with the tools to perform identity as they see fit.

As arcs, half-circles and spirals perform in *Ravensong* to open chinks in the narrative, so do triangles perform the same function in *Sundogs*. Maracle's 1992 novel is

set in an urban centre — east Vancouver — its opening paragraph a stark contrast to the natural configuration of water, tree and bird that opens *Ravensong*. The lazy Tuesday afternoon mood of the narrator's street is marked by displacement and absence. In the absence of garages and tow trucks, residents' cars are displaced by the cars of others in the parking lane; an imaginary triangle forms between three locations: the regular parking place, the person's home, and the new parking spot "a little further away" down the street (1). While this shape encloses empty space, it has been necessitated by "crowding" (1). The space inside the three-cornered design inscribes a vacancy in the subject position where a conventionally-developed hero or heroine might reside. But this centre position is empty, the subject deferred, elsewhere.

In *Ravensong* Maracle defers primacy of the subject from Stacey by displacing her with Raven from time to time. She uses a different strategy to displace the main character in *Sundogs*. Marianne resists centrality by etching triangles outward from her in all her textual relationships. She has two suitors, James, white, and Mark, Native, and the triangle formed between them keeps her deflected, the performance of her identity intermittent. Marianne is mothered by two women: her mother, Momma, and her older sister, Rita, who leaves her husband and moves in with Marianne and Momma, the three of them forming another triangle. Rita's brand new nameless twins are aligned with Marianne, forming yet another three-sided figure, since she identifies herself as "baby. I really am such a baby" (35), and because she holds a favoured place in the family, just as "twins are special ... Twins mark our beginning in the land we now occupy" (40).

Spatially, Marianne's life inscribes a triangle as she moves between home, school

and her job at the Indian Affairs office. Later the axes on her triangle extend across Canada as she leaves her work to join the Run for Peace. That her triangle becomes longer and larger as her story develops signals the increased authorial pressure on the reader to enter and extend the openings in discourse to find interstices where the dissolving subject is enunciated. The politicality of the three points of the triangle becomes more evident to Marianne as the triangle enlargens, and marks effectively the contingent nature of identity as performance.

*Sundogs* resists dominant discourse in another way, also. Greg Young-ing describes how

*Sundogs* is written in a style that [Maracle] calls 'Contemporary Aboriginal Voice.' It is written cover to cover with no chapter breaks and often jumps out of the storyline on a tangent, the relevance of which does not necessarily become immediately apparent. This is similar to the oratory style of an Elder speaking in a storytelling or ceremonial setting. (184)

A good example of this occurs when Marianne goes to the hospital when Dorry, Jacob and Wade are in a car accident. In the Emergency ward, she is aware of the tragedy, but then suddenly she is remembering life when she was six years old:

The room spins, the sound of grief tornadoes about in the spin.

Memory intrudes. Lacey returns home all grown up ...Lacey takes me shopping, puts new shoes on Sugar, picks out dresses and goes to parent night with Momma. She pours pride all over Sugar's every

accomplishment, tones down the acid of Momma's discipline, excuses Rudy's bad behaviour, explains Joseph's aloof quiet and softens the blow of Rita's sudden aversion to six year old Sugar. (*Sundogs* 139)

Moments later, after she has fainted, Marianne is lying on a gurney talking to Mark, when, suddenly: "High school, excitement, wonderment. I am thirteen" (*Sundogs* 141). After recalling acutely the shame that comes when "[l]aughter follows insults wherever I go" in high school, and the nights when she "pray[s] to God to wake up white" (141), Marianne is once again back in the hospital. These "leaps" from the storyline serve to unsettle the linearity of plot and reinforce the openings in the text formed by triangles and arcs.

In a more abstract way, an ideological triangle forms between Marianne, as she undergoes a socio-political awakening, Momma, who rants at the politicians on television, and Elijah Harper, whose "clean smooth unobtrusive lines" of his face are filmed daily during his filibuster in Parliament. In this space enclosed and simultaneously opened by the triangle, Marianne wrestles with her racial-national identity: "It shames me to hear the statistics about us in class. The shame burns holes in whatever sympathy I may have for Indians" (3). Marianne admits that she has "come to rely on [Momma's] weird sense of logic to shape my own perceptions" (46), but yet she is uncomfortable with her mother's audacity: "Momma shows up harumphing a store clerk, challenging some bureaucrat, or railing at some teacher. I wince with embarrassment" (78). She recognizes the connection between her mother's actions and Elijah Harper's efforts: "I know her challenge of these people has something to do with

Elijah finding the strength to stand up each day, day after day, hour after hour, and talk the country to a standstill" (78) but she is still "ashamed of my mother, and her challenges to those people embarrasses [sic] me" (78).

The textual triangle formed between Marianne, Momma and Elijah Harper has the most powerful effect on her development in the novel because it is through the empty space in the middle of this social, historical, political and personal triangle that Marianne learns to negotiate the markers of her identity. The empathy she and her mother feel for the Native leader in Parliament performs a connection within the dominant cultural ethos that is invisible to most non-Natives. James asks, flippantly, "What's behind all this Elijah stuff?" (81). This link, in the model of a triangle, creates a chink in discourse through which Momma and Marianne enunciate a moment in which they can see themselves.

As Marianne witnesses member Harper's repeated oral performances, she comes to read the "powerful sense of truth" between the lines of her mother's "genocidal plot" theory (81). Harper's and Momma's audacious enunciations of self fashion the sides of the triangle that draw Marianne out of her role of Baby, and move her toward her work as political activist. Marianne says, "The fabric of resistance and repression woven around Elijah and Oka has altered the texture of me" (137). This three-way alliance becomes a support structure for Marianne when she encounters those who want to contain her identity according to stereotypes associated with gender (Mark says, "You aren't a fanatical feminist are you?" (79)), and race (James says, "Indians are capable of great invisibility" (83)).



Through iteration Momma's rants create "the blade of cultural genocide" (85) that cuts chinks in the official version of national history:

She'll talk for Elijah, kick at the Prime Minister and the ten foolish  
Premiers, rail at the whole country, and rearticulate the genocidal plot  
theory. (91)

Even if the reader, like Marianne, only buys Momma's "genocidal plot theory with major reservations about its validity" (90), s/he becomes complicitous in interpolating received discourse with interruptions of what may be considered nonsense or "madness" (92). Marianne says to herself, "[c]arfeul girl, you're beginning to buy into the genocidal conspiracy. I can't help it. She's right as rain" (10). She embraces its contradictions and finds herself "ranting" in her daydreams, just like her mother does: "The Premier dances in my head like a puppet. I give him what for" (10). Like those who produce writings outside of the circle of sense in Nicole Brossard's diagram, Maracle uses Momma's theories to incise traditional representation. She is relentless in her mission to reveal "every law, custom and practice of these people as some sort of anti-Native genocidal plot" (8). Her efforts seek out interstices where heterogeneity can be articulated.

*Sundogs* wrestles with alienation in the urban environment and uses the figure of raven to problematize causal solutions. For example, Marianne realizes her inadvertent power to affect the lives of her beaus with behaviour conditioned by racist paradigms: "I turned him upside down, from raven's cock sure self to defeat in just a few seconds. I did not create the defeat but I may have reminded Mark of it. I want to tell him that but can't" (129).

Maracle's 1992 novel works constantly to remind the reader of the import of what she calls cultural "honesty" and has Marianne refer to herself and her Native boyfriend as "cultural cripple" and "cultural idiot" respectively (95). While she quite often sees herself as a "social idiot" (80, 92), and says that she wants to "slap myself about the head and ears for being this honest" (84) Marianne's resistance to the dehumanizing effect of cultural ignorance takes the form of an exhausting daily battle. She struggles with the shifting culturally-imposed parameters of identity that confine and define her in terms of self, family, community, school, work and relationships in a politico-historical intersection of time and space that seems bent on negating her and her community.

Marianne's mother is an outspoken radical. Marianne is annoyed by her but also admires her committed resistance to invisibility. Marianne conducts a little test to see how well people "see" her on the street:

I watch myself walk down the street, gauge these people's reaction to me. I duck and dodge the bodies hurrying home. I wonder what would happen if I didn't do the side-stepping. I test it out and bump into the first white man in front of me. 'Scuze me' he says, not looking at me. I do this over and over. The scenario is always the same. He sees me only after he bumps into me. I duck into a doorway and watch the street walkers. White men duck and dodge each other and their own women. Men of colour duck and dodge white men and women and women of colour duck and dodge everyone. It is the hierarchy of things. (88-9)

This test makes clear to Marianne that strategies for survival must be different for Native

people. She suddenly understands her mother:

My mother looks different in this context. She refuses to duck and dodge. I thought it was so petty of her. Now I know it took something indefinable just now, but something I would like to know about, to carry on refusing to duck and dodge the whole world. Her crass resistance looks normal.

(89)

Like Stacey's Momma in *Ravensong*, Marianne's mother has a steadfast clench on her people's worth. She unremittably rejects internalized racism and unflinchingly engages in dialectic with political and community leaders (even if only when they appear on television). She is the picture of strength the teenage Marianne needs to emulate, continuously subverting the European figuration of the indigene. When Marianne realizes for the first time that white people on the street will walk right into her, not seeing her, she suddenly sees that her mother's "crass resistance looks normal" (89). Her mother's behaviour forces her to see her own racialized, gendered subjectivity in terms of enunciative moments of her own creation. Maracle seems to suggest that if Momma were a white middle-class woman her audacity might appear charming, precocious or merely assertive, decorative in any case, but being a Native woman, her gift from raven is a necessity for survival.

In *Sundogs*, Marianne's growing sense of identification with Elijah Harper functions to draw her into the Run for Peace in support of the Oka blockade. She comes to recognize the potential of political power embodied in Harper's filibuster taking shape in the events at Oka. These incidents inspire Marianne because they bring to crisis

situations that rely on the racially-biased status quo. As Mike Meyers writes, “[t]he events at Oka gave a great many Aboriginal people permission to express their frustrations about their oppression, and maybe more importantly, look within themselves and become familiar with an almost forgotten sense of self” (*Sundogs* v). Marianne latches onto these crises and places them as a kind of overlay on her life. Through them she views her own family-in-crisis, her emotional struggles with Mark, the relevance of her programme of study at university. She begins to re-assess her life choices.

The text foregrounds the politics of identity in the context of social institutions such as the university. Twinning and the triangles in Marianne’s life point her to the spaces where culture eclipses onto the interposing colonial conditions. These devices also serve to problematize the politics of dating, marriage breakdown, family violence and alcoholism.

An explanation of the term *sundogs* appears in the text: “Impossible images reflected under extraordinary circumstances. Sundogs. Twin suns” (185). Marianne fastens onto this definition because it seems to speak to her particular situation: she has twins in her family; there are twin mountains in her homeland. Inspired by Harper’s accomplishment in parliament, Marianne finds the idea of the impossible becoming real powerfully appealing. *Sundogs* is a vernacular expression for the phenomenon of *parhelion*, which is defined firstly as “a bright spot on a solar halo ... frequently occurring in pairs on either side of the sun and sometimes prismatically coloured; a mock sun; a sun-dog,” and secondly as an image or reflection of something (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2101).

On the cover of *Sundogs*, the novel (1992 edition), the painting by Casey Dennis depicts a sun flanked by two reflections or sundogs; twin peaks of a mountain appear below the sun image, and a little lower still on either side of a lake a face is carved into the rock. The twinning of the suns, the mountain peaks and the faces in this picture certainly reinforces the twin images referred to in the title, *Sundogs*. More than that, however, the cover picture symbolizes the two main narrative strategies of the text within, the use of iteration and the trace. The two profiles, decidedly Native in appearance, do not occupy the central position in the picture; they are, rather, inscribed into the landscape, so as not to be seen right away. The way that Marianne describes her experience of people walking into her on the street resonates with this image. It is almost as if the white passersby consider her part of the streetscape; she is not seen right away, not looked at, in fact, until someone makes actual physical contact with her body.

The faces on the cover are facing each other, suggesting the repetition of one, or a mirror image, but on closer examination are revealed to be dissimilar: the changing same. They emerge out of the backdrop when the observer looks for them, in the same way that the trace can be found only if one searches for it. The iterative glimpses of the dissolving Native subject in the act of assembling an identity in *Sundogs* appear if you know where to look for them. Utilising the trace, incising discourse in unexpected places, Maracle writes her characters into the textual landscape just as Dennis has drawn these carved faces into the landscape of his painting.

As Marianne comes to see how intrinsically political her life is and she leaves the complacency of a sociology degree to march with the Mohawk nation, Maracle's

narrative demands that her readers examine their own lives for traces of complicitous behaviour. Maracle asks her reader:

In my life, look for your complicit silence, look for the inequality between yourself and others. Search out the meaning of colonial robbery and figure out how you are going to undo it all ... You need to challenge your friends, your family whenever they utter inhuman sentiments about some other race of people. (*Bobbi Lee* 241)

Maracle uses stereotypes to question the assumptions that perpetuate them. Rather than avoiding or ignoring them, Maracle's writing faces them head on and asks her reader to see them with clarity. bell hooks maintains "[s]tereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real" (*killing rage* 38). Recognizing the deleterious effects of this kind of representation, Maracle writes in the spaces around the stereotype, inviting the reader to join her in demystifying the power that makes stereotyping of the other so attractive for members of the dominant culture.

The character in the story "Eunice" anticipates questions a white woman might ask her: "Why do Indian women drink so much? ... why can't they look after their children? ... if they are so poor, why do they continue to have large families?" (*Sojourner's Truth* 57). Bhabha writes, "Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries — both actual and conceptual — disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" ("*DissemiNation*" *Nation and Narration* 300). Maracle's texts work to

demonstrate the frailties of essentialist views that keep woman and Native configured as other: as a resource to be assimilated and as a romantic escape for the white male European. Godard sees this choice as ultimately the same: "to remain caught in a binary antagonism between a hegemonic discourse and its inverse, a counter-hegemonic discourse" ("Politics of Representation" 217). Maracle offers no such limiting options. Instead her narratives unravel the constraints of genre as they work to unseat such stereotypical representations of Native women as the princess and the squaw.

In "Bertha" the main character is so colonized by internalized racism that the only emotions she knows or can remember are life-negating: "bewildered tension," "confusion," "horrific shame" (20), "sudden uselessness," "disempower[ment]," "anxiety ... rooted in futureless existence" (21). The extreme state of her dispossession can only end in self-destruction (*Sojourner's Truth* 15-26). The writing creates circles that open and spin forward rather than progress linearly, opening spaces in discourse for the production of a racialized, gendered, dissolving subject. In "Bertha," the main character looks toward her hut outside the fish plant, knowing that is not her home:

It wasn't home. She had no home. Home was fifty years ago and gone.  
Home was education forever cut short by christian well-meaning. Home was the impossibility of her ever becoming the intellectual she should have been; it was the silence of not knowing how it all came to pass.  
(*Sojourner's Truth* 22)

In an uncanny echo of orated tales, Maracle's stories circle around the traditional place of the subject, leaving it empty, allowing for the performance of meaning to be a joint

negotiation between reader, text and author. The ache that comes with remembering her youth, a time when “[e]ach girl was born in the comfort of knowing how she would grow, bear children and age with dignity to become a respected matriarch” (19), brings a sadness that embodies both yearning and repulsion:

On the hills, basket on her back, Bertha was not called Bertha. She wanted to hear her name again, but something inside her fought against its articulation. In her new state of shame, she could not whisper, even to herself, the name she had taken as a woman. (19)

Maracle cleverly inserts fleeting glimpses of a contingent, contradictory, dissolving subject in gaps and crevices where readers of European-based works are not used to looking. In the story “Bertha,” Maracle uses the trace to inscribe the character Bertha, iteratively suggesting lost components of Bertha’s identity that dissolve as quickly as she turns her mind towards them. The name that cannot be spoken, like the village that has disappeared, exists in minute vestiges somewhere in Bertha’s feeble enunciations of self. She can no longer bear to articulate the descriptors that will signal her now-extinguished hopes for the future:

Home was a young girl rushing through a meadow, a cedar basket swishing lightly against dew-laden leaves, her nimble fingers plucking ripe fat berries from their branches, the wind playfully teasing and tangling the loose, waist-length hair that glistened in the autumnal dawn while her mind enjoyed the prospect of becoming ... becoming, and the words in English would not come. (20)



Maracle uses the character of Bertha to recount the changes that engulfed aboriginal groups when colonized by Christian proselytisers. The construction of identity for these characters is linked to the loss of self associated with storying: “[t]he stories changed and so did the language. No one explained the intimacies of the new feeling in either language. ... Stories, empowering ceremonies, became pagan rituals, pagan rituals full of horrific shame” (20). Along with the breaking up of families into “[l]ittle houses that separated each sister from the other,” the “stripping of woman-power”(21) emerges as a powerful factor in the loss of the stories: “[d]isempowered, the old ladies ceased to tell stories and lived out their lives without taking the children to the hills again” (21). Bertha has lost her own story and cannot reconcile herself to the task of assembling an identity from the detritus of her current life. She can no longer speak herself: “[u]nable to leave, but not quite up to sitting down, she remained rooted to the spot” (23). So empty is her reservoir of identity markers, so weak is her will to assemble new ones, so far out of the frame is her existence, that she is textually mandated to perish. Invisible even in death, her “absence at the cannery went unnoticed by all but the foreman” (25).

Maracle uses iteration and the trace, as well as images of half-circles, triangles and the spiral effects of the language to re-write the composition of identity. These strategies serve in “Bertha,” as they do in other works, to render ineffectual any imposition of a conventional subject. The characters’ raven-like audacity and multi-layered interdiscursive play afforded by the technique of iteration combine to achieve the postcolonial doubling or splitting of subjectivity that Bhabha contends creates a “crisis in the representation of personhood and, ... initiates the possibility of political subversion”

(*Location of Culture* 55). The characters of Bobbi Lee, Marianne, Emma and Stacey as new heroines embody the contradictions and complexities of contingent identity-construction by resisting the reifying categories of colonial tradition. Collectively, they intervene in the official historical moment, challenging the Canadian reader to notice the shadows on the wall.

In *Thresholds of Difference*, Emberley calls for “the prevalent form of cultural feminism in Canada [to] be reinvented in the historical and cultural relations of Native women’s struggle for self-determination” (98). I believe that Maracle’s texts rewrite feminist discourse as they force the reader to look in new places for the performance of identity. They challenge the reader’s expectations of where culture is located not only by telling stories of Native women who become socially active and resist racial injustice, but also by re-writing traditional discursive strategies to unravel stereotypes. When Maracle’s character Marianne in *Sundogs*, on the Run for Peace, feels that the ugly reception the runners receive in one town has precipitated the rift building between the runners and the organizers, she says, “I want to translate the gap between the sharp colours of hate and the long distance between the organizers and those who run” (184). Maracle’s writing translates that gap.

Her texts, by pulling even the most reluctant of readers into their spirals, triangles, shadows and raven-jokes, insist that all Canadians suffer from the effects of racism and all Canadians can benefit from its eradication. Like bell hooks’ call for a “discourse of self-determination” that “can be part of an inclusive struggle to end racist domination” (“Refusing to be a Victim” *Killing Rage* 61), and her urging that we start “fundamentally

challenging and changing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" ("Beyond Black Rage" *Killing Rage* 29), Maracle's optimistic appeal to readers credits them with the intelligence and social conscience that will enable them to recognize the need for the decolonizing of the minds of all members of society, not just those of minority groups:

We need a country free of racism, but we do not need to struggle with white people on our backs to eradicate it. White people have this need as well. They need to stop our continued robbery, to rectify colonialism in order to de-colonize their lives and feel at home in this land. (Maracle *Bobbi Lee* 240)

By re-writing the master narratives and myths on which this nation's history relies, her works force readers to re-see what has been called the "Native problem" and unceasingly demand that her readers take responsibility for the meaning-producing cultural icons that manufacture the erasure and distortion of othered communities in Canada.

## Spanning the gap: the poetics of insurgency in Joy Kogawa's writing

"What heals is a process of empowerment" (Joy Kogawa).

"The problem is in the space" (Gail Scott).

"The trick was to live here without hating yourself because all around you was hatred. The trick was to refuse to allow your pain to prevent you from living honorably" (Guterson 200).

There are so many fictions. We construct our lives out of the tales we tell ourselves, our myths and legends, the grids of understanding that chart the paths of good and evil, right and wrong. And when our stories no longer serve to guide and direct us, when the truths we once believed turn out to be lies, we struggle on towards fresh understanding (Kogawa *The Rain Ascends* 86).

The kind of resistance writing we encounter in Joy Kogawa's explorations of race and gender through text counters postmodernist attacks on the stability of meaning; this writing re-constitutes the conditions of meaning, subverting, in its insistence on the givenness of certain past events, recent trends in critical theory that assume absence or vacancy at the centre of a text. Kogawa creates a poetics of insurgency that recuperates the agency of the subject. This poetics restores history's indebtedness to a humanist/essentialist paradigm while simultaneously acknowledging the provisional nature of language.

In *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* Gayatri Spivak includes a critical review essay of *Subaltern Studies I (II& III): Writing on South Asian History and Society* (edited by Ranajit Guha).<sup>1</sup> She writes in her analysis that the Subaltern Studies group has re-written the definition of India's entrance into colonialism. The official story draws on a change from feudalism to capitalism in order to account for and explain the colonial

subject. The Subaltern Studies group re-writes the story, moving it from the realm of “modes-of-production” narratives, into the realm of domination and exploitation narratives. *Subaltern Studies* posits moments of change “pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transitions” and holds that “such changes are signalled or marked by a functional change in sign-systems” (Spivak 197). Functional changes of importance in this theory include the one from the religious to the militant. “The most significant outcome of this change or shift in perspective,” Spivak maintains, “is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or ‘subaltern’” (197).

She praises *Subaltern Studies*, saying it succeeds in deconstructing the discourses that have shaped perceptions of subalternity; the members of the Subaltern Studies group “are themselves bringing hegemonic historiography to crisis” (198). Spivak sees their work as “a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (205 emphasis Spivak’s). Spivak suggests that Subaltern Studies’ “own subalternity in claiming a positive subject-position for the subaltern might be reinscribed as a strategy for our times.” This strategy “acknowledges that the subaltern’s persistent emergence into hegemony must always and by definition remain heterogeneous to the efforts of the disciplinary historian” (207).

Working in the same way that George Gugelberger describes postcolonial writing operating (“Postcolonial writing ... is a slow, painful, and highly complex means of fighting one’s way into European-made history” 582), Kogawa’s work engages the

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<sup>1</sup> Subaltern studies: a branch of postcolonial studies; subaltern: of inferior rank; commonly used in Third World Studies, notably in the works of Gayatri Spivak and Ranajit Guha.

dialectic of counter-discourse, sensitive to the inevitability of replacing one problematic with yet another. She does not allow her texts to resist meaning to the point of opacity or hollow themselves to the point of emptiness; the texts retain the substance, residue and trace of the elements necessary to allow the reader to make meaning in a carefully-controlled political context. I am using the word "trace" in the same spirit as I explored it in the previous chapter on the writing of Lee Maracle. As a metaphor for the confabulation of identity it is useful, for it exists like an after image, imprinted on the retina and then gone, no less real for its brevity.

What P. Merivale says of Anne Hébert's characters in *Les fous de Basan* can also be said of Joy Kogawa's characters: "They are living, not *in* the picture, but on its edge, in its frame" (74 emphasis Merivale's). The affirming humanist determinations in the text constitute an ethos where cultural identity meets the colonizing gaze and sees itself in the afterimage in the colonizers' eyes; language facilitates and complicates the healing and questioning of Kogawa's characters, who wrestle with the inflexible national narratives that push them to edges beyond the frame (of the colonial gaze). The activity of re-writing history and investigating sites of cultural identity invites the reader to join the characters' struggle to bring themselves to a place where they can leave traces of resistance. The notion of the trace, afforded by intrinsic gaps in language, is key to making clear how Kogawa's writing, like Maracle's, functions to break open damaging racist master narratives. The trace of an assumed homogeneous cultural community, like the afterimage on the retina,

presences even as it escapes the frame. Thus it exists indefinitely, in a preter-textual space<sup>2</sup>, presencing only to remind one of its absence, occupying brief iterative instances to subvert its appearance.

The reader engages the text, entering into the contrived gaps to produce the alter-narrative, following clues to embedded confrontations that penetrate the narrative space of the collectively-received story. The confrontations that point the reader to recognize the insurgent subversion of history can be seen in terms of what Spivak calls moments of transgression: "You can only read against the grain if misfits in the text signal the way. (These are sometimes called 'moments of transgression')" (Spivak 211). Kogawa's character Naomi is forced into a series of confrontations in *Obasan*, starting with the death of her uncle. Throughout this text she is continually required to transgress the received stories that inhabit her consciousness. She charts a journey from the Issei way of acceptance and forgetting to a way more akin to that of Aunt Emily, who is forever butting heads with racist rhetoric in government administration. The movement for redress that occupies centre stage in *Isuka* is an example of the insurgent's engagement with the dominant culture in the form of a confrontation<sup>3</sup>. Through this focused political activism, a small group of Japanese

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<sup>2</sup> By "preter-textual" space I mean space that is outside of the text. In Kogawa's novels, this would indicate a space created by the text but existing beyond its limits: an imagined space. The prefix "preter," besides meaning "beyond" and "more than," also means "past" (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2346). I use this term to invoke this particular connotation since the space that Kogawa's texts re-configure is often historical, i.e. the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II.

<sup>3</sup> Japanese Canadians have, in fact, been lobbying against government injustice for quite some time. For example, the Canadian Japanese Association "was organized in 1900 by business and professional people. It tried to speak for the community. It was originally formed to give support to Mr. Tomekichi (Tomey) Homma, who tried to win the right to vote for the Japanese. (In 1895 all Asians were excluded from the vote in British Columbia.) He took his case to court, but was not successful in gaining the vote" (Ito *The Japanese Canadians* 24).

Canadians transgresses the official historical narrative of Canada's past, empowering themselves by making their voices heard and creating a moment that makes apparent the trace of an assumed homogeneous cultural community.

Aunt Emily says to Naomi: "Japanese Canadians are east-west bridges. We span the gap. It's our fate and our calling – to be hyphens – to be diplomats" (*Itsuka* 78). Kogawa's novels effectively disarm racist wartime rhetoric, politicize cultural identity and write meaning-producing symbols into the assumed-spaces between the hyphen in the term Japanese-Canadian.

"'To be colonized,' according to Walter Rodney, 'is to be removed from history'" (Gugelberger 582). Kogawa's texts aim to rectify the removal that colonization has effected by recovering a displaced portion of Canadian history. Her poetics insert a substitution to re-inscribe the textual presencing of past injustices. As Spivak notes, "each substitution is also a displacement" ("Translator's Preface" box). The third definition of displacement in the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is: "'The removal of something by something else which takes its place; *spec.* the fact of a submerged or partially submerged body occupying a volume which would otherwise be occupied by the fluid" (699).

The removal from history that Kogawa treats is one such displacement. Her writing draws attention not only to the gap that has been left by the absence of truth in the historical record, but also to the invented stories that have come to fill that gap. A government-created fiction of Japanese Canadians as enemy spies has displaced the real tales of individual lives (like Uncle's) that depend on the sea for subsistence. Kogawa's characters recognize that their identities have been displaced by a fiction created by fear and nationalist propaganda.



By invoking an emotional reaction to the image of an unindividuated army of fierce Japanese soldiers and spies, the Canadian government succeeded in displacing in the minds of fellow-Canadians, the heterogenous thousands of Japanese Canadians who had been friends, neighbours and fellow-citizens prior to World War II.

In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, David Guterson's poignant novel about the murder trial of a Japanese American on a remote West coast island shortly after the war, the defendant's wife reprimands him about his stony expression in the courtroom: "you look like one of Tojo's soldiers" (80). In Kogawa's work we find similar vestiges of war rhetoric. "It's not your country" the little Goldilocks girl says to Stephen in *Naomi's Road* (39). "That's not your flag," she says of the Union Jack, and, "You're going to lose the war" (41). Schoolboy bullies provoke Stephen in *Obasan*, shouting, "Fight, Jap. Fight!" (153).

Kogawa's characters grapple with the effects of being colonized, confronting the invisibility that Canadian history has bestowed on them and resisting the language of political authority that creates biased views of immigrant people. They challenge the racist persecution of Canadian citizens with Japanese ancestry, and, through re-writing the nation's history to create a functional change in the sign system, they recuperate the dignity that was robbed of them.

Kogawa's writing assumes that a substitute displacement wrought by the marginalized cultural group itself is better than the one enacted by colonizers. For her, then, history is an important part of the postcolonial recuperative project. In order to re-vision the past (as feminist writers have also discovered), one has to credit the writing subject with some sort of ontology. If it did not matter whose hand was moving when Canadian history

was written, Japanese Canadians (and First Nations people, French-Canadians and others) would not have to set about re-writing that history.

Some postmodern historians (Gertrude Himmelfarb, for example<sup>4</sup>) have put forth the view that history consists only in its various versions. The unified consciousness often posited for the subaltern is negated by the discourse of postmodernism, and the negation "leads to an emptying of the subject position" (Spivak "Subaltern Studies" 209). However, a postmodern questioning of both the received and silenced histories does not serve the political interests of a group like the Japanese-Canadian League that sought an acknowledgement, apology and monetary redress for the wrongs committed against it: "While postmodern literature tends to postulate the death of history, postcolonial writing insists on the historical as the fundamental and all-embracing" (Gugelberger 584). Kogawa relies on this received history to lay the foundation for her narrative insurgency. In this way, Kogawa's work can be seen as postcolonial writing. Although, as Gugelberger argues, postcolonial writing relegates aesthetics to incidental status in the name of political and ideological concerns (582), this, of course, is not the case in Kogawa's work; her texts are far from bankrupt of aesthetic qualities.

Kogawa, like her character Naomi Nakane, came late to a political life. Her earliest published writing (poetry) betrays little attention to political concerns. She works language into compact, beautiful inquisitions of itself, playing with notions of self and other, urban existence, philosophical and emotional questions. Her later writing in the novels contains

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<sup>4</sup> See her article "Telling It As You Like It" in *Times Literary Supplement* 16 October 1992: 12-15. ("[Postmodern history] is a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past" 12).

this same minimalist style, carrying over the stark beauty of her intense poetic verse. In her treatment of political issues, Kogawa's writing never sacrifices its aesthetic qualities, perhaps because in her journey, poetry came first. The spare, dense quality of her prose makes it unique in the arena of polemical writing.

Through a poetics of insurgency, Joy Kogawa's writing enacts a disruption in hegemonic historiography; its assumption of an extant writing subject serves a particular political interest (or "a scrupulously visible political interest" as Gayatri Spivak would put it). Kogawa's alter-stories<sup>3</sup> persist in piercing the skin of hegemonic perceptions, and their emerging presence remains in contra-position to the nation's official recorded history. Both *Obasan* and *Itsuka* write into being a displaced portion of the historical record, creating what one writer calls an "alterna(rra)tive project" (Jones 138).

Manina Jones, in her essay "The Avenues of Speech and Silence: Telling Difference in Kogawa's *Obasan*" in *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary Collage' and English-Canadian Writing*, writes of the "intersection of 'political' and 'literary' discourses" (121) and observes that the text enacts "a strategic act of signification that conditions both individual and collective history and subjectivity" (120). Kogawa's subversive use of the documentary form helps to create this change in signification. The official record in the national archives and her own remembered past are articulated into fictive situations with invented characters. Manina Jones suggests, "the novel ... both includes historical documentation and opens it up to the gaps it both encodes and conceals"

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<sup>3</sup> I will use this term to refer to the "other" stories that are not included in received history primarily recorded by the system that keeps discursive power in the hands of the white, Euro-American dominant culture.

(138-9).

Weaving a complex tissue of historical narrative through the interdependent discourses of three generations of Japanese-Canadian voices, *Obasan* and *Itsuka* recuperate the integrity of the subject both through telling and not-telling, positing, for political purposes, a vision of a unified, if contingent, historico-textual cultural community. Frank Davey comments that internment “transformed Japanese Canadians from a coherent community ... into a diaspora people more conscious of commonality than of difference” (112). Kogawa’s writing assumes the existence of a coherent community before internment insofar as that community is determined by language, culture and history.

In *Obasan*, on the occasion of her uncle’s death, Naomi Nakane embarks on a journey backward in time to re-live her experiences during World War II. Through her remembrances and aided by her aunt Emily’s files, Naomi comes to understand the tragedies that took her parents from her, and accepts the role that her history has played in shaping her present day perceptions. In *Itsuka*, Naomi has moved to Toronto and joins her aunt in political struggle. Continuing a journey of self-discovery that began in *Obasan*, she finds a sense of integration as part of a community (she joins the National League of Japanese Canadians) and in intimacy (she becomes involved with Father Cedric). Whereas the internment and dispersal of Japanese Canadians during World War II serve as the backdrop for events in *Obasan*, the lobbying for redress for those interned is the sustaining action in *Itsuka*.

But, as Lawrence Grossberg explains, those engaged in postcolonial studies must confront what he calls the “globalisation of culture,” which means that “a critic can no

longer confidently assume that he or she understands how cultural practices are working, even within their own territories" (169). Grossberg also contends that we have reached the limit of "theorising political struggles organised around notions, however complex, of identity and difference;" politics of identity are "synecdochal," he says, and this conflation of political and cultural identity "makes politics into a matter of representation (or its absence)" (169). This type of conflation is actualized in Kogawa's work. Because she fuses the cultural and political communities of Japanese Canadians in order to rectify history, she allows her texts to treat representation in an essentialist way. Grossberg maintains that the only strategies open to politics conceived as representation are "deconstruction, strategic essentialism and an unfocused alliance" (169). Kogawa makes selective use of "strategic essentialism" along with an unspoken meta-text to challenge notions of identity and culture (while positing them as stable in order to re-inscribe the events which devastated a community), as Grossberg delineates, to "enable us to think about the possibilities of a politics which recognises the positivity or singularity of the other" (169).

However, while Kogawa's works conceive of a coherent cultural/ political community of Japanese-Canadians, they also strain against othering notions of community confabulated by the colonizing culture and based on racist fears and biases. The language of Kogawa's texts commits a surreptitious violence to the homogenizing, totalizing view of community insofar as it is constituted by the racist damage perpetrated by the meaning-making institutions and cultural-production systems in Canada.

Kogawa's writing, making use of positivist essentialism, politicizes the erasure of the Japanese-Canadian experience during the Second World War. Gayatri Spivak describes

the dilemma facing western thinkers: "The radical intellectual in the West is either caught in a deliberate choice of subalternity, granting to the oppressed either that very expressive subjectivity which s/he criticizes or, instead, a total unrepresentability" (Spivak "Subaltern Studies" 209). Myths of the political past designate Japanese-Canadians as totally unrepresentable. Kogawa's texts attempt to displace this omission with alter-stories using representation itself in language to subvert and problematize the alternative of subalternity. Kogawa's writing (especially the novels *Obasan* and *Itsuka*) brings about a crisis in hegemonic historiography. This crisis reveals, through insurrections in language, what Gayatri Spivak would call "epistemic violence" enacted upon a cultural community. On the limits of western intellectualism, Spivak suggests:

Although some of these Western intellectuals express genuine concern about the ravages of contemporary neo-colonialism in their own nation-states, they are not knowledgeable in the history of imperialism, in the epistemic violence that constituted/ effaced a subject that was obliged to cathect (occupy in response to a desire) the space of the Imperialists' self-consolidating other. It is almost as if the force generated by their crisis is separated from its appropriate field by a sanctioned ignorance of that history.

(209)

Kogawa's use of representational language allows for the presencing of a subject that resists the perceiving gaze responsible for the concept of the imperialist/ colonist's other.

The counter-discourse generated by Kogawa's texts draws on the agency of the victims of war crimes, re-configuring them as insurgents and inscribing their existence on

the edges of the frame, avoiding the othering colonial gaze and supplying them with the freedom of guerrillas. Kogawa's fictions posit a world in which the colonial subject can exist intermittently outside of dominant institutions and structures (language, law, society). Thus they are at liberty to behave and incite change on their own terms. This is what I call a poetics of insurgency.

Many reviews of Kogawa's work have focused on the social, cultural and historical significance of her novels. It is interesting to see that critics take the novel *Obasan*, for example, more as a social document than as a work of fiction. Kogawa admits the novel is partially autobiographical, but the reviewers' willingness to accept her alter-stories as the proper gap-filler in Canadian war history indicates how the colonizing gaze works to consolidate the subjectivity of the colonized. This attitude points toward what Spivak would call the "sanctioned ignorance of history." Most reviews of *Obasan* have a reverent, apologetic tone, as if the critic feels sorry on behalf of all Canadians for the events that Kogawa recounts in her book. Most talk about the novel in terms of its contribution to a body of historical documents, rather than its contribution to a literary canon. This approach does *Obasan* a disservice not only because it neglects the novel's literary strengths, but also because it condones the homogenizing gaze of the colonist by supporting the possibility that this one story can speak for all Japanese-Canadians. It overlooks the heterogeneity of lived experience by swallowing whole this one alter-narrative, othering Japanese-Canadians and all other hyphenated Canadians in the process. In this regard, it can be said that Kogawa's novels have achieved what they set out to do, relying on the totalizing approach of the colonizer to be at work in the reviewer's gaze. As Kogawa assumed a unified community in

order to make her point about the official record, reviewers also assume a unified community in their acceptance of Kogawa's texts as *the* alternative version of that same history, bearing out the unfortunate observation made by Lawrence Grossberg: that politics of identity are "synecdochal" (169).

However, an early review of *Obasan* for *The Montreal Gazette*, does take note of its aesthetic qualities. Sherry Simon notes the social and historical importance of the novel and suggests, "*Obasan* is a poet's novel." She compares it to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* because of the "tense power of its prose," "the silences of its restraint" and its "intense but detached emotionalism and brittle, perfect sentences." Simon says that the novel builds "an exceptionally graceful structure to articulate and fuse the private and public experience." By concentrating on the power of the language and the unique strategies Kogawa enlists to convey deeply emotional issues, she pays homage to the literary achievement of *Obasan*. This review is rare; most critics, I feel, have completely missed how Kogawa's language works to subvert its own assumptions, and labours to enact insurgent forays into the myths of the dominant culture. Despite an unfortunate misprint of the main character's last name (Katane instead of Nakane), Simon's review is acutely prescient. It predicts that "*Obasan* will join Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* as a classic Canadian novel of girlhood awakening" (B9).

The review of *Obasan* by Sandra Martin in *The Globe and Mail* emphasizes the social, historical and political implications of the novel. Informative, it begins by describing Joy Kogawa's house in Toronto, and then moves to her physical appearance. Martin dispenses with praise for its literary techniques quickly by saying *Obasan* is



"absorbing and lyrical" and then focuses on the novel as if it were a window to lived reality: "it is a loaded weapon." Martin's diction indicates that she values the text more as a political weapon than as a piece of literature. She commends it because it "confronts our [Canadians'] meanness of spirit" and explores the "fallout from such a concerted and systematic destruction of culture" (E16).

The review places *Obasan* in context by mentioning the awards it has won and judges that it has been "remarkably successful, particularly for a first novel." Martin focuses much of the review on Kogawa's sources in the Public Archives. She recounts that Kogawa had dreams, in the late 1970s, of looking through the archives in Ottawa; when she did so she found letters written by Muriel Kitagawa to her brother during World War II<sup>6</sup>. Martin reports that on reading the documents, Kogawa came to see Kitagawa as "passionate," "militant," "strong" and "desperate about everything" and she became the model for Aunt Emily. In contrast to Kitagawa, Kogawa says she saw herself more as Obasan and Naomi: "shy, reticent and self-effacing." Martin finds that the use of Kitagawa's letters gives the book "the authenticity of a documentary" (E16).

This reviewer sees *Obasan* as having a direct relationship to the world, assuming that the relating of historical accounts is not provisional and contingent. Martin values the novel based on its close resemblance to the "actual" facts as they were found in documents in the Public Archives. She extols the text for its ability to report what really happened, and for its competence in showing the reading public how badly the Canadian

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<sup>6</sup> These letters have since been edited and printed in *This is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings On Japanese Canadians 1941-48* (Ed. Roy Miki. Talon Books: Vancouver, 1985.)

authorities handled Japanese-Canadians during the war. This is not a bad way to measure the worth of a book, and certainly what *Obasan* has achieved in this regard is admirable.

"Meanness of spirit" emerges in a review by Carole Corbeil who says that it "has driven many writers to throw themselves against their origins like so many flies against a screen." This review focuses on the historical events with which the novel deals, choosing to comment on the actual events that frame the novel rather than its literary traits. Corbeil calls the wartime internment and dispersal of Japanese-Canadians "concrete, legislated cruelty." Corbeil also mentions the awards the book has won and assesses that "Miss Kogawa ... has documented history as a force that shoots through the minutiae of daily life." She comments on the imagery of the novel and ends up evaluating the actual historical responses of Japanese-Canadians to their treatment: "Much of the imagery in *Obasan* centres on silence, the silence of accepting suffering; as a tactic for dealing with the forces of quirky bureaucracies, silence leaves a lot to be desired." (E1) This review uses *Obasan* as an opening through which to talk about the events of history as if they could be known directly.

Marilyn Rose, in her article "Hawthorne's 'Custom House,' Said's *Orientalism* and Kogawa's *Obasan*: an Intertextual Reading of an Historical Fiction," looks at Kogawa's literary use of history. She insightfully asserts that *Obasan* figures history as "the instrument of de-marginalization through which minorities may find their voices and challenge whatever oppressive hegemony has delimited them" (295). She sees *Obasan*'s mission as causing the "'text', and the 'critic' ... to intersect meaningfully with the 'world'" (295). But, while Rose acknowledges the "problematics" of history, she often

engages the dialectics of colonial history as if they were unproblematic.

Erika Gottlieb refers to the use of history in *Obasan* as if it were not an equivocal value. Where Rose figured history in the novel as an instrument of freedom “through which minorities may find their voices,” Gottlieb sees history in *Obasan* as an instrument of constriction. Positing the revelation of Naomi’s mother’s fate as the “central mystery” of the novel, Gottlieb resolves that once this mystery is unravelled, “her new understanding allows Naomi to extricate herself from the snare of her history” (52).

In Marilyn Rose’s view, both Aunt Emily’s and Naomi’s opinions on the knowability of truth imply that “if there can be no confirmation of *subjective* visions of truth, there can be no faith in *historical* versions of truth” (291 emphasis Rose’s). I think she is right in determining that *Obasan* wants to retain the modernist notion of how texts mean, although it falls short of accepting the notion of an indisputable truth (or truths) that imbues the act of telling history with the power to right all wrongs. Kogawa’s writing constantly draws attention to the impossibility of totalizing versions of truth, making use of the frailties of language to display and undermine the places where meaning is created. Rose correctly asserts that *Obasan* is not just a “rather uncomplicated ‘historiographic metafiction,’ a novel in which Kogawa sets up and exploits a point of view which explores the problematics of history-writing even as it writes history” (291). Rose also acknowledges the novel’s reluctance to offer the “easy out” of an epistemological constant.

The two forces that work in complicity with one another as well as in contraposition to one another in *Obasan* are not what many critics cite — that is — Naomi’s

silence versus Emily's wordiness<sup>7</sup>, but instead Naomi's conscious resistance of history ("Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?" "Life is so short ... the past so long. Shouldn't we turn and page and move on?" (42) ), against Emily's concerted effort to reconstruct a suppressed history ("The war was just an excuse for the racism that was already there" (35).)

Marilyn Rose sees the model that *Obasan* presents for reconstructing a suppressed history as a violent one: "minority history...is about something forced on a people" (292). I, too, see that Kogawa has enlisted violence in a way that empowers the inscription of alter-stories of the past. Violence is manifested in the language Kogawa enlists to enact the functional change in sign systems that empowers the insurgent characters in her narrative to usurp agency and revitalize their relationships with their heritage. Erika Gottlieb notes:

To say that Kogawa has a language of her own is not sufficient. Many good poets or writers do achieve that. But in Naomi's narration one often has the feeling that the writer is virtually reinventing language. Unmistakably, the style is the result of extensive linguistic experimentation. (39)

Gottlieb's acknowledgement of Kogawa's veritable overhauling of language is a commendable one. Kogawa manipulates language to underline its provisional nature, and

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Erika Gottlieb's "The Riddle of Centric Worlds in *Obasan*" (37,39,41,52), Gary Willis' "Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*"(241-8), A. Lynne Magnusson's "Language and Longing in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (62-64,66), Mason Harris' "Broken Generations in *Obasan*" (43,46-7,51-2,54-5) and P. Merivale's "Framed Voices: The Polyphonic Elegies of Hébert and Kogawa" (70-2).

to undermine received narratives, subverting the myths that constitute and efface racial others.

A series of embedded confrontations (i.e. Naomi with herself, Naomi and Emily, The League and the government) grows out of the change in signification achieved by Kogawa's dynamic manipulation of language. Many critics have noticed the tension between sound and silence in *Obasan*<sup>8</sup>. Mason Harris has explored the oppositions in the text between inner and outer worlds, fertility and sterility, water and sea images versus desert and prairie images, earth and air, living and dead forest images. P. Merivale fruitfully considers the interplay between Christian and Buddhist metaphors and the way the text embodies elegies both personal and communal. Erika Gottlieb looks at the complex relations between the concentric circles in the novel, what she calls "container hidden within container within container" (34). A. Lynne Magnusson deals with longing for a pre-linguistic union with mother in opposition to the separation from mother which is exacerbated by sexual interference and wartime internment. Gary Willis points out the tacit dichotomy between what he calls "Japanese and Canadian ways of seeing" (239), fastening onto the analogy of push versus pull techniques in carpentry to illustrate his argument. Robin Potter examines *Obasan* with a view to the suppression of matriarchal power and the abjection that surfaces in its place.

Frank Davey contends that although "*Obasan* never really chooses between the Issei and Nisei positions it foregrounds," (111) a tension seems to develop in Naomi between "Issei reticence" and "Nisei activism" (112). Aunt "Emily's positivism" (104) continually

comes up against Naomi's humanism and ultimately the novel illustrates a "Sansei affirmation that a discourse of humanism should replace a discourse of rights and difference" (Davey 112). Mason Harris argues that "Naomi's narrative could be seen as a synthesis of two opposing kinds of discourse ... the silent discourse implicit in the accumulation of carefully preserved objects which makes the house a filing cabinet of the family's past" (53) and "Emily's polemical view of the past" (54). "Naomi revives the living content of the silence with which her community endured injustice, thus finding a speech within silence (228)" (Harris 54). The humanist-essentialist paradigm works well in Kogawa's first novel, allowing subtle realizations and epiphanies to pave the way to a more unified conscious understanding for the main character: "My loved ones, rest in your world of stone" (*Obasan* 246).

But the affirmation of the efficacy of humanist discourse is disavowed in favour of strident positivism by the end of *Itsuka* as Naomi steps into the political fray and the narrative takes on the tenor of forthright documentary: "How can you not be interested [in redress]?" asks Morty, the editor of the magazine where Naomi works (*Itsuka* 102). Naomi finally admits: "I am sick of my safe old dead-end tale. Give me a crossroads where the beginning of an altogether new story touches a turning point in the old" (138), and in chapter thirty-eight, there she is, arriving out of breath, distressed that she is late for the election of the council for the Toronto Japanese Canadian League (*Itsuka* 224). By the end of the novel when she stands and applauds as Brian Mulroney speaks the formal apology in parliament (September 22 1988), she has embraced the positivist activism of Aunt Emily

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<sup>4</sup> See note 7.

and the Nisei (*Itsuka* 274).

In the critical reception of *Itsuka* we see reviewers taking a more serious look at the literary quality of the text<sup>9</sup>. What appears to be *Itsuka*'s solitary positive review comes from Val Ross who calls *Itsuka* Kogawa's "long-awaited sequel to her semi-autobiographical novel *Obasan*." Ross says that while *Obasan* is about Naomi's search for Mother and faith, *Itsuka* is about messy struggle for rebirth. Ross calls Kogawa a "morally complex" writer and pays special attention to her physical appearance ("she looks surprisingly chic in stovepipe pants and a leather jacket") and her way of speaking ("she speaks hesitantly, in fits and starts"). This critic unites personal observations about the author with comments on the attributes of the novel; she also takes a stab at evaluating how *Itsuka* measures up to literary standards. Ross suggests that the writing rises above its social message: "Her work is more than the sum of its political parts." Focusing once again on the biographical details, Ross compares Kogawa to June Callwood presumably because of her political activism (C1).

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<sup>9</sup>May 21 1997 The Toronto Women's Bookstore, Harbord Street Toronto, Ontario: Joy Kogawa is giving a reading from *The Rain Ascends* and signing books after. When I hand her my copy of *Itsuka* to sign she says, "this is embarrassing." Thinking she might be referring to the remark I have just made about writing a chapter of my doctoral dissertation on her work, I ask, what is? "This book," she says and looks at the cover for a moment. Why? Why is it embarrassing? I prod. "Oh, I don't know," she says as she writes her name inside the cover. "I wish I could do it over again."

Why? I prod again. She looks up at me from the book and smiles. "Well, it got a bad review; I guess that's why." I hand her the next book to sign. She asks me the date. I tell her and then say, What would you change? What would you do differently? She closes the book she has just signed and looks down at its cover for a moment. It is the hardback of *The Rain Ascends*. She thinks a good long minute, as if she's trying to figure it out. Then she shakes her head, smiles, looks up at me and says, "Oh I would just do the whole thing differently."

The reviewers didn't seem to like the documentary part of the novel, I say. But what's wrong with documentary? I ask. Is it any less of an art form? She smiles at this and puts her hands over my hands almost as if to bless me, and then sort of waves it all away in the air, waving me away, too, saying, "At least it's out there," smiling and turning to the next person in line.

Oddly, what critics loved about *Obasan*, its seemingly transparent window to a chapter in Canadian history, critics hate about *Itsuka*. While most reviewers felt that the “documentary-collage” component of *Obasan* strengthened its literary value, most reviewers feel that the same component of *Itsuka* diminishes its value. Readers clearly did not enjoy *Itsuka* as much as they did *Obasan*. I’m not sure why. Kogawa herself says in an interview with Sally Ito that *Itsuka* “would have been better served had other points of view been more fully explored. ...In *Itsuka*, Aunt Emily’s realities were being lived without her inner landscape being revealed. This is one of that book’s many flaws, I suspect” (103).

Two western Canadian newspapers give *Itsuka* lukewarm reviews. Jo Steffens’ review of *Itsuka* in *The Calgary Herald*, titled, “Novel focuses on Canada’s shame,” gives the novel tepid praise (“It is a worthy successor to *Obasan*”), focusing instead on biographical details of Kogawa’s life, such as her work with the National Association of Japanese Canadians (1986-88), and her induction into the Order of Canada (B12). In *The Vancouver Sun*, Mia Stainsby’s review, titled “The poetics of cultural resurrection,” praises *Obasan*, extolling its “haunting voice, empowered by Kogawa’s poetics;” the critic finds, however, that “in *Itsuka*, the language, the imagery, the shimmering characterizations are not as constant.” Stainsby misspells Naomi’s last name: Nakani vs Nakane, and exhorts: “Too often, Kogawa preaches” (C20). The historico-political gap-filling that reviewers saw *Obasan* providing, they call preaching in *Itsuka*. *Obasan* was praised as a social document; now *Itsuka* is panned as a social document.

The negative reviews include one by Claire Rothman (*The Montreal Gazette*) who



says, "political clamor drowns out Kogawa's voice." Both novels fulfill the role of re-writing history and re-telling the past. Both novels recount actual events that happened. Both novels paint white Canadians, including the Canadian government, in a bad light, as bigoted, intolerant, racist monsters. But Rothman praises *Obasan*, saying of that novel, "Kogawa's lucent prose breathes life into Naomi's family circle," and she criticizes *Itsuka* for shifting the focus from the personal to the political. (Does she therefore mean to argue that *Obasan* was *not* political?) Her pronouncement that "*Itsuka* seems less like a novel than a documentary on the National Japanese-Canadian League and its fight for government redress" sounds more like a criticism than an observation. Rothman finds fault with *Itsuka* for being "a book with an agenda;" she compares it to *Obasan*, "whose roots," she claims, "are firmly embedded in the literary tradition of precision and sensual detail." She finds *Itsuka* lacking in this regard – as if to say that because it is not firmly embedded in a literary tradition [i.e. documentary is not considered literary perhaps?] it is not good. Her complaint that "characters and their relationships rank second to the political message" reveals an assumption that character and relationships are primary in measures of literary value. She calls the characters in *Itsuka* "paper cut-outs" and concludes that "Kogawa has sacrificed the subtlety of her earlier prose; the clamor of *Itsuka*'s politics drowns out the artist's voice" (H2). Does this mean to say that political writing is only effective when it is subtle? How can the clamor of politics in a piece of writing be anything other than the artist's voice?

"Wearing the 'hairshirt' of ethnicity" is the title of Mary di Michele's review of *Itsuka* in *The Toronto Star*. Using the measures of authenticity and realism, she finds the

first part of the book convincing: it “has the power and specificity, the particularity of experience;” but she is not fond of the second half: “the Toronto scenes...read like the minutes of meetings of the National Japanese-Canadian League...and the drama dissipates.” She commends the aesthetic value of Kogawa’s poetic sections: “Kogawa’s strengths as a writer are evident in passages of lyrical beauty and depth in the book,” but di Michele denounces the latter, more historiographic portion of the work: “The novel falls flat when it moves into the arena of documentary.” Documentary was cited as one of *Obasan*’s strengths<sup>10</sup>. Why is it that *Itsuka* does not fare as well with its documentary qualities? Like Claire Rothman, di Michele exhibits a sense of disappointment in the novel’s documentary quality: “It is ambitious of Kogawa to wish to tell the story of this political fight.” This comment admonishes that Kogawa has not told the story well, and, in judging the task to be ambitious, infers that it is not a story worth telling in a literary frame (G17).

Probably the harshest panning of *Itsuka* was published in *The Globe and Mail*. Stan Persky writes: “*Itsuka* pales in *Obasan*’s shadow.” He compares it to *Obasan* which he says gave Canadians “a powerful and poetic glimpse into...a heretofore taboo topic.” Of *Itsuka*, he says “there are pages and pages of painfully embarrassing writing.” He complains that the characters (other than *Obasan*) are “utterly without substance.” He calls the book a “mess,” and “a publisher’s nightmare.” He objects to the almost-encyclopaedic quality of the political discourse: “The rhetoric of Community Studies 101

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<sup>10</sup> i.e. Sandra Martin praises the use of historical documents, claiming they give the book “the authenticity of a documentary” (E16).

is laid on with a trowel in Kogawa's earnest, well-meaning, ultimately lifeless documentary-a-clef." Persky draws the line between social document and art: "*Itsuka* offers some interest as anecdotal sociology: as literature almost none" (C20).

The sections most akin to documentary in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, the largest of which are the memorandum excerpt at the end of *Obasan* (248-50) and the reproduction of the acknowledgement made by the Canadian government in September 1988 at the end of *Itsuka*, privilege historical fact and document yet stop short of collapsing into a totalizing concept of truth. Naomi interrogates the notions of history, truth, story, justice and the speaking subject, recognizing that she is, as they are, constituted by and of language: "All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past" (*Obasan* 25). She is rendered alternately powerless and empowered, voiceless and voiced, damaged and healed, caught in an ambivalent dependence on the interstitial spaces in discourse where she emerges.

Emily, on the other hand, seeks to actualize her vision by filling the world with artefacts attesting to the events that damaged so many lives: "the vision is the truth as she lives it"; for Naomi the truth is "more murky, shadowy, grey" (*Obasan* 32). Positivism is a philosophical system recognizing only positive facts and observable phenomenon. The positivist holds that only if it can be proved, then it exists. Acutely aware of language and its ambiguous power, Emily counters official history with battalions and fleets of her own words: "the army, the navy, the air force of letters – all the Aunt Emily correspondence jamming up our small metal box in the Granton P.O." (*Obasan* 32). In Emily's world, writing it down assures its continued existence: "There it was in black and white – our short

harsh history. Beside each date were the ugly facts of the treatment given to Japanese Canadians” (33). Emily labours to extinguish lies by displacing them with provable facts: “Wherever the words ‘Japanese race’ appeared, Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written ‘Canadian citizen’” (33).

Next to timid and reluctant Naomi, Emily appears to be without qualms and doubts: “You are your history. If you cut any of it off, you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything ... Denial is gangrene” (*Obasan* 50). She insists on knowing categorically the quantity and quality of the wrongs committed, suspecting that fancied-up rhetoric camouflages truth: “There’s no strength in seeing all sides unless you can act where real measurable injustice exists. A lot of academic talk just immobilizes the oppressed and maintains oppressors in their positions of power” (35). Emily acknowledges how language can be used to manipulate and control (“ ‘Interior Housing Projects’! With language like that you can disguise any crime” [34]), but rather than withdrawing from its potency, she seizes it and uses it to make her presence felt, as, for example, in the writing of her manuscript, “The Story of the Nisei in Canada: A Struggle for Liberty” (38). Emily’s verve and ambition keep the reader aware of the hidden spaces in the received national narratives while Naomi’s resistant recollections provide access to the personal alter-stories of the characters.

Interestingly, Aunt Emily is absent from *Naomi’s Road*, and so the conflicts apparent between Emily’s and Naomi’s ways of knowing and being in *Obasan* and *Itsuka* are internalized in *Naomi’s Road*. The child Naomi focuses on problems such as the making and keeping of a friend, and the changing dynamics of her own family unit as

important caregivers disappear. These problems are dealt with in as sensitive and poetic a way in *Naomi's Road* as they are in the adult novels; however, even though treatment of the larger political scope is downplayed in the book for children, *Naomi's Road* is definitely a model in miniature for the creation of insurgency poetics, the strategic use of essentialism, the subversive use of language and the places of confrontation that form the framework for *Obasan*, *Itsuka* and *The Rain Ascends*.

Naomi compares Aunt Emily to a white blood cell "rushing from trouble spot to trouble spot with her medication," admitting, in awe, that for Aunt Emily, "the injustice done to us in the past was still a live issue" (*Obasan* 34). It is through her positivism that Emily works to keep the past alive, re-creating it every day. Naomi's amazement that Emily should consider the past alive suggests that she considers it dead, and her refusal to examine it keeps it buried. Morty says, "People like you, Naomi, they really disappeared you good" (*Itsuka* 102). These two women's responses to the past are emblematic for the way they use language to accommodate their ways of being in the world. Their attitudes mirror the ways that Kogawa takes advantage of historical gaps and blanks in official discourse to effect the emergence of a qualified racial-cultural subject.

Recent thinkers, (most notably Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva), have made us acutely aware of the distance between words and the things that they refer to. Writers have found this distance or gap, inhering in language because of its metaphoric nature, a unique site of exploration. As words represent things, refer to them (as opposed to *are* them), they point to the things they represent, and away from themselves. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, in his

chapter on “The Description of Statements,” Michel Foucault explains, “the ‘signifying’ structure of language (*langage*) always refers back to something else; objects are designated by it; meaning is intended by it; the subject is referred back to it by a number of signs even if he is not himself present in them” (111). Any kind of representation relies on distance from the thing that is represented. Foucault explains further, in his essay “What is an Author?”,

the writing of our day has freed itself from the necessity of ‘expression’; it only refers to itself, yet it is not restricted to the confines of interiority. On the contrary, we recognize it in its exterior deployment[]. This reversal transforms writing into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier. Moreover, it implies an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates. Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. (116)

Kogawa enters the game of writing, urging it to move beyond its own rules. She depends on language’s ability to to transgress and reverse order to accomplish her political ends. Enlisting the ambivalence emerging from the complex “interplay of signs” of writing, Kogawa forces openings in which the identity of her characters can be assembled. These incursions allow her to harness the power of language and effect cultural change.

As her characters are inscribed into being through the forced opening of linguistic spaces, they begin to fill not only the gaps in history but also the present-day gaps in

Canada's cultural consciousness. The necessity of first pushing open a space that one can inhabit requires one to take an aggressive stance opposite the rest of society. It is the nature of language that allows Kogawa to play out this aggression in writing that often appears to point to just the opposite: gentleness and passivity. Writing oneself into being in a culture that systematically denies your worth is a violent act. But this act is accomplished with subtlety and beauty in Kogawa's work.

Perhaps because the space between words and the things they represent is so crucial to Kogawa's work, space itself figures largely in all her texts. Her characters are continually being asked to negotiate space as spatial reality – that is – the occupying of physical space. The notions of filling a space (in the historical record) and inhabiting space (in the physical world) are mirrored by the space taken up by words on the page. Especially in Kogawa's poetry and somewhat in the lyrical prose of *Obasan*, the blank spaces of the white page around and between the printed words create a powerful visual illustration of the relationship between space itself and the things occupying space within it.

All these uses of space function to point to the space between words and their referents. Foucault writes, "[l]anguage always seems to be inhabited by the other, the elsewhere, the distant; it is hollowed by absence. Is it not the locus in which something other than itself appears, does not its own existence seem to be dissipated in this function?" (*Archaeology* 111). Blank space becomes a rich potential site for the presencing of the unseen, unsaid alter-stories, comprising what can be seen as an unspoken meta-text. The meta-text, emerging in the space between signifier and signified, speaks the presence of the other.

Space becomes prominent in Kogawa's work to mirror the gaps in the historical record, in memory, in thought, in awareness and to depict the effacing racist regard of the persecutors. But, as King-Kok Cheung tells, "The gaps in the narrative demand from a reader a heedfulness that corresponds to the narrator's attentiveness" (129). In this way the blank spaces that Kogawa creates and appropriates entice the reader to join in the struggle for insurgency, asking him/her to co-create meaning and incite a change in the representational system that has heretofore accounted for the immigrant experience.

The invitation to pay attention as much to the spaces as to the text itself comes through the continuous iteration of silence and absence images (for example in *Obasan*, the repeated allusion to the letter "o," in the word *Obasan*, in the shape of her mouth, and so on). A reversal of the sign-system draws attention to the colonial assumption of a homogeneous other by refusing the possibility of a totalizing concept of identity: "We are the silences that speak from stone" (*Obasan* 111). Gaps in the text both constitute and transform language, providing opportunities for insurrections in the envelope of discursive reality: moments in which would-be victims emerge and bring "hegemonic historiography to crisis" (Spivak 198). Deploying language's propensity for "transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates" (Foucault), Kogawa counters efforts to negate, displace or erase Japanese Canadians. Her writing makes incursions into the national historical sign system of record, arming her characters with the power to be insurgents. Good examples of postcolonial writing, Kogawa's works succeed in fighting their way into the histories of the dominant culture. She creates characters who claim the power of the language that de-humanized them, and harness it to write themselves into a reality which



sanctions not only their humanity but also their right to rise up against the forces that oppress them.

Space is used to intimidate and demoralize the Japanese Canadian characters in a variety of ways. For example, space becomes a rare privilege as the living space of the characters in Kogawa's novels diminishes. The dwindling of personal space becomes associated with violent actions, such as the seizure of the Nakanes' goods and property and their subsequent forced detention in work camps and internment camps. Personal space in the "Pool" ("a prison at the exhibition grounds called Hastings Park in Vancouver" [*Obasan* 77]) is an animal stall. Aunt Emily's friend Eiko "sleeps in a partitioned stall — being on staff so to speak. The stall was the former home of a pair of stallions and boy oh boy did they leave their odour behind! The whole place is impregnated with the smell of ancient manure" (*Obasan* 97). Internment camps were set up in "[g]host towns such as Slocan — those old mining settlements, sometimes abandoned, sometimes with a remnant community" where "row upon row of two-family wooden huts were erected" (*Obasan* 77). Naomi's family must live in a "small, grey hut with a broken porch" (121) in Slocan. To the child "[i]t seems more like a giant toadstool than a building"; "[t]he ceiling is so low it reminds [her] of the house of the seven dwarves" (*Obasan* 121). As the space they are allowed to occupy (in the world, in the country, in the national consciousness, and in humanity) shrinks, their continued survival, and occupation of physical space, becomes a form of resistance.

As the space between families is widened with the geographical dispersal of internees, the solidarity of community is interrupted and the distance becomes an emblem

of brokenness. The orders that reach Naomi's father read, "In accordance with the segregation programme which is now being carried out by the Government, you will be required to move to Kaslo where you will await Eastern Placement" (*Obasan* 173). Aunt Emily tells Naomi, "the message to disappear worked its way deep into the Nisei heart and into the bone marrow" (*Obasan* 184). From the Granton sugar beet farm the family drives "seventy-odd miles" on special occasions to visit Nakayama-sensei in Coaldale (*Obasan* 203).

The nature of the space Japanese Canadians were made to occupy during the war spells another way they were rendered powerless. For example, on the excuse of the threat of espionage, and positing sea coasts as vulnerable to attack or infiltration ("the 'protected area' — a hundred mile strip along the coast" [*Obasan* 77]), the government required citizens like Uncle, who relied on proximity to the ocean for his livelihood, to be detained in the interior. Naomi notices the "strange empty landscape" as she and her family leave Lethbridge on the back of a truck piled with their belongings (*Obasan* 191). Ironically, she compares it to the sea: "It is flat as the ocean for as far as I can see with a few farm houses like ships on the horizon. Here and there are straight unnatural rows of fierce almost lifeless trees pruned like the brooms of a chimney-sweep" (191). A displaced fisherman on a beet farm in Alberta is a telling example of the effect of the forced occupation of unfamiliar space. Eventually Uncle loses hope: "I can't remember when Uncle stopped talking about going back. It may have been the first year after the ghost towns, or the next year, or the year after that" (*Obasan* 197). After Uncle's death, Naomi muses, "Perhaps some genealogist of the future will come across this patch of bones and wonder why so many

fishermen died on the prairies” (225).

The physical appearance of Kogawa’s poems speak to the resisting subject. The poems, tiny, compact, dense and economical icons, survive on the “tiny language of terror” (Kogawa *Woman in the Woods*), but survive nonetheless. By not disappearing, by not becoming empty space, the community resists the extinction intended in their naming.

Naomi mourns, in *Obasan*,

We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, untended and spindly. We erupt in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside-down on the prairies, our hair wild as spiders’ legs, our feet rooted nowhere. We grow where we are not seen, we flourish where we are not heard, the thick undergrowth of an unlikely planting. ... We come from our untold tales that wait for their telling. (226)

Kogawa enlists the power of expressions, such as “a stench in the nostrils of the Canadian people” (*Obasan* 118), to unveil and resist racial hatred, writing in a space on the edges of the frame, and thereby restoring dignity to a community. Her inroads into the tyranny of the hegemonically- received narratives which perpetuate an unjust depiction of the Japanese-Canadian community crack the shell of mythic truthfulness so effectively that by the end of *Itsuka* Naomi can say, “I can hear the voices...It’s the sound of the underground stream...I can hear the breath of life” (279).

One of the strategies Kogawa deploys unravels common assumptions about silence. She plies her craft to remind the reader that absence of sound construed as a space (as

opposed to silence) should not be conceived as always negative. King-kok Cheung has argued that in dichotomizing language and silence reviewers have rebuilt the hierarchy that *Obasan* labours to dismantle (126). Filling the silence with speech – any speech – is not always preferable to silence: “Certainly words can liberate, but they can also distort and wound; and while silence may obliterate it can minister, soothe and communicate” (Cheung 128). The many silences critics have noticed, such as the silence of Naomi’s dead mother and the silence of her unspeaking aunt, Obasan, can be re-configured in a spatial dimension as absences. “For Derrida, ... a text ... is a play of presence and absence, a place of the effaced trace” (Spivak “Translator’s Preface” lvii). The effaced other, existing as trace in Kogawa’s work, occupies both the physical space and the metaphysical space unoccupied by Naomi’s mother: “To enter into a world of relationships mediated by language is to enter into a world of endless yearning, where words and substitute objects always register a lack” (Magnusson 62). The blank space which represents the mother contains the residue of the effaced trace of her presence. The oral space and the metaphorical space signified by Obasan’s extended silence on the subject of Naomi’s mother hold the trace of her (present) absence.

As different kinds of spaces are invoked in *Obasan*, particularly in the chapters where the Nakanes are sequestered in Slocan and Granton (such as living space, personal space, head space, dream space, outer space, spaces on a piano keyboard, spaces between words, spaces that come after unanswered questions), the language of the text takes on the sparsity and claustrophobia of the decreasing spaces available to the concepts of hope, survival, freedom and dignity. These iterative presencings of limited space become places

of enunciation where the skilled writer interposes threads connected to signs. These signs take on different significations when poked intermittently between the visible, traditional enunciations of cultural meaning.

In her essay "Red Tin + White Tulle," Gail Scott writes, "it seems so clear that, as women, we have been forced to operate in language from a negative semantic space, reduced or missing from the range of positive symbols" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 26). This is the space that Kogawa appropriates: the negative semantic space, that which participates in the meaning-producing sign systems of dominant culture by being hidden. Not currently occupied by the hegemonic symbols of meaning, and therefore commonly unnoticed, this space is available, like an empty storefront for rent downtown.

Squeezed into living spaces and societal spaces that were never meant for human beings, all personal, private space eradicated, the characters in Kogawa's novels are forced to discover the chinks, the gaps in between the discursive skeleton of a power that has disinherited them. Gail Scott asks, "what space might our discursive writing occupy?" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 108). Kogawa's texts answer, here, in the hidden spaces in between the frames of the master narratives. "The space beyond the text is the new place" (Scott *Spaces Like Stairs* 111). Unseen, unnoticed, like the hidden places of internment, this place is the absence of sound, and the space of not being-there. It contains within it the trace of the potential yet-to-be-there.

A.Lynne Magnusson comments on "linguistic anxiety" in the novel; she remarks on the book's "power as a political speech act" and notes "Kogawa's pervasive concern with the act of speech itself" (58). Once the government of Canada named Japanese-

Canadians enemies, it became the perpetrator of an injurious speech act. Judith Butler says, in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, "the one who acts ... acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor, and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset" (16). Thus the Japanese-Canadian community was made part of the dominating language system, linguistically included by the application of the label 'enemy.' "To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns" (Butler "On Linguistic Vulnerability" 2). Once Japanese-Canadians are part of this sign system, however, both the government and the community are vulnerable to the same conditions and ambiguities of language. Both parties are somewhat injured by the name-calling. Butler explains: "If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power" ("On Linguistic Vulnerability" 2).

What Kogawa effects in her writing is a re-appropriation of language that works to free rather than immobilize. Butler observes how linguistic agency can emerge from a place of vulnerability in language:

One is not simply fixed by the name that one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. Thus injurious speech may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response. If to be addressed

is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call.

(2)

The purpose of the name-calling by McKenzie King was to subjugate and erase Japanese-Canadians. At the same time it interpellated the racial community and initiated it into a temporal life. While it did fix and paralyze the lives of Japanese-Canadians during and after World War II, what Kogawa writes now, thirty, forty and fifty years later, can be seen as the unexpected enabling response. The offensive call inadvertently inaugurated a subject in speech who then came to use this same language system to counter the offensive call. What I call Kogawa's poetics of insurgency reconfigures the sign system of the dominant culture and uses it to re-write sections of history. While there is no way to undo what has been done and said, Kogawa's writing claims autonomy and self-assertion by using the language of the oppressors in a way that enacts a functional change in the sign system.

At the start of *Naomi's Road* Kogawa writes: "there was a war going on. Canada and Japan were enemies. How sad that was" (v). She acknowledges the unfortunate political facts, and then extracts the naming-calling from the historical record: "It is hard to understand but Japanese Canadians were treated as enemies at home, even though we were good Canadians." She replaces the injurious speech act with a re-naming: "we were good Canadians;" and offers evidence to confirm this naming: "Not one Japanese Canadian was ever found to be a traitor to our country" (v). Kogawa affirms Japanese-Canadians' identity as Canadian citizens.

In *Obasan*, Naomi recognizes her community's "short harsh history:" "there it was

in black and white" in the official documents her aunt brings from a recent conference (33). Aunt Emily is the perfect example of a subject that comes to use language to counter the offensive call. She has gone through a government document and "wherever the words 'Japanese race' appeared, Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written 'Canadian citizen'" (33). This image of the literal re-writing of the official record is a startling illustration of the way that Kogawa uses language to recuperate an unrecorded past, substituting a new (alter)story in the place of the old racist-based story.

In my view Kogawa creates a poetics of insurgency to seize the blank spaces beyond the frame of the dominating sign system. In these spaces, she writes traces of enunciation, inscribing the markers that both welcome and refuse discourse. In fostering this poetics, Kogawa empowers her interned citizen-characters to re-invest in their own autonomy and see themselves reflected back in their own re-asserted versions of history.

Although Kogawa says that, "Racism is stronger than sexism for me" (as told to Karen Gram, *The Vancouver Sun* A9), her main characters are women and it may be that her writing plays out Gail Scott's idea that "women are skilled at stepping into spaces" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 110). Kogawa's texts make ingenious use of the liminal space, and while she focuses mainly (but not exclusively) on women and the relationships between them (for example, in *Obasan*, Naomi, Emily, Obasan, Mother, Grandma Kato) she does not privilege the struggle for a gendered identity over a racial, or cultural identity. (Maybe they cannot be separated anyway?) Unlike Maracle, whose writing specifically marks a gendered subject, Kogawa attends almost exclusively to the complexities intrinsic in the marginalization of a cultural community. While gender figures in her narratives, it only



intersects incidentally with issues related to race and culture, i.e. the importance placed on the birth of a male child (*Obasan* 20), that Emily's determined political activism is "not like woman" (*Obasan* 36) and that therefore she will probably not marry, Naomi's mother's personality, "altogether yasashi" (*Obasan* 51), the description of her mother's and her grandmother's intuitive caregiving as "alert and accurate knowing" (*Obasan* 56), her mother's eyes, embodying "Japanese motherhood," are eyes that protect (*Obasan* 59).

Kogawa's attention to feminism is obviously secondary to her attention to racism. Gram explains: "Kogawa said she isn't saying sexism should be neglected over racism, but that racism is a more urgent issue and should not be sacrificed for issues pertaining to privileged Canadian women" (A9). Other writers of colour have made similar remarks<sup>11</sup>. It is hard to say exactly what Kogawa's feminism is. P. Merivale offers cryptically that "Kogawa's is largely an oblique feminism of marginality" (74). She seems skeptical of the more radical forms of feminism. Kogawa told Carole Corbeil in a 1983 interview: "I think it's time someone did a thorough criticism of what now passes for feminism. There comes a point in any movement where what was healthy and wholesome turns into something quite pernicious and death-producing" (E1). She maintained that the infant within us "can grow into a grotesque glutton who continues to maraud about without seeing that it is no longer necessary to do so ... there comes a point when screaming victimization begins to victimize others" (E1). Corbeil writes: "Miss Kogawa, who is acutely conscious of how vague, undefined moral guidelines often hatch spurious politics, is relentless in her analysis of the

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example my chapters on Lee Maracle and Dionne Brand. See also Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks, Bharati Mukherjee, Himani Bannerji, Claire Harris, Beth Brant, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Jeannette Armstrong, Sky Lee, Makeda Silvera, Hiromi Goto, Trinh Minh-ha.

moral discrepancies that popular, superficial feminism allows" (E1).

While it is unclear what Corbeil means by "popular, superficial feminism" her attention to "spurious politics" is a significant one. Throughout much of *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, Naomi distrusts the more vocal approach to politics that her Aunt Emily embraces. It is Naomi's resistance to confront her past that signals the reader to look for the blank spaces in which markers of culture are present. Naomi's reluctance to get involved in the redress movement is a metonymy for the way that certain cultural groups resist political activism, not because they believe the stories recorded about them are true, but because they recognize that there is more than one way to resolve conflict. Kogawa does not limn the character of Naomi in order to lambaste her for holding back. Rather, she etches Naomi sympathetically to represent a great many people's response to injustice. Naomi herself is the blank space where the traces of past events are found: "The internment and dispersal ... left ... Naomi a deracinated, depressed, and apolitical Sansei with the psychological conflicts of the Nisei and no ethnic community to mediate between her sense of alienness and the WASP world of rural Alberta" (Harris 43). Merivale notes how grief has conditioned Naomi's life: "Her emotional stunting has been a negative, unflowering silence;" "Naomi ... is living in the hyphen of non-identity" (70).

Gaps in Naomi's knowledge stand in for gaps in the narrative history of her family. Yearning for her lost mother spells an absence that defies explanation. The unread letters from her mother on blue rice paper represent this gap. Naomi's mother's intention to communicate her circumstances to the children is thwarted; the children are never told the story of their mother's fate. When the letters surface later, Naomi cannot read them

herself because she cannot read Japanese. These tragic gaps are symbolic of the gaps in the official record of this nation's wartime activities. The withholding of the information that could satisfy Naomi's curiosity about her mother and grandmother is eerily symbolic of the purposive linguistic treatment of Japanese Canadians in wartime. "What do you think happened to Mother and Grandma in Japan?" Naomi asks Aunt Emily (*Obasan* 186). She wonders, "Did they starve, do you think?" and on seeing Emily's reaction she thinks, "It was as if my unexpected question was a sudden beam of pain that had to be extinguished immediately" (*Obasan* 186). Indeed, the Canadian government acted quickly to extinguish any possibility of treachery from its perceived enemies, and, in naming Japanese Canadians thusly, produced a gap as painful to Japanese Canadians as the loss of her mother was to Naomi.

Naomi's reticent personality helps us see the gaps and chinks in the master narratives where the residue of difference resides. She is a foil for Emily who charges ahead and creates alter-stories. Naomi waits silently, a kind of gap herself, for the blanks to be filled in. Through her we read Emily's journals and other documents, and so she becomes the opening for our entry into the text. She is our guide to the present absence of her mother and her *Obasan*, occupying the acoustic and temporal space where the just-past and the yet-to-be are mere stains on the consciousness.

Kogawa made a name for herself as a poet, publishing three volumes of poetry before she wrote her first novel. The story that is told in *Obasan* and continued in *Itsuka* is the story of the internment and dispersal of Japanese-Canadians during World War II. Kogawa's desire to tell this story could never have been fulfilled if she had stayed with the

genre of poetry. She needed a forum to write an extended narrative. She had to have space to undo the many pleats and explore the complexities in her story. She needed time to layer the voices and the myths one over top of another. That could only be achieved in the novel form.

Joy Kogawa said in an interview with Mia Stainsby that when she writes she “attends to the unknown. ... It’s not so much trying to tell my story as being obedient to some kind of voice coming out of the cauldron in which emotions live” (*Vancouver Sun* April 4 1992 C20). This idea of being obedient to another’s voice says a lot about the persona/ speaker that surfaces in Kogawa’s poetry. Her speaker, like Naomi, is also a blank space, many times acted upon rather than acting. For all of this, the speaker is not completely helpless; appropriating and manipulating language to create rhetorical markers that signal the way to the blank spaces, the speaker subverts and undermines the dominating language of the other, “the voice coming out of the cauldron in which emotions live.”

Kogawa’s 1977 volume of poetry, *Jericho Road*, which is dedicated to her two children, Gordon and Deidre, treats the subjects of death (“Like Spearing a Butterfly” 21, “When the Alive Packed His Suitcase” 59, “The Wedlocked” 72-5, “Last Letter before Decree Nisi” 100, “Sitting in the Plane at Last” 106, “Poem for Wednesday” 109-12;), filth (“Laryngitis” 20, “Washday” 23, “Leaf” 89;), the human body (“Overnight Guest” 26, “Laryngitis” 20, “Being Limbless” 61, “Post Mortem” 78;), pregnancy (“Joseph and Saleena” 29, “The Aquarium Has Its Own Silences” 30;), ageing (“Old Man in the Library” 39, “Leaving Her Waving at the Airport” 41, “Deaf Pensioner” 42;), and isolation (“In the Almost Evening” 38) deftly in small seemingly hermetically-sealed packages, in which

economical, terse bursts of language are meted out carefully. The voice is a controlled, concise one; it speaks from a place of present absence, in whispers, in echoes, and describes the trace of the insurgent cultural presencing in the gaps of the dominant discourse.

The poems can be seen as small utterances of graffiti carefully written on the chinks and spacings of mortar on a wall where the large, easy-to-read writing is hate literature against Japanese-Canadians. In the sign-system of the dominant culture, the words are largely seen as silence, but in the altered textual world of reformation where a functional change in the dominant sign-system has been effected, the poems become the filled emptiness, the present absence and the written-on blank pages of historiographic crisis. Confronting the absence, but also speaking from inside it, the poet-speaker in the works in *Jericho Road* toils thanklessly to fight her way "into European-made history" (Gugelberger 582).

Tellingly the subject that *Jericho Road* treats most often is silence, and the dominant imagery is of blood and violence. Consider the way that silence and violence work in conjunction in the poem "Deaf Pensioner":

he terrifies himself  
 into submission  
 makes their decisions his  
 turns mouse-like  
 a garbage-can man  
 collecting orders  
 and mouse at the bottom  
 dreaming of dancing  
 always the dreams corroding  
 the base of the garbage can  
 dreams dancing the anvil chorus  
 in their frenzy to escape  
 while the orders gnaw steadily

along the edges  
of his broken ear drums  
("Deaf Pensioner" *Jericho Road* 42)

The dynamics created by the repetition of the word "dream," juxtaposed to the images of refuse and rodents, drive the movement in the poem into a "frenzy" akin to the one experienced by the old man. Those wielding power over him prey on and abuse his silence, manipulating him so that "he terrifies himself/ into submission/ makes their decisions his." The images of music conjured by the words "dancing" and "chorus" evoke a striking contrast of an earlier, happier time (or maybe an imagined dreamed time) during which the man could hear and respond to music. The contrast struck between the hearing and non-hearing worlds of the senior citizen is evident also in the gulf between his world and "their" world, even though the music exists in palimpsest or trace in the negative acoustic space of his deafness.

The movement of the poem widens this gulf; the violence of terror, frenzy, and escape penetrates the edges of the elderly gentleman's personal space. Even as the dream world tries to eat away at the garbage world ("the dreams corroding the base of the garbage can"), the controlling "orders" and "decisions" of the oppressors start to chew like rodents on the already damaged victim. In this way, the poem shifts the responsibility for the silence onto the bullying civil servant/ law enforcement officer/ nursing home matron, implying that preying on the helplessness of the silent is tantamount to causing that silence in the first place. The persecution and/or paranoia of the deaf pensioner becomes the source of his silence.

The power of silence and negative space that emerges in Kogawa's 1985 collection,

*Woman in the Woods*, is less violent. An aura of calm and restfulness exudes from references to "inaudible songs" ("Bird Song" 9), silent insects ("The Insects in Our House" 16), "soundless chewing" ("Etiquette" 18), the lost language of grief ("Grief Poem" 38), "mute music" ("Mute Music" 52), "silent falling" ("The Riddle of Night" 56), deaf mother ("July in Coaldale" 70), and the "quiet garden" ("Fish Poem" 78). Judith Fitzgerald in *The Toronto Star* compares Kogawa's work to that of Patrick Lane because of her treatment of humanity's relations to the natural world<sup>12</sup>. Although she protests that "Kogawa's poetry too often contains the easy rhyme and the safe sentiment," she also remarks: "A calm and cool solemnity permeates Kogawa's *Woman in the Woods*" (M4). In *Woman in the Woods* we see more dramatic evidence of Kogawa's deft utilisation of language and strategic essentialist representation to bring about a change in signification that empowers textual victims and cultivates the flowering of alter-stories.

The quieter action in the poems in this collection displaces the violence of the action in *Jericho Road* poems. For example, activities mentioned in "Deaf Pensioner" such as "gnaw," "escape," "collecting," "dreaming," and "corroding" create an overall impression of intensity and frustration. Action in the *Woman in the Woods* collection, such as in "Garden Poem" (10) ("rooting," "wiped," "grew," "turned" and "nestled"), effects a calmer, easier presence. In "She Has Fled" the subject, though currently "nameless," moves "to where the / name tree grows" (*Woman in the Woods* 35). Movement here is indicative of empowerment and freedom. The flight in "She Has Fled" is away from a stationary "he,"

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<sup>12</sup> She may be thinking of poems such as "It Is Said," "From the Hot Hills," "Slash Burning on Silver Star," "What Little is Left," "That Quick and Instant Flight," "Spring," "Stigmata," "Albino Pheasants" and just about any of the poems collected in Lane's *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford UP 1987.)

whereas the dreams' frenzy to escape in "Deaf Pensioner" is constantly thwarted by the issuer of "the orders" (*Jericho Road* 42).

The sharp concision of the words that comprise the poems in *Jericho Road* slices in razor-like expediency to the quick of the vulnerability of the silent, and gesture towards the threat of violence that hovers over the unfilled space of the other. The word "Nameless" on the sign in King Midas' dream ("Dream of King Midas Asleep" *Jericho Road* 18) is as menacing as the voicelessness of the laryngitis-sufferers in "Laryngitis" (*Jericho Road* 20). These silences, Kogawa seems to suggest, are the resultant residue of greed and waste respectively.

Contrarily, the silence of the woman in "She Has Been Here For Three Months," a poem in *Woman in the Woods* (72), is healing, recuperative — almost angelic: she has been "silent as a saint on trial and /regal as a snow queen." Moving through the nursing home with "a sudden smiling grace," the woman claims peaceful ownership of all she sees: "her/ private popcorn tree country," "her familiar orchard," "her new winter trees," re-appropriating meaning, transmuting signs of entrapment into emblems of connection. Images of sterile nature, such as "glacial whiteness," "the earth bled to stubble," and "last fall's hay," correspond to the woman's calm acceptance of her spent state of being. The summer and fall of her life are over, her hair is probably "growing white// and whiter" like the dandelion puffs she sees; she herself has been "bled to stubble," her days of menstruation and child-bearing past; "it is time, dry time;" she is empty and dry like the egg shells and husks of hay; her eyes are dry, empty of tears ("all crying past"). She waits, serene and oblivious to physical restrictions ("sometimes on walker/ sometimes in



wheelchair”), to follow the “smoke trails showing/ the pathway home.” Kogawa’s character here seems to have joined the spirit world, even though her body still exists on earth. The unused spaces in “She Has Been Here For Three Months” penetrate the boundaries of physical and metaphysical realms, creating a mood of contentment and rest; the old woman is quietly unafraid, secure in her unfinished identity as defined by time and place.

The poem “Offerings” (*Woman in the Woods* 77) produces a similar atmosphere; its simple prayer-like diction and form reflect the brevity and fragility of human life as well as the “interstitiality” and “contingency” of all inscriptions of cultural (Bhabha). Gifts of fleeting beauty (“soap bubble,” “glass thread,” “snow fleck,” “sliver of smoke”) become metonyms for natural and cultural phenomena that refuse stasis. These offerings, unlike the human sacrificial victims in *Jericho Road*, fulfil their natural quiet destiny and burst, break, melt and are swallowed just as Kogawa’s poetics of insurgency assures enunciative moments in intermittent liminal spaces, where the “ethnic” / political other emerges in the chinks and gaps only to vanish, like the after-image, leaving a trace which is no less real than the flicker of the image itself. The offered objects dissolve and vanish, but “we” remain to make sense of it: “we lift/ the barricades/ we take the edges/ of our transience.” In this poem Kogawa imbues the “we” persona with agency. Silence in this poem does not cripple, stifle, harm or even signify powerlessness. Rather it functions in the “we” to produce a state of wonder and awe in much the same way as a functional change in a sign system effects a transformation of power which allows a colonized subject to appropriate the negative semantic spaces in a life-enhancing way. The disintegration of the offered

treasures is both accepted and investigated. Silence emerges as a component of the “we” that can be examined and analysed: “we bury the ashes/ of our absences/ and sift/ the silences.”

Like the women in “She Has Fled,” and “She Has Been Here For Three Months,” the “we” in “Offerings” transforms the toxic silence of *Jericho Road* into a silence of wistful acquiescence, or what King-kok Cheung calls “attentive silence.” In her discussion of *Obasan* Cheung points out that while silence signifies the opposite of speech in the English language, “the most common Chinese and Japanese ideogram for ‘silence,’ [ ] is synonymous with ‘serenity’ ...in the United States silence is generally looked upon as passive; in China and Japan it traditionally signals pensiveness, vigilance, or grace” (127). Silence as unfilled space in this respect manifests the unused portion of sound and activity. In this way the silences and absences, necessary in the play of any text, in Kogawa’s text hold both the negative consequences of suffering caused by loss, grief, persecution and damage as well as the positive consequences of pensiveness, vigilance or grace as appropriate responses to healing, ageing and forgiveness.

It is hard to agree with Fraser Sutherland’s review of *Woman in the Woods* in *The Globe & Mail*; he wrote that the book was about “rough rides in life and a lot of anxiety,” saying “anxiety pervades” and that the poems basically testify that “the world is going to hell in a handcart.” I do not think this work is about anxiety at all. In fact, *Jericho Road* is by far the more anxious of the books. Compared to Erin Mouré, Sutherland finds Joy Kogawa “a gloomier poet”; he criticizes the tiny type face that Mosaic Press “affects.” I think the small type face is marvellous, giving visual representation to the “tiny language

of terror" that Kogawa seems to be writing against in this work. He sees Kogawa's created persona as "a hapless creature in the wilderness, easily spooked yet flying straight into a gunsight or the headlights of a speeding car." Sutherland calls *Woman in the Woods* "a graveyard of animal victims" and complains of "padding," saying "too many short, slight poems have been included, apparently to round out a sequence or theme" (D15).

Charles Campbell's review in *The Vancouver Sun*, titled "the reluctant activist," says of Kogawa: "she is by nature a writer of dream-like stories, not an activist." He comments on themes in her biography and calls *Woman in the Woods* "a book of poetry about a woman in flight from her conventional suburban life" (C4). But in *Woman in the Woods*, there is more than flight; there is also peace and watchfulness, which signal a turn in attitude in Kogawa's writing.

With *Naomi's Road*, Kogawa ventures into yet another genre. This work is less well-known than *Obasan* or her books of poetry. This eighty-two-page illustrated book for children was recently reprinted by Stoddart (Toronto 1995). Since Kogawa has said that her primary concern is racism, I imagine she has chosen to write for children on this very topic in an effort to contribute to the body of anti-racist material available for young people. Perhaps her intention is for the book to be used in schools and in this way counter some of the received history that is perpetuated by Canadian educational institutions.

Janice Kennedy of *The Montreal Gazette* praises the book: "Kogawa fuses the metaphoric road of Naomi's young life, with the real road of her new home." This review tells of Joy Kogawa's internment experience, mentions David Suzuki, and re-capitulates

the basic points of the War Measures Act, including the fact that internment was carried out against the advice of Canadian military and RCMP. Kennedy comments: "*Naomi's Road* is no strident polemic ... it is not even a sad book." She commends Kogawa's "hauntingly evocative style," attributing her ability to create "scenes and moods that startle with their familiarity" to her experience as a poet. She concludes: Joy Kogawa "tells a story that should be told and she tells it in language marked by a graceful strength rare in children's books today" (B9). In the review in *The Winnipeg Free Press* Helen Norrie calls *Naomi's Road*: "a story of quiet heroism in the face of great physical and emotional hardships" and says that "Joy Kagawa's [sic] prose has the sparse beauty of haiku poetry" (62).

In the foreword to *Naomi's Road* called "A letter from the author" Kogawa writes: "Not one Japanese Canadian was ever found to be a traitor to our country" (i) and introduces the metaphor – a literary substitution – of the road of life. In this preamble to what has been called a children's adaptation of her best-selling novel *Obasan*, Kogawa addresses directly a complex political idea and she introduces and explains a rather sophisticated literary device.

Despite its address, "Dear Children," ultimately the foreword is written for an adult; a child of eight would probably not know the meaning of the word "traitor," and might not understand how a metaphor works. Kogawa's strategies earmark the text, even before it starts, as a re-writing of history. This opening missive alerts the reader to what Linda Hutcheon would call "the Canadian postmodern" quality of the text. The overt pointers to the corresponding historical context and to the dominant metaphor of the story

accomplish as much by doing as they do by telling. As with the writing in Kogawa's novels and poetry, the language of *Naomi's Road* betrays an awareness of the problems in writing history even as it writes history. Hutcheon defines what she calls the Canadian postmodern<sup>13</sup> as texts which are

both self-consciously fictional but also overtly concerned with the acts (and consequences) of the reading and writing of history as well as fiction. In other words, the aesthetic and social, the past and the present, are not separable discourses in these novels. ... This is not a modernist denial of the literary value of historical fact (in the name of aesthetic autonomy); nor is it a realist use of that fact to make the reality of the fictional world seem authentic. Instead it is a critical counterpointing or dialogue between the 'texts' of both history and art, done in such a way that it does not deny the existence or significance of either (*Canadian Postmodern* 14).

Kogawa's *Naomi's Road* counterpoints events from the historical past ( e.g. "in the 1940s ... there was a war going on. Canada and Japan were enemies" (i)) with moments of poetic beauty (e.g. "Streamers and streamers and streamers are everywhere. The pink and yellow and blue and green ribbons of paper twirl and sway through the noisy air. It's like a giant maypole dance" (8)). She sets them in dialogue with each other, assuming the average reader's received knowledge of such stories, and making conscious reference to literary devices (e.g. "Naomi's road is a different kind of road. It is the path of her life"

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<sup>13</sup> In this work, Hutcheon treats works by George Bowering, Timothy Findley, Rudy Wiebe, Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Jack Hodgins, Clark Blaise, Audrey Thomas, Susan Swan, Aritha Van Herk and others.

(ii). Not only does this strategy draw attention to the writing process and foreground the artifice of creating text, but it also serves to break open little spaces between the two discourses. Inside these spaces the traces of both the aesthetic and the historic coexist.

Juxtaposed, the rhetoric of history and art both animate and contradict each other. One seems to say, "Everyone knows about World War II and what happened," while the other seems to say, "I am making this up as I go along." Kogawa's writing unmask the interconnectedness between what she is doing and what historians do, while at the same time pointing out that "we can never describe our own...discursive history, because we always speak from within it" (Hutcheon *Canadian Postmodern* 67). Swathed in the simplistic language of a primary school reader ("This little story is told by a Canadian child..."), or couched in the rhetoric of formal governmental documents ("It is urgently admitted that the Orders-in-Council [for the deportation of Canadians of Japanese racial origin] are wrong and indefensible and constitute a grave threat to the rights and liberties of Canadian citizens...", *Obasan* 248), this story, like any story, is always told by someone, at some time, for some particular reason.

The use of other documents in her novels gives Kogawa openings through which she can revolutionize the construction of identity. The interpellation of extraneous texts in any given work has been termed intertextuality. Kristeva explains the process which involves an altering of the *thetic* position — the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one. The new signifying system may be produced with the same signifying material; in language, for example, the passage may be from narrative to text. ... The term *intertextuality*

denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources,' we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic — of enunciative and denotative positionality. (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 59-60)

According to Marilyn Russell Rose, there does not need to be evidence that the author meant to use other texts in instances the reader might consider intertextual:

"'Intertextuality' refers to a relationship between texts that is neither causal nor intentional. ... Rather, the connection made between texts is entirely 'readerly'" (286). She goes on to say that "Intertextuality then is related to reader response theory, for it assumes that texts are 'created,' to some extent, by readers" (286). Merivale calls the framing voices in *Obasan* compulsive narrators, voices of intertextuality and memory. She says the narrators are paralyzed by loss and suffering, "stop developing morally or emotionally, stop relating to other people (if they ever did), stop living, in short, in order to live in the past, among the living" (Merivale 74).

Canadian history is the intertext for much of Kogawa's writing. The writing (or re-writing) of history is as political as the events about which one writes. As Grossberg points out, the discourse of postcoloniality needs "to think through the consequences – and the strategic possibilities – of articulation as both a descriptive and political practice" (169). Kogawa's texts speak about history from within that history. While interpellating history into fiction, showing that history is another form of story-making, and

acknowledging that writing itself is a political act, Kogawa's writing also depends on the givenness of that history. Because the works rely on an essentialist paradigm of representation, spaces and gaps emerge readily between the sites of the reader's body of received knowledge and the writer's construction of a fictive world. It is in these spaces that the reader and writer co-create the residue and after-images of cultural conditions, such as race, gender and historicity.

Race, for example, surfaces immediately in *Naomi's Road's* invocation to Canada: "Oh Canada! What a vast, beautiful country. Here there are people from all around the world. And along with the Native Peoples, we are all Canadians together" (i). Though the central character in the story is not actually "from" another part of the world – she was born in Canada – Kogawa caters to dominant assumptions about origins based on physical appearance. She then broaches Naomi's cultural identity specifically, naming her "a Canadian child," but describing her as having "lovely Japanese eyes and a face like a valentine" (i). The reader is then told that even though Naomi did not know how to read or write the Japanese language "she had to be ashamed to be Japanese" (i). Naomi is affirmed in her identity as both "Canadian," and "Japanese," fracturing the myths about where cultural identity is located. Readers are invited to puzzle over the question: what constitutes cultural identity? If place of birth, primary language and eating style do not yield a definitive answer, then what will?

Ethnicity is, as Kogawa admits in the following paragraph, "hard to understand" (i). Winfried Siemerling probes the paradoxes of ethnicity as a literary category, quoting Simon and Leahy: "our postmodern fascination with, and distrust of, categories of



difference throws suspicion on ethnicity, just as it does on gender, race, and nationality” (Simon & Leahy 388) ...“ethnicity has traditionally been constructed in opposite ways” (Siemerling 15). He says, further,

That it designates a quality traversed, whether voluntarily or not, by that relation to which it is ethnic has usually been obscured by a flattened dialectic. The presumable “purity” of the identities of both dominant and ethnic culture is construed, albeit relationally between communal self and other, through the ascription of exclusive qualities whose oppositional homogeneity can only be guaranteed by a maintenance of symbolic boundaries. (15)

Kogawa’s writing presents and deconstructs these boundaries. But she locates the identity-traces of her characters not in stereotypes (or through ascription of exclusive qualities whose oppositional homogeneity are guaranteed), but in the spaces between the stereotypes. These spaces, existing on the edges of the frame of the master narratives, and escaping the focus of racist notions, both welcome and resist the presencing of cultural identity. These spaces both contain and eclipse the possibility of stasis. The problematic of ethnicity surfaces throughout Kogawa’s texts as a paradox: “It’s a riddle, Stephen tells me. We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (*Obasan* 70).

Kogawa admits:

I’ve always been curious about this very human thing we do which is to seek definitions. Ethnicity is a definition. We can view something when we can put it within that boundary. It’s inevitable that we have these definitions put

upon us like different articles of clothing. Ethnicity is something that got put onto me by this country. (Redekop "Joy Kogawa" 95)

And as Hiromi Goto's character Murasaki notes in the novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*, "People talk race this ethnic that. It's easy to be theoretical if the words are coming from a face that has little or no pigmentation" (90-1). In answer to Redekop's question: do you find that you are ambivalent about your ethnicity? Kogawa responds, "Oh yes. Almost all of my life I would have done anything to be white, I just wanted it so desperately" (97). In an interview with Sandra Martin of *The Globe and Mail* Kogawa says: "I totally identified with the white community ... My consciousness had been sort of obliterated" (E16). While Kogawa treats this thorny category with deft sophistication in her work, critics have been slow to see how her use of language creates sites of confrontation to effect a change in the sign system. The resultant changed sign system forbids any meaning-making structure the tendency to rely on stereotypes; it breaks open traditional categories and forces the reader to pay attention to the places in all discursive interaction occupied by the stain of the vanishing other.

Arnold Davidson says of *Obasan* in the section "The Importance of the Work" in *Writing Against the Silence: Joy Kogawa's Obasan*: "The novel is socially significant because it tells us something about ourselves as a society. ... The novel is artistically significant because it tells us unpalatable truths with consummate art. The novel is culturally significant because ... it claims a special place for the ethnic writer in the ostensibly bicultural context of Canada" (13). Though Davidson's book was published as recently as 1993, his comment about the "special" place of the "ethnic" writer in Canada

already sounds dated. Marilyn Rose's comments in her 1987 article in *The Dalhousie Review* betray similar biases: her references to "minority history" (292) [since when is the history of Canadian citizens minority history?], "minority fiction," "sophisticated minority fiction," "racial minority," and "majority attitudes" (292) seem alien in the context of an ideology indebted to assumptions of heterogeneity in difference.

Rose seems to be using the term "Orientalism" as Edward Said coins it; she paraphrases in her text: "a set of beliefs about the nature of the 'Oriental' ... a set of useful ideas" (Rose 293). She draws on these beliefs throughout her article as if they were not problematic, referring to "the Japanese way,"<sup>14</sup> "the 'Oriental' way," "the occidental hegemony," calling Emily's rhetoric "*occidental* in tenor"<sup>15</sup> (emphasis Rose's) (293); and as the American critic King-kok Cheung points out, Rose "places inordinate blame on the victims in *Obasan*: "'Orientalism' has been so internalized by this Oriental minority, that their silence is an inadvertent bow to the occidental hegemony which legitimizes their abuse"(1987, 293)" (128)<sup>16</sup>.

This insinuation that victims are to blame for their maltreatment is compounded by Rose's suggestion that the silence of the characters in *Obasan* "amounts to

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Willis, in his 1987 article "Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," also refers to the "Japanese way" claiming *Obasan* wishes to define and combine "Japanese and Canadian ways of seeing" (239). P. Merivale says that the letters from Naomi's mother which create a "present absence" in the book is a "very 'Japanese' literary touch" (73), and describing the the different "languages of the book," says "there is something almost Japanese in this eroticism" (78).

<sup>15</sup>Note that 'occidental' is spelled with a lower case 'o' and the 'o' in 'oriental' is capitalized, bringing to mind the argument of some First Nations writers who question why the 'n' in the word 'native' is so often capitalized when the 'w' in white is never capitalized.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Willis seems to place blame on the victims as well when he writes: "By maintaining silence, the Japanese Canadians have allowed the lies about them to remain uncontradicted" (242), as if the onus is on the victims to prove themselves innocent.

masochism, to consenting to abuse" (294). She contends that the book is about "overt and orientally specific racism on the part of white Canadians" but goes on to call the racism "latent" and declares that this "latent racism on the part of occidental Canadians...is then internalized and paralleled by the Orientals' view of themselves" (294). Contrary to Rose's view that "the victim has internalized, has become, the perpetrator, and so must remain silent" (294), I would argue that the evidence in the text suggests that the Issei are silent out of gratitude: when pressed, Obasan says "that she was grateful for life. 'Arigatai. Gratitude only'" and Uncle echoes, " 'in the world, there is no better place...this country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude'" (*Obasan* 42); Sensei echoes, "while we breathe we have gratitude" (*Obasan* 122).

The Issei (the generation born and raised in Japan) in Kogawa's novels bend in compliant gratitude, and attempt to show their fierce patriotism and loyalty to their country and to a government who divests them of all humanity and dignity and designates them as enemies. Judith Butler asserts: "certain kinds of utterances, when delivered by those in positions of power against those who are already subordinated, have the effect of resubordinating those to whom such utterances are addressed" ("On Linguistic Vulnerability" 26). While the Issei may feel more privileged in Canada than they do in their country of origin, the fact that the government would target them in the first place for denigrating treatment shows that they were in a subordinate position to begin with. To the name "immigrant" (which is often a case of injurious speech in the Canadian political landscape), the name "enemy" was then added. If, as Michel Foucault suggests, "there

exists in speech an essential affinity between death, endless striving, and the self-representation of language" ("Language to Infinity" 55), the Canadian government abuses its power to name its citizens. The refusal to reward, or even acknowledge, the Issei's endless striving to please is tantamount to their erasure.

Kogawa shows through her writing that the racism that was the catalyst for the effacement of Japanese culture in Canada is responsible for the displacement of self-representation in language. The absence of Japanese-Canadians' voices in what Neil Bissoondath calls the cult of multi-culturalism in Canada<sup>17</sup> is a telling reminder of the affinity between "death, endless striving and self-representation." For this reason, silence, or rather absence of sound, is a recurring emblem in Kogawa's prose: Naomi's childhood shyness and the unknown in *Naomi's Road*; the empty space of Naomi's mother and the wordlessness of Obasan, in *Obasan*; Naomi's interior silence (more of a not-listening than a not-speaking) and refusal to confront the past; the unyielding suffering and passive resistance of the people interned and dispersed; the unresponsiveness of the Canadian government to the pleas of the National League of Japanese Canadians for redress in *Itsuka*; the cover-up by the church, the reluctance to name the scandal by Millicent and the invisibility of the victims in *The Rain Ascends*.

The absence of speech in these cases tends to produce the same effect as hate speech in that it robs the characters of their place or context. Judith Butler says "to be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are" (4). Having been written out of their own history, Kogawa's characters suffer acutely from a loss of context

that can only be remedied by an intermittent presencing in the blank spaces of the prevailing discourses.

In *Obasan*, Aunt Emily explains: "None of us ... escaped the naming" (188). That racism was behind calling Japanese-Canadians enemies during the war is taken pretty much as a given by critics today.<sup>18</sup> About racism Kogawa has said:

I can't defend against the hurt. The hurt comes. It's there. In fact, it feels like a disease within me that I'm on the look-out for. It's a kind of paranoia. If you touch the fire you're going to get burned. You walk around and sometimes you can look and the scar's not there. It's clean because nobody's hurt you for a long time. And then suddenly it's gushing because somebody stabs you. Well, I think that to be constantly aware that you're going to be hurt is to be scratching at the scab all the time. I think it's better not to even think about it. You've taken upon yourself a burden and you have accepted it. (Redekop 1990 100)

Naomi's Aunt Emily tells her that: "my entire life has been shaped by racism" (*Itsuka* 60). In *Obasan* and in *Itsuka* Kogawa makes plain how "racism becomes a way of coalescing and reinforcing wartime nationalism, but the latter reveals racism already at work as a contradiction within the supposed Canadian ideal of the very democratic, mutually tolerant society for which the war was supposedly being fought" (Manina Jones 127).

The concerted efforts, by the government, to destroy the culture of Kogawa's

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<sup>17</sup> See *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Penguin, 1994.)

<sup>18</sup> See Robin Potter, Erika Gottlieb, Gary Willis, Marilyn Russell Rose, P. Merivale, Mason Harris, Manina Jones, King-kok Cheung among others.

Japanese Canadians characters can be seen as instances of hate speech. Kogawa's novels and poems show that the practises of internment and dispersal in World War II not only cemented conventions and myths based on racism (i.e. Orientalism) but also extended old ones and created new ones. These new myths were then perceived as acceptable and proper since they were not just condoned but administered by the most powerful political power in the nation: the federal government. Godard reiterates Roland Barthes' assertion that "the marker of myth is its creation of universals" ("Feminism And/As Myth" 9). Racist-based myths are especially dangerous for this very reason, for the universals they create eventually become a set of "common sense or 'what-goes-without-saying,' values and assumptions *unspoken*, their ideology asserted as 'naturalness'" ("Feminism And/As Myth" 9). Emily implores Naomi: "the power of the government, Nomi. Power. See how palpable it is? They took away the land, the stores, the businesses, the boats, the houses – everything" (*Obasan* 36). I believe Godard is correct when she asserts that "[t]here are no eternal myths" ("Feminism And/As Myth" 9). The myths of the Japanese spy in Canada (and the U.S.) served a specific purpose: "[myths] function within a specific historical moment and discursive practice" (Godard "Feminism And/As Myth" 9). What Kogawa shows us, however, is that through the telling of alter-stories, damaging myths can be disarmed, displaced and deconstructed.

Kogawa's textual rendering of institutionalized racism (and all its consequences) works effectively to illustrate that actions such as those taken by the government against Japanese Canadians demean not only those targeted by such actions, but the entire nation from the government on down: "Racist speech works through the invocation of convention;

it circulates, and though it requires the subject for its speaking, it neither begins nor ends with the subject who speaks or with the specific name that is used" (Butler 34). Or, as Aunt Emily reminds us, "What this country did to us, it did to itself" (*Obasan* 33).

Kogawa shows that the racist rhetoric perpetrated and sustained by the government constitutes hate speech. For example, that Canadian citizens with Japanese heritage were officially labelled "enemy aliens" (*Obasan* 92) emerges as an injurious act. Roy Ito reports that Japanese-Canadians from British Columbia were not permitted to enlist in the army for World War I:

There was no place in the Canadian Army for the Japanese. The white people claimed that the Japanese would never assimilate with other Canadians. They said the Japanese had peculiar customs, a strange language, and a different appearance, and that they would never make good Canadian citizens. (23)<sup>19</sup>

As in Kogawa's collections of poetry, in her novels we find language connected to violence. Colloquial name-calling, including "Jap" and the phrase "the yellow peril,"<sup>20</sup> definitely qualify as injurious speech. Butler says: "Because the threat is a speech act that is at once a bodily act, it is already, in part, out of its own control" (12); and "as an 'instrument' of a violent rhetoric, the body of the speaker exceeds the words that are spoken, exposing the

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<sup>19</sup> Ito also reports, however, that many British Columbian Japanese-Canadians succeeded in joining up by going to Alberta (23), and today there is a war memorial in Stanley Park, in Vancouver, erected to honour Japanese Canadian soldiers who fell in World War I (27). When Japanese Canadians tried to enlist when war broke out in 1939, they were refused (45). Even before Canada declared war on Japan in 1941, Japanese Canadians were required to carry identity cards bearing their name, address, age, height, weight, occupation, photograph, thumb print and registry number (45).

<sup>20</sup> See Erika Gottlieb p.37 and *Obasan* p. 152 for Naomi's response to the "Yellow Peril" game.



addressed body as no longer (and not ever fully) in its own control" (13). Emily's description carries the same weight of reference to the bodies of the initiator of hate speech and its addressee: "we were all 'deformed by the Dispersal Policy'" (*Itsuka* 107).

The danger that hate speech entails goes far beyond deformity because, as Butler points out, it continually escapes the frame of both the speaker and the listener. In that we are constituted by language and we also use language (or "do language" as Butler would say, 8) the problematic is intrinsically tied to our existence. A speech act can call us into being by making us part of the language system, even as it can injure us by defining us. The speech act also defines the speaker, not because of the nature of the words in the speech act, but because of the historical and cultural apparatus carried with the expression.

Joy Kogawa's most recent novel *The Rain Ascends* recounts the troubling journey of a daughter exploring the truth about her father's past sexual assaults on young boys. In *The Rain Ascends* an instance of an injurious speech act is naming Millicent's father a child molester: saying the unsayable. "The truth is unspeakable. The truth is a knife that slays" (*The Rain Ascends* 9). In "On Linguistic Vulnerability" Butler explains:

As we think about worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible, the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable become part of the very 'offense' that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival. (41)

Millicent finally realizes that in naming her father a child molester, she creates a linguistic reality in which both she (the namer) and he (the one named) can then act. Butler argues, "to be named by another is traumatic: it is an act that precedes my will, an

act that brings me into a linguistic world in which I might then begin to exercise agency at all" (Butler 38). While Millicent's naming of her father is an act that precedes his will, it also confers on him the right to agency in that discursive world. And she finds that in order to act she must first initiate the linguistic world in which she will act, by naming her father.

Thought itself extends beyond meaning. Language constantly gets beyond the user of language. Millicent is tortured by the way her own role becomes distorted: "The panic within me was now full blown. Was there not a promise when this journey began? I had walked in the way of Abraham, had I not? I had told the truth. Where was the safety now?" (*The Rain Ascends* 210). In *The Rain Ascends* Kogawa makes sure to direct the reader to look for and create meaning in the spaces between where the user of language ends and the receiver of language begins. Butler contends, drawing on the work of Mari Matsuda, "hate speech is understood not only to *act upon* its listener (a perlocutionary scene), but to contribute to the social constitution of the one addressed (and, hence, to become part of a process of social interpellation)" (18 emphasis Butler's).

Millicent feels terrible for naming her father a criminal and so she names herself his betrayer. At the same time, she denies that her existence is constituted in being her father's betrayer: "I will not live,...as my father's betrayer" (*The Rain Ascends* 211). The naming, regardless of its actual correspondence to any lived reality, brings the named and namer both into a linguistic world in which they can exercise some agency. Perhaps the resultant potential of agency is what makes Millicent finally decide that "a human being, simply by being human, retains dignity" (*The Rain Ascends* 212).

Critical reception of *The Rain Ascends* demonstrates a continued interest in Kogawa's writing as social document. In *The Calgary Herald* Elizabeth Westbrook says Kogawa uses "fine poetic skills to create and explore an emotional landscape of love and disillusionment, trust and betrayal, mercy and hurt rage." She goes on to report, "this is a difficult book, fearlessly tackling a subject many wish could be left in darkness"(C6). Douglas Fetherling writes, "It's a novel of morals"; "It's that rare stand, in our culture, most antique of literary achievements, a religious novel, a novel of (and about) spirituality." He says "the writing is like a globe of spun crystal" (*The Toronto Star* H18). Philip Marchand says *The Rain Ascends's* treatment of "unexpiated guilt" links it with *Obasan* as does its "sober, reflective, almost poetic style" (*The Toronto Star* E4).

Joan Thomas in *The Globe and Mail* stresses the social-political nature of the novel: "Kogawa is interested in matters of justice and revenge ... she sacrifices the exigencies of fiction to their thorough exploration" (C28). Thomas admires how *The Rain Ascends* is like *Itsuka* and *Obasan* in that it concerns itself "with the importance of facing up to the sins of the past;" she also admires "the tenaciousness of this book and the risks it takes" (C28). Kogawa says that she chose to write this book, seeing the child molester as the most "othered" social figure in our society: "Perhaps the more 'other' a person is, the more challenge there is to 'know' the reality of that other. ...In our society today, there is, I find, no-one more demonized, more 'other' than the pedophile" (Interview by Sally Ito 98-9).

Martin Zeilig's review emphasizes the social importance of *The Rain Ascends*. He writes that it is a "deeply felt" novel. He sees it as writing against recent media

coverage which focuses on the victims of sex crimes, as Kogawa's novel focuses on the abuser and his family, his world. "Overall, this novel demonstrates how essential it is to expose familial and societal dysfunction" (*The Winnipeg Free Press* D6).

Kogawa's writing accomplishes this important exposition of "familial and societal dysfunction" without compromising a keen attention to flaws in representational systems. As her poetics of insurgency enact functional changes in the sign-systems that have colonized (Canadians of Japanese heritage, child molesters and others), she manages to write into the emerging gaps a discourse of identity that recovers dignity for all who deserve it "simply by being human." Treating the difficult topics of racial hatred and pedophilia, Kogawa wrestles meaning-producing paradigms to make clear the "epistemic violence" inherent in racism, colonialism and all othering discourses.

In the naming of the Japanese Canadians "enemies" during the Second World War, the Canadian government assigned to them a complex set of embedded assumptions and identity markers. Butler explains,

Clearly, injurious names have a history, one that is invoked and reconsolidated at the moment of utterance, but not explicitly told. This is not simply a history of how they have been used, in what contexts, and for what purposes; it is the way such histories are installed and arrested in and by the name (36).

Kogawa's work plays out Butler's tenet that the discursive power of naming is eclipsed by nothing less than the power to call into being.

Finally, in *The Rain Ascends*, Millicent finds a guide, surrenders to her, and allows

herself to become the namer that will change her and her father's way of being in the world: "You will grope among small white stones and through a house of bones, until you find your way to Mercy's throne" (*The Rain Ascends* 72). As is the case in Dionne Brand's poetry, Kogawa's guide is a goddess. The figure of the Mercy Goddess that surfaces in *The Rain Ascends* is perhaps the female deity noted by Joan Thomas, who says of Kogawa, "She has developed some sense of how truth and mercy can co-exist, and her prayers are now directed to a female deity" (C28).

Elizabeth Westbrook says *The Rain Ascends* is "a story of mercy battling justice" (C6). It is through the Goddess of Mercy that Millicent reconciles the relationship between her concepts of love and truth: "Love and truth belong together" (11). The character Eleanor echoes: "Love without truth...is a cheap sentiment" (84).

The Goddess Mercy appears to Millicent intermittently, surfacing in the text in places where Millicent is negotiating and assembling her identity. She often addresses her guide, "Merciful Goddess" (133); she dreams her into being: "I have sought the Goddess the way a starving beast seeks food. Madly. Faster than the speed of light, she has been hastening my way, catching me even as I tumble and fall. She has required of me only this: to see her face" (202). Kogawa talks about the role of "Mercy:"

In confronting the problem of evil directly as embodied in a character, I struggled internally to take the character into myself. That process brought Millicent to the edge of her known moral universe. I walked there with Millicent, and, like her, leaned out into outer space, 'where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.' Hell. To be able to go down to hell and discover the

presence of Mercy is to be rescued, and I have found strength. (Interview by Sally Ito 99)

Mercy apparently acted as a guide for Kogawa, the writer, as well as for Millicent the character. The Goddess of Mercy appears to occupy a site of healing in *The Rain Ascends*.

When Magdalene Redekop asks, How can healing and forgiveness be achieved in the real, political realm? Kogawa answers, "What is healing for a community is more than just a solution of a political kind. What heals is a process of empowerment, the process that heals is one where there is a striving for and an attainment of mutuality" (1990 98). Her texts demonstrate that mutuality can only be achieved when the division between the namer and the named is acknowledged to be permeable and it is recognized that the damage caused by the naming is wreaked on the entire discursive community involved.

Though spiritual elements pervade her work, Kogawa does not see her writing as religious and one has the sense that she does not offer religion as an antidote to the injuries caused by horror. In an interview with Val Ross she said: "I'm a skeptic about skepticism," and "I have a horror of militant Christianity" (C1). Yet, Christian motifs and symbols recur throughout her novels. Philip Marchand sees the novel as exploring that doctrine of Christianity which encourages devotees to see themselves as victims (*The Toronto Star* E4). And Martin Zeilig observes that in *The Rain Ascends*, "every so often we encounter preachy passages that contain quasi-religious references" (*The Winnipeg Free Press* D6).

As with the "truths" of language and history, Kogawa recognizes the difficulties innate in the "truths" of the spiritual and religious: "I don't see how the feeble human brain can ever claim any static truths" (Marchand E4). Her faith is important; but she is not at all

sure where that devotion is directed: "All my prayers disappear into space" (Gottlieb 42). She told Philip Marchand that "religious quests are always surrounded by a lot of doubt;" "whatever I believe is bound to be inaccurate" (E4).

Millicent's Mercy Goddess is also "the Goddess of Abundance" (173), and it is possible to read this character as part of Kogawa's "countermythology" (Godard "Feminism And/As Myth" 7). Just as, in *Obasan* and *Itsuka* she creates alter-stories to displace the noxious myths contrived by the government, here in *The Rain Ascends* she creates an alter-narrative to oppose the "edifice of the patriarchs" that comprises Christianity (176). When Millicent no longer finds comfort in "the God of the patriarchs," she looks "instead upon the faces of women, in their strong or haunted eyes, in their rage or sorrow" (74). Millicent abandons what she calls the banner of the "Lord and King" and seeks instead "the Goddess of Mercy, ancient assuager of suffering" (175). Godard calls this kind of feminist counter-discourse the "vast project of countermythology" which entails "rewriting myth from a woman-centred point of view to (re)create a past where god was a woman and women had power" ("Feminism And/As Myth" 7).

Her use of myth here is unlike her use of myth in the two earlier novels, which there seems to function in keeping with Barthes' concept of myth — that is — as a kind of language, to be approached through the "general field of semiology, or the science of signs" (Godard "Feminism And/As Myth" 9). In *The Rain Ascends*, Millicent, traces a genealogy of the Mercy Goddess: "It is not Abraham's but Sarah's deeper love that draws me. ... The power of the female, at some point around the seventh century I'm told, overtook the male and Kannon, the God of mercy in China became commonly known as Kannon, the

Goddess" (74). Kogawa seems to be drawing on the notion of myth "as a body of stories having roots in primitive folk-beliefs or religions. Myth holds the vestiges of primordial ritual and ceremony; it is the embodiment of a cosmic view" (Godard "Feminism And/As Myth" 7).

This is another instance of Kogawa's "*strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak). In her writing of a countermythology to recuperate the dignity robbed of her by the "God of the patriarchs," she has enlisted a form of feminist critique that "foregrounds a universalist and essentialist enterprise to (re)construct a concept of Woman to replace generic Man" (Godard "Feminism And/As Myth" 7).

However, Millicent's creation of Mercy also exposes the social construction of identity categories such as gender: The Goddess is the one who tells her to "slay the fiction." And Millicent admits: "The Goddess herself may be just another fiction or part fiction, arising out of dream and imagination. Or she may be beyond fiction. I cannot say. But I shall not slay her, nor the hope that lies within me" (86-7). When she decides to tell the bishop everything, she drives "into the evening and through the night, not trusting myself, not trusting anything. The Goddess was my conceit. The dream of mercy was a conceit. I cried into the darkness for Mother" (205).

In coming to trust in, and rely on, the Goddess of Mercy, Millicent surrenders to the myth that we create our own knowledge, and, ultimately our own identities. In facing the heinous acts of her father, Millicent allows herself to see the Christian patriarchs' sublimation of women, and these two realizations propel her toward inventing a mythology



that resurrects "woman-power" (Maracle) of the past, as well as offer her a guide who reflects back to her some of the markers with which she performs her own identity.

Millicent tells her father:

We are to stand together, you and I, under the harsh and merciless light of the newspaper moon. It is not so much that I choose to be with you or against you, or to be with or against the world, but that the Goddess beckons through the fire towards life. While all this that I have most dreaded is upon us and the flames of loathing rise, this is the grace that is granted: the Presence of Mercy, and her ascending rain. (215-16)

The Goddess of Mercy stays the violence associated with fear and hatred. Millicent comes to rely on her as a small space of calm in the middle of her turbulent and tortured imaginings. The violence attached to the names that her father will be called invokes the context and associations that make hate speech so destructive.

Kogawa's writings re-shape the linguistic being of "others" (pedophile, "enemies of Canada") by creating alter-stories and countermyths that appropriate and subvert instances of injurious speech. As Butler claims, "a name tends to fix, to freeze, to delimit, to render substantial" (35). The fictitious "enemy-spy" Japanese-Canadian community created by Mackenzie King is displaced in Kogawa's works by textual tactics that limn a community transgressing the limits of the name. Kogawa's poetics destabilize the stasis of the name, enlisting the violence of representation to transform oppressive sign-systems.

Through a series of embedded confrontations that rupture the violence of totalizing constructions of the "other," Kogawa creates a discourse that interferes with the

master narratives of Canadian history. Her words are like the "hailstones seeking an underground stream" (*Obasan* before p.1), working like myriad little insurrections, gradually disintegrating the totality of the complex of characteristics evinced by the injurious utterance.

## “Another place, not here”: the tra(n)sverse in the writing of Dionne Brand

Transverse: situated or arranged in cross-wise direction  
Traverse: 1. Travel or lie across, turn horizontally  
2. Sideways movement, thing that crosses another (OED)

“Impermanence, which perhaps you felt all along. Perhaps it was built into you long before you came and coming was not so much another place but travelling, a continuation” (Brand *In Another Place Not Here* 65).

“Canadian blackness is a bubbling brew of desires for elsewhere, disappointments in the nation and the pleasures of exile” (Rinaldo Walcott *xiii*).

“Migrations of the subject refers to the many locations of Black women’s writing, but also to the Black female subject refusing to be subjugated. Black female subjectivity then can be conceived ... in terms of slipperiness, elsewhere-ness” (Carol Boyce Davies 36).

“Go home. This is not a place for us” (*In Another Place Not Here* 229, 230).

In Marlene Nourbese Philip’s 1991 novel, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (The Mercury Press), an unnamed black woman traveler moves through a figurative African landscape, exploring the depth of her silence and discovering personal power through the union of silence and word. In this extended metaphor, we see a potent image of de-colonization, citing the deployment of voice as a means of unclenching the imperial grasp and re-affirming one’s cultural heritage, identity and power.

For a poet, voice is the primary means of being in the world. The discovery of, and utilisation of, voice is at once a form of resistance and an act of affirmation and validation. The unstable complex of voice is conditioned by myriad cultural forces. For people who emigrate to another country, voice becomes a way of *traversing* (travelling)

the distance between the lost home and the adopted place of the present. The voice in the writing of Dionne Brand moves *transversely* through the terrain of elsewhere, pushing characters relentlessly into places where they are uncomfortable, ill-at-ease, disempowered and lonely so that they might confront the prevailing myths and historical images that contain them. I am using the word transverse here in order to call on its literal meaning: trans, meaning across; verse meaning poetry. Brand works in other genres besides poetry, obviously, and in the combination and transgression of genres her writing becomes a traverse: a thing that crosses another. Her voice achieves a delicate balance between word and silence, and like the speaker in *Looking for Livingstone*, it finds its way toward expressions of identity that reveal moments of clarity and purpose. Through language that traverses the gap between actual and the wished-for realities, Brand creates a voice that invokes space where black women perform the expressions of identity that liberate and empower them.

The struggle to express one's self emerges as a common theme in writing by the newly-arrived to Canada. Longing for the homeland often appears as sentiment and nostalgia, framed by the hostility of racism and cultural ignorance encountered in the new country. See, for example, recent writing by Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje and Clark Blaise. But identity is not so easily assembled. While only partly comprising a sense of racial history, even this component can be tangled with unimaginably long tentacles. For example, a writer in Dionne Brand's position, emigrating from Trinidad, may perceive her racial history as encompassing all past colonial forays, including the

colonization of African nations, the dispersal of black Africans worldwide, the institution of slavery in the United States as well as the commodification of domestic workers from the Caribbean in Canada.

In other words, representing blackness in Canada involves all the problems of representing blackness period. Rinaldo Walcott writes: "To be black and 'at home' in Canada is to both belong and not belong" (45). Arguably, most immigrants to Canada feel this same tension. And, as I have argued in the cases of Lee Maracle and Joy Kogawa immigrants are not alone in their experience of betrayal, alienation, colonisation and the politics of dislocation. But according to Walcott and others,<sup>1</sup> being black in Canada presents a different set of challenges than would say, being Sri Lankan in Canada. Similarly, an expression of blackness in Canada would necessarily include certain peculiarities that an expression of blackness in, say, the U.S. would not.

People of African descent adopt different survival strategies according to the societies of which they are a part. This is certainly true of day-to-day survival. Perhaps it is also true of more extensive resistance proposals. Within the black diaspora, despite claims to global brotherhood and sisterhood – not that solidarity between blacks conceptually exclude diversity – there is a constellation of blackness, different ways of being black. (Laforest 115).

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese-Philip, Maxine Tynes, George Elliot Clarke.

Many feel that one can no longer speak of the "black diaspora." Recent years have seen much critical dispute over the usefulness of the notion of the black diaspora, initially intended to account for and encompass all the black people whose ancestors presumably originated in Africa. Today, however, in what could be called the post-Commonwealth era, many African nations have attained independence, at least nominally, and black culture around the globe has developed in so many diverging forms that even the hint of the existence of a unifying quality in the notion of "black diaspora" appears outdated.

Some thinkers have put forward other models to describe the complex and various expressions of black culture. For example, Paul Gilroy has developed the model of the "black Atlantic" and draws on the metaphor of crossing or traversing to flesh it out.<sup>2</sup>

A battle is still raging between those who make the pluralising inner logic of the diaspora idea their starting point for theorising black identity, refusing its simple negation in return to the motherland or fatherland, and others who seek to terminate the fragmentation and dissipation of Africans abroad and favour the ruthless simplicity of undifferentiated racial essences as a solution to growing divisions inside black communities.

(Gilroy 21)

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<sup>2</sup> See Gilroy's contribution to the collection edited by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, called "Route Work: The Black Atlantic and the Politics of Exile" in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. New York: Routledge, 1996. See also work by Marie Hélène Laforest, who points to the black presence in Europe as a key component in the unravelling of obsolete notions of the "black diaspora." Her essay, "Black Cultures in Difference" in the same volume, *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, is a succinct example of this perspective.

Gilroy proposes his idea of the black Atlantic as a way of talking about black populations to replace the concept of 'the diaspora' because it "provides an invitation to move into the contested spaces between the local and the global in ways that do not privilege the modern nation-state" (22). By enlisting the notion of the black Atlantic, he says, "the concept of space is itself transformed when it is seen less through outmoded notions of fixity and place and more in terms of the ex-centric communicative circuitry that has enabled dispersed populations to converse, interact and even synchronise" (22). He argues that the model of the black Atlantic is useful because it

valorises something more than a protracted condition of mourning over the ruptures of exile, loss, brutality, stress and forced separation. It highlights a more indeterminate mood in which natal alienation and cultural estrangement are capable of conferring insight as well as precipitating anxiety. (Gilroy 22)

In this statement I find a resonance with an idea I discussed in my chapter on Joy Kogawa's writing. In her essay, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," Gayatri Spivak writes that the Subaltern Studies group has reworked the definition of India's entrance into colonialism, transforming it from a story of change from feudalism to capitalism, to a story that finds its sources in the narratives of domination and exploitation, rather than the modes-of-production narratives. "The most significant outcome of this change or shift in perspective" Spivak maintains, "is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or 'subaltern'" (197). Similarly, Gilroy's black Atlantic

theorizes a “mood in which natal alienation and cultural estrangement are capable of conferring insight as well as precipitating anxiety” (22). Gilroy’s model also brings to mind Judith Butler, who argues, in *Excitable Speech*, that being named is a chance to engage in a particular discursive reality: “to be named by another is traumatic: it is an act that precedes my will, an act that brings me into a linguistic world in which I might then begin to exercise agency at all” (38).

In Gilroy’s black Atlantic,

similarity and differentiation in the cultural habits and gestures of separated yet connected black populations can be identified as local and non-local properties of a non-linear system in which complexity is itself a powerful factor in fixing the limits of possibility. The transverse and the diagonal, the self-similar, the fractal and the multiple are exalted here over the simplicity and unnatural purity of straight lines that simply cannot express the constitutive asymmetry of the insubordinate political cultures nurtured in what Homi Bhabha calls ‘the in-between.’ (Gilroy 22-3)

What Gilroy says here reflects a movement in other critical theorizing – that is – away from simplistic, linear, binary models and towards complex, unstable, heterogeneous models of identity. Re-visioning of the subject to account for ambiguity and a resistance to stasis sets the stage for the kind of theorizing increasingly reflective of such influences as deconstructionist, psychological and language-based critical theory spawned by the current post-structuralist ethos. Scholarly work in black studies is part of the groundswell



that is shaking most other areas of study in the late twentieth century. The effects of the demise of humanism, unity, authenticity along with other Modern values is felt in black studies as it is in other areas of critical inquiry (with the sole exception of, maybe, history, Hayden White notwithstanding.) I am speaking here of how critical theory has, for example, been forced to recognize its blind spot in excluding the experience of the Third World; of the emergence of the phenomenon of cultural studies; of the entrance of gender theory, race theory, queer theory, class theory, among others into the arena of critical thought.

At this juncture Dionne Brand produces cultural artifacts that betray a growing awareness of and concern with received meanings attached to various determinants of identity-performance. Inscripting blackness onto Canadian space, she meets a variety of social inhibitors, including the myths that still cling to both the qualifiers "black" and "Canadian." It is through the attitudes of the transverse and the traverse that Brand brings lively expression in her writing to identity markers such as black, woman, lesbian and working class. The voice she creates in the writings I will discuss makes use of what Homi Bhabha calls the "iterative, agonistic self" (205).

Through language, she deftly traverses gaps in the cultural consciousness, in much the same way as Gilroy's travelers cross and criss-cross the Atlantic. Homi Bhabha maintains, "There is a self that occupies a space of ambivalence, a space of agonism" (205). Rinaldo Walcott writes, "Brand uses her characters' experience to write a text that exists at/on the in-between space" (41). For those readers who suspect that Walcott may

be traveling over well-trodden ground here, I offer the cautionary words of Trinh Minh-Ha:

One becomes tired of hearing concepts such as in-betweenness, border, hybridity, and so on. It's like the word 'difference': it is so old a word and yet we keep on using it again and again in widely varied contexts of struggle. Diversity, identity, ethnicity. The more these terms are popularised, the more difficult the challenge we encounter when we use them. ... You'll have to keep on undoing and redoing what tends to be hastily encased. (Minh-Ha 10).

The voice that emerges in the poetry and prose writings of Dionne Brand works constantly to undo and redo any encrusted, stultifying meanings that have become fastened to the notion of the "in-between."

Brand's works, her research into the lives of working class black women in *No Burden to Carry*, her research into the ways racism is perceived and manifested in Canada in *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots*, her commitment to political activism as seen in her numerous articles on current issues and her collection of essays *Bread Out of Stone*, her vibrant evocation of powerful stories in the fiction (*Sans Souci, Another Place Not Here*) and her unflagging determined voice in the poetry (eight volumes in all), de-mythologize Canada as a space for black people. Her writing not only traverses the stereotypes, the myths and the colonial biases that have skewed impressions of blackness in Canada in the past, but also rejects nostalgia as a strategy for theorizing "home."

Recognizing the binary inhering in nostalgia, Brand re-writes that yearning into a network of conflicting desires that have as much to do with the forces that determine expressions of identity (colour, class, gender, sexuality, geography, politics, religion, ideology) as with the longing for that which one cannot possess. She creates the space of elsewhere as a function of the unwritten, unspoken voice. She works her characters within this space, forcing them to address and traverse their limitations, to abandon deleterious notions of blackness, and to transcribe new spaces into black spaces<sup>3</sup>.

Today there are still significant differences between the ways in which blackness, race and nationality are understood in the different locations whose complex interactions composed the black Atlantic system.

Contrasting black identities remain routed through distinct local histories and projected on to various landscapes. (Paul Gilroy 20)

Canada, as a resettlement choice in the context of the "black diaspora," if indeed such a thing can still be considered, has the unique distinction of its proximity to the United States. A sanctuary for fleeing slaves, a haven for draft-dodgers, Canada has long been regarded as a safe place to be black. Saundra Sharp writes:

Loyalists were those siding with Britain during America's war for independence. Among them were free Blacks and Blacks who gained freedom in exchange for soldiering. Some 5,000 fled to Canada. More

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<sup>3</sup> See Rinaldo Walcott's analysis of Brand's story "Bathurst" in which he asserts that by having the character walk back and forth on and across Bathurst street so many times, Brand is actually re-writing that

followed in the War of 1812. In the early 1900s Black families founded settlements in Alberta and Saskatchewan. (29).

This image has been reinforced by myths such as the one that maintains that Canadians never kept slaves<sup>4</sup>.

Brand depicts the performance of blackness in Canada as an unstable process teetering on the hyphen that marks all immigrant and non-white members of Canadian society. One of Joy Kogawa's characters says that Japanese Canadians are the hyphens between east and west. The hyphen appears as an unseen yet potent motif in the work of Dionne Brand as the space between identities, worlds and selves. While the hyphen joins two identity-labels it occupies an "in-between" space that is necessarily empty..

Identities are articulated across the hyphen, the transition, the bridge or passage between, rather than firmly located in any one culture, place or position. Of course, this is both an unequal and often unexamined relationship. ... [T]he latter inheritance is located and worked through in the context of the former; this challenges the national configuration for *all* who inhabit it. ... They scramble and confuse the teleological narrative of national identity. ... This interrogates the understanding of culture as a site of belonging with the idea of culture as a process of transition and becoming. In the double movement of globalisation – both from above ... and below ...— there can emerge counter-histories .....

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urban Canadian space as black space (*Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada*. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1997: 42, 45-47).

<sup>4</sup> See *No Burden to Carry*, p.15.

counter-memories...., and counter-communities ... that persist in the counter-discourse of a non-linear or syncopated understanding of modernity. (Chambers 53)

Understood in the way that Brand's characters extend themselves endlessly between the Caribbean world they have departed and the North American world they have adopted, is the unspoken longing for an identity that signifies autonomy and power. Whether this identity is framed in the racial memories of an ancient, free Africa, or projected into an idealized version of a familiar world in which colour-bias has been eradicated, the characters struggle to affirm their blackness in positive ways without collapsing into nostalgia and without surrendering those parts of their identity that have created new paradigms of "home" which include both their native Caribbean and their adopted Canadian cities.

As Marie H el ene Laforest notes:

Black British intellectuals rightly argue that Blackness cannot be fixed and stable, that identities are not continuous, *traversed* as they are by other events; slavery then or the media today. 'All lives are made of fragments', suggested Black British women in their 1988 anthology *Charting the Journey*. Identities are always constructed, 'black' is a shifting signifier, maintains the cultural critic Kobena Mercer. ... Identities are *crossed* not only by race but also by the categories of class, gender and sexuality, shows the Anglo-Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi. (118, my emphasis)

I find it interesting that Laforest says that identities are “traversed” by events, and “crossed” by categories. The use of these terms suggest at least two ways Brand’s writing treats identity: that it is at once a force that acts and a condition that is acted upon. Identity crosses spans of physical, cultural, temporal and metaphoric space; inasmuch as identity can be seen as a (social, cultural, emotional, intellectual) force in its own right, it is also pressured by extraneous forces such as those factors Laforest has mentioned (gender, class and sexuality). It is transgressed by a variety of determinants even as it traverses those same determinants.

Paul Gilroy maintains, “A sense of identity-making as a process has been enforced by the enduring memories of coerced crossing experiences like slavery and migration” (20). Gilroy’s statement speaks not only to identity as construct but also to the effects of “crossings” on the performance of identity. Gilroy cites the lives of Martin Delany and W.E. Dubois “to exemplify some of the paradigmatic instances of crossing – mixing and moving – that make the idea of the black Atlantic a plausible and attractive alternative to the narrow certainties of merely nationalist histories” (24). Nationalist versions of Canada, as geographical, historical and cultural signifier, officially written as a safe harbour for escaping slaves and draft dodgers, is confronted in recent writing by black Canadians with the reality that affluent Canadians kept slaves and forced Blacks to fight in their wars. Largely omitted from the official record are programmes like The Domestic Scheme which legalized the exploitation of Black women from the Caribbean.

Unhappy in both past and present homes, faced with adversity in each, Brand's characters are caught in a transverse attitude, locating themselves in the unarticulated space between. Arced crossways across the ocean that separates Canada and the Caribbean, trying impossibly to bridge them, they struggle fruitlessly to hold elements of the old and embrace aspects of the new, and enact positive change in each. Every character is a traverse, a thing that crosses another. S/he has crossed the country of origin by abandoning it; s/he has crossed the new country by being different, foreign. Crossing the geographic space between old and new countries, Brand's characters stay suspended in this in-between space, the movement sideways never completing itself, never finishing, never landing. In this way the hyphen, a joining mechanism, by itself signifies nothing. The emptiness and frustration of not belonging anywhere is at the centre of Brand's characters' stories, lives and struggles.

Rinaldo Walcott, in his study of expressions of black Canadian culture, writes:

Writing blackness after the civil-rights era, second wave feminism, black cultural nationalism, gay and lesbian liberation, the Clarence Thomas / Anita Hill spectacle, the Rodney King beating and L.A.. riots, the Yonge Street Riots, and the O.J. Simpson trials, is difficult work. Yet, writing blackness remains important work. Black postmodernity insists upon being chronicled as it makes fun of and spoofs the very notion of writing blackness. A certain kind of upheaval of 'blacknesses' exists which makes

apparent the senselessness of writing blackness even as we are compelled and forced to write it. (xiii)

Of the construction of discourses of blackness in Canada, using Martin Delany's *Blake* as a source, Walcott writes, "Canada – it was a place of sanctuary, but not necessarily a place where black people would participate in the public sphere" ("Going to the North': The Limit of Black Diasporic Discourse(s)" 24). He refers also to Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*:

black North America border crossings. In the 1960s there were two types of crossings: one type was occasioned by conscientious objectors to the Vietnam war, while at the same time, some black Nova Scotians were leaving Canada and moving down the eastern seaboard after the razing of Africville. ("Going to the North': The Limit of Black Diasporic Discourse(s)" 30)

Walcott sees blackness in Canada "as an interstitial space" (31). He writes, "For black Canadians, living the in-between is conditioned by their inside/outside status in the nation-state" (Walcott 41-2). Few writers take on the difficult task of writing blackness in Canada as assuredly as does Dionne Brand.

Her corpus is a diverse one. She has published to date eight volumes of poetry, one book of short fiction, a novel, a collection of essays, and edited two non-fiction texts. Brand's poetry is evocative, graphic and resplendent with physicality and tactile urgency. Her prose is lyrical and sensuous. Her essays and non-fiction work are equally vivid and



accessible. The unique power of each genre haunts the other genres at her disposal. Remarkably skilled, she transports her lucid expression from genre to genre.

She works in all genres, not respecting boundaries and conventions. In the same way that her inscription of identity-performance through text does, her cross-genre experimentation assures a break from linearity, the confusion of binary oppositions, and the resistance to normative categories. Her writing works like music sampling (a technique used in 'rap') to suggest diversity, force an extension beyond the comfortable and appeal to differing sensibilities. Brand's writing enacts the iteration of "the changing same" wherein a message is repeated within significantly varying contexts<sup>1</sup>. Walcott writes:

Dionne Brand, by working across different genres ... has used her immigrant / citizen status to bring a new cartography to the question of race and space in the Canadian context. She redraws and remaps the Canadian urban landscape in order to announce and articulate a black presence that signals defiance, survival and renewal. Brand's work, located in the urban spaces of migrant existences, refigures the actual, literary and figurative landscapes of Canada and so redraws boundaries of knowing, experience and belonging. (38)

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<sup>1</sup> See Gilroy's essay "Route Work." "This changing same is not some invariant essence that gets enclosed in a shape-shifting exterior. It is not the sign of an unbroken, integral identity protected by a camouflaged husk. ... The same is present, but not as an essence generating the merely accidental. ... The same is retained but not reified. It is recombinant, ceaselessly reprocessed in the glow of its own dying embers" (Gilroy 23).

As Brand's genre-crossing writing iterates the changing same, it points to the value of repetition as a linguistic strategy. Trinh Minh-Ha writes:

One of [repetition's] functions, for example, is to emphasise something that may be lost otherwise, therefore drawing attention to the negligible, the unessential, the marginal. Another function is to fragment, because repetition can interrupt, hamper or delay the flow of a narrative, an event or an argument. In musical practices that are passed on through oral

transmission, repetition is linked to collective memory and its social function may be said to be that of uniting a community, ritualising its cyclical activities, marking its life passages, and providing it with a sense of identity. (11)

Like Kogawa's, Brand's writing betrays a recognition of the opacity of language. She marks language with the determinants of race, gender, class and sexuality so that it will speak the sounds of her voice. She pushes it to its edges so that meaning will stretch and fold back on itself to occupy the space she allows it. Her language contorts to become the transverse not only between worlds but also between the culturally-determined signifiers of identity those worlds engender. Brand's language traverses categories, inscribing the "in-between spaces." Her characters work to puncture the paradigms that would render them invisible, rupturing totalizing notions based on racist, sexist and classist biases.

Brand's texts work to politicize identity by drawing attention to the inextricability of converging sites of cultural makeup. She examines the impossibility of separating out these vectors:

I remember a white woman asking me how did I decide which to be – Black or a woman – and when. As if she didn't have to decide which to be, white or a woman, and when. As if there were a moment I wasn't a woman and a moment I wasn't Black, as if there were a moment she wasn't white. ("Bread out of Stone" *Bread Out of Stone* 10-11)

Gilroy writes:

Itinerant lives and the dissident political observations which they facilitate can only disappoint and frustrate absolutist understandings of racialised cultural forms and the overintegrated conceptions of self, kinship and community to which they remain invariably bound. (21)

Brand interrogates the signifiers of location, gender and race to make visible the identity-markers that resonate with assumptions about class and sexuality. In Brand's writing, desire emerges as the impetus that impels her women characters to inscribe a trajectory beyond historical, geographic and social boundaries. Stretched in a transverse attitude against social structures that shun, hate or exploit them, Brand's characters continually unmake the signifiers that represent them. In Homi Bhabha's explanation of the "space-in-between" we hear an echo of the moment of placelessness that Brand's characters achieve in order to contest and entertain the possibility of "another place, not here":

Many may want to question my proposal that in the process of cultural translation there opens up a 'space-in-between', an interstitial temporality, that stands in contention with both the return to an originary 'essentialist' self-consciousness as well as a release into an endlessly fragmented subject in 'process'. I want to try to occupy this hybrid, in between space to address the issue of the subject of a 'translational' rather than 'concentric' cosmopolitanism, conceived on the grounds of what I earlier described as 'the continua of transformation.' ("Unpacking" Bhabha 204)

Occupying the in-between space, the characters in Brand's writing resist the void, and yearn ceaselessly for that other place, just outside the limits of their experience, recuperating the shards of the fractured self long enough to glimpse the imagined moment of self-fulfillment.

Contrasting forms of political action emerge to create new possibilities and new pleasures where dispersed people recognise the effects of spatial dislocation as rendering the issue of origin problematic, and embrace the possibility that they are no longer what they once were and cannot therefore rewind the tapes of cultural history. The obsession with origins which appears all too regularly in black cultural history is itself an expression of some particularly and peculiarly modernist intellectual habits. (Gilroy 22)

According to Carol Boyce Davies' definition, they are subjects in migration: "Migratory subjects suggests that Black women's writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion" (Davies 36). Never quite settling in a position, these voyagers hold themselves between places, in the "space-in-between," maintaining attachments, however tenuous, to both points of departure and entry.

Unlike Kogawa, who puts feminism second to racism, Brand sees all negotiations of identity as inseparable. She finds most feminist writing oblivious to colour, and most Black writing oblivious to gender. Marlene Nourbese Philip's concise

exposition on the ambiguities contained in the use of words like "racism" and "feminism" might be useful here:

Sexism is to racism as feminism is to civil rights? multiculturalism? Black Power? anti-racism? None of those suggestions is satisfactory, and the difficulty in finding the word that corresponds with feminism is linked to some of the difficulty around the concept of anti-racism. Were we to be entirely accurate when talking about discrimination practised by one racial group against the other, the appropriate word would be "racialism" and not "racism." Usage has, however, determined that racism is the word that has come to encapsulate that particular practice; it includes and embraces both the individual type of discrimination, as typified by the landlord who refuses to rent his apartment to an Indian, as well as the more elaborate philosophies, such as those espoused by Rushton, of white supremacist movements.

The absence of a word that parallels feminism is significant. Sexism refers to the practice of patriarchy; feminism, or womanism as some Black women have chosen to re-define it, to a movement that seeks to empower women through any number of ways. To be feminist or womanist would, I assume, at least imply that one was anti-sexist, and I would argue that contained within the concept of feminism is the practice of anti-sexism. However, while books, policies and workplaces may be

anti-sexist, the term feminism means more than being anti-sexist. There is an element of the positive, the proactive, the celebratory implied in the use of the word: feminism is not only *against* sexism, but in favour of, in support of, in celebration of something. ("Gut Issues in Babylon" 219-20, Philip's italics.)

bell hooks writes:

The vast majority of people in our society, women and men, understand feminism to be only about woman gaining equality with men. It is this understanding of feminism that is taught via mass media, reinforced by popular feminist literature; that literature rarely acknowledges race or racism as factors that also determine female status, and consequently does not highlight the voices and experiences of black women. ("Feminism in Black and White" 271)

Brand saw that there was a lack of blackness in feminist theory and that there was a lack of women in black history, "something was missing" (*No Burden To Carry* 29). She also saw that most theory and history was obdurate to considerations of class (and sexuality). Davies writes:

Black feminist politics has the potential of truly being an oppositional, transformational, revolutionary discourse, but has not yet become so for a variety of reasons. Black feminist politics can only become transformational if it is sharper in its opposition and critique of systems of

domination and able to activate its principles in more practical ways.[ ] It would therefore have to be more deliberately and practically located at sites of resistance to, and struggle against, multiple oppression: whiteness, maleness, bourgeois culture, heterosexuality, Anglo-centeredness and so on. Black feminist politics can only be transformational if it seeks to challenge social conditions and processes and give value to existences often rendered silent or invisible in current patterns of social ordering. ("Introduction" 27)

Brand re-writes myths which demonize women and creates new ones which empower them. She seems to concur with Sen and Grown that,

women have been the butt of male ridicule in proverbs and myths throughout history. While women have sometimes responded in kind, the predominant myths are usually insulting to women's bodies, mental capacities, and social behaviour. Modern education and mass media often perpetuate such sex-biased stereotypes. (Sen & Grown 27)

Documents presented at the World conferences for the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women, in 1980 and in 1985, show that "women's relative access to economic resources, incomes, and employment has worsened, their burdens of work have increased, and their relative and even absolute health, nutritional and educational status has declined" (Sen & Grown 28).



Brand's social-political commitment to equality emerges in her writing in a variety of ways. "It is the refusal of marginalization in all of Brand's work that transfigures the space/place of domination" (Walcott 46). She said to Makeda Silvera in an interview, "I've always been a leftist ... I want to state explicitly that my work is leftist work and that I've always seen my work as leftist work" ("In the company of my work" 356). A tendency to avoid the use of capital letters in poetry reflects her desire to effect a symbolic socialist levelling out of power, the absence of capitalization suggesting an eradication of capitalism.

Themes of labour, union-organizing, revolution and workers' rights pervade her work. The study by Sen and Grown shows that although "some of the most successful organizing efforts have flowered among poor, self-employed women" (Sen & Grown 37)<sup>4</sup>, "[w]omen remain the most poorly paid, badly organized, and vulnerable group of industrial workers in the Third World and elsewhere, and the record of trade unions in this regard continues to be a sorry one" (36). Brand maintains, "I still think there is a need for a socialist vision. And I honestly don't mind saying that that is what my work is about" ("In the company" 357).

Like Lee Maracle and Joy Kogawa, Dionne Brand herself has been part of myriad groups and movements for political action. Brand is concerned with the exploitation of low-paid labour, and sees this exploitation as a consequence not only of

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<sup>4</sup> "This runs counter to the myth prevalent in trade unions and bureaucratic circles that women are inherently more conservative in their consciousness, and hence more difficult to organize. It is the male

capitalism but also of racism. She argues that the lowest-paid group of the working class is made up mostly of people of colour. She says, "Every relationship is social, and you don't exist outside of that. Even if you think you're not writing politically, you are in some way contributing to themaking of the culture that we're in" ("Writing It" 34).

To rectify the lack of attention to gender and class in Black history, Brand produced *No Burden To Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* (1991), a collection of experiences of black women working in Ontario<sup>7</sup>. One reviewer calls this work "a fascinating and important, pioneering effort to restore Black women's history" (Sangster 125). Brand's text recounts stories of Black working class women in the thirty-year period immediately before, during and after World War II. They are ministers, secretaries, farmers, teachers, domestics and factory workers. Their stories reveal that previous to the Second World War, domestic work was virtually the only work available to black women. During the war women obtained work in munitions factories (usually on the most dangerous parts of the line), but post-war industry expelled them into a job market that limited them again to domestic labour. By this time the Caribbean domestic worker scheme of the 1950s was in effect<sup>8</sup>, and the previously employed Black-

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family and union members who tend to be more conservative and concerned about their own privileges when the subject of women's participation in collective organizations is raised" (Sen & Grown 37).

<sup>7</sup> Another book that makes a fine contribution to this area of black history is Makeda Silvera's *Silenced*, published in 1983 by Williams-Wallace, Toronto. Silvera's compilation targets the experiences of "West Indian women who are employed as domestic workers on temporary employment visas in Canada" (11). The "Domestic Scheme" was put in place as early as 1955 and women from the Caribbean are still being recruited for domestic work in Canada. Silvera interviews women who were currently (at time of the publication of *Silenced*) employed as domestics.

<sup>8</sup> Silvera explains:

Canadian women were powerless to re-claim their old jobs. The women's stories in Brand's collection touch on subjects of family life, church and community life, union membership, the importance of black history, the impact of Garveyism<sup>9</sup> and other black movements.

Brand writes, "my purpose is to unchain these histories from the genderless bundle of information and misinformation on 'Blacks,' both by outside groups (whites) and inside groups (Blacks)" (30). She explains the use of the title:

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The first full-scale recruitment of West Indian women to Canada was initiated in 1955 by the Canadian government. These women came under a new organised program, known then, as The Domestic Scheme. Hundreds of women from Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados came to Canada annually to work as domestic workers through this Scheme.

To qualify for the Scheme, applicants had to be between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, single, with at least a grade eight education, and be able to pass a medical examination. Final applicants were interviewed by a team of Canadian immigration officials who visited the islands once a year specifically for this purpose. (*Silenced* 13)

Silvera goes on to write that "Not much has been documented about this group of workers" (14) and Brand's *No Burden to Carry* partly rectifies this lack. It should also be noted that while bestowing high praise on *No Burden to Carry* for its contribution to scholarship, Patricia Daenzer contends that, "the book requires a sharpened accuracy with regard to the domestic worker issue" (167).

<sup>9</sup> Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) is "easily the most controversial figure associated with Harlem in the 1920s" according to the editors of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. He is said to be "a hero to millions of blacks," and "a profound human force during the Harlem Renaissance, a mighty shaper of attitudes and molder of opinions concerning the rights and destiny of black Americans." Jamaican-born Garvey led a printers' union strike in Kingston, Jamaica in 1907. He traveled and worked his way through Central America and moved to London, England in 1912. He returned to Jamaica in 1914 and formed the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). When Garvey went to the U.S. in 1916 to raise money he decided to remain in Harlem. Garnering a following unmatched by any other black leader in the U.S., Garvey founded a weekly newspaper in 1918 called *Negro World*, to which the tremendous growth of the UNIA is attributed. Gates and McKay speculate that *Negro World* at one time reached a quarter of a million subscribers. The UNIA flourished in the 1920s, hosting an international convention in Harlem, attracting twenty-five thousand delegates. Trying to raise money through a mail campaign to support the Black Star Line, which was formed among other reasons, to help blacks escape oppression in America by moving to Africa, Garvey was convicted and jailed for mail fraud in 1925. He served nearly three years and then was deported to Jamaica in 1927. Gates and McKay suggest his enduring contribution to black culture was his gospel of "race pride and race solidarity." (*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, Eds. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997: 972-74.)

The title, *No Burden to Carry*, is borrowed from a woman not included in these narratives. In the 1930s her mother and father told her that education was “no burden to carry,” and no one could take it away from her. It struck me that with this advice they might have felt that they were handing her a way out of both gender and race inequality. (34)

This text can be seen as giving voice to the working class “of a certain time, narratives of particular moments in history” (34). The working class is a group largely unrepresented in the official recorded history of Canada. In this way, *No Burden to Carry* makes evident not only a racial gap but also a class gap in women’s history. As Joan Sangster astutely notes, this text points out that “existing historical landmarks may *themselves* reflect assumptions and definitions which do not take the lives of Black women into account” (123, Sangster’s emphasis).

The feminism this text propounds can be regarded as pro-working class, anti-white-academia in its attitude. However, Brand admits in the “Introduction,” which Marilyn Mohr calls “impassioned” and “intelligent” (52), that, “even outside the white academy, patriarchy was written into the texts which were themselves written to oppose race-biased texts” (29). Historian Karen Dubinsky writes that *No Burden to Carry* “provides a rich and compelling empirical foundation” for the premise that “gender is hardly the only social location which shapes past experiences” (347). Dubinsky calls it a rewarding “work of historical excavation,” saying it “reveals a fascinating array of responses to racism” (348).

*No Burden to Carry* occupies a space transverse to the histories of black men, white women, and the entire middle class. Brand says, "Canadian scholarship overall has been preoccupied with English and French concerns, to the exclusion of Canadian peoples of non-European origin" (11). It crosses the frames of the stereotypes of poor black women in the first part of this century.

This text operates transversely to written history in its form as well. The stories were collected orally. Brand says, "I decided to use the method of oral history to bring into high relief the terrain of Black women's lives" (30). While written history pretends to deal in fact, "oral history ... affords a primacy to the opinions and interpretations of the people" (31). These records are the testimonies of black working class women, their telling emerging from a place that is routinely subjugated and erased by mainstream history. Brand found that the interviewing process itself was empowering for these elderly black women, at least half of whom "said at first that they had nothing substantial to say" (34).

The histories in *No Burden to Carry* have been transcribed from oral recordings. Writing these stories down verbatim, Brand has attempted to capture the rhythms and cadence of the original speakers. Marilyn Simonds Mohr writes, "This book is part of the relatively new subgenre of oral history" (52). Mohr goes on to say, "Reading [*No Burden to Carry*] is like spending an afternoon with a roomful of charming, strong, witty women who have a lifetime of stories to share" (52). Patricia Daenzer commends Brand's work:

Brand pays an extraordinary tribute to the women by permitting their words to stand as the only testament. She resists the intellectual propensity to restate, question, and reshape during the narratives. ... The power of oral history as a methodology suggests by implication that only the subject (in this case Black women) can and must tell their stories. (167)

These women's experience of their remembered pasts is valorized as is the experience of the telling itself. The individual voices are preserved, the dialects retained, "they was pretty well freeborn, most of them" (128), and the tone upheld, "I could serve the communion, but I couldn't consecrate the elements" (63).

Another text which Brand edited draws on oral communication with people of colour, specifically with regard to racism in Canada. In the introduction to *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism* (1986), she explains:

The value of an oral text such as this lies in its ability to put the phenomena it describes in context. It locates people in the world around them; it gives specificity to events and incidents; it places these events within the continuum of our daily lives. (2)

This text was produced in cooperation with the Cross Cultural Communications Centre in Toronto, and assisted by OXFAM, three different levels of government and volunteers. It is part of a series of anti-racist educational books published by the Cross Cultural Communications Centre. Brand worked on it with Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta, both of whom are described on the back of the book as political activists. They interviewed

"Native, Black, South Asian and Chinese peoples" (iii), groups they felt shared "a commonality of the experience of racism" (iii). Leslie Sanders reviewed this text and Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*<sup>10</sup> at the same time, saying both books are "remarkable in their simplicity, clarity and intensity" (39). In the Foreword by the publishers, we are told that "the book provides a long overdue opportunity for people of colour to be heard in their own voices" (i). Kari Dehli notes a commanding detail about the book: "Many of the one hundred people who were interviewed are not identified, something which underscores the very real fears which are integral to racism, fears of being recognized, of being attacked, of being fired from your job" (62). The Foreword also informs us that "the voice that emerges [from this text] is both a political outcry and a call to organize against the institutionalized violence of people's basic human rights ... the book is a call to *organize and mobilize for change*" (i, original italics).

While the CCCC states proudly that it has a long history of political organizing (i), and the call-to-arms rhetoric of the 1980s sounds a little overbearing to a reader of the late nineties, when positionality and political correctness have eclipsed most other normative directives in the interest of identity-construction, this text is really no more political than the rest of Brand's writing. (In this particular context I am using the word "political" to describe a text which situates itself in order to critique its particular historical or cultural moment. This critique may come in the form of polemic discourse, or pointed sketches which expose particular social problems.) *No Burden to Carry* is as

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<sup>10</sup> I referred to *Slash* in my chapter on *Maracle*.

political a text, though the language of the interviewers is a little more subtle: "Was there discrimination?" (*NBTC* 32) as opposed to "those sites where racism is encountered and fought" (*RHSTHR* 3). *No Burden To Carry* does not call for action in quite as bold a way as *Rivers Have Sources* does, but it does suggest that "oral histories were seen ... as one means in the effort to change our condition" (*NBTC* 34).

In *No Burden To Carry* Brand focuses specifically on women's experience. Its subject, then, as well as its formal aspect enacts a critique of the master discourses. Davies explains, "migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses. ... Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts" (Davies 37). This text subverts the dominant discourses by writing from outside them. As Mohr explains, "Individual stories may rankle or delight, but there is no single, simple "truth" to be drawn from an oral history such as this" (53).

Brand's text enacts a presencing of a largely invisible (heretofore unrepresented) wealth of human experience. It subverts and/or challenges the hegemonic narratives that create history – white, male, middle to upper class. It gestures towards spaces that few knew existed. And it exposes the falsity of a few commonly-held myths: "the colour bar, it turns out, crosses a multitude of hues" (Mohr 53).

Ruth Roach Pierson of OISE writes on the back cover that *No Burden to Carry* fills "a gap in Canadian history," which is resonant of the comments reviewers made about Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. I would argue, rather, that it makes evident a very large gap



by dropping into that gap one very small text. Once again critics would have the reading public take this document as *the* missing chapter on Black-Canadian history. Or, as Karen Dubinsky puts it, “a collection of interviews is not (nor does this claim to be) an exhaustive examination of the history of Black women in early twentieth-century Ontario” (349).

Pierson claims that with this collection, Brand begins the task of “restoring to Black women in Canada their history.” Unstated, but sadly obvious, is the fact that *No Burden to Carry* should not be asked to stand for the stories of all Black-Canadian women, just as *Obasan* cannot be asked to stand for the stories of all Japanese-Canadians.

Interestingly, for a political text, this work does very little to identify the positionality of the editor. As Dubinsky affirms, “Questions about the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the politics of writing about marginalized groups, are thorny and complicated” (349). A few obvious gaps come to mind which go completely unremarked. Aside from age difference, other gaps between Brand and the women she interviewed are: education, class, and sexuality. Joan Sangster points out, “Attention to questions of power, control, and intention, and careful analysis of the relationship between those interviewing and those interviewed, must thus remain central to our analysis” (125). The women interviewed were nearly all involved in conventional heterosexual relationships, except for the woman who became a minister (Addie Aylestock) and the one who stayed single to look after her crippled mother (June

Robbins<sup>11</sup>). Dionne Brand, as a lesbian, extends herself across the boundaries of and gaps between several identity-markers to meet the people she interviews, films and writes about.

As we are told in the author's note at the back of the book, Brand is a highly-educated, literate, academic professional: author, poet, film-maker, professor; the women in *No Burden to Carry* are mostly under-educated, ill-educated or uneducated. This is not a criticism, but an observation, which apparently Brand herself feels ambivalent about:

[D]uring the years I've had three lives; one doing community work in the women's movement and the Black movement, then a kind of academic life, and then my sort of literary life. I'm really cautious about the academic one. I always think it's dangerous just to stay in academia — it is only relevant if you can put it to some good use in the communities you work in and struggle for. ("Writing It" 31)

Brand's first books went mostly unreviewed. Her 1984 collection of poetry did receive some critical attention. Jan Bartley Rehner writes that its "poems are uncompromisingly dedicated to overthrowing the bone-cold anti-life values of imperialism, the racial colonizing of blacks by whites, and the sexual colonizing of women by men" (31).

In the introduction to the section on Brand in the anthology *Grammar of Dissent*, Carol Morrell calls *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun* (1984) "a reaction in poetry to Brand's

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<sup>11</sup> June Robbins also reports in this text that she missed her entire high school (four years) to stay home and

experience of the U.S. invasion, which occurred while she was working in Grenada" (169-70). This is probably Brand's most political book. The sections are titled, "Languages," "Sieges" and "Military Occupations." The first section revels in language play, making liberal use of natural images, particularly those of fruit and insects (see, for example, "like the tiniest cricket" 22). Consider the effect of the allusions to colour in this one:

Union  
 ink-blue water  
 around you, gnarl or crusty turtles  
 in blue  
 peacock  
 blood  
 batons, heads, blood, jail,  
 huddle there (17)

There are poems that are small and dense like this one, and others that extend for a number of pages: "P.P.S. Grenada" is eight pages long, "four hours on a bus..." is a dense piece of unpunctuated prose running to two pages. Rehner writes that in this collection, "language is the tragedy of illiteracy: power in the mouths of the oppressors, shame and futility in the mouths of the oppressed" (32).

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look after a brother who had spinal meningitis (*NBTC* 146).

Much of the material in the last section deals with Grenada: "I'm sick of writing history / I'm sick of scribbling dates / of particular tortures / I'm sick of feeling the boot / of the world on my breast" (65); "And rain does not rust bombers / instead it looks for weaknesses in farm implements" (45). Some poems deal with the Canadian political landscape: "right wing calgary which is after all self conscious and naked oil" (67), "I must explain imperialism again / in a library in Saskatoon" (66), "a little red neck in Sudbury ... / called me / a marxist" (64).

Two of the most powerful pieces in the collection are "Amelia" ( 24-5), and "October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983" (40-1). "Amelia" is the first poem in the section called "Sieges." This section also includes a poem called "Anti-poetry" (30-33) which lays out Brand's commitment to political writing. The poem "I am not that strong woman" is a compelling statement against male dominance: "I want no husband / I want nothing inside of me / that hates me / ... / I want nothing that enters me / screaming / claiming to be history/ ... / alone is my only rescue / alone is the only thing I chose" (26).

Both "Amelia," about Brand's grandmother, and "October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983," about Grenada, create the impression of auralty and manipulate the medium of voice to traverse the gulf that introduces death. Frustrated love emerges as a theme in both poems while the ceaseless agony of powerlessness against poverty, old age, and military invasion is evoked through the repetition of images and rhythm. Clipped foreshortened lines simulate the speaker's shortness of breath. The impression of panting, especially in "October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983," gives the poems a sense of urgency as if the text were being

transmitted, between gasps of air, by an out-of-breath messenger who had just been running for some distance. The short lines and breathlessness of "Amelia" seem to be the result of the painfulness of the speaker's fragmented reverie, addressing at times the reader, and at other times the dead woman.

The reappearance of the word "children" three times in the poem "Amelia" (and the word "child" once) emphasizes Amelia's role as grandmother. Children repeatedly figure in the poem just as "two generations of children" have figured in the old woman's life. The speaker in the poem introduces images associated with childhood, for example, the idea of pretending the bed is a ship and Amelia's promise to buy her a bicycle. So, while the speaker is not a child when Amelia dies, she speaks as though Amelia has played a big part in her childhood; her memories and impressions of Amelia are largely from a child's point of view. When Amelia dies, the narrator smiles a child's smile as both the inescapability and the freedom of Amelia's death transport her back to her own childhood. These allusions also evoke the impression of innocence and trust associated with the very young that characterizes Amelia.

The importance of children in the poem and in the dying woman's life is certain, yet the role they play in her deterioration is ambivalent. There is the sense that the children have betrayed Amelia. She must lie there, ill, with the smell of their urine. The speaker conjectures that she "wanted to escape, / run from that room / and the children huddling against you" as though their demands had weakened her. She has been betrayed, or at the least let down, by "a criminal for a son." Her last breaths are gasps at "what was

left in the air / after husband and two generations of children” as though caring for family has used up her life.

But her love for the children is also apparent. She asks the speaker to describe the parking lot outside the window; she promises her a new bike. The speaker refers to Amelia throughout the poem with love; the smile and kiss of conspiracy with the dead woman at the end of the poem indicate a close connection between them. It is not the children from whom she wants to escape, but rather a life of poverty. She is stranded not in a sea of ungrateful relations, but rather in a sea of destitution, exploitation and oppression. She is, in fact, not betrayed and used up by children but anchored in a life of struggle in which economic need robs her of the ability and pleasure of giving her grandchild a gift: “your promise, impossible, / to buy me a bicycle.”

The fragility and innocence of childhood evoked by recurring images of childhood and the word “children” reinforce the sense of displacement and bewilderment that the speaker reads in the dying woman. Descriptions of the physical posture of the old woman convey her state of helplessness. She is described, for example, as “lying,” “bundled up,” “stranded,” “withered,” “hiding” and “fearful.” The woman attempts to disappear: “she tried to roll herself / into the tiniest of balls,” and relinquishes her power to speak: “at once she lost her voice / since all of its words contained her downfall.” The speaker’s own sense of helplessness in the face of her grandmother’s death is compounded by the obvious helplessness of the dying woman herself. This helplessness

culminates in the claustrophobia of dying as breathable air diminishes: "she ... breathed, in gasps / what was left in the air."

The poem infers that the woman died because she was transplanted from a place of familiarity. The speaker imagines that the sick woman might have recovered, or remained healthy, had she stayed home: "I think that she would have been better / by the sea / in the guayguayare, / but in the town / hot with neighbours and want / she withered and swelled / and died and left me." The speaker intimates that she died because she was not at home, home at this point signifying her own room: "lying in a hospital bed / you could not live by then / without the contradictions / of your own aggrieved room." The word "bed" occurs in the poem four times, in the beginning, middle and end, perhaps tracing the essential role the bed plays in so many important activities in life: conception, birthing, sickness and death.

The point of view is first-person throughout the poem; however, when referring to the character Amelia, the speaker switches from using "her" and "she" to "you." In the first fifteen lines of the poem, all one sentence, the speaker addresses Amelia as "you": "you wanted to escape." In the next thirty-one lines, three sentences, Amelia is "she": "she tried to roll herself," "she did not succeed," "she would have been better," "she withered and swelled." The last ten lines, the final sentence, refer to her as "you" again: "you could not live by then," "when they brought your body home." This movement swells the poem in the middle, away from the intimacy of direct address, imbuing the start and finish with the familiarity of a personal conversation. It is as though the speaker

is talking directly to Amelia, then turns her head to elaborate to a listener, and then turns back and addresses Amelia once again. The use of the pronoun "I" at the beginning of verses creates an impression of highly personal engagement: "I know that lying there," "I think that she would have been better," "I smiled a child's smile." The pronoun "me" appears in the middle and the last sections indicating a reciprocal relationship between the speaker and Amelia, as if the speaker is both subject and object in Amelia's life, giver and receiver of love.

The shift in modes of address effects a feeling of removal or displacement, as though a telephoto lens is focusing in close and then panning out to a long shot, only to cut in close again. In two sections the reader is listening in as the speaker addresses Amelia. In the middle section the reader is told about Amelia. The reader is thus made privy to an intimacy and then pushed away only to be drawn back in to that closeness.

The sense of removal or displacement created by the shifting mode of address accomplishes at least two functions: first, it mirrors the ambiguous feeling embodied in the description of Amelia's life. She feels both trapped and alienated. She loves her offspring but cannot adequately provide for them. She hugs them to her and then brushes them off so she can labour for their welfare. She feels blessed by her family but saddened by their prospects. She wants them near her, but a life of struggle and need has weakened her.



The other displacement effected by the shift is a geographical one. Amelia moves from the guayguayare to town where she is “hot with neighbours and want.”<sup>12</sup> This shift in location serves to highlight the shift in Amelia’s psychological well-being. As in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, when the Nakane family is interned, the physical cramping and humiliating surroundings mirror Amelia’s claustrophobic, despairing spirit.

Once she has seen Amelia wither, swell and die in the city, the speaker speculates that she might have been better off staying at home. In *In Another Place, Not Here* when Elizete goes to Abena, she is told, “go home. This is not a place for us,” (229) but Elizete knows that all that awaits her at home is back-breaking work in the field. In the city, Amelia hides, becomes fearful and nervous, does not want to walk on asphalt. We know from Brand’s other work that the life she left in the guayguayare is different but not much better. So when she dies and the speaker smiles in conspiracy, perhaps it is because she believes she will go to a new place that is as warm and familiar as home, but without the hardships.

The short choppy lines reflect both Amelia’s truncated desires and her unrealized ambitions. The speaker shares Amelia’s sense of displacement and frustration. Reflecting on Amelia’s life reminds her of her own unattained goals. Her telling of Amelia’s life in a series of abrupt phrases reflects her own anxiety, reflected in quickness of breath, as if she were the one who “breathed, in gasps/ what was left of the air.”

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<sup>12</sup> Loss of privacy and self-respect is a recurring theme in Brand’s work. The character Elizete in *In Another Place, Not Here* feels this displacement when she arrives in Toronto, just as Verlia did many years before her. The loss and yearning for home while in a foreign country, and the hardship and yearning for a

Images of moisture abound in "Amelia." Some of them are bodily, such as tears, urine and sweat. Rain appears three times. Images of the sea include a ship, waves, swell, floating, dipping and swimming. The word "sewer" conjures the wetness of a city drain. The denotation of the word "swell" is doubled as it refers to the swell of the ocean waves and then, later on, the swelling of Amelia's body in sickness. The narrator wishes Amelia had stayed near the sea, but having moved away, her own body swells. Both indicate a building up of fluid below the surface, a bloating that rises and expands. The sick room is called a sea, "that sea of a room," where the bed is a ship, and Amelia is stranded "floating and dipping / into the waves."

The network of moisture images in "Amelia" sustains a movement from intense saturation in liquid to sterile aridity, tracing the tragic path of a woman moving towards her end. In the beginning of the poem Amelia is surrounded by water, but by the end of the poem the only moisture she has is her tears. This movement reflects the psychic journey of the immigrant that surfaces elsewhere in Brand's work: from plenitude to sterility.

The poem opens with an acute appeal to the sense of touch, evoking the dampness of the sick room: "wet coconut fibres," "children's urine," "cold / sweating sheets," "the scent of the sewer," and the rain. This mixture of images combines natural (coconut fibres, rain), human (urine, sweat), and urban (sewer) to create an impression of the

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better life while in the home country create the paradox that characterizes *In Another Place, Not Here* and much of Brand's work.

clammy discomfort of a bed-ridden invalid. In the next sentence, the room becomes a sea, and the sick woman is stranded on the bed/ship floating in "the swell / of a life anchored."

In the next sentence we find that this new sea replaces the one that Amelia has left behind, "she would have been better / by the sea." Her current place of exile, the urban centre, is hot and causes her to wither. Perhaps yearning for a home by the sea, Amelia hides and shies away from land-lover activities such as walking and putting on shoes. The closest she gets to swimming in this locale is making her way through the "brutish rain." Her bodily fluids dry up as she withers and loses her voice. Aching for moisture she gargles with her tears ("coarse water from her eyes") in an attempt to regain her voice, her throat and lungs fighting for the last few gasps of air. As once her room was a sea, now her body is a grotesque parody of the sea as it swells with death gases and expires.

The final section of the poem moves into the dryness of death when the body's fluids stop pumping through the system, and burial, when the body is interred in the dry earth. The absence of water images signifies Amelia's last departure from the seaside home. There is a wistful longing for the room at home with its "contradictions" which, the speaker believes, might have kept Amelia alive. The hospital room does not offer the spectre of the ocean-room, the wet smells, the children, the imagined sea voyage or even the sewer and brutish rain of the city streets and so cannot help Amelia sustain her existence. In death Amelia has been sucked dry just as Brand's immigrant characters, too, are sucked dry when they traverse the ocean from the West Indies to North America.

“S” sounds predominate in the last lines of the poem: “I smiled a child’s smile of conspiracy / and kissed your face” creating the impression of a whisper or a prayer. The speaker may be whispering to the dead, to the sleeping, to the ill, or to the suffering. This “s” sound gives the poem an aurally gentle ending, and, in approximating the gentle way in which she died, serves to underline by contrast the violence of poverty and displacement that conditioned the way in which Amelia lived.

The poem “October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983” (*Chronicles* 40-1) reads like a dirge or lament, combining the pointed specificity of proper names with the agonized repeated recognition of the failure of language to manage the horrific. The speaker’s feeling of inadequacy to speak of the events that transpired on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983, translates directly into her conviction that language fails. The gulf between the lived experience and the only tool available to communicate this experience to others becomes un-navigable. The poem itself stands as the only transverse across this gulf. As flawed an attempt as it may be, it nevertheless crosses the space between the two disparate worlds.

The poem is aware of itself not only as a poem but also as a failed poem: “this poem cannot find words.” This self-effacement, or cancelling out, works as a metonymy for the absence of the lost comrades. The lines close to the end of the poem: “how do you write tears / it is not enough, too much / our mouths reduced, / informed by our grief” can be seen as a comment on the way the poem has failed. This is a piece of writing that negates itself even as it propels itself forward. It constantly unravels itself: “i deny this poem.” The speaker denies the existence of the poem even as she herself creates it,

allowing the poem to occupy a space that both utilizes and refuses language. It critiques itself: “this poem repeats itself,” warning the reader of its strategies, claiming them to be unremarkable and banal. The first two lines act almost like a waiver or disclaimer in which the speaker acknowledges the failure of the work and asks to be absolved of responsibility.

The line “this poem cannot find words” is an apology for the poem, operating both in terms of an apologia – a formal defence – and in terms of an apology – a “regretful acknowledgement of offence or failure” (*OED*). The line also acts as an introduction to the poem, preparing the reader for the self-deprecating attitude of the poem towards itself. It asks for a kind of release from expectation, as if the speaker is saying, “don’t expect the usual poetic components here, such as words.” The obvious unacceptability of the poem to the poet/speaker is broached immediately and sets the tone for the poetic conveyance of the unacceptable events that follow. “October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983” is an example of resistance writing that also enacts a resistance to writing.

That the poem and the speaker have survived while so many others have been destroyed haunts the observations and reflections in the poem. A series of names, the list of the dead, is repeated like a litany, beating out a steady rhythm. Living in the face of so much death is the cause for a certain amount of guilt and regret. The repeated confirmation of the lives lost acts both as a form of self-castigation, and as a chant or mantra intoned to assure remembrance of these facts in the mind of the speaker (and the

listener / reader). The chanted names traverse the gap between living and dead, each word existing in a concrete way on the page in the continuing present.

The central line "dream is dead" appears eight times in the poem. The word "dream" takes the place of another proper name, and comprises part of the list of the dead, thus affording it the significance of a person. However, it is always "dream," not preceded by an article, that is, the dream or a dream. In this way, specificity is removed from the dream, in direct opposition to the specificity that is granted to the dream by figuring it as a proper name. This ambiguity reflects the pull of intimacy and the repulsion of horror that is contained in the act of acknowledging the dead loved ones.

At the same time, the poem also works to enact the death of a larger dream in the general or universal, signifying perhaps the ability to dream or the defencelessness of the dreamer. Dream without an article may also point to a collective dream, specific in intent but in no need of an article because it is embraced by all, such as a political dream of revolution, or of independence. Insofar as the colloquial meaning associated with the term "dreamer" or one who has a "pipe-dream" is that of an impractical idealist, dream here is representative of innocence, faith, hope, optimism, creativity or wishes. The death of dream in this context is the departure from a child-like trust in goodness. In the case of Grenada, it is the death of the belief in the United States as a benevolent world power. In the context of racial struggle it is the waking dream of racial equality. It also encompasses the day dreams of the oppressed: the flowering of opportunities and self-fulfillment in a post-racist world.

The phrase "in these antilles" functions as a chorus or refrain in "October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983" and places the poem in a specific locale. The islands of the West Indies are the Antilles and the Bahamas. Within the Antilles, there are the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles. The speaker refers to both of these in the poem, "lesser and greater." The Greater Antilles include Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. The Lesser Antilles include Trinidad, the Leeward and Windward islands, and other islands. Grenada is part of the Windward Islands, in the Lesser Antilles<sup>13</sup>.

In contrast to the way "dream" has no article attached to it, the word "antilles" in the poem is always preceded by the word "these." The use of the demonstrative pronoun here may indicate that the speaker wants to emphasize to which antilles she is referring, that is, the Lesser Antilles as opposed to the Greater. However, she mentions both, and the phrase "lesser and greater" is part of a repeated section that recurs at regular intervals. It is more likely that the speaker uses "these" to locate herself in the geographic space of the poem. "These" demonstrates that she is in the antilles, for otherwise she would refer to them as "those."

In the same way, the demonstrative pronoun "this" ("this poem cannot find words / this poem repeats itself," "i deny this poem") indicates the speaker's position within the poem. This particular poem is what is "not enough." These particular antilles is where "dream is dead." The demonstrative pronouns inject an abrupt resonance of intimacy in the face of the widening gap between the dead comrades and the living poet/speaker. The

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<sup>13</sup> The Leeward Islands are Antigua, St. Christopher, Nevis and Anguilla, Montserrat and British Virgin

speaker implicates herself in the deaths, situates herself at the scene in order to claim that these are her antilles, this is her poem, these were her friends that died. This assertion of personal involvement exacerbates the impotence of survivor guilt and points to the inefficacy of language when confronted with grief and suffering.

The word "dead" is repeated so often in the poem (twenty-five times in all<sup>14</sup>), that like any word that is said over and over again, it starts to become nothing more than its sound. Such repetition steals the meaning from the word, empties it. This emptiness mirrors the gaps between experience and language, between the dream and reality, between the speaker and the dead friends.

Dead is personified: "dead insists itself on us," adding itself to the list of fallen revolutionaries. The poem itself is attributed human qualities when the speaker insists: "there isn't a hand large enough / to gesture this tragedy." Allusions to slavery ("some of us sold each other / bracelets, undecorative and unholy, / back to god!" "back to shackles! back to slavery!") and in particular the manacle image, military images ("ships," "three armoured personnel carriers," "revolution," "white flare," "the fort"), and references to violence (that is, "tragedy," "blood," "betrayal," "blindfolded," "stripped," "drowned," "shot," "fratricide,"<sup>15</sup> "murdering," and "rearrested,") all serve to intensify the spectre of death that haunts the poem by associating violence with the loss of freedom. The dead

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Islands; the Windward Islands are Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent.

<sup>14</sup> For some reason, this repetition of the word "dead" calls to mind the repetition of the same word at the end of the old death sentence by hanging, almost as if to say good and dead, as opposed to just dead.

<sup>15</sup> Brand uses the word "fratricide" here, not fratricide, which means the killing of a brother or sister. I could not find "fratricide" in any of the dictionaries I consulted. If it is a neologism, she draws on the root



Maurice, Jackie, Uni and Vincent are emblems for the death of personal, social and political freedom signified by slavery and a military coup.

The speaker's reaction as she finds herself powerless to allay this violence is multiple. She is numb, hence the repetitious intoning of names; she is in denial: "i deny this poem," "i refuse to watch faces." She is grief-stricken and sad: "a dirge sung forever," "how do you write tears," "our mouths reduced, / informed by grief." Desperation colours her pleas: "what, rumour, not true / please, rearrested not dead;" anger alights her bitterness: "back once again / betrayal again," "how did they feel," "how did they feel." Echoes of survivor guilt surface almost unintentionally: "skulking," "fleeing."

The gamut of the emotional spectrum is inferred, while the speaker relentlessly points to the insufficiency of language as yet another violence. Allusions to forms of communication, in references to "radio," "rumour," and "death announcements" embody a stark contrast to the denial of expression in phrases like, "this poem cannot find words," "how do you write tears." The overpowering noxious tone of death in the poem is clarified by the insidious distrust of language, and the assumed violence of the cleft between the symbolic nature of words and lived human experience<sup>16</sup>.

Palm tree in Toronto: *fore day morning*

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"fract," as in fraction, a piece or fragment, and also as in fracture, or breakage. Perhaps it is a typographical error.

<sup>16</sup> Writer Gail Scott also utilizes this gap to situate the inexpressible. The distance between signifier and signified becomes a shifting space of enunciation where the propulsion of drives and volitions reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's pre-symbolic *chora* is possible. See my chapter on Gail Scott in this work.

*'fore day morning*, Brand's first published collection of poems (1978), opens a window on a dismal world characterized by death, fright and winter. Themes of displacement (25) and dirt (27) figure in the bleak, eloquent poems, but the most striking and pronounced imagery is that of magic, superstition and other-worldly powers. The retention of the supernatural becomes the transverse reminder of home, the speaker's identity stretched across the ocean that separates the two worlds.

Totems and ghosts from the home world reflect the fear and alienation the speaker experiences in her adopted country. She relies on this magic to fend off the new demons as well as to transform them into shapes that she can recognize. Her world is still peopled by "jumbie"(8) and "demi-gods" (30). Her nights are stricken with "nightmare" (9, 28) and "demon shadows" (14). The potency of the "jumble beads" (26) is tested in the new world on myriad forms of grotesque human hatred. Ill-equipped to cope with a society ordered by racial bias, the speaker utters "incantations" (21), calls on "prayer" (29) and "sorcery" (10). Her supplications are "chanted" (28), her pleas unanswered.

Consider this short poem from *'fore day morning*:

AFRO WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANT

I feel like a palm tree  
 at the corner of Bloor and Yonge  
 in a wild snow storm.  
 Scared, surprised,  
 trying desperately to appear unperplexed

put out, sun brown naked and a little embarrassed.

"Afro West Indian Immigrant" (25) speaks pointedly about displacement and uses juxtaposition to mirror the rupture created by geographic dispersal. The first juxtaposition of "palm tree" with "Bloor and Yonge" strikes any reader who knows Toronto as absurd not only because Canadian climates are hardly tropical, but also because "palm tree" evokes a natural setting and "Bloor and Yonge" represents the heart of a bustling urban centre. By claiming "I feel like a palm tree" the speaker associates herself with the tropical and the natural in opposition to the northern and the urban.

The juxtaposition created in the next verse with "a wild snow storm" works to enhance the violence of displacement in two ways, the more obvious way being the contrast between the heat connoted by palm tree and the cold connoted by snow. In another, more subtle dynamic, the word "wild" aligns itself with "palm tree" in connoting the meaning of natural, as in the wild kingdom, the wilderness and so forth and thereby situates itself against the human-wrought setting of the cityscape. The phrase "wild snow storm" can also be associated with palm tree as both belong to the natural world. The word "wild" as synonymous with the natural, then, forms a link between the first and third verses of the poem, and insulates the middle line sandwiched between them. The middle line, evoking the urban context of "Bloor and Yonge," is consequently isolated. So while feeling like a palm tree emerges as the initial reason why the speaker feels alienated, the later images work in tandem with this one to show that the ethos of Bloor and Yonge is itself alienating.

The complex way that the first three verses work with and against each other reflects the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the immigrant's sense of place: a yearning for home in the midst of an awareness that life at home is unacceptable, a desire to fit in and belong in the new country in the midst of outrage at the treatment of the racial minority. The speaker in the poem identifies both with the Caribbean landscape represented by the palm tree and the urban-industrial centre represented by Bloor and Yonge. However, her identity is not so easily divided. She identifies, no doubt, also, with the wild snow storm. The "wild" in her is not merely the part that longs for the natural tropical landscape of the forsaken homeland, but also the wild inside her that spawns the frustration and rage against oppression and exploitation. Her storm of indignation belongs both in the city of Toronto, as snow does and in the Caribbean, as a palm tree does.

She becomes the inappropriate object in unfamiliar surroundings at the mercy of storms created by the barrage of urban stimuli, the threat of racial violence and by the conflicting urges within her. The new immigrant to Canada is no more prepared to process the daily demands of life in a big city than a palm tree is able to cope with a snow storm.

The incongruity of the palm tree in a snowstorm is exacerbated by the tension in the phrase "trying desperately to appear unperplexed," the action of "trying desperately" negating the infinitive "to appear" since the desired result is one of stasis and calm. This paradox encapsulates the eternal plight of a newcomer: trying desperately not to appear

to be trying desperately. The speaker sees herself as the anomaly: the stranger from a hot southern agriculture-based society in the middle of a cold industrialized Western nation.

The final line makes metaphoric use of the word “naked” to characterize how skin colour translates into vulnerability: “sun brown naked.” In other words, to be brown in a white country is to be naked. “Sun” evokes the heat of the country of origin; brown indicates the speaker’s skin pigmentation, directly related to her home country’s proximity to the sun, and also echoes back to the contrast created by the discordant palm tree in a snow storm. Its trunk, brown, sticks out like a sore thumb in the snow, white.

The adjectives used to describe the state of mind of the speaker, “scared,” “surprised,” “put out” and “embarrassed,” all speak to the vulnerability of someone out of place. The expression “put out” invokes not only the speaker’s discomfort, her put-out feeling, but also the idea of being physically put out of one’s home. The speaker’s place in the new land is one that is felt to be outside of the zones of familiarity and ease. In this way the speaker’s arrival in the new land puts her out, both emotionally and physically. She is out of place and also not in her place.

The title is noticeably long for such a short poem, its length extended by the overt attempt to trace the speaker’s ancestry through naming. The long name side by side with the short poem illustrates the absurdity of placing oneself (and others) according to one’s racial history. The assumption that the majority of black Caribbeans originally came from Africa (transported by the British to become slaves in the colonies) accounts for the “Afro” at the start of the speaker’s name. Though her people originated in Africa, she

herself lived in the West Indies, so “West Indian” is also added to her name. Lastly, she has now moved to another country, emigrated to Canada, so she is tagged an “immigrant.” All that these labels serve to distinguish is that the speaker is a newcomer of colour. Brand employs this name in the title to show, tongue-in-cheek, what she thinks others see. The title, thence, springs from the gaze of a white passerby at the corner of Bloor and Yonge, creating a palpable distance between that picture and the one that the speaker has created for us of herself: “I feel like a palm tree...” .

The speaker names herself thus in the title, providing irony to ensure that the reader does not take the poem as naïve. The title indicates that the speaker recognizes its own absurdity, encouraging the reader to grin, but at the same time, acknowledging the seriousness of the newcomer’s dilemma which is continually compounded by the compunction of the dominant culture to label and categorize.

Brand’s clever deployment of irony, anger and contrast in this poem creates an opening for blackness to be inscribed onto a Toronto landscape. She places the palm tree at the corner of Bloor and Yonge so that it is imposed onto a familiar cityscape in the reader’s mind. She places herself at Bloor and Yonge and forces the reader to see her there, thus resisting invisibility. Making one small corner of downtown Toronto admit her blackness, subtly, wittily, Brand insinuates herself into the reader’s vision of that city. Confessing her vulnerability, her feeling of being “scared” and “put out,” she reduces resistance to the transformation of white space to black space. Owning her embarrassment, she calls attention to the gaze of the passerby who sees her painful, and

slightly humorous displacement. (Brand is perhaps referring to a collective cultural uneasiness that attempts to legislate racial tolerance have created<sup>17</sup>.)

This poem works as do many of Brand's epigrams in her 1983 collection *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia*. Like an epigram, its images jar and surprise; its compact form creates a brief, striking visual impression that is almost humorous in its self-aware candour. However, the epigrams in Brand's later work (*Winter Epigrams*) are more self-consciously biting than "Afro West Indian Immigrant." Carol Morrell sees *Winter Epigrams* and *Primitive Offensive* as much more "politically engaged" than *fore day morning* (169).

In his review of *Winter Epigrams* Edward Kamau Brathwaite writes, "And what else, what more a fitting form, we ask at the 'end' of the reading, for exile, for loneliness, for such bleak loveliness" (18). The epigram is an interesting choice of form for Brand. Its odd history as both inscription and invective fits it to very specific applications.

Dating back to classic Latin literature, the English epigram has come to be known as a witty and well-turned saying with a sting in its tail<sup>18</sup>. But the Greeks used the epigram

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<sup>17</sup> I am referring here to the political practise of endorsing the policy of "Multiculturalism" at the expense of addressing real social issues such as discrimination based on perceived race, culture, religion or heritage. In a synopsis of the weaknesses of the Multiculturalism Act of 1971, Neil Bissoondath writes, "In its rush, the act appears to indulge in several unexamined assumptions: that people, coming here from elsewhere, wish to remain what they have been; that personalities and ways of doing things, ways of looking at the world, can be frozen in time; that Canadian cultural influences pale before the exoticism of the foreign. It views newcomers as exotics, and pretends that this is both proper and sufficient" (*Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* 43).

<sup>18</sup> This definition of the epigram and the factoids that follow are taken from *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. Ed. Ian Ousby. Foreword by Margaret Atwood. (First pub. 1988.) New York:

as an inscription, funerary or celebratory, suitable for monuments, and not usually satiric. Latin poet Martial (c. AD 38-104) is reputed to be the greatest of the classical epigrammists. His epigrams were both pithy and lengthy (some as long as fifty lines.) When the epigram enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the English and European Renaissance, Martial's epigrams served as the model. Thomas More, the reputed master, wrote epigrams in Latin. Other seventeenth century epigrammists include Sir John Harington, Ben Jonson (*Epigrams* 1616), and Robert Herrick (*Hesperides* 1648). Prior, Pope, Swift, Goldsmith, Cowper, Burns, Byron, Landor and Coleridge also turned their hands to the epigram, but overdid the satiric wit and sacrificed directness. Coleridge and Blake both offered self-defining epigrams: "What is an epigram? A dwarfish whole, / Its body brevity, and wit its soul" (Coleridge); "Her whole life is an epigram, smart, smooth and neatly penn'd, / Platted quite neat to catch applause with a sliding noose at the end" (Blake).

Brand's choice of the epigram shows courage and confidence. Brand says that in the works that came before *Epigrams* she was "interested in holding form together. The easiest and most difficult way of doing that was to find the shape of a poem — the shape of an epigram — and see how I could work it" ("In the company" 366). She engages this historically male-dominated form and makes it her own. Brand carefully places these epigrams like weights on a set of scales. She audaciously confronts Greek and Latin poets from the classical era, British and European poets from the Renaissance, all men, all



white, all of privileged social stature. She stares down these published pundits of the past by offering her own epigrams, showing that no genre and no form is closed to the determined writer / activist.

Few critics have written on the *Winter Epigrams* collection; perhaps they do not know how to take them. Edward Brathwaite finds in them an attractive "stubbornness," which he says "is the spring round which the poems curl & curve" (27). He writes, "the poem coils in into itself to make its meaning" (26). Brathwaite calls the collection "the enigmatic diary" (19) and Brand "our first major female exile poet" (18). He astutely notes, however, that "the theme of exile, we understand from the start, isn't going to be conventionally rootless, conventionally protest, conventionally shivering" (20). He finds in the epigrams "the icicle act, the insidious implosion" (21) and "the lovely handled anti-line" (21). For Brathwaite, the *Winter Epigrams* are about love: "love, in all its various guises, its remarch of voices, is what these poems (in addition to their major themes, connected, disconnected) are 'about.' And no, not turtle dove; not even Russe Zhivago love. But something that a sister comes to understand" (22). Brathwaite uses the term "sister" here in the colloquial meaning of black woman. In *Black Women For Beginners*, Sandra Sharp writes, in the chapter called "Names By Which She is Known: A Glossary," "**sistuh / sister / sista** – the most popular I.D. for a BW" (41); on page 6 she explains that "**BW = Black Woman**" (Sharp's use of bold type in both quotations). *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* lists as the second definition for the word

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*Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition.* (First pub. 1948.) New York: Harper & Row, 1987: 307.

“sister”: “Also used preceding a name and as a form of address or reference. a A woman who is a close friend; a female fellow citizen or creature; a female of the same race, colour, class, profession, etc., a fellow female member of a trade union; a female associate or equal, a fellow feminist” (2875).

The second half of the title bears some explanation; Brathwaite writes:

Cardenal (he was the one in line on TV when the Pope visited Nicaragua; the revolutionary priest taking off his beret and kneeling to kiss the ring with the Pope wagging his finger at him. One of the finest poets of Our America. In *Apocalypse and other poems* (trans 1977), Ernesto, alive to the blandishments of Claudia, the Cocoa-Cola girl, one of the problems of Our America, wrote

They told me you were in love with another man  
 And [so] I went off to my room  
 And I wrote that article against the government  
 That landed me in jail.

(quoted in McTair’s Introduction)

and Dionne picks this up; becoming herself Claudia, taking note of that male arrogance against the “other,” herself so different from that Claudia, yet sharing in the common gender, the oppression, and at last the love: for in the end the Revolution cannot be only politics, but heart & whole: from which the heal itself may one day come. (22)

In the "Introduction" to Brand's collection, Roger McTair writes,

The epigrams in this collection ... have been written by a poet fully aware of her origins as poet, woman and social being. ... These epigrams began as a reaction to some epigrams in Apocalypse and other poems by Ernesto Cardenal the Nicaraguan priest, poet, Marxist and humanist. ... Cardenal's epigrams to Claudia are poems of love, loss and politics. Poems of a passionate and conscious person in love with a capricious being.

Brand's response, in defense of Claudia, are poems of love and politics from a feminist and dialectical stand. Brand's Claudia is a thinking woman, as opposed to the flighty bourgeois that has enthralled Cardenal.

(iv)

The epigrams in this collection treat themes of displacement, irony, and exile, and they examine what constitutes one's sense of place and placelessness. The tone is questioning, playful, tongue-in-cheek; see for example "winter suicide" (15) or epigram 12, in the epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal:

How do I know that this is love  
and not legitimation of capitalist relations of production  
in advanced patriarchy? (24)

Or epigram 16:

I can't speak  
for the girls of the bourgeoisie,

But girls like me can't wait  
for poems and men's hearts. (25)

The flip, necessarily curt, attitude of the epigram lends itself easily to satiric social critique. In Brand's collection, short pointed remarks lance through heterosexist politics, capitalism, urban alienation, and the Caribbean immigrant's response to winter. Consider epigram 8 of the winter epigrams:

cold is cold is  
cold is cold is  
not skiing  
or any other foolhardiness in snow. (4)

The dominating metaphor in the winter epigrams is that of the epigram itself:

11  
winters should be answered  
in curt, no-nonsense phrases,  
don't encourage them to linger. (5)

Winter emerges for the speaker as an unacceptable condition, much like the condition of so many comrades killed in the U.S. invasion in Grenada in the poem "October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983." The sharp language of the epigrams shoots arrows across the space between the politics of the speaker and the injustice around her. In these poems she paints herself as small and fragile like the tiny poems she writes:

Monday: I am one of one hundred  
 against the united states  
 in a demo' for Nicaragua  
 the snow, still falling, softly. (14)

Once again we are reminded of Joy Kogawa's work, in particular the poems in her collection *Woman in the Woods*. Brand here effects a small, plaintive voice; she seems to be ready to bow to the overpowering forces against her. But she never does. In an epigram, less is more and their literary power looms large while their size remains diminutive.

In the epigram above, as the speaker stands on a Toronto street she is standing against all the others who do not share her protest. She is standing against the mammoth United States; she is standing against the snow. She exists in a cross-wise modality to all these antagonists. She emphasizes the smallness of her number, one, and the smallness of the number of her group: one hundred. The poem forms a small box on a large white page, mirroring the speaker's body standing in a large snow-covered cityscape. The more diminutive the the speaker makes herself appear to be in the epigram, the larger the antagonist in the poem seems to be.

The speaker's resistance to the northern climate, embellished in her epigrams to winter, enacts a metonymic substitution for her resistance to other more vicious forces of subjugation. Consider winter epigram 9:

I give you these epigrams, Toronto,

these winter fragments  
 these stark white papers  
 because you mothered me  
 because you held me with a distance that i expected,  
 here, my mittens,  
 here, my frozen body,  
 because you gave me nothing more  
 and i took nothing less,  
 i give you winter epigrams  
 because you are a liar,  
 there is no other season here. (4-5)

This biting impression of the cold sterility of a specifically-named Canadian city is clearly both metaphoric and literal. The speaker, as newcomer to Toronto, obviously feels displaced and uncomfortable. The sense of being betrayed by the weather mirrors the experience of being alienated by Toronto society. Both of these are underlined by the cool rigid form of the epigram.

The unreciprocated action of giving, mentioned in the first and tenth lines, makes the poem a stark parody of a love poem. Sensual closeness is replaced by "a distance that i expected"; caressing hands are replaced by "mittens"; the warm body of a lover is replaced by "my frozen body." While the speaker continues to give (epigrams), the lover (Toronto) is cold-hearted and recalcitrant. In a grotesque parody of romantic love, the

penultimate line hurls an accusation, “you are a liar,” and the final line admits defeat, “there is no other season”; the vanquished lover upbraids the unmoved woman for her cruelty, and then, still smitten, meekly bows out, hopeless and dejected. The poet-speaker paints herself in this dwarfish light to emphasize the harshness of the winter, the city and North American xenophobia.

In Epigram 40, Brand cleverly mocks capitalist society:

40

*Reading the Corporate Pages*

I was thinking

that it was a waste to have a moon here,

a moon is not cost-efficient. (13)

Playfully positing the reflective light of the night orb as inefficient compared with solar light, Brand succeeds in critiquing patriarchal-controlled consumerism since myriad cultures have regarded the moon as female.<sup>19</sup> She emphasizes location with the pronoun “here,” inferring a dissimilarity to “there.” The moon figures as just one point of unfavourable comparison, but tellingly it is a natural phenomenon that has long been associated with the feminine principle. With this conceit, the poet-speaker reveals her longing for home as an extension and component of her longing for another (woman).

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Walker writes that Egyptians, gnostic Naassians, Central Asians, Sioux Indians, South Africans, Gaulish tribes, Persians, Indo-Europeans, Romans, Polynesians, Finns, Peruvians, and others over the years have revered the moon as a (female) goddess. (669-73.)

Reading the “corporate pages” calls to mind the world of high finance which is still largely a domain of male power. The way that business news is reported leaves no doubt that corporate Canada still focuses on the bottom-line to ascertain success or failure, which accounts for Brand’s reference to cost-efficiency. She conjures a marvellous mental picture of a profit and loss statement with the sun on one side and the moon on the other. Once again mocking binary divisions through evocative images, Brand cracks open a tiny gap in language through which her black feminine subject seeps through.

Without sacrificing her feminism an iota, Brand manages to highlight the absurd elements that invariably surface in as prolific a political magnet as the women’s movement:

47

you say you want me to ...

to what?

no i can’t tap dance

at the International Women’s Day rally. (35)

This epigram creates a persona who deals with limits in a humorous way.

The epigrams, while clever, suggest an endearing wide-eyed naiveté which forms a deft contrast to the hard-won wisdom and bitterness that crop up in Brand’s other writing, most especially in her essays (*Bread Out of Stone*). The contrast is a source of delight for the Brand reader. This book’s tone is vastly different compared to that of



*Primitive Offensive*, which was published only one year previous. Brand's forthright appropriation of this little-used, largely male-dominated poetic form represents a considerable risk on her part. Fortunately the poems work in all the ways that I presume she means them to. The sparkling wit and quirky aphoristic charm of *Winter Epigrams* comes as a bit of a relief after the gloomy and slightly pedantic *Primitive Offensive*.

Brand's 1982 collection *Primitive Offensive* is a set of poems marked by images of death, filth, putrid nature, blood, brokenness and betrayal. The poems are dark and serious, satire and irony often descending into bitter sarcasm ("we die badly," "we are not cats" in "Canto XI" 50) and repugnant visual imagery ("a morning in Pretoria / a morning nervous and yellowish / its guts ripped out / and putrifying [sic] / stuffed back into its throat" in "Canto XII" 52-3.) These poems' effect is powerful, depicting darkness without guile or pretension. The reader is never allowed to forget that these poems are "wrestling with piss and shit / in gutters" (50).

Brand's work never prettifies or glosses over subject matter that creates discomfort; here in *Primitive Offensive*, the ease and humour of the epigrams is absent. Lacking is the sophisticated dance with language that will come in *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun*. She said in a 1995 interview that *Primitive Offensive* "is not a book I like any more because I find it kind of young" ("In the company" 360). *Primitive Offensive* is unbroken by the heavy interspersal of the prose poem found in the later collections, *No Language is Neutral* and *Land to Light On*. The strength of emotion evoked in this

collection renders it provocative and disturbing. Gut-wrenching and preachy, *Primitive Offensive* traverses the gap between the raw, unnegotiable realm of human passion and the confined, socially-encoded realm of human expression. Brand forces language to labour for her purposes; she coerces it; she stretches it; she uses every possible vestige of its residual power to shock or sicken in order to make her visions come alive for the reader.

A phrase emerges in *No Language is Neutral*, twice, which will become the title of Brand's novel: "In another place, not here" (33, 34). This phrase encapsulates not only the themes of the novel and the tone of "No Language is Neutral," but also the tension that characterizes all of Brand's work.

Brand's characters hail from the Caribbean, and long for the affluence and easy life they associate with North America. Brand's short story "Sketches in transit ... going home" in her collection *Sans Souci and other stories* (1988) takes place on a flight from Toronto with stops at various West Indian islands. The sketches give glimpses into the lives of the people returning home for the carnival, Caribana. One male passenger brags about his sexual exploits and looks forward to having many women over the holiday. Another passenger is headed to Grenada to take part in the revolution. One woman cleans offices at night in Toronto and puts on a display of great wealth for the trip she makes every five years: "Home! To be rich for two weeks and then back to the endless dirty floors at night and the white security guard trying to feel her breasts as she left the

building" (132). One passenger has been deported from Canada for staying beyond the limit of her visitor's visa.

They all make up their minds to embellish the lie that their lives in Canada are perfect, for "no one back home believed that things were not better out here and no one could be convinced" (135). Their families are comforted by the delusion that their children have done well going to Canada. The character, Ayo, whose "snappy, more outwardly political anger" delights reviewer Bronwen Wallace (34), muses that

she, like them, had been grown for export, like sugar cane and arrowroot, to go away, to have distaste for staying. She had been taught there was nothing worthwhile about staying; you should 'go away and make something of yourself,' her family had said. It was everyone's dream to leave. Leaving was supposed to change class and station. (134)

The closer the plane gets to home, the more exuberant the returnees become, practising their jollity to be sure they are convincing for the relations who will greet them: "They were becoming more and more uninhibited, the music louder, the laughter more infectious and elongated. Canadian anonymity was giving way to Trinidadian familiarity ... The accents returned, minding to keep that hint of 'away' to impress friends at home" (141).

When the travellers disembark they are struck immediately by ambiguity: "Love which was not love because it could not centre itself on a shape, a piece of land. Love which only recollected gesture and not movement, event and not time. They glimpsed,

half-understood, half-seen, themselves ... Useless as a cash crop" (142). The story ends as the passengers arrive, the flight being the whole of the narrative. The trip between Toronto and the islands etches the transverse line that shapes the lives of Brand's characters. They exist hanging in between these two locations, "half here and half there" (133).

A constant lack in them, sustained by the misery of life in the new land, is constantly interpellated with longing for the homeland. Bronwen Wallace echoes: "the stories move between those at home and those away, with those who shuttle endlessly between both worlds" (34). The myth of the land of opportunity is maintained by a charade both masking and revealing hatred for the poverty of the home they left behind. Unfulfilled desire springs ceaselessly from this lack and suspends the immigrants in the transverse between two lives. Excluded from both geographic landscapes by xenophobia, envy and racial bias, they negate their own worth, thus excluding themselves even from their own psychic landscapes. Placeless, they invent lies to themselves about home and perpetuate lies to dear ones at home about Toronto. While they continually yearn for another place, the possibility of such a place is forever deferred.

The other place towards which the characters yearn is an imagined place free of hardship and troubles. The trajectory of their thoughts is constantly extending beyond the place where they are currently located, be that a temporal, emotional or geographic space. The other place is not a specific locale, but a composite of what is positive in two or more of their homes in addition to that which desire moves them towards. Because of the

nebulous, utopian nature of the “other place,” the “here” will always lack. This abiding lack drives the characters through the relationships and journeys of their lives, questing for the impossible union of the here and the not-here. They are suspended in a movement that keeps them between worlds, unable to successfully free themselves of the complex interplay of ambiguous and contradictory desires, caught in an unstopping migration that pushes them to traverse the expanses that separate where they are from where they desire to be.

*No Language is Neutral*, Brand’s 1990 collection of poetry, takes its title from a Derek Walcott’s poem, “Midsummer:” “no language is neutral / the green oak of English is a murmurous cathedral / where some take umbrage and some take peace / but all help to widen its shade.” Brand says,

Walcott and I come from different generations and different genders; that English language that he wants to claim is not the same one that I want to claim. The one that I want contains the resistances to how that language was made, because that language was made through imperialism, through the oppression of women. As women and peoples of colour we write against that language. (“Writing It” 37)

It is in this collection, (which was nominated for a Governor General’s award,) that she says, “I finally caught my style” (“In the company” 366). Brand elaborates:

My poems have always been poems that document something social, something historic, so there has been a mix of documentary poems and at

times more lyrical poems. Finally I came to the point in *No Language* where I could do those two things together. ... I think what I did in *No Language* was mix the lyricism with the documentary. (366)

She also says of this work: "It was like a memory of when language became possible, changed, through that experience of colonization" (*Writing It* 37).

The middle section of *No Language is Neutral* running from page 21 to page 34 can be read either as a single poem or as a series of linked poems. (Donna Nurse describes the entire work as a "book-length poem" 54). It is titled "No Language Is Neutral" and begins with a description of two rivers, "one river dead and teeming from waste," "the other rumbling to the ocean" (22). These rivers will come to hold a double signification: two impulses in language, and the paradoxical longing for the here and the not-here. Like a river that forks, the speaker's language "seemed to split in two, one branch fell silent, the other argued hotly for going home" (31). Distortions in language are traced through the history of structures of domination, such as slavery, marriage and racism. Brand explains,

"Within that language, it's not just questions of race for me, but questions of gender.

What was there for my great-great-grandmother between the ocean and the sink? How did that shape what she said? And how did what she didn't say about being a woman shape it, too?" (*Writing It* 38).

Brand says that this collection is the first work in which she found a way to write in the language she grew up with, “not only in terms of its cadences but in terms of its syntax” (“In the company” 366-7). She tells Silvera:

I never wanted to write in so-called dialect — certainly not without first appreciating what I was doing, and that had a lot to do with finding myself in a country like Canada where everything can be turned exotic. Everything that is non-white, that is not standard.

... When I began to write *No Language* lots of things had happened, and I had also become more easy with language as a whole, more easy with literature. I'd become more mature, more versed, more clever — you know all dem shit. And I'd also come to understand that I could write anything now. And I did. (367-8)

The speaker's conception of home splits and braids itself back together throughout the poem: “here was beautiful” (22), “here is history” (23), “five hundred dollars and a passport ... is how I reach here” (28), “it don't have nothing call beauty here” (29), “you can't smile here” (31). The final idea of transience, “I am only here for a moment” (32), is an echo of a sentiment articulated in the beginning of the poem: “being born to her was temporary, wet and thrown half dressed among the dozens of brown legs itching to run” (22). After the idea of transience is introduced (32), the poet-speaker can only refer to “here” indirectly through allusions to “not here” (33, 34).

The first six pages of "No Language is Neutral" (poem or series of poems) deal with the homeland and the remembered past. Sanders reports that this poem is a "kind of genealogy, as well as a revisiting of landscape earlier explored in both poetry and prose" (31). The speaker regards her place of origin, the here: she sees "nigger brown sand," "almond leaves fat as women, the conch shell tiny as sand, the rock stone old like water" (22). She savours "the smell of sea water and fresh fish wind" (22). But very young she already feels the impulse to be away: "the taste of leaving was already on my tongue"; "there was history which had taught my eyes to look for escape"; she sees that "here was beautiful and here was nowhere," and the sadness of this contradiction impels her to go, even though her attachment to this place is instinctual: "It was as if a signal burning like a fer de lance's<sup>20</sup> sting turned my eyes against the water even as love for this nigger beach became resolute" (22). The dual impulse towards the here and the not-here is played out in a number of images. A memory is described as "half-eaten and half-hungry"; a backbone is "bending and unbending" (23).

The poem traces the barbarity of slavery, linking the alterations of language to that invasion: "spitting out the last spun syllables for cruelty, new sound forming, pushing toward lips made to bubble blood," "prose reaching for murder," "a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong," "hush was idiom" (23). The imposition of slavery onto a people in their own homeland becomes a divisive act which then haunts all associations with the homeland. The people themselves are divided in hatred and submission, enlisting

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<sup>20</sup> A fer-de-lance is a large venomous snake of tropical South America and Martinique, related to the



language as a means to both survival and subversion. Silence becomes potent and speech becomes empty: "Silence done curse god and beauty here, people does hear things in this heliconia<sup>21</sup> peace," "talking was left for night" (23).

The poem, or series of poems, explore(s) the lives and roles of women as instruments of the transverse. They lie cross-wise between the past and the present,

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copperhead and rattlesnake (*OED*).

<sup>21</sup> Of Helicon, legendary home of the Muses.

between actual and wished-for lives, between sexism of the homeland and the sexism of the new land. Erin Mouré writes of this collection: "Repeatedly the images are of women, of discovery and engagement with women" (42). They invoke dreams and visions, their breasts and wombs transmitting the suffering and enlightenment of their realities. They function as teachers and as sacrificial warriors, their hyphenated beings showing the speaker the way to traverse worlds. Meira Cook notes "the subject's refusal to participate in her own confinement in language whilst simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of knowing the body other than textually" (90).

Two woman-figures appear in the first six pages of the poem. The speaker's voyage through the history of her homeland is guided by an ancient woman called Liney, an immigrant herself: "that old woman who wasn't even from here" (24). Liney is the double for the speaker, also an immigrant, both transfixed by the here and the not-here, both traversing the gap indefinitely. The speaker's ancestral past is enriched by women but transmitted, ironically, through a man, "Ben, son, now ninety, ex-saga boy" (24). The speaker extracts from him a recollection of Liney and "something of my mama, something of his mama" (24), emphasizing the matrilineal threads that sew together her history<sup>22</sup>. Erin Mouré concurs, "the poem evokes a lineage of women, struggling, a personal history that comes from a beautiful place. ... the lives of women twine and untwine, not flinching from what it means to be black and women" (43).

Liney is the visionary, the dreamer and the ancient fish-goddess, "fly skinless and

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<sup>22</sup> It is possible that the name Liney was chosen to indicate the lines of blood stretching back into the past.

turn into river-fish" (25), spurning sex and womb, freeing herself from the parts of woman that have been most exploited and invaded by man. Honouring Liney's story, the speaker and her female sibling enact an energetic dance, mock Ben's pride, and induce him to "tell we any story he remember" (25). Thus the connective tissue between generations of women is refigured as the transverse which stands in opposition to the brutality of slave-dealers and promiscuous men. Ben's trail of conquests is a substitution for the metaphoric road down which black slaves were forced, "dragged through the Manzinilla," "hardbitten on mangrove and wild bush" (23).

The speaker affirms the unrecorded life of Liney and her other female ancestors, mourning, "as if your life could never see itself," "as if your life could never hear itself" (26). She grapples with the invisibility of women's experience, invoking the images of text to mark its importance: "without your autobiography now between my stories," "the passages that I too take out of liking," "a verse still missing," "a chapter yellowed and moth-eaten" (26). Cook offers that "the written subject in these poems is plural and profligate, the woman refuses to position herself outside a discourse that had excluded her (as woman, as lesbian, as Caribbean, as lover)" (91).

As the speaker addresses her dead mentor, she betrays an incessant yearning for the temporal not-here, the past. Her desire to recover the stories that condition and clarify her life is akin to the wish to leave her homeland and yet retain it in its entirety. The past is like both the new land that will never fully admit her and the homeland that continuously deprives her. The speaker is moved by the lack in her immediate moment

to traverse the space that separates her from her past, in search of identity markers and fragments of text that will enhance her present. She sees the denial of access to her ancient sisters' stories as owing, in part, to their erasure from a history written by men like Ben, who "prepares to lie gently for his own redemption" (26).

The poem affirms the life of the speaker's mother, the second woman-guide in the first section, as black woman and as sufferer. Though it does not name her, it explains the acquisition of self-hatred:

A woman who thought she was human but got the message, female and black and somehow those who gave it to her were like family, mother and brother, spitting woman at her, somehow they were the only place to return to and this gushing river had already swallowed most of her, the little girls drowned on its indifferent bank, the river hardened like the centre of her. (27)

The image of this woman weeping, trapped by "that river gushed past her feet blocked her flight" (27), instructed not to see herself "the oblique shape of something without expectation" (27), frightens the speaker even as it draws her. The mother's tongue is still, in contrast to Liney's, which spun tales and histories. While Liney turned into a river-fish, this woman negated her own "body composed in doubt" (27). Liney let go of sex and womb; this woman would "come to bend her back, to dissemble, then to stand on anger like a ledge, a tilting house, the crazy curtain blazing at her teeth" (27). The unnamed mother serves as the transverse between Liney and the poet-speaker. Her silence

is the pathway between ancient wisdom and present-day struggle. She is the branch of language that fell silent; Liney is the branch that argues hotly for going home. Mother is the tributary that teems with waste while Liney is the one rumbling to the ocean in a tumult.

The next seven pages of the poem series treat the speaker's life in her adopted home, Toronto, Canada. Impressions of the newly-encountered urban centre commingle with the speaker's fractured image of self "shards, shards, shards" (29), concrete buildings overwhelming her "block my eyesight and send the sky back, back" (28), new language bedeviling her tongue "calling Spadina *Spadeena*" (29 Brand's italics) and the lie of her entrance to the country resting like a needle of fear in her spirit "the son-of-a-bitch know I have labourer mark all over my face" (29). Her memories of home range from the intangible, "something that breaks the heart open," to vividly-remembered nature images, "the red-green threads of a humming bird's twitching back," to the pain of manual labour, "too much cutlass and too much cut foot" (28). She traverses the gap between "nowhere to live" (28) and "this is a place" (29). The city itself appears to the speaker to be in transit, in constant shivering motion, "a gasp of water from a hundred lakes, fierce bright windows screaming with goods" (29) a tenuous transverse between the self she has abandoned and the not-yet-created Toronto self.

The woman-guide who emerges in this section is a friend named Pearl. She shares the speaker's longing for home and together they try to re-create a Caribbean Christmas in a Toronto apartment, complete with rum punch and sweet bread (30). But the speaker

realizes, as they sing songs “we weself never even sing,” and as Pearl coaxes in “a voice no room nowhere could believe was sincere,” that their nostalgia is forced and empty (30), the ache for the not-here tracing an incomplete flight through time and space. The suspended transverse they both extend towards home is vibrating with “a voice half lie and half memory” (30).

Pearl's life plays out for the speaker so that she can see the tragedy of committing wholeheartedly to a nation that makes your every step an agony: “Pearl, working nights, cleaning, Pearl beating books at her age” (30). Pearl's twenty years in Canada contain all the cultural signifiers of a successful life, “a trip to Europe, a condominium, a man she suckled like a baby” (30) and yet she is obliterated in a senseless death in her homeland, as if the pressure of holding the two worlds was too much to bear. The speaker finds rum a poor substitute for the heat of a Caribbean Christmas, and the cold sterility of her life in Toronto just intensifies the fact that her remembrance of “back home,” “the slim red earnest sound of long ago,” has been altered by the ache of placelessness (30). As she admits later, “it's fiction what I remember” (31).

The coldness of the city gradually robs the speaker of language. She is “dumbfounded,” says that “not a single word drops from my lips” (31). She notices “I became more secretive,” thinks of “a hidden verb,” “that once grammar” (31). She becomes like the silent mother by the river: “hush,” “shhh” (31). She is suspended in the transverse, not allowing herself to live fully in the new place, her seeping away of language a symptom of the ebbing of her vitality. She is still in between the old and the

new, knowing that before her immigration she was “waiting so long to live” (31), and now that she is here, her fiction of back home is more attractive. Like so many of Brand’s characters, this one is perpetually deferring life, putting it off until another time, “another place, not here.”

The poem addresses the ugliness of racism, “race conscious landlords and their jim crow flats,” “the work nobody else wants to do” (31), “the smell of an office full of hatred each morning” (32), and links it to other foreign burdens like ice and snow, “reading biology,” “insults” and “new english” (32). The suspension of the immigrant between the “cold darkness” (32) of the here and the fiction of the not-here erodes her feeling of connection to her ancestral sisters. The pressure of paradox and ambiguity, “this place so full of your absence” (33), and the invisibility of the immigrant etch an impression of non-existence: “It is like saying you are dead” (33). The speaker is relieved to “escape” (32) her femininity at a Post Office job; she is disgusted that to walk in public “your breasts need armour” (33). She reflects on the courage it takes for two women to “assume their presence” and drink beer on the beach at night (33).

Perhaps she is thinking of Liney, getting rid of sex and womb and transforming into a fish-goddess, when she muses, “In another place, not here, a woman might ...” (33). Recognizing that she had desired rebirth in a new land, now knowing that her desire has been thwarted, the speaker imagines “the passage on that six hour flight to ourselves is wide and like another world” (33). This passage is the arc of the transverse between the here and the not-here, the trajectory of the plane between continents, another world,

never ending. Within this passage, she is still contained, “never born, or born and stilled ... hush” (33).

In the final part of the poem-series, the speaker completes the thought she started when she said, “in another place not here, a woman might...” (33). She says now, “in another place, not here, a woman might touch something between beauty and nowhere, back there and here” (34), recalling the paradox she used to embody “here” at the beginning of the poem: “here was beauty and here was nowhere” (22). “A woman might touch something between”: she combines the here and the not-here in an offering of the in-between space. But this conditional gesture is then discounted, “the hard gossip of race” (34) making it impossible. Despite and because of the speaker’s efforts to be like her mother, “trembling” and silent (“I have tried ... to sit peacefully”), she has journeyed back to the wisdom of the elder woman, Liney. She says, “I have tried to write this thing calmly even as its lines burn to a close” (34).

She takes the branch of the river that rumbles to the ocean in a tumult. As flawed and as contradictory as language is, the speaker opts to re-claim it and embrace its paradoxes: “in drunkenness and weeping, told as a woman without matches and tinder, not in words and in words and in words learned by heart, told in secret and not in secret, and listen, does not burn out or waste and is plenty and pitiless and loves” (34). “No language is neutral” (22, 23) because “what I say in any language is told in faultless knowledge of skin” (34). Any language the speaker uses carries the imprint of injustice



and cruelty. But she chooses to follow the branch of language that argues hotly, not for home, but for social change.

Another genre: fiction

Brand decided to try living in another place, not here, metaphorically, when she jumped to a new genre in *In Another Place, Not Here*, her 1996 novel. Ashante Infantry, who reviewed it for *The Toronto Star*, remarks that “Dionne Brand’s debut novel is the poem that just kept on going” (F6). This reviewer calls *In Another Place, Not Here* a “sensuous, lyrical work of fiction in the tradition of one of her favourite authors: Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison” (F6).

Critic Lorna Jackson writes that “Her first novel will please those intrigued with Brand’s politically mediated, emotional writing. As much poem as prose narrative, as much romance as exposé of Toronto’s dirty try at multiculturalism, *In Another Place, Not Here* flashes with Brand’s social acumen and lyricism” (26). Rather than concurring with her comparison to Toni Morrison (Knopf apparently dubbed Brand as Canada’s young Toni Morrison), Jackson says that Brand has more in common with Canadian writers like Gail Scott and Michael Ondaatje: “As those writers do, Brand constructs an expressionistic view of selfhood” (26).

Donna Nurse compares Brand to Alice Walker, saying *In Another Place, Not Here* “has echoes of works by Brand’s African-American literary peers, particularly Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” (54). Nurse also notes the commonalities between the novel’s Verlia and Brand herself (both are Caribbean-born, move to Sudbury, then later

to Toronto where they become politically-active). Nurse praises Brand's "rendering of the island's slave history" as "sublimely evocative," saying "she transforms island patois into a kind of heroic poetry" (54). She finds the parts of the novel dealing with Toronto "pedestrian," criticizing Brand's aptitude for prose, saying it comes "an uneasy second" to poetry, her "first language" (54).

"To live in another place, is to begin to inhabit the ambiguous territories that draw us out of our actual being towards a way of becoming in which no one history or identity is immune from a new and diverse 'worlding of the world'" (Chambers 59). *In Another Place, Not Here* is a novel about the politics of dislocation and displacement. "So many of us are nearly always preoccupied with elsewhere and very seldom with here" (Walcott ix). Two women struggle to see a space for themselves in a world that seems forever collapsing in on them. Jackson says the novel is about two women who "do their nomadic dance of immigration, desire and death" (26). At different times, both find that their Caribbean "home" is not a place for them. Both find, at different times, that Toronto, Canada, is also not the place for them. "What these two women's stories allow us to see is the ways in which their existence redraws the boundaries of Toronto, Ontario and Canada" (Walcott 41). Constantly traversing the distance between the two worlds, they exist in the otherness of the transverse itself, neither here nor there, in-between, situated cross-wise between the two, belonging to neither. Davies writes:

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the re-writing of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or

the longing for home become motivating factors in this re-writing. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it. Still home is contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation. (Davies "Writing Home" 113)

Place emerges as a fluctuating category that inscribes and challenges the mental and physical hardships of existence. Poverty and excruciatingly intense labour in the Caribbean are continually juxtaposed to alienation and persecution in Canada. Further, people indigenous to regions such as the Caribbean were alienated from the land by colonial rule. Elizete's back-breaking labour in Grenada is metonymic for the way that colonized populations were forced to extract from their home-soil whatever goods were deemed export commodities by their colonizers:

Alienation of large segments of the population from the land or their access to land under highly exploitive conditions, degradation of forests and soils, the resulting pressure on resources, and the rapid growth of urban slums, all testify to the impoverishment experienced by the majority of the Third World's people during the colonial period. ... While large numbers of both women and men were impoverished by these processes, women tended to suffer more. (Sen and Grown 30)

Sen and Grown explain, "When private property in land was introduced, for example, women more often than men lost traditional land use-rights. It was women's labour that tended to be unpaid and ill-specified under systems of tenancy and debt peonage. When

traditional manufactures decayed, it was often female employment and incomes that were affected most, as for example in food processing. Women were often left with meagre resources to feed and care for children, the aged, and the infirm when men migrated or were conscripted into forced labour by the colonialists" (30-1). "[M]ost Third World countries have retained many of the dominant features of the colonial era" (32).

Walcott quotes George Elliot Clarke who maintains that " 'exiles and refugees' (7) are the primary source for black Canadian literature" (40). The place of the theoretical is measured against revolutionary action for Verlia; the two places are ultimately irreconcilable. None of the places visited by the characters are "here." " Here is not a word with meaning when it can spring legs, vault time, take you ..." (*LAPNT* 199). "Not here. Here. There is no way of marking ..." (198). Just like the passengers waiting to board the plane flying to the West Indies in Brand's short story "Sketches in transit ... going home," Verlia and Elizete are "half here and half there" (*SS* 133).

Rinaldo Walcott writes,

Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*, a complexly woven tale of space, language, identity and place, is uncharacteristic in terms of recent (Caribbean?) black Canadian literature. Brand's refusal to construct a narrative of the easy nostalgia that has come to mark much immigrant writing is notable. *In Another Place* puts an end to, or at least signals the demise of such cultural representations and (literary) politics. (38)

The novel enacts, as Brand's poetry does, a searching that includes a traversing of spaces, individual, national, cultural, geographical, ideological and political. It reconfigures identity as performative process. Lorna Jackson says that in the novel "identity — national, sexual — involves an imprecation of who we've loved, where we've lived and how we are scorned and scarred" (26). Brand talks about *In Another Place, Not Here* as she was writing it:

I had this idea for this novel about a woman living underground in this city and I couldn't figure out how I was going to write it — whether it was going to be a long poem about identities and changes and about moving to a country and a place and a city like this and then to a street or another area in the city like this and having to keep changing identities. ("In the company" 373).

The characters create a space between them, in love, that is bearable. That space becomes familiar and in this way resembles an ideal of "home." Brand writes in a story titled "Bathurst": "Home is the first place you look for even if you are running from it, you are nevertheless always running toward it, not the same spot but a spot you're sure that you'll know" (*Bread Out of Stone* 67). Home is the closest the characters can get to the imagined, wished-for place that is always exceeding their grasp. Walcott writes: "*In Another Place* is Brand's lyrical portrayal of the ways in which identity, place, belonging and the politics of the self and collectivity are lived out and actualized in language" (47).

The transverse that exists in the love relationship is fluctuating, shimmering, thriving in the instability of the in-between-space. Walcott suggests that Brand's language in the novel occupies the space of the in-between (41). And the selves of the lovers are no more fixed than the transverse itself, their identities construed as each new situation warrants. Verlia's inability to accept the elsewhere-ness inhering in her identity proves fatal. The effect of Verlia's love makes it impossible for Elizete to accept her rootedness to home. The transverse that is catalyzed by Verlia's yearning finds a place of landing, at the bottom of the cliff. Elizete discovers a longing for elsewhere in the vacancy left by Verlia's death, and her transverse is one that is never completed. While Verlia can be seen as a victim of idealism and displacement, Elizete's journey to another continent is the beginning of her suspended existence between the here and the not-here. Seeking traces of Verlia's former life in Toronto lands Elizete in a city which ultimately renders her placeless as well.

Elizete, however, recreates another love-space, traversing the distance between herself and her desire for Abena. Elizete worries, "Will she become one of those women standing at Bathurst and Bloor, looking into the window of some store, plastic bags in her hand, looking into the window but not looking, forgetting that she is looking into a window because she is seeing some other place" (197-8). She transforms her provisional emptiness into a site of multiple migrations, salvaging a meagre sliver of happiness in the end.

In a way, her redemption depends on Verlia's flying into nothingness over the edge of a cavern. What was not enough for Verlia in Abena is more than enough for Elizete; and what Abena finds in Elizete is a space in which to open her wounds and cleanse them. What begins as the story of how Verlia's yearning for the not-here brings about the relationship between Verlia and Elizete, ends up as the story of the dissolving subject and how it is manifested in the desire of the never-fulfilled. The lovers, Elizete and Abena, find each other in "another place, not here."

On the whole, Brand's characters are marked by a kind of lostness that persists in disheveling the lines between self and identity. Geographic place emerges as one of the most powerful, yet also the most unstable, determinants that condition one's sense of identity. The possibilities of being no one and anyone at the same time frighten and unsettle characters like Elizete who claims: "If you live in this city, nobody knows anybody so you could be anybody. If you lived here no one would stare into your face and say that you were somebody's child or look for intention" (66).

The women in Brand's work yearn for a place that will free them, but finding everywhere forces that seek to dominate them, they learn the survival techniques that were once used by their ancestors in slavery. They turn to sign systems they can manipulate to assemble appropriate identities. Language becomes a medium for subversion. At the same time, language continually falls short. As does the speaker in "October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983," many of Brand's characters find that the language they need simply does not exist and it seems that the circumstances they find themselves in constantly deny

language. For example, Elizete, in Toronto, says: "This is how she would come to know a place but somehow this place resisted knowing. When she tried calling it something; the words would not come. ... She would not come to know this place no matter how much she walked it, no matter if she set herself to knowing, she could not size it up. It resisted knowing, the words would not come" (69).

Betrayed by the social institutions that negate their colour and their sex, these women characters look to other women, and to dead female relatives for wisdom and strength. Elizete finds Verlia's old lover who tells her, "Go home, this is not a place for us" (109); "Go home, it's not a place for us" (110). Elizete starts to panic, thinking: "Go home. And really no country will do. Not any now on the face of the earth when she thought about it. Nothing existed that she could live in" (110). Her place is nowhere. "She had a permanent buzz in her head, nowhere was happy or the right place, she was always waiting to live ..." (131).

Unwilling to accept injustice in both the worlds they long for, the women who survive successfully are those who work to subvert meaning-making systems and enact social change in these worlds. Language thus transformed into political organizing becomes an ally. Language has been a powerful tool for Brand's own activism. The black working women that Brand interviewed for her collection, *No Burden to Carry*, have manipulated language to see themselves in the "here" of their tumultuous lives. Women such as the speaker in "No Language is Neutral," and the speaker in the epigrams, Ayo in "Sketches in transit ... going home," Abena in *In Another Place, Not Here*, the poet-



speaker in “October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1983,” are women who have learned to deal with their elsewhere-ness by resisting the attraction of the transverse that suspends and denies their existence. They have deployed the insidious feeling of lack that afflicts the newcomer to make a space for pleasure and self-love within the shifting limits of the gaps in the text that makes up their lives.

Brand’s texts feature the unfinished or dissolving subject in the act of putting together the markers of identity that will take them through another day. The unofficial existence of illegal immigrants in an urban centre like Toronto is an apt model of the survival techniques that Brand’s unseen heroines utilize. Changing names, trades, and addresses as deftly as changing clothes, Elizete and others like her manage to circumvent the officially-sanctioned routes to resident-status. Finding ways to exist in the gaps and spaces where government officials will not think to look, illegals in Canada make strategic use of racist blindnesses. In the same way, Brand’s writing takes advantages of gaps that are left unattended. She says

You know we play the stereotype — it would be so much trouble to play our real selves. We’d really have to mow down a bunch of white people to play our real selves. We’d have to go to war with white people to be our real selves, so we fit into the little corners and spaces they allow us. (“In the company” 374)

## “The beauty of deferral”: the dissolving subject in Gail Scott’s writing

“She writes. The better to see herself. Identity needs appearances. Storybook surfaces. So tell a story. Narrate a little order in the decadence. The holes show. Never mind. Under the surface the fragments. But who can speak of that?” (Scott “A Story Between Two Chairs” *Spaces Like Stairs* 61)

“[T]he *chora* ... is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm” (Kristeva “Revolution in Poetic Language” 94).

“Surely the assertion of the self has to start with language. But what if the surfacing unconscious finds void instead of code?” (Scott “Red Tin + White Tulle” *Spaces Like Stairs* 17).

“Prescriptive directives have no place in our trajectory towards the uncanny edge of language” (Scott “A Story Between Two Chairs” *Spaces Like Stairs* 62).

“The question is, is it possible to create Paradise in this Strangeness?” (*Heroine* 183)

“Maybe it is possible to have a set of female (non-patriarchal) standards to judge the world by” (*Heroine* 141).

Desire for sexual, political and social autonomy initiates movement through textual space in the writing of Gail Scott. Set against a background of distorted and fragmented linguistic material, Scott’s characters struggle to fashion identities that furnish them with sexual agency and access to language practise. Blood, womb and fertility imagery is counterpointed by images of vacancy such as the dank interior of rooms and the hole to emphasize the presencing of the “*genotext*” and highlight the cultural determinations of gender through creative expression. Scott’s texts reveal the presencing of woman as dissolving subject, or “subject-in-process,” through the manifestation of what Julia Kristeva has coined the “*genotext*,” and the borrowing of French feminist strategies to enact an interrogation of the culturally-determined dictates of identity construction.

All Scott’s women characters, caricatures of brides, silhouetted against the darkness of their own lives, crave union with an other. This craving works in tandem

with the exposition of the texts' "semiotic disposition" (also a Kristevan term), and creates the desire that propels Scott's women characters ("there's such a hole to fill" [*Spaces Like Stairs* 79]). They are stark pristine dolls standing woodenly in front of a backdrop of men's suits, the dark trope for the toxic social norms thrust on them virtually from birth: "*Le mariage est une chose humiliante pour une femme*" (*Main Brides* 52). Desire for union is played out in the text alongside desire for autonomy and the complex interaction of these desires is often manifested in self-destructive ways; Bina Freiwald explains that the mother-foetus union "becomes 'the tyranny of intimacy' for the individuated self" (Freiwald 68). As the pre-teen narrator in "Climbing the Oak" and the tub-languishing G.S. in *Heroine* learn, the sexual economy produced by Western culture makes a replication of such a union impossible. G.S.'s friend Marie warns, "En amour, il nous faut éviter la fusion" (21). Freiwald speculates "what we seek in freedom is the ecstasy of impossible love: 'the illusion of perfect fusion'" (Freiwald 68). In Scott's writing, the link between language, the deferral of meaning, and woman's sexuality is crucial to the playing out of tensions that characterize woman's struggle to discover and sustain identity strategies in the symbolic world.

I am borrowing the terms "*genotext*" and "*semiotic disposition*" to draw directly on the work of Kristeva and hope to show how her "*semanalysis*" elucidates Scott's texts. Toril Moi gives a good synopsis in the "Introduction" to her *Kristeva Reader*:

Kristeva transforms Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic order into a distinction between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*. The interaction between these two terms (which, it must be stressed, are processes, not static entities) then constitutes the signifying process. The

semiotic is linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes, the basic pulsions of which Kristeva sees as predominantly anal and oral, and as simultaneously dichotomous (life/ death, expulsion/ introjection) and heterogeneous. The endless flow of pulsions is gathered up in the *chora* (from the Greek word for enclosed space, womb). Kristeva appropriates and redefines this Platonic concept and concludes that the *chora* is neither a sign nor a position, but 'an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases ... Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm.'

(Moi "Intro" 12-13, Moi's ellipsis and italics)

Julia Kristeva's "semanalysis of the speaking subject," and the importance of the "*genotext*," is crucial to an understanding of Scott's achievements. For instance, Kristeva's insistence on the retention of a subject is important to Scott's work because it is in the subject position that places of fracture in the symbolic order become possible. The particular experimentation with language that Scott enacts points to the undeniable "*semiotic disposition*" of her writing.

In "The System and the Speaking Subject,"<sup>1</sup> Kristeva critiques structuralism, maintaining that it focuses solely on the static phase of language; she endorses semiotics because it studies language as a discourse enunciated by a speaking subject and she

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<sup>1</sup> Originally appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* (12 October 1973: 1249-52). It was reprinted in Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *The Tell-Tale Sign. A Survey of Semiotics* (Lisse, Netherlands: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1975). Also appears in Toril Moi (ed), *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia Press, 1986): 24-33.

contends that semiotics thereby grasps language's fundamentally heterogeneous nature. However, she does not find semiotics wholly capable as a mode of analysis because it assumes that all things are contained within language. She transmutes it, coining what she calls "semanalysis," which "conceives of meaning not as a sign system but as a *signifying process*" (28). She is interested in a theory of meaning which she says must necessarily be a theory of the speaking subject:

The theory of meaning now stands at a crossroads: either it will remain an attempt at formalizing meaning-systems ... or else it will attune itself to the theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) and go on to attempt to specify the types of operation characteristic of the two sides of this split, thereby exposing them to those forces extraneous to the logic of the systematic. ("The System and the Speaking Subject" 28)

These forces, Kristeva says, can be "bio-physiological processes" (drives) and "social constraints (family structures, modes of production etc.)" (28). In paying attention to those "forces extraneous to the logic of the systematic," one can uncover the *semiotic disposition* of the text and consequently one can identify what falls outside (28). "The release and subsequent articulation of drives as constrained by social code not yet reducible to the language system" is what Kristeva calls the *genotext*; "the signifying system as it presents itself to the phenomenological intuition" is what Kristeva calls the *phenotext* (28). The *semiotic disposition* of a text is the presence of the *genotext* within the *phenotext* (28).

Uncovering the *semiotic disposition* of Scott's texts show her tremendous accomplishment in creating narratives that yoke the regaining of women's sexual power with innovative language practices to construe identity. Scott's writing keeps the *genotext* present in an unrelenting, unparalleled way. The constant pressure of the *genotext* in Scott's work re-creates language in a way that makes the reader aware of the extra-linguistic forces acting on it. Her stories are continually interrupted by elements from the *chora* such as desire and pleasure.

Scott's admiration for Kristeva's work is apparent. She writes:

*Julia Kristeva, for example, invokes a 'post-Freudian rationality' – two stages or levels of text to take into account the conscious and the unconscious – to write her essays. This requirement is not a pose, but an imposition, which, I think, has to do with the link of the unconscious in women's writing to the repressed (female) body. It indicates, therefore, a necessary disturbance of the rational surface of what is usually considered a 'theoretical' text. ("Shaping a Vehicle For Her Use" Spaces Like Stairs 66, her italics).*

Scott writes this "necessary disturbance" into her own texts. The *genotext* imposes itself on narrative, allowing the "repressed female body" to surface. "Bio-physiological processes" from the *genotext* signal drives and volitions that link sexual pleasure, desire and what Kristeva calls "pulsions" to the textual creation of self. Thus, the *semiotic disposition* of Scott's writing reclaims the lost pre-linguistic world and articulates it intermittently in the other, more rational, layer of meaning-, and knowledge-production in narrative.

I spoke about the metaphoric distance inhering in language as a sign system in my chapter on Joy Kogawa. Kristeva says that this “double articulation (signifier/signified; ... stands in an arbitrary relation to the referent; and that all social functioning is marked by the split between referent and symbolic and by the shift from signifier to signified coextensive with it” (“The System and the Speaking Subject” 25). This distance and the “shift” that happens in the “in-between” space provide the sites where Scott writes in enunciations of desire. Kristeva tells us, “identifying the semiotic disposition means in fact identifying the shift in the speaking subject, his [sic] capacity for renewing the order in which he is inescapably caught up; and that capacity is, for the *subject*, the capacity for enjoyment” (29).

Scott writes, in the Preface to *Spaces Like Stairs*, that imagining the writing subject is the most complex and exciting task of the compilation. She thinks of “not the ‘self’ as a (feminist or otherwise) predetermined figure, but a complex tissue of texts, experiences, evolving in the very act of writing” (*Spaces Like Stairs* 11).

Roland Barthes introduced contemporary readers to this notion of the “tissue of texts” in his influential piece “The Death of the Author”: “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture ... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original” (Barthes 148). Scott draws on Barthes’ idea here to underline the importance of her subject’s solubility. In her notion of the writing self, we also hear echoes of Foucault, who says that, writing “is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears” (“What is an Author?” 116).

The places Scott chooses to speak from must by necessity be unstable, for she endeavours to produce "writing pushing on the edges of the blanks in discourse, the gaps in history, the spaces between the established genres of a male-dominant literary canon" ("Preface" *Spaces Like Stairs* 9-10).

Scott relies on a theory of the speaking subject that sanctions a subject who continually shifts, and is capable of renewing "the order in which he [sic] is inescapably caught up" (Kristeva). She must do so in order to rehabilitate her characters' capacity for pleasure and for autonomous identity construction. As the speaking space shifts<sup>2</sup>, the trajectory of meaning is also disturbed: "the problem is in the space between herself and image she used to watch herself in surrounding world of mirrors" (Scott 110-11). She wants to create a "subject-in-process," or what Kristeva would call a "work-in-progress." "The Kristevan subject is a subject-in-process (*sujet en procès*), but a subject nonetheless" (Moi "Introduction" 13).

Scott's manipulation of subject position includes the enunciation of desire and pleasure, and she retains Kristeva's "concern to safeguard a place for the subject," because that place is "the instance which allows us to account for the various heterogeneous forces (drives, pulsions) which disrupt language" (Moi 16). I realize that the concept of desire is one tangled with myriad connotative baggage. Lorna Irvine explains: " 'Female' desire is, nonetheless, a suspect term, even if used metaphorically.

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<sup>2</sup> See Gayatri Spivak: "No one can quite articulate the space she herself inhabits" ("The Post-colonial Critic." *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. New York: Routledge, 1990:68).



Freud speaks of only one libido, a masculine, aggressive one. Today, feminist theorists are analyzing the dynamics of desire in an effort to determine how it is represented culturally in sexually specific ways" (93). When I use the term desire in this chapter, I am using it mainly in the spirit of Cixous's notion of *jouissance*. She writes: For me, the question asked of woman 'What does she want?' – is a question that woman asks herself, in fact, because she is asked it. It is precisely because there is so little room for her desire in society that, because of not knowing what to do with it, she ends up not knowing where to put it or even if she has it. This question conceals the most immediate and most urgent question: 'How do I pleasure?' What is it – feminine *jouissance* – where does it happen, how does it inscribe itself – on the level of her body or of her unconscious? And then, how does it write itself? ("Sorties" *Newly Born Woman* 82)

Cixous also imparts,

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide: her writing also can go on and on; ... Her rising: is not erection. But diffusion. Not the shaft. The vessel. Let her write! ... Heterogenous, yes, to her joyful benefit, she is erogenous; she is what is erogenous in the heterogenous; she is not attached to herself, the airborne swimmer, the thieving flyer; ... There is a bond between woman's libidinal economy – her *jouissance*, the feminine Imaginary – and her way of self-constituting a subjectivity that splits apart without regret; ... She has never 'held still'; explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance, she takes pleasure in being boundless, outside self, outside same, far from a 'center,' from from any capital of her 'dark continent. (88-91)

Scott wants to create “*a new female subject-in-process through the act of writing – which act was also a process of deconstructing traditional fictions about women*” (“A Story Between Two Chairs” *Spaces Like Stairs* 62, her italics). Kristeva believes that the subject is the locus of change, and therefore she valorizes the arts which utilize a subject position: it is “Kristeva’s belief that art or literature, precisely because it relies on the notion of the subject, is the privileged place of transformation or change” (Moi 17). Similarly, Scott’s writing betrays a fascination with the place of the subject as a space of transgression and subversion.

While some readers may find the overdetermination of a *sujet-en-procès* slightly irritating (for instance, one of Philip Marchand’s comments on *Main Brides* is “welcome to literary theory” [G11]; Margaret Gunning writes, “*Main Brides* leaves a flat taste” [D16]), the achievement of Scott’s writing lies in her successful transmutation of fixed narrative exigencies which condition the nature of the subject.

In this study I will look first at Scott’s book of essays, *Spaces Like Stairs*, in which she lays down much of the theory that launches and elucidates her other writing. I hesitate to classify these texts as fiction and non-fiction because a large part of Scott’s writing crosses genre-boundaries, embodying expertly the phenomenon of fiction-theory that has come to be associated with Quebec writer Nicole Brossard. I will then look at select evidence from all the texts to develop an argument for the presencing of *genotext* within the body of her writing, including her use of memory and the figure of the spiral as well as her notions of negative semantic space and history. The next part of my discussion will start with an examination of her earliest published book, *Spare Parts*, a collection of short fiction. I will treat two of the stories in this collection in some depth,

first, because many of the image patterns and linguistic techniques I identify in it are also found in the later works on a larger scale, and second, because while there is a fairly comprehensive body of critical work on Scott's longer prose works, very little to date has been devoted to the extremely dense and fertile *Spare Parts* collection.

From there I will remark on *Heroine* and *Main Brides*, Scott's recent novels, attending to the use of imagery to advance themes of the loss of women's sexual agency, the space of the female dissolving subject in the text, the role of desire and gender in the context of linguistic-cultural communities, and the use of particular strategies deployed to create spaces for unauthorized feminine voices.

Scott's treatment and subversion of the writing subject is treated thoroughly in her work, *Spaces Like Stairs: Essays by Gail Scott*. Divided into three parts that deal with identity and alterity ("Moi et L'Autre" [Self and Other] 16-55), formal problems ("About Form" 60-111) and feminist concerns ("The Feminist in the Writing" 116-36), Scott's essays scratch through the lines that define fiction and theory, challenging assumptions about the creation of identity and the way that culture shapes meaning in language.

Since its emergence in the 1960s, feminism in Quebec has run alongside its temporal counterpart, the Quebec nationalist movement, sharing some desires and aims. Among these, autonomy from controlling institutions of power such as the Catholic church and the federalism of English Canada is perhaps the greatest. Producers of Quebec feminism, like those producing strains of feminism developing in other parts of North America and in Europe, harnessed the anger incited by the images, myths and roles imposed on women in society to create works that would impel readers to recognize the assumptions and ideologies that underlie social practices that maintain these images,

myths and roles. Many Quebec writers undertook the exploration and examination of language itself to confront and subvert the cultural codes and conventions that require women to remain in disempowered roles in society.

Quebec feminist writing emerged at an exciting juncture when traditional ideas and concepts were being challenged on every front. As Louise Forsyth explains:

During the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, the transformation of European thought by new trends in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and linguistics, the rise of the counter-culture in the United States, and modernity in Quebec all offered a radical challenge to dominant ideologies through their critique of language and power. Such initiatives proved useful to Quebec feminists. ("Errant and Air-born" 11)

The rich intellectual and political climate that fertilized feminism in Quebec was influenced by the burgeoning language-theory-based feminism in France, which acknowledged and extended the work of women writers such as Simone de Beauvoir<sup>3</sup>.

In the 1970s, the intellectual community in France was astounded by groundbreaking advances in psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan and in semiotic theory by Jacques Derrida. Acting on a desire to appropriate and deploy these theories in the service of feminism, writers like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva produced work in which a growing emphasis on sexual difference is seen through the lens of French psychoanalytical and philosophical theory. At a time when British feminism was

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<sup>3</sup> *The Second Sex* was originally published in France by Librairie Gallimard in two volumes as *Le Deuxieme Sexe: I. Les Faits et Les Mythes, II. L'Expérience Vécue* 1949. It was first translated into English and published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1953.

building on the social-materialist work of Virginia Woolf<sup>4</sup> and American feminism was taking its cue from the Civil Rights, Black power and Red power movements, the heavily-theory-based feminism flourishing in France appeared dense and opaque. Anglo-American feminists who were reading Betty Friedan<sup>5</sup>, Mary Ellmann<sup>6</sup>, Kate Millet<sup>7</sup> and Germaine Greer<sup>8</sup> were mystified by major works of Luce Irigaray<sup>9</sup>, Julia Kristeva<sup>10</sup> and Hélène Cixous<sup>11</sup> which were published in the mid-seventies, and contributed significant theories of sexual difference, femininity, language and the body.

Naturally, Quebec readers had access to these texts long before English readers did. While Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron's anthology *New French Feminisms*<sup>12</sup> gave anglophones a taste of these influential writers in the form of a few short collected texts, French feminist major works were not available in translation until well into the nineteen-eighties<sup>13</sup>. It is with little hesitation that I assume Gail Scott was undoubtedly reading these texts in the seventies as well. She stood to be influenced by an

<sup>4</sup> I refer to works such as *A Room of One's Own* published by Hogarth Press, 1929 and *Three Guineas* published by Hogarth Press, 1938.

<sup>5</sup> *The Feminine Mystique*, called "the year's most controversial best-seller" was published by Dell Publishing in New York in 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, published *Thinking About Women* in 1968.

<sup>7</sup> *Sexual Politics* came out in 1970, published by Doubleday in Garden City, N.Y.

<sup>8</sup> *The Female Eunuch* was published in London, England by Paladin in 1971.

<sup>9</sup> *Speculum of the Other Woman (Speculum de l'autre femme)* by Les Editions de Minuit, 1974. *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1974, *About Chinese Women*, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> *The Newly Born Woman*, not translated and published in English until 1986 in Minneapolis by the University of Minnesota Press, was published in France as *La Jeune Née* in 1975 by Union Générale d'Éditions, Paris. Betsy Wing, the translator of *La Jeune Née*, writes in the Glossary of the English edition: "In a few important instances, the vocabulary of *La Jeune Née* reflects the cultural milieu of Paris, 1975. Ten years later, this vocabulary has entered our culture in certain academic settings; however, *La Jeune Née* was written to reach a wide audience. In the U.S., such a wide audience is far less likely to have been nourished on a mixture of structuralism, Marxism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis with a Lacanian bent" (163). "The Laugh of Medusa" was published in *Signs*, summer 1976.

<sup>12</sup> Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* was translated in 1984, Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* in 1985, and Cixous' *the Newly Born Woman* also in 1985.

odd intersection of feminisms, growing up in Ontario but later living in Quebec, speaking and understanding French but being an anglophone by birth, adopting Quebec nationalism as her cause, while still seen to be an outsider by francophone Quebecers.

Rosemary Sullivan calls *Spaces Like Stairs*, "one of the best records we will have of the energy and anguish involved in the feminist debates around writing in the seventies and eighties, striding as it does two cultures, attempting to trace the new journey while resisting dogmatism" (C17). Striding two cultures is a good way of seeing Scott's writing. One critic who reviewed *Main Brides* called his article: "Gail Scott straddles two solitudes."<sup>14</sup> While she attempts to "*fait le bilan... d'une décennie*," as one critic calls it<sup>15</sup>, she straddles two language communities, two cultural milieus, and two genres of writing. The categories of fiction and theory blur under her hand and she partakes in what has come to be known as fiction-theory.

While Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous were revolutionizing feminism across the Atlantic, here in Canada, Quebec bore witness to the innovative writing of Brossard, who was quickly carving out a place for herself as an important feminist writer-theorist. In 1975, at the same time as the major works of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous were being published in France, Brossard was organizing a special issue of *La barre du jour* on "Femme et langage" and giving the opening paper, (titled "La femme et l'écriture,") at the annual international conference of writers organized by the Quebec journal *Liberté*. Aside from her written work, Brossard has worked tirelessly, actively creating the spaces of opportunity where Quebec women's writing can germinate. To name just a few of her

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<sup>14</sup> Ken McGoogan's review entitled "Gail Scott straddles two solitudes: review of *Main Brides*" appears in the *Calgary Herald* May 22 1993: H7.

accomplishments: she co-founded the publication, *La nouvelle barre du jour*; she co-founded Quebec's first feminist newspaper, *Les Têtes de pioches*; she edited a bilingual anthology of Quebec texts, *les stratégies du réel/the story so far*; she co-edited two feminist series of texts, "Réelles" et "Idéelles;" she has also worked extensively in theatre and film in collaboration with other women.<sup>16</sup>

Louise Forsyth writes that Brossard's innovative approach to writing "makes a synthesis of the seemingly dual perspective of lucid reflection on the creative process and emotional involvement in the same creative process" ("Nicole Brossard and the Emergence of Feminist Literary Theory in Quebec since 1970" 212). Forsyth goes on to argue that Nicole Brossard "has established her own literary theories, and she practises them in her writing" (213, Forsyth's italics), even though she has claimed to be neither literary critic nor theorist. It is this new kind of writing (*la nouvelle écriture*) which reflects on itself as it expresses itself creatively that has come to be known as fiction-theory. The transgression that takes place in Brossard's fiction-theory is one that in its movement across boundaries creates new spaces where woman's desire can be inscribed:

Pour moi, ce qui est important actuellement, c'est que des femmes  
 écrivent, conscientes que leurs différence doit s'explorer dans la  
 connaissance d'elles devenues sujets, et plus encore sujets en lutte.  
 Explorer cette différence, c'est nécessairement l'inscrire dans un langage  
 qui questionne le sexisme des langues que nous parlons et écrivons. C'est

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<sup>16</sup> Belzil, Patricia. "Review of *Héroïne*" *Nuit blanche* 35 (mars - mai 1989): 22.

par le fait même, amorcer des lieux nouveaux d'écriture et de lecture, c'est par le fait même, inscrire une littérature de l'inédit. Interdite et inédite. (Brossard "La femme et l'écriture" 13)

In the writing of Gail Scott, the impulse to "amorcer des lieux nouveaux d'écriture" et "inscrire une littérature de l'inédit" is very strong.

Like Brossard, Scott is committed to working with other women. The essays in *Spaces Like Stairs*, Scott says, emerge "from a network of women speaking, writing, thinking" (10). The feminism of the seventies and eighties relied heavily on the forging of communities of women, in consciousness-raising groups, street demonstrations, abortion lobbying, violence-against-women activism, and other communal activities. This collection is a fine testament to the spirit and consciousness of the time; the essays are intimately bound to the particular historical moment in which they were wrought, a moment that is now twenty-odd years in the past. Rosemary Sullivan writes,

*Spaces Like Stairs* is a collection of eight essays which Gail Scott describes as a writer's journey among the literary, theoretical and political signposts of the late seventies and early eighties in Quebec. ... The most powerful element of the collection is the subjective voice of Gail Scott trying to weave her way through the complex theoretical concerns of feminist and postmodern writing without losing a sense of her own identity as a writer. (C17)

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<sup>16</sup> For more information see Louise Forsyth's essay, "Nicole Brossard and the Emergence of Feminist Literary Theory in Quebec since 1970" in *Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing*. Ed. Barbara Godard. 211-21. See also Susan Knutson's essay "Nicole Brossard's Elegant International Play," in *Canada: Theoretical Discourse / Discours théoriques*. Eds. Terry Goldie, Carmen Lambert, Rowland Lorimer. 187-202.



Reading this collection in the late nineteen-nineties brings into dramatic relief the identity-obsessed ethos of the decade in which the essays were produced. As the essays grapple with problems of conflicting identico-determinants, they strain painfully toward the possibility of synthesis in a way that Scott's later writing does not. Where *Spaces Like Stairs* worries about pleasing or at least acknowledging the feminist community that surrounds it, *Main Brides* abandons the impulse to adapt one's expression to pay lip service to political ideals. In "A Feminist at the Carnival," Scott writes:

One would think, also, that feminism would be open to exploring the darker side of being – given the mother's 'place' in it. But, paradoxically, that positive image of the indomitably courageous feminist marching down a straight road towards the sun feels like a block when she, the writer tries to reach, in a poetic gesture, towards the negative (cohabited by the muted mother, murdered species of all kinds, death in particular and in general). Because feminism is almost a wall of meaning... (*Spaces Like Stairs* 128)

Echoing what Forsyth says about how Brossard's writing blends the "dual perspective of lucid reflection on the creative process and emotional involvement in the same creative process" (212), Scott writes that "to write about how we write, then, is to try to understand the processes of our work" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 9). Scott is writing from within the Quebec feminist writing tradition, but at the same time, writing from outside it.

Rosemary Sullivan explains the title: "Scott titles her essays *Spaces Like Stairs* to signal the fact that women have been forced to operate in a negative semantic space, to live the silent gap in patriarchal culture, but that the spaces can be connected, made the

vehicle for movement" (C17). Scott's concept of negative semantic space may be directly transported from Brossard's concept "de l'inédit," the space that is "interdite et inédite." The English abstract of Nicole Brossard's contribution to *Gynocritics : Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing* says, "Women's experience is repressed in non-meaning, in nonsense" (227).

Pour les femmes, l'essentiel est soit inavouable, soit impensable ou encore *interdit de pensée*. Plus l'essentiel est impensable, c'est-à-dire refoulé dans le non-sens (par exemple, qu'une femme aime une autre femme, que dieu soit une femme, etc.), plus les stratégies seront complexes. Des stratégies d'un autre ordre seront aussi élaborées pour confronter la notion d'interdit ou tout simplement *les interdits*. En d'autres termes, disons qu'il existe des stratégies susceptibles d'inventer du sens, de produire du sens, là où c'était vide de sens ou non-sens; d'autres qui servent à transgresser le sens patriarcal. (Brossard "Mouvements et stratégies de l'écriture de fiction" 228-9, Brossard's italics)

Scott writes that she likes "the way an essay (even more than fiction) precisely intersects the period in which it is written" ("Preface" *Spaces Like Stairs* 9). One could argue that her fiction also accomplishes this same intersection since it so closely attends to the details of time and place.<sup>17</sup> The period in which this collection is written is intersected in a way that Scott does not always fully acknowledge. Her unique position as bilingual anglophone in Quebec, drawing on the rich body of Quebec feminist writing that existed to date, gives her a curious perspective. She is intrigued by the notions put

forth by writers like Brossard and France Theoret (to whom she dedicates *Heroïne*). But English cannot accommodate all the transgressions of language that Brossard, for example, endorses. That French nouns are gendered is an important place of contestation. Brossard writes an essay titled “*E muet mutant*” (the mutation of the mute *E*)<sup>18</sup> re-inventing the appearance and sound of the final “e” that marks French feminine nouns. Scott, of course, writing in English cannot capitalize on this strategy, but she does use some of the other suggestions that Brossard delineates.

Nicole Brossard writes:

Toute écriture de fiction est une stratégie pour affronter le réel, pour transformer la réalité, pour en inventer une autre. Parmi les stratégies à long terme, [ ] on constate fréquemment: a) l'ironie, l'humour, la parodie; b) l'intertextualité; c) l'emploi d'une langue étrangère; d) l'anthropomorphisme; e) l'emploi de mythes ou la création de personnages féminins dont les dimensions sont mythiques (exemple: *L' Eugélienne* de Louky Bersianik). (“Mouvements” 228)

The movements Brossard cites include the pendulum, repetitive, spiral, diffuse or suspended, jerky and elliptical movements (227-9). She cites Monique Wittig and Gertrude Stein as good examples of writers who utilize the spiral movement, Hélène Cixous and Marguerite Duras as those who use the diffuse or suspended movement, and Anne-Marie Alonzo as one who uses elliptical movement (228). Scott's writing practise, in *Spaces Like Stairs* and in other works, is a compilation of the *mouvements et stratégies*

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<sup>17</sup> I am thinking particularly of *Heroïne* and *Main Brides*.

<sup>18</sup> *La Barre du jour* Special issue on “femme et langage” 50 (Winter, 1975).

that Brossard identifies such as humour, intertextuality, myths and the use of a foreign language among others.

Scott writes in the introduction to her essay "Virginia and Colette:" "*Being a minority anglophone in a largely French milieu surely throws more light on one's own culture than on the culture of the other*" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 30, Scott's italics). She brings this odd perspective to her writing. Because the minority to which she belongs in Quebec is the linguistic group that wields the most power in Canada, she is viewed by the local francophone majority with a certain amount of distrust and suspicion. In *Main Brides* the central character describes someone who could be Scott herself:

A woman in some ways impossible to grasp. ... Always appearing in ambivalent and parsimonious fragments. As if precariously constructed in both the official (French) and unofficial (English) language. So the English in her at war against the French – and the reverse. Only when confident (self-absorbed) to the point of neutral could the woman synthesize the two. Becoming extraordinary. (136)

Referring to her novel *Heroine*, Scott says that francophone critics cannot understand why an anglophone character would get involved in the separatist movement: "The one thing that everyone notices is that the anglophone in the book doesn't mind at all the idea of Quebec independence. That always brings chuckles or exclamation points" (Scott, quoted in Carey 17).

Scott relies on the workings of memory to render her discourse suggestive of the *chora*:

the unwinding of words, the thinking back ... leading to ... the inexpressible. The inexpressible pain of contradiction. Unless, behind it all somewhere, perhaps in an ocean-crevice of madness, lies the simple undeniable lucidity: 'I see the fish swimming deep in the sea,' says the stoned Mexican skindiver. 'They are beautiful colours. And do you know something? They are kissing.' ("Red Tin + White Tulle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 17)

Scott's use of memory is an archaeology, implying engaged digging rather than passive scanning of remembered events. She writes: "Memory, then, as a reconnaissance operation. A tool for writing, but not as mere description. 'Je n'écris la mémoire, je la travaille,' says a Québécois writer friend" ("Red Tin +White Tulle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 24, emphasis Scott's).

Perhaps she owes her application of memory as archaeology to the work of noted Canadian prairie writer, Robert Kroetsch, who recognized as a boy, listening to the hired men on his father's farm, "the archaeological sites of my own short life" ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" 4). Kroetsch explains, "Archaeology allows the fragmentary nature of the story, against the coerced unity of traditional history. Archaeology allows for discontinuity. It allows for layering. It allows for imaginative speculation" ("Moment of Discovery" 7).

In fact, Scott's heroine echoes a strategy that Kroetsch himself uses in this very essay. On returning repeatedly to re-assess her failed love affair, she frequently uses "twas" or "tis": "Tis October" (13); "Tis nearly November" (33); "Tis a grey day" (50); "Tis March 17" (62); "Twas still November" (115); "Tis only after sex" (125); "Twas a beautiful June day" (150). In "The Moment of the Discovery of America

Continues," Kroetsch restarts the same story with: "Begin," "Beginnings," or "Begin again" followed by a colon, fourteen times (9-11). Possibly as an explanatory note for this repetition, Kroetsch writes: "The tyranny of narrative. It may be, yes, that motion signifies life: but there is also the vast and complicated stillness of living. Do not carry light into the darkness; stand in the dark and learn" (11). "The tyranny of narrative" forces Scott's heroines to begin again. Scott writes: "the trick is to tell a story" (31); "the trick is just this: to *hear* a pub," writes Kroetsch ("Moment of Discovery" 17, his italics).

Kroetsch could be referring to Lydia. She is the main character in *Main Brides*, who sips wine and wonders "if 'reality' comprises what's just gone by in the mind, or what's in the process of unfolding" (*Main Brides* 165). Scott's use of memory may also be owing to the influence of Nicole Brossard's writing which is "intimately related to the realms of the imagination and memory, which she explores with delight" ("Errant and Air-born" Forsyth 13). Scott treats imagination and memory as related processes. Extracting from memory is an archaeology, requiring focus, selection and invention: "But, Lydia (having trouble focusing) returns to her portrait: anecdotal fragments organized but not too rigorously – with a little space around them to open possibilities" (*Main Brides* 167).

Scott's attention to memory as a means of creating one's identity anew and as a preferred method of healing rarely excludes the relationship between mother and child: "Mother and me. Simulated in the same skin. The vicious-circle search for boundaries in the memory-mass of borrowed phrases. Like and dislike. Her warmth. Her (frightened) love" (Scott "RT+WT" *Spaces Like Stairs* 18). Memory of mother, for Scott, is intrinsically tied to language acquisition and patterns of constructing meaning which all

conspire to erase and alienate woman. As H el ene Cixous writes: "The relation to the 'mother,' in terms of intense pleasure and violence, is curtailed no more than the relation to childhood (the child that she was, that she is, that she makes, remakes, undoes, there at the point where, the same, she mothers herself). Text: my body, shot through with streams of song" ("Laugh of the Medusa" 322). Scott's female characters experience the same ambivalence about love and intimacy that Scott associates with the mother-child union: "The emotional matrix is the same: an all-consuming yearning for an other whose rejection and absence both intensify that yearning and make it intolerable, self-crushing" (Freiwald 74).

Freiwald sees the central character of *Heroine* as "a woman desperately seeking to fill the void with a love that will restore the lost maternal touch and affirm her being" (74). In the portraits Lydia creates in *Main Brides* we find the same impulse. The reflective, depressed G.S. is cocooned in her warm erotic envelope of bath water in the Waikiki tourist rooms; the voyeuristic Lydia is insulated in a thick haze of intoxication and endless deferral. The wombs in which Scott encloses her characters are continually ruptured by desire: textual desire, sexual desire, political desire, creative desire, maternal desire and so on.

Brossard wrote in *Libert * that, for her

toute l'histoire de la po sie, du romanesque et de la fiction, est  
essentiellement li e   la recherche du corps. Faire parler ce qui  touffe et  
qui fantasme sous la loi, l'ordre et la hierarchie. Et ceci parle avec toutes  
les distortions possibles: violence, ironie, pornographie, id alisme, folie.  
Car ce qui veut parler, veut en m me temps condamner la loi qui exige son

refoulement. Ce qui est empêché désire, et ce désir écrit, propulsé par la loi même qu'il transgresse. ("La femme et l'écriture" 11)

Scott recovers woman's sexual body by writing desire. Brossard says that historically, "[c]e qui n'est pas permis dans nos sociétés, c'est de faire parler le corps. C'est d'être troublé et de réagir dans et par le corps" (10). She remarks further that "[p]our la femme, écrire consiste à décoller de son corps, à libérer de son propre corps ce qui est efféminé" (11), and she wishes for a new kind of writing that will enact "une exploration du corps linguistique qui traverse *le corps certain* de l'écrivain" (12, her italics). She postulates that "cette forme de narration ne s'exerce pas dans la linéarité" (12). Scott's writing is just this kind of writing.

Brossard wrote the above in 1976; in a collection of essays published in 1987, Louise Forsyth describes Brossard's writing:

Brossard's individual texts, as well as her work as a whole, display a circular structure, a constantly mobile process of revolving around a centre which she designates as the womb, the ardent white centre of her inner self, the source of her vital energy and the force with which she reaches to touch the world. From this centre, matrices unfold in increasing complexity, ramifications occur, and endless openings are produced. The energy of this circular movement, pulsing inward and outward on both sides of the surface of the skin, ensures that the circle is never closed and that, in fact, it is transformed into an endless spiral. The spiral has the double structural principle of constantly extending outward, while rotating with increasing intensity around its own inner self. It is always the product



of a vital, moving process. ("Nicole Brossard and the Emergence of Feminist Literary Theory in Quebec since 1970" 217-18)

Brossard produced the kind of writing she called for in *Liberté* in 1976; so did Scott. While Scott incorporates images of the womb and vagina to recuperate woman's sexual body through text, and employs the spiral to structure her narratives, Brossard's white ardent energy centre that dominates such works as *Mauve Desert* and *Picture Theory* has been transmuted into an unstable, unarticulated space where the potential subject dissolves. In Scott's fiction, womb images such as the bathtub in *Heroine*, the "culvert" (11) and the "egg-shaped horse about to colt" (12) in *Spare Parts*, and the bar-café where Lydia sits in *Main Brides* are constantly undermined by images of rupture and frustration. Broken windows in *Spare Parts* (18, 43), images like the cross stuck in a bleeding loaf of bread (9) in *Heroine*, the murdered body in the park (10), and the armed intruder (79) in *Main Brides* function to disturb the illusion of the seamless union between signifier and signified.

Scott asks, in her essay "A Feminist at the Carnival":

What happens when I start to write from this space of *herself-defined*, knowing this is the only space from which I can write forward? Will my act of writing be too contained within that circle of light where women are significant (i.e. where we have meaning)? Can I explore beyond it and still be 'correct' politically? May I admit, like *The Princess and The Pea*, that despite all those mattress layers of solidarity provided by feminism, I cannot prevent myself from being conscious of a deep internal knot?  
(*Spaces Like Stairs* 126)

Even in her collection of essays, *Spaces Like Stairs*, which could be read as a testimony to the desire to belong to and define a feminist community of which she would be worthy, Scott's own writing betrays the safe cocoon-like joining to which she aspires:

But no sooner had she arrived in that warm cozy place, than she wanted more: she wanted both the legitimizing community, and for that community to cast no moral judgements on the free flow of her desire, of her imagination. For the more radical she was (the more she wished to dangle dangerously on the edge of meaning) the more she, who exists only negatively in the symbolic, needed a frame within which to reinvent herself, *yet spin free*. ("A Feminist at the Carnival" *Spaces Like Stairs* 130-1, Scott's italics)

The spinning motion Scott mentions here evokes the spiral movement I have talked about in other chapters<sup>19</sup>. The moving spiral creates openings in semantic space; these openings traverse space that is not inscribed by the moving spiral itself: "My writing becomes part of a spiral-like movement" ("Virginia and Collette" *Spaces Like Stairs* 40). One of Scott's heroines comments, "my little novel has certain inconsistencies. Given how the heroine's inner time is fractured between light and dark, so she seems to move in circles" (*Heroine* 143-4).

Scott's writing constructs an array of superficial details which frame the shifting *pastiche* of identities deployed by her heroines. The details are mined from memory, imagination, observation and a fascination with structures. "She, who exists only negatively in the symbolic, needed a frame within which to reinvent herself" (Scott) and

so, she arranges superficial minutiae to create the framed space within which she can both participate in identity and elude identity, or "*spin free*." Scott's heroines spin free of their own flimsy constructions of identity, slipping out of their own frames, disappearing constantly beyond the limits produced by conventional assumptions about identity. In this way, they elude the reader's gaze that strives to fix them<sup>20</sup> in the act of meaning-creation.

The contradictory desires of Scott (and her characters) for belonging and autonomy — "she wanted both the legitimizing community, and for that community to cast no moral judgements on the free flow of her desire, of her imagination"— occasion the failure of language practise to account for the complexity of her (their) experience of her (their) own being-in-the-world. "We may use language our whole lives without noticing the distortions" ("Red Tin +White Tulle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 17), Scott writes referring to the male-encoded signifiers in language. In her novels and short fiction, however, she implants "distortions and omissions" ("RT+WT" *Spaces Like Stairs* 17) that draw attention to the creation of and deferral of meaning. As Mary Meigs says of the heroine in *Heroine*, Scott "learns to see through patriarchal language to its self-serving bones; she learns how to take a worn vocabulary and infuse it with her energy" (Meigs 222-3). Discursive strategies that approximate the heterogeneous forces (drives, volitions, pulsions) of the *chora* constantly disrupt syntactic formations and de-create patterns that maintain rigid identity-requirements.

Scott asks: "What would writing which was also a questioning of language do to the shape of a story or novel? What would it do to the reader who would have to circle

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<sup>19</sup> See my chapter on Lee Maracle.

back, to become involved in the process of struggling through a text?" ("Virginia and Collette" *Spaces Like Stairs* 37). The spiral-movement of Scott's characters, like the spiral in Nicole Brossard's "Aerial Vision" (*The Aerial Letter* 116-17), ventures into negative semantic space, transgressing the safety of ideological boundaries, and transmuting the assumed signifying processes of identity. Scott shares Brossard's starting place: "Her starting point is the subjectivity of women as the site of difference: '... they cannot write if they camouflage the essential, that is, that they are women' (p.73). Brossard was one of the first to recognize the importance of writing from such a perspective: 'Ecrire: je suis une femme est plein de conséquences.' " (Forsyth "Errant" 14).

Scott's creation of a text that produces a "multiple-determined subject position" points the way to a reading of the tensions and ambiguities playing out in her fiction. In her essay "Spaces Like Stairs" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 107-11) Scott writes: "watching the mirrors she wondered which one named her new woman amazon abandoned lover mother daddy's girl french english every image had a different way of talking every image had a different way of walking she got so dizzy she had to stop looking" (111). Obviously the way Scott puts together her own identity has some bearing on the way she creates a writing subject: "To be an anglophone in Quebec is to shoulder a history which renders one guilty, which diminishes the self-image of the politically sensitive person, at least as far as her relationship to history is concerned" (Scott "Tale of Two Chairs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 63).

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<sup>20</sup> See my chapter on Joy Kogawa and what P. Merivale has to say about characters living on the edge of the frame.

Scott's heroines create for themselves identities fraught with guilt, self-diminishment and a constant seeking to amend history, renew political striving and place themselves at the matrices of a cause through which they will be seen as worthy. Throughout *Main Brides*, Lydia thoughtfully conceives ways of re-shaping 'History,' imagining one that is "open, floating, like a field of flowers. Instead of rigid, even homicidal—" (*Main Brides* 135). Brossard writes that "[p]our survivre au présent de l'histoire, il ou elle n'a d'autre alternative que de confronter son corps à ce système par un dérèglement de la convention linguistique" ("La femme et l'écriture" 12). The woman in the bath in *Heroine* replays scenes from her past, digging at the impulses, feelings and rationale behind behaviour, ceaselessly apologizing to her feminist self, her heterosexual self, her wounded self, her moral self and her political self. G.S declares: "I'm no journalist, ... I have a different view of history" (56).

The writings in *Spaces Like Stairs* trace a struggle to come to terms with identity determinants that simultaneously exclude and enclose. Much of Scott's writing is driven by the ways her heroines shoulder their personal histories and the official History of the culture. The heroine of *Heroine* says, "As a feminist, I shouldn't admit it. But my independence problems were (briefly, for 76 was a good year) on another level" (90); she speaks of "life before feminism" (141), and snaps about a peer: "Where's her sense of feminist duty?" (158). Their journeying through alternate constructions of identity plays out the difference between shouldering history that is accepted as already-written ("a history which renders one guilty") and re-conceiving History as a *pastiche* of codes as contingent, taste-determined and functional as the images the heroines create and present of themselves.

Exploring linguistic and cultural space between two or more ways of thinking in a way that does not insist on enclosing that space – that is to say, affirming the negativity of the space – acknowledges that the frontiers bordering that space are ragged and unstable: “[Scott’s] space-off is fiction-theory, a method that explores gaps ... without attempting to close them; it is thus the antithesis of a bridge” (Freiwald 65). Scott’s writing celebrates the distance between signifier and signified inherent in language, offering an alternative to what she calls the ‘fathertongue’ of societal institutions, probing the gap with linguistic deviations.

We women have two ways of speaking. The first begins in our mother’s womb as we listen to the rhythms of her body. ... [W]e continue to develop this largely oral tongue in our ongoing relationship and identification with her. ... But at the same time we are developing another relationship to the ‘fathertongue’ of education, the media, the law – all patriarchal institutions. Consequently, we end up with a split relationship to language: there is the undernurtured woman’s voice, badly heard outside in what my mother called a ‘man’s world,’ and the other language, the one we try to speak in order to bridge the gap. (Scott “Shaping a Vehicle For Her Use” *Spaces Like Stairs* 67)

Scott’s writing fractures narrative conventions, such as the unity of the subject, to disrupt hegemonic language structures and suggest the presence of the *genotext*, approximating the multiplicitous renderings of drives and volitions that originate in what Kristeva calls the semiotic. In the theory of Brossard, the *genotext* points towards a lesbian Utopia, where language has been transfigured to actualize a feminine imaginary.

Suggestions of this utopia occur in various of Brossard's books of poetry. For example, in *Lovers*, (in French: *Amantes*):

an intuition of reciprocal knowledge  
 women with curves of fire and eiderdown  
 fresh-skinned – essential surface  
*you float within my page* she said  
 and the four dimensional woman is inscribed  
 in the space between the moon and (fire belt)  
 of the discovery and combats that the echo  
 you persevere, fervour flaming (61)

Also:

time is measured here in waters  
 into vessels, in harmony  
 the precision of graffiti in our eyes  
 fugitives ( here) the writings  
 in THE BARBIZON HOTEL FOR WOMEN  
 nascent figures within the wheel  
 cyclical tenderness converging (62)

And:

*space (má)*  
 among all ages, versatile  
 wrinkles of the unexpected woman  
 when midnight and the elevator  
 in us rises the fluidity  
 our feet placed on the worn out carpets  
 here the girls of the Barbizon  
 in the narrow beds of America  
 have invented with their lips  
 a vital form of power  
 to stretch out side by side  
 without parallel and: fusion (63)

i succumbed to the impression and instantaneous  
 both of us —— life mobilizes itself  
 with the fine ardour of women showing forth  
 their vertigo and those two  
 dazzled *sur terre* turning seized suddenly

in the most ritual amorous slowness ex—  
 temptation with all gravity  
 of ecstasy, these two were so  
 enraptured celebrating the daily  
 emergence of temptation (73 Italics and capitalization are Brossard's.)

In *Surfaces of Sense* (in French *Le sens apparent*):

the entire skin the fictional skin the epidermis  
 deep in her eyes lies the very question of everyday living  
 the impression that the lower belly in generating signs  
 saliva that substance directly secreted by the exposed body  
 like a page full of potentialities  
 the entire skin the motions: the appetite waiting intently  
 inside the unpredictable bodies free  
 fictional, in the prosaic city  
 the epidermis and yielding, crazed with desire: the imaginary (31)

Scott's writing constantly points away from itself, deferring endlessly, dismantling its own structures, to suggest a non-linguistic space, that is, while not exactly a Utopia, a projection of woman's sexual desire and agency. Paradoxically, she relies on language-focused writing to achieve this, maintaining that "writing focused on language (where words, syntax, are the real material of writing, not necessarily subjugated to genre requirements such as plot) is so important for feminists" ("*Red Tin + White Tulle*" *Spaces Like Stairs* 24).

Scott pressures her writing to operate in what she calls "negative semantic space,"<sup>21</sup> or, that which is not inscribed with, nor identified by, discursive meanings of the dominant culture. In the essay "*Spaces Like Stairs*," in her 1989 critical collection of the same name, Scott writes "the problem is in the space" ("*Spaces Like Stairs*" *Spaces Like Stairs* 107, 109, 110, 111). She wonders, "from what space can we best define our new



culture is it in the space beyond the text" (107) and "what space might our discursive writing occupy" (108)? As in the texts of the other writers I have treated in this work, space becomes a major emblem of transformation. Her writing strives to move into the realm of non-sense that defies received wisdom ("Women's experience is repressed in non-meaning, in nonsense" [Brossard 227]).

She posits the unimaginable: a space for language outside the symbolic order. This space, unfilled by the codes of the symbolic, is perhaps close to the imaginary that Brossard projects for the "interdite et inédite." Judith Butler writes: "The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms" ("On Linguistic Vulnerability" 41). Scott's strategies for uncovering this space include a tenacious striving to draw attention to the *semiotic disposition* of her writing: "the problem is in the space between the conscious and the unconscious" (107). Her texts do not presume to erase gender codes, but rather, they use the distance between signifier and signified to defer meaning, transgress and subvert cultural norms, "pushing on the edges of the blanks in discourse."<sup>22</sup> By employing grotesque and absurd cartoons of stereotypes<sup>23</sup>, Scott

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<sup>21</sup> "It seems so clear that, as women, we have been forced to operate in language from a negative semantic space, reduced or missing from the range of positive symbols" (Scott "Red Tin + White Tulle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 26).

<sup>22</sup> "When second-wave feminists first began to explore the problems of women in patriarchy, I often heard it said that the English language was neutral, requiring only minor changes to make it adequate for our use. But as we struggled to express ourselves in language, as well as in the new lives we were forging for ourselves, there were problems. These problems we also experienced when working with men or talking to the media: we found ourselves constantly monitoring our language to be 'clear.' All this is not surprising when one remembers that nineteenth-century grammarians decreed that in language the male gender is more comprehensive. Thus, the precedence of he and man (man shall not live by bread alone) over woman, making much of language androcentric." ("Red Tin + White Tulle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 22).

disarms the social rules that govern the expression of signifiers like gender: “maybe the problem is in the space between male and female reading” (108).

Scott’s writing, “operating on the limits of language” (“Shaping a Vehicle For Her Use” *Spaces Like Stairs* 73), fractures grammatical constructs as it strives to unseat the locus of the subject and gesture towards a place prior to the moment at which language begins to structure one’s world. Scott admits that one of her obsessions is “delving beneath the racket of patriarchal laws of economics, systems, as reflected in the surface of language” (“Red Tin +White Tulle” *Spaces Like Stairs* 22). Scott’s writing strains to make visible the gulf between signifier and signified where meaning collapses; her writing celebrates this space, marking the deferral of and transgression of boundaries as woman’s strategies to reclaim her right to sexual desire: “the more one transgresses, the more one distances from law and order” (“Shaping a Vehicle For Her Use” *Spaces Like Stairs* 73). While it is impossible to move *away* completely from law and order, since the world is irrevocably conditioned by the symbolic, Scott’s writings do gesture towards a re-conception of order that is flexible and nuanced.

Scott writes of how she discovered that the *genotext* was missing from conventional writing:

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<sup>23</sup> In my use of the word “stereotype” here, and in other instances in this chapter, I am thinking of the definition by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*: “The stereotype is the word repeated without any magic, any enthusiasm, as though it were natural, as though by some miracle this recurring word were adequate on each occasion for different reasons, as though to imitate could no longer be sensed as an imitation: an unconstrained word that claims consistency and is unaware of its own insistence;” “The distrust of the stereotype (linked to the bliss of the new word or the untenable discourse) is a principle of absolute instability which respects nothing ( no content, no choice). Nausea occurs whenever the liaison of two important words *follows of itself*. And when something follows of itself, I abandon it: that is bliss” (42-3, Barthes’ italics).

I wrote stories that were mocking convex surfaces of what I perceived the 'real' to be. The spaces left by the sparseness of the writing pointing, perhaps, to the gaps in culture where the feminine should be. While the spaces between the fragments that comprised the text emphasized the presence of voice where there had been woman's silence in the past.

("Shaping a Vehicle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 73)

In her subsequent writing, she strove to write in the "spaces between the fragments," making audible what she perceived as "woman's silence in the past." Lorna Irvine writes:

Various writers use gaps in narrative coherence to point to female repression, or emphasize beginnings while demoting endings, or retell myths so that the organization and emphasis are altered. Women writers also question a dominant bias, both in the narratives and in the critical theory that accompanies them, by positing a desiring female subject, conscious of her gender, who acts in response to her own needs.

("Women's Desire" 93)

Scott both creates new female myths, and fills in gaps with woman's sexual agency and desire, but she resists creating a subject *per se*. She explores fractures in language to find "the presence of voice" that eclipses woman's silence required by official history and received cultural norms. By making visible (or audible) the *genotext*, Scott's writings do not so much reach back for origins as they reach forward for the unspoken, "l'interdite et inédite," using allusions to holes and vessels to reflect the unfilled space of the unspoken: "In the cupboard there's a hole where the tile's off. It's a wonder a rat hasn't come through" (*Heroine* 180).

The presencing of the *genotext* can be seen as a renewal of voice: "Our nostalgia for a 'whole' self is less a nostalgia for origins than it is for the parts of our female memory that have been violently blanked out by patriarchy" ("Shaping a Vehicle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 74). The *genotext* is the portion of the text that is retained from an unfractured state of being when the child is in the womb: "the genotext ... organizes a space in which the subject is not yet a split unity that will become blurred, giving rise to the symbolic" (Kristeva "Revolution in Poetic Language" 121, her italics). The *genotext* is primarily made up of energy transfers; drives and pulsions are articulated by the *chora*<sup>24</sup> non-linguistically. Therefore much of the writing practise that suggests it is also non-linguistic although Leon Roudiez says that the *genotext*<sup>25</sup> "may be detected by means of certain aspects or elements of language, even though it is not linguistic per se" ("Introduction" *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* 7).

Once the subject has entered into the symbolic order, the *chora* will be more or less successfully repressed and can be perceived only as pulsional pressure on or within symbolic language: as contradictions,

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<sup>24</sup> Word used by Plato in *The Symposium*, (*khore*) and adopted by Julia Kristeva to describe the articulation of the drives in this pre-linguistic state: "Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body – always already involved in a semiotic process – by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full as it is regulated" (italics Kristeva's) (Kristeva "Revolution in Poetic Language" *The Kristeva Reader* Ed. Toril Moi 93).

<sup>25</sup> Word coined by Kristeva to describe that portion of the text which is accounted for by the *chora*: "One might see the release and subsequent articulation of the drives as constrained by the social code yet not reducible to the language system as a *genotext*" ("System and the Speaking Subject" 28); "the genotext is thus the only transfer of drive energies that organizes a space in which the subject is not yet a split unity that will become blurred, giving rise to the symbolic" ("Revolution in Poetic Language" 121); "even though it can be seen in language, the genotext is not linguistic. ... It is, rather, a *process*, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral ... and non-signifying" ("Revolution in Poetic Language" 121); "the genotext can thus be seen as language's underlying foundation" ("Revolution in Poetic Language" 121). Emphasis Kristeva's.

meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences. The chora, then, is a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language. It constitutes the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory (Moi "Introduction" 13).

Judith Butler writes: "The multiple drives that characterize the semiotic constitute a prediscursive libidinal economy which occasionally makes itself known in language, but which maintains an ontological status prior to language itself" ("Subversive Bodily Acts" 80). The *genotext* is indicated by a *semiotic disposition*, which can be detected through such articulatory effects as deviations from grammar, movement towards drive-governed bases of sound-production, "the overdetermination of a lexeme by multiple meanings which it does not carry in ordinary usage but which accrue to it as a result of its occurrence in other texts" (28), "syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions, indefinite embeddings" and "the replacement of the relationship between the protagonists of any enunciation as they function in a locutory act ... by a system of relations based on fantasy" (Kristeva "The System and the Speaking Subject" 28-9). It is not surprising to find this list of articulatory effects is similar to the list compiled by Brossard previously referred to, called "Movements and Strategies."

In the opening of her essay "Red Tin + White Tulle," Scott writes: "Distortions and omissions. Surely the assertion of the inner self has to start with language" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 17). Scott's literary ambitions respond to Kristeva's project, as Moi describes it in the introduction to her text, *The Kristeva Reader*: "her consistent and fundamental project [:] the desire to produce a discourse which always confronts the *impasse* of

language (as at once subject to and subversive of the rule of the Law), a discourse which in a final aporetic move dares to think language against itself" (Moi "Intro" 10). Scott choreographs strategies and techniques in language practise to confront assumptions about the relationship between culture, identity and gender. Scott's work assembles a compilation of details to create impressions of identity that recover woman's sexual power, question cultural norms and repeatedly invite the reader to deflect common meaning-making practises in order to allow the text to "inscrire une littérature de l'inédit" (Brossard "La femme et l'écriture" 13).

In *Main Brides*, the relationship between Lydia, the "focalizing" character, and her locutory functions with all the other characters is replaced by a system of relations based on fantasy. As Jennifer Henderson explains in her article "Femme(s) Focale(s): Gail Scott's *Main Brides* and the Post-Identity Narrative," *Main Brides* "displaces the narrative quest(ion) for / of identity" (93). By enlisting a *fabula* and figuring identity as a shifting *pastiche* of surface details, *Main Brides* "reverses the traditional location of value in the depth / surface opposition" (93); "Truth as depth, as expressive inner essence, is reformulated as a fantasy spun from a reading of surfaces" (93). Scott destabilizes associations between identity and fixity, expressing identity in ways that suggest continual renewal. Henderson writes: "Scott's first move is to refuse to represent a transcendental subject that would serve as source of meaning;" "in *Main Brides* identities are produced as unstable, discontinuous, contingent surface effects" (96). Transgression of the oppositions inner and outer, deep and superficial, enables *Main Brides* to "synthesize the inner and the outer" (*Main Brides* 19) and skim over depth to concentrate

on surfaces, because, as Henderson explains, it is “a text that works to produce hesitation rather than certainty” (97).

The compilation of details that fills *Main Brides* enacts this subversion and forms an eloquent counterpoint to the syntactic irregularities and grammatical deviations that mark this text’s approximation of the pre-linguistic state. Consider, in the following passage from *Main Brides*, the predominance of the verbs in the participle form which creates a series of sentence fragments:

In the bar Lydia crossed out *The Persian Cat Is Absent*. Then she wrote: *A wide-open window. From which a white cat is flying. Feet splayed, fine white hair streaming against the grey sky. Me, Lydia, watching with my brother. He, looking down, sees a horse standing in a field. Do horses lay eggs? he asks. I know better than to answer. Do horses lay eggs? he asks again. Despite myself, I look down. If they did – It Would Protect My Mother.*

Underlining *It Would Protect My Mother*. Feeling slightly weird.

(*Main Brides* 186)

The grammatical deviation formed by the overuse of participles together with the variations in type (use of italics), punctuation (use of capitalization) and repetition (“Do horses lay eggs?”) combine to make evident the *semiotic disposition* of the text. This passage creates an impression of sound and rhythm. The odd blend of grammatical distortion (“Feeling slightly weird”) with keen descriptive detail (“fine white hair streaming against the grey sky”) gestures toward sensory experience. Through the

creation of aural, rhythmic and sensual impressions, Scott's writing, in passages like this one, insinuates the presence of the *genotext*.

Unfinished sentences such as the one on the following page in this section of "Donkey Riding" contribute to the sound-quality of the text.

Lydia pulled out her chair. In a corner, Norma jean, naturally. But

Lydia couldn't bother —. (187)

Typographical markers that indicate an unwritten or uncompleted thought (such as the em dash, or double hyphen) point to silences interspersed between the long, irregular blocks of sound suggested by the text. While much of the writing in *Main Brides*, for example, indicates the interior life experience of Lydia, the syntactic incompletions point to a further interiorizing, or editing. The impression created suggests that the end of the sentence is unspeakable or unthinkable. Truncations of thought, then, come to signify suppression and control. Scott has created these visible silences (textual space without word or speech act indicated by —, or blank lines), to make apparent the realm of what Brossard calls the "l'interdite et inédite."

Scott writes gaps and spaces into her narrative to approximate the impression of intermittent sound and silence, suggesting the *chora* which "is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm" (Moi 13). Deletions and incompletions create articulatory effects that bespeak a movement towards drive-governed bases of sound-production. The loss or suppression of speech indicated by an incompleteness disrupts narrative flow with a pause and disturbs the construction of meaning. The reader is left to persevere as s/he wishes. For example, in *Main Brides*, the sentence, "Lydia's chair is empty" (160) is followed by two lines of dots (.....). The next paragraph begins, "Then she's back,



impeccable as ever" (160). The lines of dots indicate a space in time during which Lydia is not sitting at the table. Presumably she has visited the washroom and then returned, but rather than making this clear, Scott has chosen to insert a typographical code for silence and / or absence.

Unlike the unfinished sentence, however, this technique does not suggest suppression, but rather random absence and dislocation. There is no real reason why the stream of consciousness that we are witnessing as readers must be interrupted for a bathroom break. That it indicates both narrative control and a gesture towards readerly desire. These two lines of dots represent a delay, an annoyance, a disruption in discursive flow. They also introduce the acoustic aspect of physical space; for example, Lydia is not occupying the specific place where we can "hear" her thoughts.

The attention to Lydia's physical movement between table and toilet highlights the sparsity of physical movement in the novel's framing story. The minimal activity contained within the exposition of Lydia's day forms a contrasting juxtaposition to the excessive amount of movement contained in the portraits. Lydia's fantasizing takes the reader on dizzying jaunts through space, traversing great geographic distances, following characters who are continually walking and moving (dancing, etc.). Change, movement and activity are inordinately prominent in the stories of the Brides, whereas physical inactivity marks Lydia's narrative position. It is her very stasis that makes her such an interesting contrast to the Brides. The reader happily allows her to make daring leaps in her vignettes of imagined lives, but becomes annoyed when her function as storyteller is disrupted by a trip to the powder room.

A reader might ask, "Why should we have to wait while she goes for a pee?"

Scott sets up Lydia as the funnel through which we see the Brides, and very quickly we come to rely on her as a focalizing device. Therefore the necessity of time out from storytelling for unavoidable bodily relief comes as a slap in the face, making us slightly uncomfortable with our dependence on her as device, function and/or character.

Understandably, the approximation of vocal and kinetic rhythm, while effective in some respects, can be frustrating for a reader. One reviewer has this to say about one articulatory effect in *Main Brides*: "Her affection for parentheses, a paratactic strategy [ ] can be quite beautiful and polyvalent, though it does sacrifice the persona who might outlive a sentence" (Sweatman 38). However, Philip Marchand praises the accomplishment of this same device: "the parenthesis offers alternate readings within a single sentence, and thereby undermines the authority of an omniscient narrator. The present participle, with its suggestion of an incompleting, open-ended process, serves the same end" (G11).

The following passage is typical of the disruptive effect in *Heroine*:

Still, my love, I wonder, do I look good because your arms keep me from  
bleeding all over town in search of love? Like I was before.

Oh Mama why'd you put this hole in me?

Stop. This is the city, 1980. A single raindrop squeezes out of the sky. Cut  
the melodrama, two lesbians told me back in 77. (31)

The sequence of disjointed, seemingly unrelated phrases is fairly representative of the narrative flow in *Heroine*. The main character in *Heroine*, a woman referred to most often simply as "G.S.," imagines a novel "with the heroine a free spirit ... radiating from the

middle of the story" (42). The novel comprises a *pastiche* of details accumulated through the imaginative wandering G.S. takes as she reclines in a bath in her rented rooms in downtown Montreal. She takes stock of an entire decade of her life, re-viewing such things as her love affairs, political activities and friendships. From her position in the tub she mines her memory to examine and re-shape the events and feelings that have led her to the present moment. She considers incidents from a multitude of perspectives, trying to re-image them and focus them in a way that allows them to be written. Liberal use of the fragment moves the text in and out, around the woman in the bath, presenting the reader with "a complex layering of focalizing frames" (Henderson 98). The jumps or disruptions in story lead like pathways to alternate views of the same picture: "the lens sweeps down" (24); "the lens turns" (54); "the lens turns" (64); "the lens shifts again to that dome-shaped café" (*Heroine* 95).

As disruptions in the text function to point to and transgress layers of focus, the occasional passage of random *lexemes* works to introduce meaninglessness. For example, consider this section in the chapter called "Car Wrecks and Bleeding Hearts":

*Political situation prostituting fascist referendum wife of Frank's girl's legs  
mufflers getting expensive four-to-one the Expos under conditions for selling  
stocks on St James' the church over the bridge at skis in the oracle ha ha that's  
what you get for being a nose-and-throat man. (Heroine 42-3)*

The textual explanation for this stream of nonsense is a syndrome afflicting the speaker, an ex-stenographer: "everything that goes in her ears comes out her mouth" (43). But it also characterizes the arbitrary nature of the details reported in the novel, and by extension, the arbitrary nature of language itself. Scott asks, "what choice do we have but

to seize language and find new ways to use it?" ("Red Tin +White Tulle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 26). She maintains, "it is not language itself, but the social conditions governing its use that pose the problem" ("Red Tin" *Spaces Like Stairs* 26). Another sequence of random lexemes appears late in the text as the mutterings of the grey woman:

*They were taking off the lights the turkey came out of the oven the children were hiding under the table he put his beefchopper on my button breast. He said: 'Madame the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.' ... To Schwartz's Smoky Meat / And to all the ragshop policemen on the street / Montreal International Sheets / Lyrical Linen At Prices Most Discrete / Lolly lolly jolly jolly / I know you love me / Because I'm a stuffed hen in a taxidermist's shop — (Heroine 180-1).*

The appearance of nonsense brings language itself into relief and forces the reader to recognize it as signifying process.

The mining of one's unconscious, most often explored in Scott's writing through memory or crazy people, opens "the floodgates of possibility (letting the play of images, the writing be an exploration of the undersides of words)" ("RT+WT" *Spaces Like Stairs* 25). The black tourist notices the grey woman:

An old bag in a filthy suede skirt is half sitting on the woodpile. He has a flash as if he's seen her somewhere before. Anyway the smell is unforgettable. She's mumbling to herself in English against the cacophony of French. Her words sound like a bad cartoon (looney tune, he thinks) about the north: *when she fell through the river ice, they were not at all content I pulled her back again they would have preferred that she never went through it's true that after she was never the same she saw everything backwards*

She stops.

The tourist, *faute de quoi faire*, prods her a little: 'Then what?'

She looks through him and says: *her mother, the music teacher, poured*

*tea on the frozen spot.* (159, Scott's italics)

This nonsense-speak is Scott's way of letting the writing be an exploration of the undersides of words; the speech of the grey woman (and that of the ex-stenographer) enters the space of nonsense in a way that the speech of other characters cannot.

While the bath-woman struggles to create a heroine who can reject conventional forms of writing, here is a woman who is free of hegemonic strictures by virtue of her insanity. The tale of her passage into nonsense-speak is contained analogously in her story of the fall through the frozen river: once she broke through the rigid boundaries of societally-sanctioned expression, she was never the same again. Having found a way to step outside frontiers that mark the limits of accepted behaviour, she "*saw everything backwards,*" and could not return. The mother-music teacher represents the community of women who work together to help each other break through the boundaries, easing and softening the way, pouring "*tea on the frozen spot.*" The grey woman is both what G.S. is afraid of becoming, and what she desires to become. She is both the quintessential nightmare for a writer, a victim of language that betrays and conceals intelligence, and the most evolved, actualized self a writer could hope to become, a initiate of nonsense-speak, a participant in Brossard's invocation to create "*une littérature de l'interdite et inédite.*" Speaking the unspeakable, the grey woman risks societal censure, is seen as crazy ("looney-tune") and thus not taken seriously. Producer of the unspoken and

unauthorized, Scott also careens dangerously close to the edge of accumulated meaning and dares the reader to dismiss her writing as crazy.

Such passages mark Scott's continued commitment to "the process [of] getting behind the cover of cultural ennui, skirting linguistic and legalistic conventions by asserting our feminine voice" ("Red Tin" *Spaces Like Stairs* 26). G.S., the central character in *Heroine*, realizes the importance of this: "Leaning forward, very excited, I say women must have a different relationship to language BECAUSE OUR LIVES ARE DIFFERENT. Somebody says Virginia Woolf wrote almost the same thing decades ago" (130, Scott's emphasis). The reference Scott is probably making here is no doubt *Three Guineas* in which Virginia Woolf writes that the Society of Outsiders seeks to achieve freedom, equality and peace "by the means that a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and the different values which result from those differences have placed within our reach" (113). Brossard also writes of this difference:

Le titre de travail que nous utilisons, c'est-à-dire, la femme et l'écriture, pose au départ la question d'une différence. D'une différence qui, quand elle s'est manifestée par l'écrit, fut plus qu'autrement évacuée, oubliée, rejetée; ou parfois assimilée par la pensée phallogocentrique, qui à l'occasion y tire un bénéfice marginal. ("La femme et l'écriture" 10)

Judith Butler writes that "the subject is constructed through acts of differentiation that distinguish the subject from its constitutive outside, a domain of abjected alterity conventionally associated with the feminine, but clearly not exclusively" ("Contingent Foundations" 12).

*Heroine* ends with an incompletion: “She –“ (183), leaving the reader and the heroine up in the air. Both have been well-fed, (G.S. at last leaves her apartment [180] to eat breakfast in a restaurant called Bagels’) and are now left poised on the cusp of the next compilation of identity markers.

Scott’s piece of short fiction “Climbing the Coiled Oak” exposes emblems of women’s powerlessness in the context of a coming-of-age story. Images of sexual pleasure and fertility are deconstructed by the rigidity and hypocrisy of Protestant morality and women’s sex organs become places of male control. In one instance in this story, diacritic markings overlaid on the text signify an alternate meaning. In the following example, where the word “cunt” has been printed in upper case and then Xed out, its importance is first emphasized and then hidden.

“Rita McQueen has a big ~~CUNT~~” (9).

The series of exes typed over the word is a superficial gesture pretending to conceal: a self-conscious writerly device aimed at drawing attention to the subversion of cultural codes enacted by such textual enunciative moments as graffiti-writing or name-calling. In the development of the story’s theme, the use of this device insinuates the vulva as a place where woman’s sexual power has been quashed.

Scott’s first full-length published work was *Spare Parts*, her 1977 collection of short fiction, self-described as “an unusual collection of evocative, tough-minded tales tracing an uncertain path from childhood to womanhood in small towns and a somewhat provincial city of the 60s” (back cover). Christine St. Peter writes, “the spare parts of the title are the bits of life the narrator pastes together; they are also the interchangeable – and generally unmanageable – parts of bodies she experiences, her own and other people’s”

(38). It attracted little critical attention, however, it contains the strategies and devices that Scott uses in her later published works to negotiate identity in terms of language, sex, gender, politics and location. In *Spare Parts* we find provocative glimpses of the resisting subject, who infinitely defers fixity of meaning, dares to explore the holes and gaps in the socio-cultural construction of woman's sexual power and sexual body, and transfigures myths into vibrant distortions that dangle on the edge of propriety, gaping with possibilities.

In this collection of spare, rather bizarre, "post-modernist"<sup>26</sup> pieces of short fiction, Scott writes powerfully against what she sees as the linearity of news-reporting. She said that "in journalism, there's often a kind of cause-and-effect movement through time, which I find restrictive" ("On the edge of change" 17). Having worked as a journalist for both *The Montreal Gazette* and *The Globe and Mail*, and having taught journalism at Concordia University, Scott undertakes in this first work of creative writing to transgress the boundaries of traditional discourse. St. Peter writes, "the whole work is as densely textured as a poem" (38). Scott's writing seeks to open up what she sees as the narrow frame of expression which hinders the kind of experimentation with language necessary to inscribe the feminine.

She said to Ken McGoogan: "Journalism is the epitome of cause-and-effect writing. You make a statement and spend the rest of the story proving it ... it's hard to have poetic resonance in a text if you're working at trying to prove something" (H7). You could say that Scott creates poetic resonance in *Spare Parts* by resisting the

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<sup>26</sup> Christine St. Peter in a review of *Spare Parts* in *Canadian Woman Studies* calls it "a collection of five post-modernist stories" (38).



allegiance to provable truths found in journalism.<sup>27</sup> Scott's style in this collection does not please every palate. Reviewer Susan Cody writes: "Scott's technique, which draws on modern experimental fiction to encompass feminist values, taxes the reader's comfort. It is a cost that some readers will begrudge" (59).

Scott writes to find the edges, constantly daring herself to go further: "the very best writing has to do with pushing the boundaries of thought as far as you can ... you have to take chances with language, with form" ("On the edge" 17). In another review of *Spare Parts*, Jane Rule writes that in these stories language itself overwhelms:

It is intellectually satisfying in a way that much feminist realism is not. The difficulty of this style is that it victimizes not only the narrator but the reader. Even if one shares some of Scott's political convictions, it is not hard to wish to get beyond all that Freudian phallic bullying, in which women can only act out their own destruction. (Rule E15)

Rule explains how Scott's experimentation with language is more likely a result of the influence of French feminist writing than the influence of English feminist writing:

She has been influenced by both Nicole Brossard and France Theoret, to whom this book is dedicated, and has more in common with these feminists and their counterparts in France, such as Monique Wittig, than with English-Canadian writers such as Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and Marian Engel, who work to command the English language rather than fracture it into dangerous, hurting fragments. (E15)

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Scott's main character in her novel *Heroine* declares twice, "I'm no journalist" (*Heroine*56).

While Rule makes an astute observation here about Scott's influences, her assessment of Atwood's, Munro's and Engel's use of language is a little facile and reductionist. There is no doubt that Scott borrows liberally from the example of many of her Quebec peers; however, her facility with and flair for the tropes of parody and litotes, and her textual treatment of small-town Ontario can arguably be attributed to the influence of the English-Canadian "major" women writers such as those listed by Rule.<sup>28</sup>

The first story in the collection, "Climbing the Coiled Oak" (*Spare Parts* 9-26), is dominated by images of rupture and violence: "Spring came through the gully bursting wide the creek edges" (9); "My dog Randy broke the ice" (12); "All the windows in her house had been broken" (18); "Dorothy picked up a board with a nail in it and went splatt" (22). The repeated allusions to brokenness underline Scott's desire to crack language open and show the spaces where the *semiotic disposition* of the text emerges. In this story, the image of rupture also signifies the violent entry of a young girl into the world of grown-up sexual relations. Language is torn apart as brutally as the hymen is ripped in the rape of a virgin. Scott's assault on language aims to destroy, or at the very least puncture, stereotypes and traditions that confine heterogeneity.

Throughout the story, Scott interweaves a network of motifs of terrified passivity and repressed sexual desire, the most striking of these being the activity of watching ("Mother was watching through the window" [10]) and allusions to the hole ("behind me was a hole in the wall" [11]). The passive intrusion of the gaze recurs in Scott's work,

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<sup>28</sup> Further, there are many who would argue that a painstaking analysis of Margaret Atwood's writing might well include the phrase: "dangerous, hurting fragments." Tellingly, about Scott's story "Tall Cowboys and True" Christine St. Peter writes: "Reminiscent of Atwood, this, but she's hard to escape in Canadian literature" (39). She also argues that "Scott follows a trail already blazed by Alice Munro" (38), pointing to a clearly anglo-Canadian tradition.

most notably in *Main Brides*, in the form of a woman sitting in a bar-café on Montreal's The Main, watching female patrons and colouring them with fantasy lives. In "Climbing the Coiled Oak," watching becomes the activity the narrator uses to discover that cultural exigencies require the repression of her sexual agency.

Hole imagery, along with allusions to the vagina, vulva and womb, figures woman's sexuality as a site of loss. Imagery that figures woman's sexual pleasure as an absence reminds the reader that Scott's women characters have "such a hole to fill" ("PBL" *Spaces Like Stairs* 79). Scott targets language practice and the way it determines normative behaviours as the space where exploitation and objectification originate: "I sometimes imagine 'whole' as representing w (for women's difference, the unspoken) + hole (as our sex is frequently referred to by men)" ("Shaping a Vehicle" *Spaces Like Stairs* 74).

References to womb- and vagina-like spaces in "Climbing the Coiled Oak" signal the commodification of woman's sexual receptivity: "Rita McQueen has a big CUNT" (with the word "cunt" X-ed out, 9), "the hole stood right over my head" (11), "the little streams rushing down the ravine ... joined a bigger stream which raced by Rita's cottage ... under a culvert" (11), "it was easy to sneak off to the swimming hole" (19), "between my legs it was as wet as the gully in spring" (21). Images of holes, indentations and hollows in the landscape reinforce the narrator's exploration of her sexual self, but they also mirror dark interior spaces such as the boys' club house (10), garage (11), teacher's cupboard, curling rink (12), old warehouse (16), the church (18) and Mr. Winton's shed (20-1), all of which are dominated by male power.

In this first story, set in "McMasterville, Ont. Pop. 310" (13), the narrator explores memories of her agonized pre-pubescent years in tandem with her ambivalent affection for the town slut. Cody writes: "the eleven-year-old girl ... is caught between her instinctive championing of the elemental beauty of the town tramp and the repressive dictates of small-town authority" (59). The coiled oak of the title works as a pictorial image-map for the twisting layers of revealed memory that substitute for plot line in the story. Layers of memory coiling around a subject position as substitute for linear plot is common to all of Scott's fiction. In *Heroine*, remembered fragments of a recent love affair coil around the depressed bathing woman like tendrils of smoke. *Main Brides* embroiders textual lives for imagined characters around swatches of memory springing from the wine-soaked consciousness of a habitu  of one of Montreal's downtown venues.

The coiled oak as signified is key to the way that the narrator's self-concept changes as she matures: initially she sees it as a shield behind which her house and family reside, safe and protected: "Mother was watching through the window behind the oak branches" (10), and the refuge to which she returns after the first time her new breasts earn her attention from the local boys in the form of a lewd rhyme: "I hurried over to my house standing behind the big branches of the coiled oak" (11). By the end of the story it has become the means by which she can both hide from and observe Rita McQueen, the woman of 'loose morals' whom the tiny Protestant community derides: "I sneaked behind the coiled oak ... Rita was my friend but it wasn't for them to know ... I was shinnying up the trunk" (25).

The narrator's growing awareness of and fascination with her own sexuality is syncopeated by the townspeople's treatment of such figures as Rita McQueen and Rose

Lynx ("a lady of disrepute" 19). She comes to associate her awakening sexual desire with the disapproval her mother extends to these women: "Harlots. Now I don't want you hanging around on the Bottom Street anymore, do you hear?" (19). Judith Butler says "to be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns" ("On Linguistic Vulnerability" 2), and "to be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are" ("On Linguistic Vulnerability" 4). The power of language to injure through a label or name is linked in this story directly to one's sexual reputation: "When Carmel heard I wasn't allowed near her place she told everyone I let Martin feel me up the day we played hookey" (19).

When she gets a chance to have a sexual experience of her own, the narrator is disappointed: "I wiggled harder, hoping to feel him against my bare skin. But it was too late. There was a rush of wet on my cotton crotch" (21); and she must contend with an imminent assault on her reputation: "Martin would blab if I wasn't around all the time to make sure he didn't" (22); "I was afraid they were saying I was easy to feel up" (24). Forced to repress her own sexual desire, the narrator admires and identifies with Rita McQueen, whom she imbues with the qualities of courage ("Rita McQueen didn't care about anything" 9; "Rita was not afraid" 15), mirth ("Rita's face laughed until the potatoes bounced on the floor" 15), and magnificence ("On the grass sat Rita dressed like a queen in a crown of millions of dandelion chains" 17).

She unintentionally comes upon Rita enjoying sex freely: "I found Rita McQueen and a boy in the pine thicket where we used to play hide-and-seek. Rita's jeans were down at her knees and her bum was covered with needles. ... Rita looked surprised for a moment. Then she laughed and pulled the boy down on top of her" (9). The narrator

years to synthesize herself with this person who defies societal censure: "I crossed the road and sat down with Rita. ... I looked at the reddish hairs on her brown arm. Her eyes were like a cat's when you pour it a saucer of milk. I looked at her arm again. Something inside, as far away as the grass under my feet, made me want to touch it" (14); "I imagined the reddish hairs of Rita's arm rubbing up against the darkish hairs of my own. Like cats. Cool and warm" (16).

Carmel, who "had pierced ears and was one of The French" (13), is the narrator's foil, a Catholic-Liberal (ideologically-opposed to the narrator whose family is Protestant-Conservative [17].) Though she lives in a part of town inhabited by the "harlots" (19) and April, a mentally-retarded adult (11), the narrator admires her, watching her play baseball (19), and saying "she was smart" (13), that she was a good fighter (16), and though she was French, "never spoke it" (13). But she is the treacherous friend, "whispering things behind [the narrator's] back" with Rosy one minute and sharing a secret cigarette with her the next (16). When the narrator literally becomes the golden-haired child, Carmel responds with disgust: "Carmel took one look at my hair and said, 'Ugh'" (13). She betrays the narrator by stealing Martin, the boy the speaker has had an encounter with in the swimming-hole shed.

The loss of Martin, after such an intimacy as revealing her breasts, marks, for the narrator, the loss of control over her own sexual pleasure in a number of ways. That she received no gratification from the encounter has already been noted. Carmel, ashamed and hurt that the narrator's family has forbidden her access to her friend, betrays her by lying about a sin so bad that it got Army Chalmers' busiest daughter thrown out of a party (17) that she let a boy feel her up (19). Directly after the shed incident, Martin alienates

the narrator and goes to Carmel: "Martin walked with Carmel" (21); further, the narrator finds Martin at the church picnic with Carmel, "who wasn't even supposed to come because she's Catholic" (24). When Martin asserts that "she came with me" we are struck by the impact of the double betrayal, the narrator's innocence transgressed by both friend and romantic interest. The ironic gap between the youthful inexperience of the child in the story and the wisdom of the mature storyteller is underlined as she explains, "He was 15" (24). The remembered young girl might have said this to apologize for Martin's cruelty, and justify why he was allowed to bring a date to the church picnic. However, the older, wiser narrator says it tongue-in-cheek, mocking her teen-self's skewed understanding of male power.

Immediately thereafter, the narrator witnesses the cruelty the congregation visits upon Rita McQueen (25). The treatment of the two adulterers (Army, the married man, is "given a place of honour"(25), while Rita, the single woman, is reviled,) is made to seem laughably hypocritical by the bizarre cartoon-like antics of the reverend and his parishioners. In an absurd bat-like gesture, the reverend waves Rita away, his vestments flapping; the onlookers whisper and hiss, one of them saying, ridiculously, "Get thee away from me Satan" (25). The speaker sneaks behind the coiled oak tree to hide the shame and humiliation she feels for and with Rita McQueen.

Her betrayal by Martin and Carmel signals her initiation into a world where a woman's sexual agency is continually compromised by preset notions of the relationship between identity and power. Scott's use of the discovery of this young narrator's sexual self and its subsequent victimization sets the pattern all her heroines follow to construct and deploy surface details that suggest identity in order to defer manipulation. The

compassion and affinity the speaker feels for Rita is complicated by her shameful awareness that she lacks the courage to risk the societal disapproval that would surely come if she were to publicly stand by her friend. Poignantly, the narrator clutches her tummy as she climbs the oak, instinctively protecting the place of her womb and sex organs, as if suddenly realizing how and where her sex makes her vulnerable. Fittingly, it takes the "stranger" from outside the community to crack the façade and deliver an appropriate response (punching the minister) to proud injustice. The narrator reaches the upper branches of the oak tree just as she sees Rita's mistreatment vindicated, figuring the recurrent image of filtered light (18, 25) as a redeeming feature of remembered textual space.

The import of Martin's exploitation and betrayal of the narrator extends to the negation of sexual pleasure in another way. Just before he mounts her, Martin condemns, "I heard you like it" (21). When the narrator is grounded, she lies in her room imagining the bats outside her window are nuns in the convent her mother has threatened to send her to: "They were whispering: 'She likes it, she likes it.'" (22). Scott cleverly depicts the cruel logic that strips girls and women of any right to sexual control or pleasure: to allow a boy to feel one's breast is a reprehensible sin, but obviously to enjoy that sensation is an even worse crime.

But Martin represents more than an opportunity for the narrator to experience sexual arousal; he also acts as the major locus of vulva imagery in the story. As early as the third page into the narrative we learn of the narrator's fascination with Martin's lips: "I watched Martin McCoon's juicy red lips and his teeth that stuck out so he always seemed to be smiling" (11). Throughout the story, their colour, texture and wetness are



continually emphasized: "I moved closer to Martin who was passing beer back and forth to Jimmy. His lips were so red they could have been bitten off an apple. I saw them open and close around the beer bottle" (12). When the narrator is trapped in Mr. Winton's shed she attends assiduously to Martin's mouth: "I could feel the breath coming out of Martin's *red mouth* in short fast spurts;" "I looked at Martin's *juicy mouth*;" "Martin's *apple-red mouth* came close to my face" (20, my emphasis). When she scans the crowd for Martin at the church picnic, she is looking for "Martin's red lips" (24).

Martin's identifying feature associates him directly with the vulva, the specific emblem of loss and displacement in the narrator's physico-sexual being. The narrator's fixation on Martin's lips also constructs the vulva as an ambiguous site of disempowerment. Sexual desire, emerging as an effect of voyeurism (watching and noticing Martin's lips), is thwarted eventually by an unequal sexual economy that devalues the vulva. The narrator's own sexual pleasure is perfunctorily erased by the actual possessor-user of the vulva personified by Martin: the male.

Martin's mouth as site of loss for the narrator, like other hole imagery in the story, acts as a symbol of consumptive and destructive sexual myths. Through his red, juicy lips things disappear, such as the beer from the bottle (12), and the shortcakes at the picnic (24). Similarly, Martin's lips emit hideous sounds, such as his breath in short fast spurts (20), the affront, "I heard you like it" (21), and the blabbing the narrator imagines he is doing while she is grounded (22). These sounds are metonymic for various female bodily fluids that have historically inspired fear in men, such as menstrual blood and birth waters. Menstrual blood, in particular, figures largely in Scott's later writing as a signifier for a complex set of ambiguous messages and traditions.

The vulva, then, figures as a gateway between worlds. It marks the entrance of the infant from the mother's womb into the realm outside her body and eventual individuation. It also signifies the locus of the narrator's adult sexual activity and potential birthing. The voyeuristic pleasure the narrator receives from gazing at Martin's lips, like the voyeurism of Lydia in *Main Brides*, is a substitution for the sexual-creative agency that is denied the narrator (just as the voyeuristic stasis of Lydia's portraits in *Main Brides* stands in for actual artistic creation)<sup>29</sup>. The desire that springs from this lack is never satisfied, and is therefore displaced to the extent that the female characters in Scott's work continually pour their energy into behaviours and activities which are often fruitless and/or destructive.

The disruption of sexual pleasure and the truncated sense of sexual identity is complemented by the distorted dream-like passages that punctuate the text. Rule writes that in *Spare Parts*

the time sequence is broken. The narrative is invaded by dream, the real landscape by surreal images. Comic, melodramatic and sentimental tonalities threaten each other in the same paragraph. Sentences struggle against their misplaced modifiers, recover in pure speech rhythms, break into fragments. For if language is to serve a vision of woman as the invisible victim of a world made by men, then commanding language is a lie. (E15)

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<sup>29</sup> And, you could also argue, just as the solitary, depressed sojourns into memory of G.S. in *Heroine* prevent her from actually writing the novel she is thinking of writing. In both *Main Brides* and *Heroine*, the absence of artistic production is superimposed on the absence of control over sexual pleasure, and thusly, over an active, healthy negotiation of identity.

Scott's narrator imagines things happening, allowing dream segments to enter the daily sequence of events: "there were clocks in all the village crotches. They sat on their verandahs rocking and ticking" (18); "But the village was a bit crooked. I thought I saw my mother in the neighbour's bed which was impossible. She never went near his house" (12). After the shed incident, the narrator's mother admonishes that she should be in a convent and confines her daughter to her room. The narrator sees "nuns flying down the white walls like Dracula" (21-2). "I could hear the bats coming out of the trees by the balcony. They were like nuns. Carmel was like a nun. They were all like nuns. They were whispering: 'She likes it, she likes it.'" (22).

The tension created by the proliferation of images of sexual ripeness and the dark atmosphere of repression in the story enhances these fantastical images. Fertility images, such as references to spring (9), "little streams rushing down the ravine through the melting snow" (11), "I drank sap from the maple pails" (12), "the buds got fatter until they would burst" (13), "the wild strawberries popped up in the fields" (15) "the milkweed pods were ready to pop" (23) and new life "the egg-shaped horse about to colt" (12), combine with allusions to the narrator's budding sexuality: "new-sprouted tits" (10), "my breasts stood up round as oranges" (20), "My nipples stuck out as if they were staring at something. Between my legs it was as wet as the gully in spring" (21) to form a dramatic contrast to the tight self-righteous religiosity of the adults in the story, such as the narrator's mother who looks "worried" (9), whose lip twitches (10), who attends to "inner sweetness" (15); the narrator's father, who is treasurer of "the Amalgamated Church of the Lord" (17); and the minister who sermonizes about marriage (18) and waves Rita McQueen away from the parish picnic (25).

Finding all outlets for natural adolescent curiosity and experimentation frustrated by a stifling Protestant morality, the narrator experiences the ambivalent attraction of violence. A girl in the narrator's class, Dorothy Blair, is beaten and humiliated in front of her classmates for getting caught running to the swimming hole on school time (22). In the scene that follows she expresses her rage by killing frogs in Lamb's Bush. The narrator accompanies Dorothy to the pond and seems to live the frogs' anguish vicariously: "the orange frog flesh made me feel like throwing up. ... I began to feel sick only as the nail sank into the skin. When it came out and the frog fell over a nice feeling floated up my legs" (23). At the same time, she identifies with Dorothy's powerlessness and, as the narrator becomes an eager voyeur, the action takes on the rhythm of sex, culminating in both girls falling exhausted to the ground:

Dorothy's fat freckled arms flapped the board down again. Splatt. 98 frogs were having a ball. ... Dorothy grunted out of her blue face. ... Dorothy's fat arms flapped the board down again on the water, faster. Faster and faster the frogs began to flop off the lily pads and float away bleeding green and orange in the brown water. The birds began to get excited. They hopped from branch to branch. ... I leaned as far as I could over the frogpond. Splatt splatt flop flop. Dorothy groaned, the frogs garrumped, the birds screamed, the trees rang. ... But finally the last frog flopped over and Dorothy and I fell down on the grass. (23)

Once again, the narrator has fixed her gaze on something outside herself to facilitate the release of her sexual tension. In this episode, her and Dorothy's shared sense of powerlessness and injustice make for a mutual experience.

The children's attitude to domestic violence (they disallow Rosy Deguire entrance to their club because her "father beat her with a hockey stick" [10], yet they engage in physical persecution of the weak, as when they throw stones at April Lily [12]) is analogous to the ambiguous attitude reflected in the sexist- and racist-based messages they receive from their elders, such as "you couldn't expect an Indian to stick by his wife, especially when she wasn't his wife. (Haw, haw, haw)" (14). Caught between choices of narrow-minded hatreds, the narrator and her peers grow up with a stunted sense of identity that demonizes sexuality and particularly sexual pleasure in women. The manipulation of codes and signifiers that signal membership in various identity groups emerges in embryonic form in this story as the primary technique Scott's heroines use to survive or "pass" in the world.

"Passing" is a term used by American Blacks during slavery to describe the activity of light-skinned Blacks "getting by as a white person" and thus escaping captivity. Saundra Sharp, in *Black Women for Beginners*, demonstrates the use of the word "passing": "We eavesdropped on old wives telling tales[:] 'You have to marry lighter and lighter, then the race will disappear. None of the Sistuhs who are currently 'passing' would agree to be interviewed for this book" (33, Sharp's emphasis). The term has been appropriated by various others to describe the manipulation of identity markers that enable one to "get by" as a person of, or at least convince the majority of observers to take one as a member of, another more empowered identity-category. Kate Bornstein quotes Teresa Stores in *My Gender Workbook*: "A woman wearing a man's suit, \*and getting away with it\*, in this [corporate] environment is subversive. Don't get me wrong, I do not try to pass as a man. I am a woman in the uniform of a corporate businessman"

(30). She explains, "Passing is the opposite of genderfuck. Passing is getting as many signals as possible all lined up" (20).

In later works, Scott's heroines become conscious of their efforts to craft the performance of identity: "*Suddenly I could see how survival for a woman is a little like the negative of a photo. She just has to pick the place in it where night (her deepest self) and day (reality) are combined in the right synthesis of light and dark for her. Even if it's not quite (I started laughing) socially acceptable. (Heroine 177, Scott's italics).*

The story "Ottawa" works, as does "Climbing the Coiled Oak," to cast a disparaging light on society's expectations of young women. The listless narrator of "Ottawa" is suspended between the roles of teacher and wife, represented respectively by Teacher's College and the parade of eligible young men at the Parliament Hill parties. She entertains escape fantasies, the lines of the song "Moon River" running throughout the narrative: "Her Moon River record was caught in a scratch" (30). She re-creates herself, alternately, as the daring Holly Golightly<sup>30</sup>, "a gentleman's escort who manages never to come across" (28), and the vamp-concert-pianist Connie, who appears mostly on roof- and car tops (30, 31, 33, 35, 36, 37, 38). A surreal array of unlikely suitors, including Chris, an Elvis impersonator who repeatedly rejects her on account of her small

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<sup>30</sup> Intertextual reference to Truman Capote's character Holly Golightly in his 1959 classic, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Much of the other text borrows from this work as well, for example the snatches of "Moon River" echo Henry Mancini's score for the movie (in which Audrey Hepburn plays an irresistible Holly Golightly.) Also a possible allusion to a major Canadian woman writer, Ethel Wilson, and the character Mrs. Golightly in the first story of her collection of the same name ("Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention" in *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories*, Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1961:1-16.) Capote's character is a clever ingenue looking for a husband who manages to get men to fall in love with her and spend their money on her, eluding their sexual advances by feigning innocence, while Wilson's Mrs. Golightly is a tentative society wife, "so shy that it was just not fair" (1), forced to defer her own desires in order to make pleasant chit-chat with other wives at an engineers' convention. With the use of this name Scott gives a nod to the traditions that continue to form her writing self while simultaneously mocking the creation of characters based on gender stereotypes.

breasts (29, 36); Elliott, whose skinny legs, Swiss collar and penchant for appearing among drooping daffodils and leafing despondently through books make him decidedly unappealing (30-1, 34, 35, 36); and the grinning Gerry-the-General's-son, whose only welcome contribution is always a mickey (33, 34), accompanies the narrator through the empty motions of dating and social posturing.

The lesser female characters take the form of the two obnoxious Heloises, aunt and cousin (30-4, 38), and the narrator's mother, whose dark eyes "burnt holes in paper" (31), dreams that she is famous (36) and who comforts her daughter by saying she could always come home and get a job at the egg-grading station (37). Peopled by an absurd cast, this wry, satiric vignette ebbs along in a fog akin to the one through which the phallic-shaped Peace Tower sticks up "like a Sherlock Holmes Mystery" (34), and lolls in the insipid, shallow ennui of the T.S. Eliot poem<sup>31</sup> evoked by several pointed allusions: "You could see the officers come and go" (29); "you could see the officers come and go. Speaking of Michelangelo" (31); "we could see the officers come and go" (32); "They were discussing Michelangelo" (34). These overt fragments of intertextual material display the influence of the Moderns on Scott's writing. Her playful, if heavy-handed, use of Eliot's poem betrays her fascination with, her indebtedness to, and her disdain for the principles of high art, intellectual elitism and the middle-class snobbery with which Modernism has come to be associated. Christine St. Peter describes the central character as "a female Prufrock" (38). The efforts of her intrepid Gail Groulx to catch a husband,

juxtaposed with these rhetorical markers of the Modernist ethos, work to relieve the Prufrockian boredom that permeates the self-anointed elite of the story.

The absence of positive female role models, the dispassionate perfunctory nature of the displays of parental concern, the mediocrity of young male companions and the numb disinterest with which lovemaking is treated combine to paint a rather dolorous picture of the worst of late twentieth-century middle class life in Canada. The dullness and small-mindedness that Scott acerbically mocks in "Ottawa" are shown to be symptoms of a culture that mindlessly and tenaciously adheres to outdated traditions rather than expends the creative energy to forge new ones. The characters in "Ottawa," like Eliot's Prufrock, are paralyzed by the need to construct identity in terms of signifiers of taste and decorum which they perceive as requisite for membership in the very social group which excludes them.

While Scott makes hyper-visible the middle class woman's legacy of deference to the ego and intellect of her male counterpart, she is not poking fun at the superficiality of the shifting identity markers her characters create to negotiate the gauntlet of gender terrorism that characterizes the personal and professional life experiences of herself and her contemporaries. She maintains the self-interested distance of a cynic in order to arm her heroines with the speed and facility necessary to adapt fluidly to any and all identity-driven societal norms.

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<sup>31</sup> These references allude to lines from Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917): "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (ll. 13-4) and repeated again at ll. 35-6. Scott's bizarre description of the fog on page 34 of "Ottawa" may be inspired by the lengthy treatment of fog in "Prufrock" which begins at ll. 15 and continues through ll. 25. It is also possible that the comment about the groping, PC party-goer's bald pate on pages 34-5 in "Ottawa" may be an intertextual reference to Eliot's repeated mention of baldness in "Prufrock," i.e. ll. 40-1, 82, 122.



The eager curiosity and candour of the pre-teen narrator in "Climbing the Coiled Oak" is replaced by the emotionless, detached passivity of twenty-something Gail Groulx (36). The images of moisture in "Climbing" that pointed to spring awakening give way to dry dusty roads (28), hot dusty dorm rooms (28), and the foetid canal to which rats are chased from Main Street (29). The only wetness in the heroine's panties, in the second story of the collection ("Was that something moist seeping onto my panties?" ["Ottawa" *Spare Parts* 38]) is not the product of arousal. It is, instead, menstrual blood, "My slip got damper ... the red spot spread outward" (38), a favourite image of Scott's, often signifying the cyclical shedding and renewal of the uterus. However, in this work, menstrual blood becomes the source of public shame for a young woman obsessed with appearances and utilitarian image-construction. Further references to blood in this story ("We were driving by the canal. The moon made it blood red" [28], "She opened her dresser drawer. Inside, neatly stacked, were used Kotex napkins. Red-brown" [30]) resonate with blood images that crop up in later works, such as this reference in *Heroine*: "She smelled of soaked Kotex. At night the dogs spread the black napkins over the snow" (43) and point to society's ambivalent rendering of woman's sex organs as both vital and dirty.

The tangle of tensions that surrounds blood imagery (and all images linked to sexuality) in Scott's writing harkens back to her preoccupation with the social messages about gender impressed on girls from the earliest of moments. Her writing plays out women's limited options about which Virginia Woolf wrote succinctly: "it was not a question of *whether* we should marry, but simply of *whom* we should marry" (*Three Guineas* 38). Scott's essay "Red Tin + White Tulle" is about "memory: the skull rattle of

coke cans under the wedding car ... a woman's memory" (*Spaces Like Stairs* 17). Scott writes:

When certain images are encoded, even as they surface, by the implicit patriarchal judgement of women embedded in the language. That silly wedding car: melodramatic, kitsch. We have two choices: to bury or confront them. And confronting means ... deconstructing them. ("Red Tin" *Spaces Like Stairs* 24, Scott's ellipsis)

In her writing, Scott deconstructs several gender-based stereotypes by cleverly re-working traditional images. For example, she writes that her

mother's fantasy of the wedding, reduced by me to the figure of a car, appears frequently in my stories. But displaced. So it's a getaway car. Not fleeing the wedding guests towards the legendary paradise of the honeymoon. Fleeing, rather, from the fear of the daughter repeating the mother's life. My love (for her) and my (self?) hate. *Le début du mépris*. The car carries women in search of light. But not quite free. One is driven by a cowboy. Another, carrying a mother and daughter ... ("Red Tin" *Spaces Like Stairs* 25, Scott's italics)

Re-fashioning the wedding car into a getaway vehicle in several pieces of fiction, Scott succeeds in disarming a deleterious socio-cultural trap for women. Cars become objects of fancy and ridicule, such as the solid-gold Cadillac in "Ottawa" which is driven by the "country boy" (28), "Ottawa's Elvis" (29), and "Diefenbaker" (35); instruments of imagined death in "Withdrawal Symphonies" (39-40, 43, 44, 46); modes of leaving town (49, 50), speeding cages driven by crazy menaces (50-1, 53) and the cool white

salvation of return (54) in "Tall Cowboys and True;" the decrepit tank with a hole in the floor and a defunct radiator belonging to the welfare mother (55, 56, 61) and the Roxy red Capri that starts and ends the story as a small red spot, an emblem of fear and oblivion (55, 56, 57, 58, 60, 62) in "Petty Thievery." This incursion into the hegemony of restrictive gender roles represents only one way that Scott re-works language practise to afford women power over the signifying processes in their own lives.

The wedding dress image ("white tulle. Easily torn" ["Red Tin" *Spaces Like Stairs* 17]) and its variations, frequently operate in counterpoint to the blood image, and appear throughout Scott's body of work. In "Ottawa" the narrator, Gail, though advised by her mother to wear a white sweater (28), most often wears black ("skinny black shift" [28], "simple black shift" [30], "a black shift, slim at the calves" [31], "black shift" [33], "spotless black sheath" [34]<sup>32</sup>). However, at the end of the story, when the red stain from her period is about to become visible, she pulls on a "tight white sweater" to sketch the (phallic) Peace Tower and chooses "wedding white" (37) to wear to the ball. When a menstrual "pain began creeping unmistakably up the centre of my stomach" (37-8), the narrator is about to start the promenade around the room with two "red-tunicked cadets" bordering either side of her "white brocade" (38).

Indeed, the image of the bride, for which the wedding dress is a metonym, play a large role in Scott's work, not the least of which are the portraits of women on Montreal's The Main, whom Lydia calls her 'Brides'. In the chapter "Jealousy, A Fish Story" in *Heroine* the narrator's journal entry reads: "*Jan. ? 1980: Outside, it's cold and white, but dates seem immaterial. I feel so weird, I take sleeping pills, I drink, I want to run away.*"

*Like brides feel, I've heard. Their white silhouettes isolated against the dark background of wedding pictures"* ( 173, Scott's italics). One beautiful, yet subtle, transfiguration of the classic romantic dream-wedding dress appears in a small vignette about Marcel, the delivery boy in a Greek café in *Heroine*: "the door opens and Marcel the delivery boy enters on the run, his pearl purse over his shoulder ... You say he'll be helpful. A comrade recently saw him in a tulle dress on The Main" (135). The performance of cross-dressing suggested by Marcel's tulle dress and pearl purse functions to transmute the stable relationship between the signifier wedding dress and its normal acquired meaning into an unstable one of displacement, using the counterculture of transvestitism to reconfigure that relationship, making the wedding dress into a signifier of cultural dissidence and identity transgression.

All Scott's women characters, caricatures of brides, are silhouetted against the darkness of their own lives. They are stark pristine dolls erected in front of a backdrop of black suits, symbolic of the toxic social norms thrust on them virtually from birth: "*Le mariage est une chose humiliante pour une femme*" (*Main Brides* 52). Scott gently makes evident the culturally-determined values that create the impulse towards marriage in young women.

Interestingly, the tunics of the potentially-marriageable officers in "Ottawa", and in the "Main Bride Remembers Halifax" (37-59) chapter of *Main Brides*, ("O" 35, 38; *Main Brides* 41, 43, 51) are red. The colour of the pursued officers' tunics forms a connection to the blood that shames Gail Groulx in "Ottawa," and to the "red red lipstick"

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<sup>22</sup> The simple black shift is the preferred attire of Capote's Holly Golightly, too.

of Adèle in *Main Brides* (44, 47) which acts as a substitution for her visualization of obsession (*Main Brides* 41, 57, 58).

The small red spot that haunts the narrative *pastiche* of desperate wandering in "Petty Thievery" (*Spare Parts* 55-62) hovers on the horizon in the form of a menacing red sports car and clings to the periphery of the welfare mother's consciousness as a signifier of the general fear and despair that pervades the story (55, 56, 57, 61, 62). The red spot transmutes into blood just after it is revealed as the symbol of a violent attack on the narrator, becoming "*The sliding red spot*" (62) at the end of "Petty Thievery." This violence culminates in the tragic separation of a mother from her child, the speaker's only joy in an otherwise dreadful existence. In the story "Tall Cowboys and True" red emerges once more as an emblem of separation (the narrator's boyfriend wears red sneakers), of menace (the driver of the car has a red statuette of Jesus on the dashboard), and of release (red blood of the cowboy is spilled at end).

In "Ottawa" sexual repression in the form of images of self-protection is played out against a backdrop of nonsensical fragments such as the advice the narrator receives from her mother: "I want to tell you how to avoid rape. ... Boys are horrid when they don't feel so hot about themselves. So stoop to conquer. Turn the other cheek. Wear a white sweater" (28). The narrator is figured several times in the position of having her knees drawn up close to her chest: "My knees up drawn up in a hump" (27), "I had my knees up" (29), "I drew my knees close to my chest" (33). This image is echoed in Scott's essay "Red Tin + White Tulle," once where the first paragraph of "Ottawa" is

duplicated almost exactly<sup>33</sup>, and again a page later when the speaker reflects on her mother/herself: "Harmony in the family keeps order in the nation.' Her knees drawn up in defence against the terrible task that homily would impose. The knees again. I am she taking our Sunday afternoon nap" ("Red Tin" *Spaces Like Stairs* 19). An attitude of protectiveness, particularly around the genitals in female characters in Scott's writing, is not surprising when the textual advice on how to avoid rape includes, "wear a white sweater" (28).

Along with providing a grotesque backdrop for other images, the passages of fragmentation and disjunction function in this text, as in the others, to introduce ambiguity and multivalence and manifest concretely the act of language confronting itself. Consider, for instance, this sequence in "Ottawa":

We kept walking. Chris's song wafted through a car window. Hands on sticky nylon stockings. 'Hasn't he called you yet?' said my mother. Taking me from behind. Yes we have no bananas. The new shopping centre smells like plastic. No he hasn't called. Yes the Mountie has moved to Manitoba. No the country boy ... as far as I know he's still jerking his radio down the road. Like a drop stitched. I smiled. I don't look back. Another rock star rose out of the shingles over Sally's Yukon Saloon. Squeezed between two highrises. (32)

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<sup>33</sup> See page 18 in *Spaces Like Stairs*. The paragraph is reprinted practically to a word with the exception of the first sentence. The version in "Ottawa" reads: "The summery breeze blew the curtains" and the version in *Spaces Like Stairs* reads: "Ottawa, 1962." One of the other minor differences is that the past tense in the final sentence of the paragraph in "Ottawa" is changed to the present tense in *Spaces Like Stairs*: "The Sunday roast hardened in the oven" becomes "*The Sunday roast hardens in the oven*" (Scott's italics).

What appears to be a conversation about old boyfriends between the narrator and her mother is interspersed with ambiguous fragments. For example, the phrase, “[h]ands on sticky nylon stockings” may refer to the narrator’s hands on her own stockings the day that she is walking with her mother to a garden party on Parliament Hill. Or, it could point back to a moment on a date with Chris, the rock star, when he put his hands on her stockinged legs. Similarly, does the phrase, “taking me from behind,”<sup>34</sup> refer to the narrator’s perception of her mother’s question as a surprise attack or metaphoric ambush? Or does it allude to a sexual episode between the narrator and Chris?

In responding to what we assume are her mother’s questions about other romantic prospects, the narrator comments that the country boy is “still jerking his radio down the road.” While the meaning of this expression may be far more obtuse, a reader is likely to accept it as a pithy combination of a snarky allusion to masturbation and an unkind put-down about the country boy’s failed gift-buying attempt (we are told he bought a radio “nobody made batteries for” [27]). These intermittent scraps of speech are fairly easy to apprehend as associative links between the present and the past.

However, immediately following this exchange, comes the fragment, “Like a drop stitched.” This incongruent simile brings to mind the notion of a dropped stitch, or a stitch dropped, as in knitting, but one has difficulty visualizing a drop that is stitched. Is it a drop of water, or a drop of blood? Or is it some relation to a ‘drip,’ a colloquial term

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<sup>34</sup> At the end of “Petty Thievery” when the narrator’s car is presumably hit by the red Capri, we find a bleak echo to this phrase, “It entered us from behind” (62) sounding just as sexual and coercive as it does in “Ottawa.”

for an uninteresting person?<sup>35</sup> It appears to be completely without logical connection to any of the preceding or following text<sup>36</sup>.

Other scraps of language in this passage are more easily explained. "Yes we have no bananas" is a song lyric containing a contradiction that plays on the notions of presence and absence. Its insertion here casts a tone of tired cynicism over the conversation which we understand has run through its familiar set of stock answers more than once before. It also hints at the narrator's strategy of veiling personal details in meaningless repartee. Scott wants, as she states to Barbara Black, "to provoke the reader into seeing that things are never as they seem" (K10). The phrase "yes, we have no bananas" represents the kind of subversive conversation-making strategy that Gail Groulx employs, masking the actual reality, "no bananas," which signifies no husband prospects, with superficial chatter, "yes" which signifies everything is fine. Suggested also is the embedded paradox that lies in the assemblage of facts about the relationship that, if revealed, would only distress or puzzle the interested mother: for instance, that the narrator and Chris have gone out on dates but that the outcome of these dates was less than favourable<sup>37</sup>. Such strategies are typical of the way that Scott's Brides endeavour to piece together the performance of an identity that will please their current company while at the same time protect their vulnerabilities.

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<sup>35</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1987) calls a "drip" slang for a feeble or dull person (224).



The main character in "Withdrawal Symphonies" (39-46) uses similar survival techniques to construct identity markers that will gain her access to freedom from a destructive relationship. In this story, which St. Peter calls "the only unsuccessful stylistic experiment in the group" (38), the images of roses and raspberries on the snow create the energy of vibrancy on a backdrop of sterility. A battered wife of an unfaithful husband sees the world coated in ice, just as her feelings are numbed in order to endure her unbearable situation. The bird-bat-like figure of her dead mother is the guide from the other world that eventually helps her to stop blaming herself and act. The woman must manipulate language in order to see herself as an active agent of change rather than a passive victim. Through language practice she disarms that which frightens her (both the cruel husband and the mother figure) and re-constructs herself as empowered. This story ends in a reunion of mother and child (and grandchild) as does "Tall Cowboys and True." Themes of oppressive gender roles, woman's lack of sexual agency and the power of language permeate.

"Tall Cowboys and True" (47-54) is the only story in the collection narrated in the third person. A desperate mother runs away with a 'cowboy,' leaving her children locked in a trailer. "The nightmare vision takes the shape of a macho western movie set under an outcrop in the Rockies" (St. Peter 39). Images of crotches dominate: "carefully

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it is meant to be part of a larger, general miscellany of assorted phrases in which words are robbed of acquired meaning. However, in most of Scott's other sequences of nonsense, each meaningless phrase is surrounded by other equally-meaningless phrases (see, for example, *Heroine* 42-3, 180-1.) Together they form a rhythmic interlude of sounds which confronts the remaining body of text in an interrogative way. Here the fragment jumps out as a complete *non sequitur*. The suspicion that this particle of language may originate in a typographical error is only indulged owing to the presence of other typos in this printing of the volume (Coach House, 1981). Typos I refer to, in this story alone, include "Caddy" (with three d's) on page 29, and my personal favourite, "Christ" for "Chris," also on page 29: "Christ slithered into the lights."

ticking crotches of grain elevators" (48), "wooden crotches" (50), "unsavoury crotch" (50), "her hand creeps closer to the crotch," "the charger cowboy's crotch was impeccable" (51), "ticking-crotch silhouettes" (54)<sup>38</sup>. The fixation on genitals marks this piece with a link between identity and sexuality. Frustrated sexual expression is set against a backdrop of repressive cultural institutions evoked by references to Jesus (52, 53, 54) and the maniacal driver of the car. This is the story in which Scott's weird imagery becomes particularly evocative: "A clitoris pounds in a closet" (50). Her use of the repugnant and the grotesque achieves a surrealistic effect which is also stomach-turning: "Like giant faeces the laughter moved in her mouth" (53)<sup>39</sup>. The details of such images remind one of the paintings of Frida Kahlo, whose beautiful yet chilling depictions of the socio-cultural elements that condition the lives of women are equally visually striking, often showing the female body dissected, entrails exposed, organs splayed open with tentacles from the outside attached to various soft, inner regions<sup>40</sup>.

Similarly, the imagery in the last story, "Petty Thievery" (55-62), functions to manifest the unemployed mother's sense of shame and disgust with her own sexual desire and pleasure. Starting with the memory of a boy in high school kicking her in the groin, the narrator manipulates language to exercise control over her growing fear and powerlessness; for example: "Wrestling but he got me with his football cleat.

<sup>37</sup> See pages 29, 35-6.

<sup>38</sup> Note the similarity to the clocks-as-crotches conceit in "Climbing the Coiled Oak:" "There were clocks in all the village crotches" (18).

<sup>39</sup> Other allusions to faeces occur in *Main Brides*, as in the chapter "Donkey Riding" when Lydia is at the osteopath's and she feels a bulging knot inside her body: "Some huge solid mass like a giant turd trying to come out the top of her head" (187); and again: "Her head inexplicably burgeoning as if a big turd were pressing on the top" (194).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, "Henry Ford Hospital, 1932," "A Few Little Pricks, 1935," "The Two Fridas, 1939," "The Dream, 1940," "Flower of Life, 1943" and "The Wounded Deer, 1946."

(Accidentally.) Right in the C. Keep smiling otherwise you'll cry" (56). The use of initials for words begins with this passage, truncating the word 'cunt' to 'c.' The narrator uses the first letter of words that deal with taboo subjects such as pregnancy and genitals: "Should be B. for a B. and G. for a G. The meaning in metaphor. I know a woman who peed G. and got a B. who pared down his P. to get back to G." (57); "with her bare C. underneath her skirt" (57); "My nostrils smarted for something warm and velvety. Like the small scented Ps in the centrefold of flowers" (58). By the end of the story she is using the first letter of an innocuous word to represent a taboo word: 'Fs' to refer to flowers (62), where flowers come to signify sexual pleasure.

This incursion into language practise creates for the woman a new domain of power. Inventing a new system of signs, the woman character enacts a performative transgression, displacing acquired meaning and opening spaces to "inscrire une littérature de l'inédite et de l'interdite" (Brossard "La femme et l'écriture" 13). The letters become substitutions for the symbols of sexual pleasure that are linked to those words throughout the story. The deferral of meaning operates to engage woman's voice in an ongoing assemblage of identity-codes which allows her to "pass" in the world.

Susan Cody misreads the ending of this story: "the bargain basement theft of an artificial flower makes a bitter joke out of the heroine's search for a symbolic representation of the self" (59). The mother and child do not, in fact, steal anything from The Bargain Basement; the lingerie they see evokes an impression of flowers and springtime. The ambivalent and abundant images evoking genitalia point to a preoccupation with sexual desire that at once seizes and frightens the narrator. Consider the passage that describes the display of lingerie in the Bargain Basement:

Softest nosebags of nylon nighties and pastel panties. The kid went wild. Up and down the aisle. Caressing the nylons. Burying her nose in the negligées. I readied my razorblade. Looked over my shoulder. Strange. No one in sight. I got scared. 'Let's get outta here,' I said. Then we saw it. Realer than real. Layer upon layer of sublime silken petals. Ever more scarlatelately [sic] towards the centrefolds. Luminations of swollen lumps out of which peeped the tiny little points of sparkling Ps. Spreading [sic] strange perfume. Lording it over the place like the crown jewels. (Must have been some new sort of technology.) The sun shining on it like a halo. 'Oh Mommy,' said the kid. 'Let's go,' I said. (59-60)

The mother and child, overwhelmed at the beauty of the display, leave the store from which they were about to pilfer. However, the way that the lingerie conjured images of flowers, which then evoked the labia, vulva and clitoris, stays with the woman. That night, sleeping who-knows-where with her daughter, the woman is obsessed with images of new life: "If only spring would come. Everything's got all swollen up. Points in the embonpoint<sup>41</sup>" (60).

Forever hiding her protruding pregnant stomach (58, 60), the narrator dreams of lesbian sex: "I could see my lips between the silken velvet petals in search of the strange perfume" (61) as homophobia erupts all around her: the demonstrators hold signs that say, "Kill all queers," "Youth Snuffed By Faggot" (60). Fantasizing about Sister Mary's

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<sup>41</sup> Literally "stoutness, portliness" (*Collins-Roberts French-English Dictionary* First published 1978. Toronto: Collins, 1992 : 238). Colloquial French for "hard-on" or erect penis. Here Scott could be referring to either an erect penis or an enlarged or swollen clitoris, as her references to "little points" (60) in this story resonate with references to G.S.'s clitoris in *Heroine* as "small point" (9, 36, 60), "In the dictionary they call it a rudimentary penis" (33).

breast ("A beautiful-shaped bottle" [61]), the narrator races away from a hostile person with a "long knife" who screams, "Lesbian" at her (61). Images of lesbian sex, like the fashioning of a new alphabet, are indications of an existence that works to subvert and undermine dominating structures at every turn. Dense images of hetero- and homosexual sex in this story combine with an atmosphere of brooding violence and instances of terrified flight to create a brutal picture of the powerlessness of the destitute single mother in a homophobic sexist society. Economic impoverishment forms a fitting frame within which Scott's female character pieces together a changing *pastiche* of badges to wear on top of her undernourished sense of sexual power.

The linked stories in *Spare Parts* contain many of the image patterns (birds, containment, the hole, genitalia, menstrual blood, getaway cars, the spiral) and linguistic techniques (syntactic disruption, dream sequence, new sign system, sentence fragments, use of a foreign language, distortion, repetition) found in Scott's later works. Attention to the mother-daughter dynamic, use of urban settings, cataloguing of components of outer-appearance, lesbian relationships, use of the grotesque, writing the body, use of memory, the cultural constructions of the "good-girl" and the "slut," and the tensions between them, voyeurism, the inferred preferability of building exteriors over interior spaces, the performative power of the speech act, themes of betrayal in love affairs, religious hypocrisy and the allure of violence introduce Scott's important techniques and themes in *Spare Parts*, all of which appear in later works.

The beginnings of a dissolving subject, like the ones we meet in *Heroine* and *Main Brides*, are present in this collection. Judith Butler explains how the constituted subject becomes a possibility:

Where are the possibilities of reworking that very matrix of power by which we are constituted, of reconstituting the legacy of that constitution, and of working against each other those processes of regulation that can destabilize existing power regimes? For if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced again and again. That subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanisms of power, but which is power's own possibility of being reworked. ("Contingent Foundations" 13)

Consider how Gail Groulx, of "Ottawa," is a composition of exterior peculiarities, in much the same way that Lydia of *Main Brides* is. Through Gail Groulx, the reader sees the parties, the suitors, the room mates and the aura of disillusionment that pervades the city, the institutions and the sectors of society with which Gail comes in contact. But Gail Groulx, herself, is a vessel (Plato's and Kristeva's *chora*: from the Greek word for enclosed space or womb), the white, ardent yet empty centre, about which the reader learns virtually nothing. So, too, is Lydia. Through her the Brides are revealed; through her the shifting, visually-arresting cityscape of Montreal is displayed. She is a window through which the reader views the minute phenomena that comprise the flickering screen of impressions that signal identity. Experimentation with this vessel-like "subject-in-process" begins in *Spare Parts* and continues in the other novels, flowering to its greatest achievement in *Main Brides*.

The critical reception of her 1987 novel, *Heroine*, surprised even Scott herself; it “won rave reviews from critics during the year since its publication by Coach House Press” (Black K10). Barbara Black comments that “the success of what, judging by the concentration needed to read it, ought to be a marginal, avant-garde literary effort has naturally delighted Scott” (K10). Mary Meigs writes, “In *Heroine* Scott has created a vessel which holds the messages registered by her surreal senses, permeated by sexual energy” (223). Reading *Spaces Like Stairs*, and in particular the essay “A Feminist at the Carnival,” as a companion piece to *Heroine*, Bina Toledo Freiwald explores the novel as fiction-theory<sup>42</sup> and advances a reading that fills in some of the gaps with an embedded incest narrative. Jennifer Henderson’s study of *Heroine* argues that the novel “displaces the narrative quest(ion) for / of identity” (93). Lorna Irvine’s article, “Words on the Prowl,” in *Quebec Studies* notes Scott’s attempt in *Heroine* to dissolve the boundaries between text and the female body, between the genres of creative and theoretical writing and between francophone and anglophone cultures.

Patricia Belzil, like many reviewers in Quebec, is delighted with the content of *Heroine*: “avec une tendre ironie et une vive intelligence des contradictions qu’elle vit, la narratrice fait le bilan, à la fois personnel et socio-politique, d’une décennie” (22). Barbara Black calls *Heroine* an “intensely female, feminine memoir of the radical 1970s” (K10). The comments of both these critics foreground the acute historicity of *Heroine*. A memoir of the 1970s, it takes stock of a particular decade. Reading *Heroine* at the end of the millenium, knowing how the 1980s and 1990s deconstructed the ethos of the 70s, one

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<sup>42</sup> Fiction-theory as Freiwald defines it is “a method that explores gaps (between two or more ways of thinking) without attempting to close them; it is thus the antithesis of a bridge” (65).

perceives the documentation of its decade to be almost quaint: "Twas the late 70s and snowing hard. Already you could feel the bottomlessness of the 80s" (*Heroine* 123). The fiery idealism of the 1970s that met its demise in the 1980s inspires a kind of nostalgia that can only come to be in a time as distant from it as ours is. "Circumstance (her place in the century), plus her sex are combining at this very moment, just below the surface, in some extraordinary vision (if she could just put her finger on it). Something so original, it could shake Western thinking" (*Main Brides* 131). The immediate seriousness of the "revolution" in the novel pales with the passing into another historical moment which denies and diminishes its cause. Avowals of commitment and longstanding steadfastness can be read today with anything from indulgence to bitterness. An important contribution to the social, cultural, literary and political historical record, *Heroine* documents a singularly interesting time in Quebec from a singularly interesting perspective.

*Heroine* engages the writing tactics Scott used in *Spare Parts*. Consisting of one extended meditation running to almost two hundred pages, *Heroine* sustains reader interest largely through its unusual language practise and perpetual deferral of meaning. The reader's desire for resolution is continually delayed as the bathing woman re-views her psychic landscape from different viewpoints. The movement of the prose works in conjunction with sound and rhythm to sustain the impression of an interior drama.

*Heroine* deflects and defers meaning as the central character confronts her own thoughts, assumptions, biases and motives. Framed by the re-examination of a love affair, Scott's language practise interrogates and deconstructs most conventional modes of telling: "the trick is to tell a story" (31); "the trick is not to get upset at past errors by giving in to melancholy" (118). Capitalizing on all the "articulatory effects" that betray



the presence of the *genotext*, Scott exposes language as a flawed signifying system that conditions the way reality is shaped: "How can a woman be centred if she isn't in charge of her words?" (59). The problem of identity under such conditions is not only epistemological (how can we know who we are?) but also ontological (what are we?).

In terms of heroism, G.S. speaks of herself as less real than the heroine she is writing into a novel: "Maybe the pneumonia I got last winter was the cause of the final humiliation. Of course, a real heroine would never get dragged down like that" (*Heroine* 166). Not just an opportunity for self-diminishment, this judgement, appearing directly after a "shot" of the grey woman whose "shoulders shake and shake with coughing" (166), thumbs its nose at notions of identity purity<sup>43</sup> and admits the burden of identity performance.

Though considered by at least one critic to be a postmodern writer, Scott creates G.S., obsessed with creating a modern heroine: "A modern woman has the detachment of an artist"(61): "Can a progressive woman sink so low?"(111); "I was behaving so unmodern" (127); her goal is "[t]o be on every front a totally avant-garde woman" (62); "[a] heroine can't just be sitting on some train writing in a diary. It isn't modern" (122). She worries constantly about imbuing her heroine with sufficient modernity: "Oh, I wish I'd asked Marie about that question about melancholy versus progress in a modern heroine. I mean could the heroine, in the whole picture, lean even more to darkness than to light? Becoming a tragic figure?" (160).

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<sup>43</sup> The concept of the real heroine, like those of the real man, real woman or real pro, is a function of obsessions with identity-based belonging. Kate Bornstein asserts: "Wanting to be *considered* a 'real man' by impossible standards keeps most men in the position of *supporting the impossible standards*" (*My Gender Workbook* 41, Bornstein's italics).

Scott's repeated allusions to a "modern" heroine is undoubtedly an acknowledgement of her debt to Modernist writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf who dismantled linguistic structures and rewrote the possibilities for heroes and heroines. Her use of this term may also be in deference to the heroines created by Nicole Brossard. For example, Florence Dérive, in *Picture Theory* is described as having "an ultra-modern New York style" (16), Sarah Dérive Stein as having an "[u]ltra modern style" (123, Brossard's translator's boldface)<sup>44</sup>.

G.S. struggles ceaselessly to resist letting her modern heroine fall into the abyss of desperation:

NO. I can't let her disintegrate like this. Racing towards the final humiliation (the reconciliation) as if she can't resist the blackness in her. It would be better to wait until that dark smudge of desperate need for love after the pneumonia hid something more essential. More socially progressive. Yes, that's it. A sensitive progressive woman naturally absorbs the pain from the air and from the streets, until it meets up with that sad (unidentified) gap in her own self. (170)

She carefully builds an outer layer representing the strong, problem-free, modern woman to mask the depressed, fragile version of self within: "Fortunately, the heroine's tough, socially progressive, external image will protect her from such sentimental weakness. But what to do then with her internal desolation?" (92).

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<sup>44</sup> Brossard's translator's use of bold type indicates a word (here, the word skyscraper) that was originally written in English: "I have indicated the passages Brossard wrote in English in boldface" (Barbara Godard "Preface" *Picture Theory* 10).

She re-visits her ideas about what a story “should be” and assesses how her own survival strategies disrupt that formula:

[S]he thinks that in the 80s a story must be all smooth and shiny. For this pretends to be the decade of appearances. Like a photo of the silhouettes of figures passing on the street outside the restaurant window ... she thinks: Yet I feel this terrible violence in me. In any story, it will break the smoothness of the surface. (182)

*Heroine*'s story “breaks the smoothness of the surface,” subverting the role of the traditional hero in narrative, making an opening for a new heroine. In her essay, “A Feminist at the Carnival,” Scott claims it is time for a new kind of heroine:

*At Delphi a[n] ... ascension ceremony conducted wholly by women was called the Herois, or 'feast of the heroine.' [ ] And this ascension represented Persephone's cyclical rise from Hades, not to 'heaven,' but to wander about on earth with Demeter (her mother) until the time came for her return to the Underworld. [ ] It is the notion of cyclical ascension, and descent ( in contrast to the dominant pattern of linear rise to climax in patriarchal drama), that appeals to my heroine as she tries to work all this out on her computer screen. For this notion would permit her heroine ( her set of heroines) to be both grandiose and humble, miserable and angry, not to mention any other imaginable contradiction, without shame .... (Spaces Like Stairs 124, Scott's italics)*

Rosemary Sullivan recounts the achievement of *Heroine* in this regard:

Her remarkable novel *Heroine* abandon[s] the realism that characterized much of English fiction in favor of what is sometimes called self-reflexive fiction; the narrative voice, a quasi-autobiographical construct, doubles back through the text, reflecting on the process of the writing itself. She wanted to create a new heroine, what she calls a 'meaning-in-the-feminine.' (Sullivan C17)

Even in light of feminist views of the day, Scott says too few advances have been made:

*The rigid attitudes prevailing in certain milieus about what a 'feminist heroine' is, for example, have progressed little beyond the social realism of the 20s and 30s. If writing is the act of always seeking more understanding, more lucidity, prescriptive directives have no place in our trajectory towards the uncanny edge of language.* ("Tale of Two Chairs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 62, Scott's italics)

In an effort to get away from prescriptive directives in narrative, Scott creates a heroine in her 1987 novel that defies the usual requirements. She writes:

Woman's 'bathos' (*ludicrous descent from the elevated to the common in writing or speech*) versus the patriarchal 'pathos' (*that quality in speech, writing, music or artistic representation which excites a feeling of pity or sadness*)? ("Paragraphs Blowing on a Line" *Spaces Like Stairs* 80, Scott's italics)

In lieu of a quest-journey motif, Scott creates a rippling of memory-laden episodes that spin out from a consciousness spiralling around the centre of the text:

The multiple images contract into the immediate warm reality of her sexual body, quivering as she lies in the bathtub, and in the pain-shot landscape of her mind. The book is the simultaneous translation of the heroine's centred energy into the medium of her becoming. (Meigs 222)

*Heroine* repeatedly interrogates the development of a new heroine. G.S., the woman at the centre of the text, unfolds in the novel in tandem with the heroine she herself is creating: "I got up to go, concentrating on how to put the whole symphony down on paper. With the heroine a free spirit (although you can taste the fragility of her chances, for self, for love) radiating from the middle of the story" (Scott *Heroine*42). As G.S. reviews the identity markers of her own self as she has presented it in the past, her new heroine challenges stock female characters of the literary past. Scott says: "The question of representation is really interesting for me as a woman, because I think women have often been represented as part of a male fantasy" (Black K10). Once again, Scott echoes Virginia Woolf, who wrote: "[U]ntil very lately women in literature were the creation of men" ("Women and Fiction" 49).

Scott's disruptions in language help shape the narrative from the centre of which her new heroine radiates. She speculates about the impact of her new heroine on form: "If this character ends up as part of a tapestry, in other words not unary, neatly resolved, she will fragment the novel form!" ("Paragraphs Blowing on a Line" *Spaces Like Stairs* 83). French-Canadian politics in the 1970s embodied revolution and upheaval. As Scott says in a 1988 interview, "You can't talk about that period – rupture on every front, in social relations, political ideals and dreams – without also thinking about form" (Black K10). Breaks in structure re-mould the plot line from a male climax-based quest into a

turning spiral that more closely reflects woman's sexual pleasure ("I'm writing round in circles" ["Paragraphs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 80]).

Barbara Black writes,

Rejecting conventional narrative (which one feminist critic has sarcastically called 'the marriage plot') gave Scott the freedom to get right inside her heroine's head, reproducing the maelstrom of thoughts, doubts, memories, fantasies and recriminations which meld into her bathtub meditation. (K10)

Indeed, the bathtub meditation at the centre of the text not only invites the reader to look at the remembered events from a certain perspective, but also, thematically, re-captures the value of woman's control over her own sexual pleasure.

There are at least two other novels in Canadian fiction that show the main character in the bath. The opening of Marian Engel's *The Honeyman Festival* features the heroine, a pregnant mother, lying in the bath staring at the ceiling, thinking. While she does not spend the entire novel in the tub, she does review her past relationship with the man in whose honour she is holding a party. Honeyman, the ex-lover-filmmaker, stands in for her absent husband, an undesirable foil, functioning to expose her feelings about her current life in which her sleeping children, her gentle, loving spouse and the tender young man living upstairs inspire fiercer emotions than the spectre of a shallow, self-serving suitor from the past. As in some other of Engel's works, she writes woman's body into the text in a nuanced yet courageous way. Scott's bath-woman also presents the centrality of the body, but rather than investigating a woman in a traditional role (such as Engel's housewife-mother character) Scott explores women in alternative life choices

(political revolutionaries, lesbians, prostitutes, single women). Scott uses the bath-womb motif to enact myriad disruptions in language in ways that Engel's novel does not attempt.

In *The Studhorse Man* by Robert Kroetsch we meet a man who works in the bathtub<sup>45</sup>. The narrator, Demeter, is taken away by police after a climactic scene during which Hazard LePage, the Studhorse man himself, is killed by his own stud horse, Poseidon, in the parlor of the house where Demeter has been holding Hazard's fiancée, Martha, against her will. Thereafter he resides in a psychiatric institution where he sits in a bathtub, naked, and writes the story that makes up the narrative content of the novel. In Demeter Kroetsch creates the ultimate unreliable narrator, and the ridiculous state of innocence that his sitting in a tub engenders augments the parodic humour of the text. The dry tub evokes a barren womb. As the narrator tries to birth himself through text, he is hindered by the sterility of his setting, the tub, the institution and the prairie itself parched and unyielding.

By contextualizing the narrator's preference for the tub as a work space, Kroetsch re-writes the association of the bathtub as a warm, safe, comforting space into evidence of mental disarray and disruption. Drawing on the reader's knowledge of bawdy sources of humour, stereotypes of the western cowboy, the picaresque hero and the rogue, and culturally-determined notions of nudity as funny, dangerous, silly or frightening, Kroetsch mocks various literary conventions and adds a new kind of hero to the Canadian roster. Scott, too, invokes the reader's intertextual experience to make room for a new

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<sup>45</sup> It was halfway through the novel that I realized this character is sitting in a dry tub. Though he is naked, he does not sit in water.

kind of hero(ine). Like Kroetsch, she enlists the devices of parody, hyperbole and repetition to mock certain literary traditions and re-assesses conventional wisdom from a refreshing perspective.

In Scott's "Climbing the Coiled Oak" we saw a young girl become aware of the skewed cultural economy operating on woman's sexuality; in *Heroine*, right from the outset, we meet a woman who literally takes her sexual pleasure into her own hands. The image of the solitary woman in the bath, positioned to masturbate with the tap water running between her legs, is sustained throughout the text, remaining a constant reminder of the centrality of the sexed, gendered body. In "Paragraphs Blowing on a Line" Scott writes:

I'm trying to create a *subject* with a bathtub for a setting. A tissue of the author, the woman's body and the would-be writer (whom the narrator is creating), working their way out of the tub. Starting with the long come. Can anything be more 'present' than the spasm of orgasm? True, the small flutters are also absence, absence that heightens clarity of vision the minute after. (*Spaces Like Stairs* 95, Scott's italics)

Through repeated small, gentle evocations (like the "small flutters" to which Scott refers), the text does not let the reader forget for a moment that it is a woman's meditation s/he is witnessing, starting with the following:

I'm lying with my legs up. Oh dream only a woman's mouth could do it as well as you. Your warm faucet's letting the white froth fall over the small point on the tub floor. Your single eye watches my floating smile in its enameled embrace. (*Heroine*9)



and continuing throughout: "Lying with my legs up" (*Heroine*20), "Ohhhhh dream, rising sap is the stuff of art...." (*Heroine* 33), "Oh froth stay warm now that Marie's gone" (*Heroine* 34), "Oh froth, your warm faucet's spurting warmly over my uh small point" (*Heroine* 36), "I'm lying in the bath, feeling fine ... The bath, the warmth" (*Heroine* 41), and so on. And even when she says, "Oh, the water's getting cold. I'll have to get out soon" (*Heroine* 50), the meditation continues for another hundred and thirty pages of text before she actually does.

The woman-in-the-bath image acts as a "focalizing" place for the reader, a place to which the action always returns. Scott explains:

I realized that I had to give [the first draft of *Heroine*] some sort of shape because if I didn't, for most people (and even for myself) it would be boring and unreadable after a while. So I added a connective narrative voice ... For me, there was a poetic stage and then a structuring stage. That was where I found the bathtub device, in which the woman begins telling a story, although she constantly rejects the form in which she is telling it. ( Carey 17)

The numerous attempts to tell the story reinforce the wave-like movement of the ripples of pleasure washing over the character G.S. in her bath. The seductive auto-eroticism, the faltering and re-starting action, combines with linguistic aberrations to produce a continuum within which language confronts itself. As in the stories in *Spare Parts*, absences, contradictions and dream images function together to manifest the semiotic.

The narrator's relationship with language is contingent on her sense of self and her sexuality. Mary Meigs writes, "In *Heroine* she plays with the subjective-objective

enigma of herself as though she were juggling particles of light" (222). Interspersed with memory fragments, her focus shifts constantly between her clitoris, her heroine and the forms which deny her story. Meigs writes: "Scott has the ability to keep all her images vibrating on the picture plane .... All her images, like her dreams, are pieces of the puzzle that she is putting together in the search for herself as heroine" (222). The new heroine that emerges from *Heroine* is necessarily one whose identity is contingent upon sexual agency and language practise: "The heroine keeps walking. Wondering why a woman can't get what she wants without going into business on every front. Social, politic, economic, domestic. Each requiring a different way of walking, a different way of talking" (*Heroine* 181). Though she emerges from time to time near the centre of the text, like Lydia in *Main Brides*, any stable reading of her place is constantly deferred. She is always "on the outside edge, with snow, romantic, overdetermined, falling like syrup" ("Paragraphs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 87).

Scott, in creating this heroine, has to wrestle with the question: "*Et comment constituer un sujet de roman qui tente de parler de deux pôles opposés simultanément?*" ("PBL" *Spaces Like Stairs* 87, Scott's italics). But the task she sets for herself is not merely one of speaking from two opposing poles simultaneously, for the reader quickly discovers that there are not only two poles. Scott's writing strategies deconstruct binarism to open up spaces for possible articulation that have been heretofore unauthorized. As Christina Crosby explains:

[C]onsciously assuming a specific standpoint, reflecting on the facts of history which place one in a particular way, leaves the problem of identity intact and the concept of history uninterrogated. It is to assume that

ontology is the ground of epistemology, that who I am determines what and how I know. (137)

Scott's heroines are not content to position themselves and be done with it. Keenly aware of the thin layer of signifiers that serves to express identity and its portable utility, they seek to initiate a new kind of history that breaks the circularity of an epistemology based on an ontology that is derived from historical conditions: "who am I? That's obvious: I am my differences, which have been given to me by history" (Crosby 137). Scott's heroines deploy identity to rework and reconstitute the subject (consider the chapter title, "I Was a Poet Before I Was You" [*Heroine* 73]) in the context of a History "smooth and gently moving. ... Full of nuance, broad, accessible, instead of mean and categorical" (*Main Brides* 199).

Repetition, one of the devices Kristeva indicates produces "articulatory effects" that signal the presence of the semiotic, is deployed in *Heroine* to register the thematic material that deals with sexuality and woman's loss of control over her sexual being. Alain in *Heroine* says, "La science dit que la répétition n'existe pas. Les choses changent imperceptiblement de fois en fois" (*Heroine* 15). G.S reflects that

Cassandra in Greek mythology also began to think of time as circular while lying down contemplating the stars on Troy's ramparts. Watching the movement of the heavens, with illuminating points in the dark waste, she realized things go round appearing to repeat themselves, but not really. (144)

The title of a piece Scott had published in *Books in Canada* is "There's No Such Thing as Repetition: A Short Novel Written in Paris."<sup>46</sup> However, *Main Brides* suggests otherwise: "Insisting on the importance of repetition; doubling; series in reinforcing ideological concepts" (*Main Brides* 122).

As in "Climbing the Coiled Oak," images of the hole reinforce the commodification of woman's sexual receptivity, and variations of the phrase, "Oh Mama why'd you put this hole in me?" are repeated throughout (31, 34, 125). Other hole imagery, along with allusions to the vagina, vulva and womb, figures woman's sexuality as a site of loss and reinforces the thread of loss of sexual control that runs through the novel. Images that emphasize woman's sexual pleasure as an absence or lack appear subtly and intermittently throughout; for example, referring to a window as a "cavity" (*Heroine* 46) reminds the reader that Scott's women characters have "such a hole to fill" ("Paragraphs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 79).

Typically Scott figures the way language practise determines normative behaviours as the root of exploitation and objectification: "I sometimes imagine 'whole' as representing w (for women's difference, the unspoken) + hole (as our sex is frequently referred to by men)" ("Shaping a Vehicle for Her Use" *Spaces Like Stairs* 74). G.S. speculates about the value of orgasms in her new heroine's narrative: "Here is a woman with good orgasms. Still, the heroine wouldn't let orgasms hold her to a man. Knowing as she does that a woman can find other ways to transcend the emptiness" (145).

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<sup>46</sup> "There's No Such Thing as Repetition: A Short Novel Written in Paris" *Books in Canada* 23.5 (Summer 1994): 8-11.

Worrying about keeping her heroine modern, G.S. constantly modifies her: "A real heroine wouldn't cover her feelings the better to please a man" (*Heroine* 171).

One of the strategies Scott uses besides repetition, is the allusion to and creation of rhythm and musicality in the text. Kristeva reminds us that "the *chora* ... is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm" ("Revolution" 94); the aural quality of *Heroine's* movement draws attention to the *genotext*. G.S. frequently laments that she is writing a novel and not a song:

On the radio Edith Piaf is singing *Je Ne Regrette Rien*. So beautiful, so sad. She was a free woman. Singing her pain to make a story out of the chaos.

I could do that in the novel. Of course, in a story, you tell, not sing.

(*Heroine* 39)

Scott, herself, told Barbara Carey that "the first draft of *Heroine* was like a long song. It was musical and rhythmic, and went on and on and on and on" (Carey 17). Margaret Sweatman writes that *Heroine* is "a book that stays in the memory as an evocative rhythmic process" (37). Scott writes in a journal entry: "the song form seems the closest to the voice / body proximity I want to evoke in my writing" ("Paragraphs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 96).

She says she envies visual artists as well, because "the audience seems to accept that visual images can 'slip,' may have multiple meanings whereas writers, especially those working in prose can be easily trapped in the preconceived notions ascribed to words by ideology" ("Paragraphs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 89). Scott told Barbara Black: "For me, it starts as poetry. My notes are very poetic. I write in cafés a lot. Things come in

almost through my pores from the street, from the past, from all over the place" (Black K10). Her openness to random stimuli evokes Virginia Woolf: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" ("Modern Fiction" 9). Scott's writing contains many qualities of music and poetry, and perhaps this is why her work achieves the kind of transformative power that Kristeva attributes to poetic language. In creating a "subject-in-process," she tries to give her heroine a "voice invoking a poetic meaning in excess of the sentence" ("Paragraphs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 90).

In re-viewing her affair, and assessing the qualities with which she would like to endow the heroine of her novel, G.S. chooses strategies that will express identities enabling her to re-enter the world outside the Waikiki Tourist Rooms: "Shh, for a novel I have to be more rational. The heroine could be from Brecht. Emphasizing the external the better to distance from inner chaos. ... Anyway, a heroine can be sad, distressed, it just has to be in a social context" (84). Expressing an identity in terms of context unclenches G.S.'s paralysis. Her friend Marie encourages, "By your own words you may start to live" (*Heroine* 172) and language practise proves to be the strategy that releases her: "The trick is to keep looking towards the future thus cancelling out nostalgia" (84); "A heroine locked in time could be the ruination of a novel" (132). The *semiotic disposition* of *Heroine*, together with its playful treatment of heroism ("Still I don't know if a real heroine would feel like doing what she felt like doing next" [*Heroine* 168]), points to the performance of identity in ways that subtly rewrite normative judgements.

Scott's latest novel<sup>47</sup>, *Main Brides against ochre pediment and aztec sky* (1993), is the book she was working on when she told Barbara Black, "I'm working on a collection of short stories, portraits of women in and around the neighbourhood of the Main" (K10). But rather than emerging as a short story collection, the finished form of *Main Brides* resembles an extended meditation similar to that of *Heroine*. Highly sensual, *Main Brides* is permeated by voices and sounds. "It is studied, and the first part is a prelude consisting of graceful gesture lines, disembodied and ephemeral, until the rhythm of the entire piece is set into motion. ... Scott constructs a novel that reflects upon itself, setting off refrains and reminiscences, a musical configuration" (Sweatman 37). It creates keen, incisive pictures, and it is fastidious in its exactitude, attending to light, colour, shading, hue and texture.

In the chapters titled "the sky is what I want," we meet Lydia, a woman in her thirties drinking wine in a bar-café on Montreal's The Main<sup>48</sup>. She is "sitting quietly in the heat. Smoking cigarettes and watching other people. As if imagining their stories. Possibly, to counter some vague sense of emptiness" (10). The lives of the other patrons spin out from Lydia's consciousness, dream-like, familiar and poignant. The women of The Main (*Main Brides*) remind Lydia of herself, of people she has known and loved, and of the women characters she imagines creating in her writing. As the *Main Brides'* tales spin out through and around Lydia, they make apparent an aching emptiness that

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<sup>47</sup> After this thesis was finished, Scott's novel *My Paris* was published by The Mercury Press in Toronto (1999). See my review in *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Spring 2000).

<sup>48</sup> The Main is actually St. Lawrence Boulevard, or Blvd St. Laurent, which runs north-south in downtown Montreal, dividing east and west, sectors of the city that have been regarded in terms of their difference, such as Franco versus Anglo, affluent versus poor, and so on. It is possible Scott chose The Main as a site of ethnic confluence.

resonates somewhere inside Lydia herself. Each Main Bride exists in a palimpsestic version of Lydia's expressions of regrets, fears and obsessions.

Emptiness emerges in the novel as cause, symptom and result of obsession. Lydia's gaze is the engine that drives and creates the narrative(s), but it is a gaze that negates creativity because it originates and finishes in stasis. A view of Montreal as a political being and as the main character in both *Heroine* and *Main Brides* would compare the vibrant energetic activism of the 1970s recounted in *Heroine* to the despondent, troubled, almost hopeless inactivity of the 1980s embodied in Lydia in *Main Brides*. The changing attitudes and responses to nationalism, language, culture, Church, sovereignty and the rest of Canada that have rocked Quebec in the last few decades can be traced in the details and movements that Scott examines, questions and mocks in her novels.

Creativity is frustrated in this novel by the shell of a paralyzed artist who can only watch and imagine, but can never create: "dreaming narratives covers up the pain" (55); "the pain can always be absorbed" (57). The patrons in the bar know, "she could be here for hours" (10). Like Adèle, "unfortunately, her small obsession showed" (41).

Obsession colours each of the vignettes, marked periodically by Lydia's own obsession: voyeurism ("Hating her voyeurism: a greed that parasites lâchement, like society does, on the fragile beauty of what intrigues" 15). Sweatman says the book is obsessed with sexuality, language and the politics of both (38). Lydia's voyeuristic pleasure flattens all the Brides, making them two-dimensional: "'They made voyeurs of us,' she thinks, 'with their notions of black and white'" (19). The novel's preoccupation with surfaces resists the allure of depth. Lydia functions as an instant of re-focus,



diverting the gaze incessantly to surfaces: "all she sees is the exterior of things. Exterior equals real" (99).

By insisting on the examination of surfaces, *Main Brides* enacts an implicit reversal of traditional places of meaning. The usual understanding of depthlessness is poor quality. But in *Main Brides*, Scott makes liberal use of striking visual imagery to show that women are continually assessed and stereotyped based on superficial values. For Lydia and the Main Brides, the clever manipulation of appearances and outer layers becomes a potent strategy for controlling the responses to images that condition one's life. Like the ochre pediment of the title, "high piece of ornamental metal, painted ochre. A fake pediment – because no depth" (138), Lydia and the Brides present a thin front: "the value of a mask being that of an anchor to the surface" (23). They keep the necessary tools at hand to change at a moment's notice. Adèle arrives in town after town, "suitcase bulging mostly with accessories capable of transforming a simple outfit into a multitude of images" (42).

Scott's characters enlist the creation of narrative as a strategy to resist normalizing societal forces, "Looking for allusions, that is, attractive surface-images providing information on how to make an art out of their lives (not repeat their mother's)" (55). Lydia, as Kristeva's quintessential "work-in-progress," and dissolving subject, makes narrative that blooms and then dissipates, because "she, who exists only negatively in the symbolic, needed a frame within which to reinvent herself" (Scott "A Feminist at The Carnival" *Spaces Like Stairs* 131). She creates images of the Brides to counter and rework the images that society makes of them. Lydia is the casement for the flight of fragments that limn the surfaces of the Brides.

Like Lydia herself, the portraits she creates are dissolving. Since she (and they) represent(s) a substitution ("the empty, white ardent centre," the vessel-*chora*-womb, the "focalizing lens," the unstable space where a potential subject might pass through), she (and they) can also be seen to embody the unalterable gap in language between the signifier and signified. Watching two "dykey-looking women" in the bar, Lydia "loves the way they're standing: close but not touching. All charged up erotically" (100). The space between the women, like the gap between signifier and signified, excites Lydia, appealing to her sense of textual agency. The stasis that surrounds Lydia frames her incursions into creative space and deflects notions of identity as stable, mirroring the carefully-constructed outer rims of identity in the *Brides*. Lydia is the place-holder of the frustrated artist-writer, "believing, as she does, in the beauty of deferral" (100), continually re-focussing on yet another detail, another hairdo, another hue in the changing sky, another line in the cut of a skirt.

*Main Brides* plays with the relationship of "figures in a ground" by placing The Main Brides against the urban background of Montreal in the late eighties and early nineties. The élan of the city is metonymically present in the details of the specific environs, such as the ochre pediment of the title. At the same time The Main Brides function like the pediment to create the illusion of depth against the ever-changing shades of the aztec sky that fascinates Lydia. The ever-evolving face of the metropolis slides back and forth between the places of figure and ground, forming a backdrop to the *Brides*, and jumping into focus as a character itself.

Scott's attention to the city is important in the context of Brossard's theory that "urban radicals" or "urban cultural militants" will achieve the lesbian Utopia in the city

("The Aerial Letter" *Aerial Letter* 80-2). *Picture Theory* is set mainly in Montreal, Paris and New York, urban centres figured as the central spaces where women meet and exchange ideas. Brossard's latest novel *Baroque d'aube* (Montreal: Hexagone, 1995) is set mainly in "une ville nord-américaine armée jusqu'aux dents" (13-94), Buenos Aires (95-199), and Montreal (200-60), where the protagonist Cybil Noland stays in various hotels (Rafale 13, Gouverneurs 54, Alvear 127, Carrasco 197, "un hôtel au coeur de Vieux-Montréal" 205). The city is the site of potential radical change "which relies on women's strong and sustained solidarity" (Forsyth "Errant" 22). In *Picture Theory*, the character M.V. has a reverie about the city:

Behind the gleaming glass of the city, there were perceptible forms of a state of mind favourable to suffering and the crushing of flesh. The voice mutilated and human passed through the glass, having a right to chapter in the streets, hotels, parlours and parliaments. Falling star above the islands of arid zone, Joyce or Dublin, the human voice blew on hair, wigs, smoothed hair, eyebrows armpits and sexes so as to show the architectural skin of heads, faces and bodies. **Skyscraper**: here, the voice carried and breached the very echo of the sirens. The mouth, urban volcanic, cried out so loudly, that the voice behind the glass was wearing out. (113, see note 50 re:translator's use of boldface)

Brossard identifies several of the urban spaces where radical militancy can effect change: "streets, hotels, parlours and parliaments." The evocation of "Joyce or Dublin" points to the novel *Ulysses*, James Joyce's epic tour-de-force journey novel that immortalized the city of Dublin. This high modernist novel is important for Brossard and Scott because, as

practitioners of language disruption, they are indebted to its linguistic experimentation. Major modernist works like *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway* paved the way for the kind of narrative freedom that writers like Brossard and Scott now enjoy.

In the city culture is produced, education is administered, stories, histories and myths are passed on, knowledge is marketed, and laws and social institutions are constructed. Cities house the major political seats of power, "the political centre[s] of human affairs" (Forsyth "Errant" 21). Forsyth explains:

The male-dominated traditions of Western civilization ... have been enshrined in legal, judicial and poetic codes. They continue to function all too well in the languages of today's educational systems, of the mass media and in the jargon and canons of the professions ... In the work of Nicole Brossard the women who are capable of radical displacement, the 'resolute ecstatic women' (p.40) are Amazons and urban radical lesbians, they being the only women not 'man-made,' (p.41) not invented by Man. ("Errant" 19-21)

The metropolis is the site Brossard has chosen "to open space for herself alone and with other women in revolt, to engage in combat, to know great anger, to discover wonderful enthusiasm. She envisions utopias, while knowing the struggle and the journey can take place only in the all-too-distressing streets of the city" (Forsyth "Errant" 24). Brossard's women, like Scott's, "are always situated in a material context" (Forsyth "Errant" 23).

The Brides are necessarily figured against structures, buildings, streets, neighbourhoods – the context of the urban environment that spawned them. They are thus seen as functions or products of their environment as well as denizens of that environment.

As the collages on the covers of Scott's fictional texts suggest, the urban stimuli in Lydia's world are subjected to a random shifting. Another debt Scott owes to Virginia Woolf and the other Moderns is this attention to the random details of an ordinary life. Consider what Woolf wrote in her essay "Modern Fiction":

The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old. (8)

The places of fore- and background in the texts are arbitrary. Sweatman says "Lydia's portraits are lateral, with a diffused perspective, and the technique is more nearly montage than embedded story. ... The portraits, or lateral narratives, are drawn from a state of 'somnambulism.' In these reside the peculiarities, gorgeous and at times wearying, of Scott's style" (38). Using language and departures from it (ellipsis, gaps, repetition) Scott constantly forces the reader's focus to shift from the portraits of the brides to their surroundings, dismantling an easy "fix" on them as figures in a ground. These shifts ask the reader to note the discrepancies between the constant re-creation of surface images and the residue<sup>49</sup> of the stock images enforced by the pressure of a society in late capitalism.

Scott's attention to exterior details of buildings and the placement of her Brides in cityscapes accomplish an extension of an ongoing movement in writing by women to relocate women characters outside of the rooms (kitchens, bedrooms, nurseries) that have

traditionally enclosed them<sup>50</sup>. Woolf comments on interior space as women's historical place: "one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years..." (*Room 95*).

Mary Meigs called Scott's heroine in *Heroine* a vessel<sup>51</sup>; Lydia as a work-in-progress can also be seen as a vessel. An unstable subject that is constantly in the act of dissolving, she is the placeholder of the artist at the privileged place of transformation and change. Lydia as voyeur-seer reflects the textual world back to itself, mirroring and distorting the Brides in portraits of the city, displacing assumptions about identity and desire, writing the new heroine:

*Among others, the universality of the writing subject (and the degree of its author-ity in relationship to the writing) cannot be assumed – since many women have a sense of being already fragmented, alienated by male fictions. MY desire was to create a new female subject-in-process through the act of writing – (Scott "Tale of Two Chairs" Spaces Like Stairs 62, Scott's italics)*

Lydia participates in the signifying process as the vacant receptacle of the matrices of the relations she creates in fantasizing about the women. Lydia's *pastiche* of details comprising the seven portraits effects Kristeva's notion of "the replacement of the relationship between the protagonists of any enunciation as they function in a locutory act

<sup>49</sup> See my discussion of the trace in Chapter One on Lee Maracle.

<sup>50</sup> In Canadian literature alone, writers such as Margaret Atwood, Aritha Van Herk, Sharon Butala, Susan Swan, among others, increasingly show heroines out of doors.

<sup>51</sup> "In *Heroine* Scott has created a vessel which holds the messages registered by her surreal senses, permeated by sexual energy" ("*Surreal Sense: Review of Heroine*" 223).

... by a system of relations based on fantasy" (28-29). Longing in the form of sexual desire, creative obsession and the archaeology of memory destabilizes her place of enunciation and enhances the distancing effect of the symbolic split.

A patron in the bar wonders about Lydia, "What's she waiting for?" (10); she seems to be waiting for the entire underpinnings of recorded time to be reformed. She is waiting "for the greedy decade to give way to some new kind of History" (63). She is "imagining a History where anyone can enter (without getting murdered). Comprised of, say, small aesthetic details as much as war and treaties" (63-4). *Main Brides* deconstructs official history by disrupting traditional fictions and by writing a new kind of history "from the point of view of women travellers" (65) focussing, particularly, on "small aesthetic details" (64). Mining the archives of woman's memory and deferring the accumulated layers of cultural meaning, this work explores the holes that show, "waiting in a window for some other kind of History" (98).

*Main Brides* highlights the importance of context and perspective, figuring creative desire as the principle that interferes with Romantic and Modernist notions of identity as unary. The subject of the text becomes the context itself. The frivolous or inconsequential becomes crucial: "It's no crime to make up portraits of patrons in a bar" (97).

One critic complains about Scott's attention to the details of fashion and architecture saying,

one of this book's more irritating features is its preoccupation with clothing and hairstyles. Lydia admits that 'all she sees is the exterior of things. Exterior equals

real.' It also equals boring, as we are subjected to an endless fashion parade worthy of *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogue*. (Margaret Gunning D16)

*Main Brides'* encyclopaedic notation of superficial minutiae suggests women's inescapable connection to the material world. Scott writes, "we must write about our thin layer of culture in order to move it forward" ("Spaces Like Stairs" *Spaces Like Stairs* 109). In the chapter "Main Bride Remembers Halifax," Adèle recalls: "Her favourite author, Colette, has taught her that the materiality of things sometimes is all that separates the human body from a terrible sense of nothingness" (54-5). For this reason, *Main Brides* emphasizes materiality to question the fixity of codes, signs and the creation of meaning: "The value of a mask being that of an anchor to the surface" (*Main Brides* 23).

Nicole Brossard also endorses this kind of attention to superficial, often mundane, details. Her writing often treats it in the context of the cityscape. For example, in *Picture Theory*, the character M.V. reflects on woman's voice:

The human voice had whispered 'warmly' in the ear of M.V. that power spread suffering like whitewash. ... The human voice spoke of trials and experiences. ... The voice mutilated and human passed through the glass. ... [T]he human voice blew on hair, wigs, smoothed hair, eyebrows armpits and sexes so as to show the architectural skin of heads, faces and bodies. ... the voice behind the glass was wearing out. Feeling was consuming M.V., her back (on the sand, some dances, bronzed body, the glass elevator in the Hilton has broken down at the third floor). Fill up the kettle, wipe the counter, touch the lumbar area ... (113-14)



Women writers continue to record details of fashion and grooming, not only to take apart the mindset that Woolf makes plain: “football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’” (*Room* 81) but also because they are socialized to do so, and do so quite well. Woolf herself wrote exhaustively of the minute aspects of a woman’s life (in *Mrs. Dalloway* especially); Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro do so today. It may still be true that “it would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men” (Woolf *Room* 95).

Scott juxtaposes fashion and architecture to make an implicit comparison between the two. She suggests that fashion and architecture, both outer surfaces designed and constructed to produce a desired effect, are as important to the production of identity as speech and action. While both fashion and architecture fall prey to taste and trends, functioning as transitory, consumable elements of culture, human identity has typically been thought of as more stable, enduring, less subject to passing fads. Scott deconstructs the traditional values associated with identity highlighting the role of taste, its constructedness, and gestures towards identity as taste-determined.

Both heroines in *Main Brides* and *Heroine* record the *pastiche* of surface signs that passes before their observing eyes, making an ostensible link between the compilation of outer details to create images and identity itself. Working arduously, probing their own memories and imaginations, these women come to see the layer of surface details they have fabricated to create an impression as the actual space where identity is enunciated, as opposed to, say, the space of their thinking, initiating consciousnesses. Just as the external aspect of a building will come to be the sign of its

identity, so does the exterior façade she has applied come to be the sign of a woman's identity.

Scott draws on the tandem function of architecture to contain as well as to erect outer layers, to underline her inversion of the values commonly associated with surface and depth: "Hats ... are like architectural details, often pointing somewhere" (*Main Brides* 133). She is especially intrigued with building façades, like the fake pediment in the title. Outer layers that contain nothing substantial are a concrete illustration of the kind of subject she has created in Lydia: a character who suggests enclosed space but turns out to be a soluble vessel through which a spectrum of images is filtered and expressed.

She uses fashion in the same way: as a metonym for the outer crust of consciousness. She allows her gaze to rest on what is reflected in the surface layer. Though Lydia asks, "But what lies behind?" (*Main Brides* 19) she never finds out. The superficial attributes of characters, places and events take precedence over any exploration of depth even in their fragmentary, often distorted, form. She comes to see identity as "an omen of sensations reassuring Lydia she's reached the real state of detachment, when one finally becomes a person. Free enough to take in all exterior impressions" (*Main Brides* 132).

Scott infuses Lydia's consciousness with seemingly endless lists of details (for example, "slim black leather pants, black boots ... straight cut of dyed black hair" [12]; "leather skirt, hooped earrings, Indian shirt" [20]). If some readers find these lists boring and tiresome it may be because such details have historically been designated as the domain of women and hence trivial, frivolous, empty. In this regard, *Main Brides* makes

a similar point to the one Virginia Woolf makes in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Lydia, an updated version of Mrs. Dalloway, takes a different kind of odyssey.

Created years later, Scott's Mrs. Dalloway is no longer required by convention to be married and a mistress of the house. She is, instead, a single woman in a bar. Both women reside in urban centres – Woolf's heroine in London, England, Scott's in Montreal, Canada. The main difference is that Mrs. Dalloway fulfils the requirements of a traditional subject: she grows through her experience; her epiphanies and revelations initiate her to a new realm of understanding. Woolf's accomplishment lies in the fact that she makes a woman participate in the hero-quest paradigm and allows a woman into the male domain of intellectual and spiritual *anagnorisis*<sup>52</sup>.

However restricted in her rigid gender-codified role, Mrs. Dalloway succeeds in transmuting her creative vision into a dinner party. Lydia's creative vision, on the other hand, remains unrealized. Because she is a dissolving subject, it does not matter that when she steps out on to the street at the end of the novel, she is more paranoid and neurotic than ever. Lydia's interior journey has not enlightened and uplifted her as Mrs. Dalloway's has. Hers is a voyeuristic journey that turns on itself, exposing language as a thin crust, constructing surfaces that dismantle the assumed truth-value of depth. *Mrs. Dalloway* seizes language, "breaking the sentence"<sup>53</sup> ("*Red Tin*" *Spaces Like Stairs* 24), celebrating woman's consciousness; Lydia, however, finds language a weak and fragile process, not up to expressing the desire that drives her voyeurism and textual fantasizing.

<sup>52</sup> *Anagnorisis*, from the Greek, meaning "[r]ecognition; the dénouement in a drama" (*OED* 72).

<sup>53</sup> This idea was originated by Virginia Woolf. In "Women and Fiction" she writes, "the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use. ... And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it" (81).

She experiments with other signifiers; she imagines freeing History from the constraints of language: "History if told through constellations of signs or images ... History told through smell (since smell's the Queen of the senses)" (*Main Brides* 163-4). She thinks of how she could write her Brides through smell: "Nanette, slightly lemon; Adèle of Halifax, violet; the woman who went to Cuba, sandalwood; Z., herbal, yet rigorously exotic; Ivory for the dyke from the West ... Her own scent is musk" (*Main Brides* 164). Lydia's creative energy focuses incessantly on superficial fragments. Like G.S. in *Heroine* who merely thinks about writing a novel, but never writes it, Lydia only imagines the portraits of the Brides. She fastens onto performative signifiers that allow her to recognize identity as a commodity produced and manipulated according to taste, desire and intention.

Scott's Brides appear pale and ghostly in the wedding photographs of their textual worlds, their white luminescence a mean contrast to the enveloping blackness of precast change-resistant traditions: "*I feel so weird, I take sleeping pills, I drink, I want to run away. Like brides feel, I've heard. Their white silhouettes isolated against the dark background of wedding pictures*" (*Heroine* 173, Scott's italics). In the opening of *Main Brides*, Lydia walks "past the Portuguese photo store with the bride standing in the window. Her soldier's X'd out. But even if he weren't, she'd be standing there in her white lace with everybody looking: the Main thing in the picture for a single minute of her life" (9-10). Lydia then notices the sky, "mauve and pink," and some drapery evokes the bride image again: "a lace curtain fluttering veil-like in a window" (10). Lydia herself wears a "white blouse," a simplified carry-over of the white brocade worn by Gail Groulx in her potential husband-catching scene at the end of "Ottawa." In Scott's novels, all

women are potential brides, and therefore susceptible to the rigours of her intricate language practise which reconstitutes them as empowered, variously-determined dissolving subjects.

*Main Brides* is a novel of watching. “[T]his pretends to be the decade of appearances. Like a photo of the silhouettes of figures passing on the street outside the restaurant window” (*Heroine*182). Lydia as voyeur deconstructs negative assumptions about the objectifying gaze. Scott tells Beverley Daurio in an interview, “Julia Kristeva says somewhere that voyeurism is the other side abjection” (“Oral Tapestry” 161). Lydia’s extended meditation validates surface details as elements of the construction of identity, challenging accumulated wisdom which would suggest depth as the *racine* of meaning. Scott says: “I try not to batten everything down, to provide all the answers ... I like the reader to participate, to argue – especially in a novel” (McGoogan H7).

Attention to the mother-daughter dynamic, use of urban settings, cataloguing of components of outer-appearance, lesbian relationships, use of the grotesque, writing the body, use of memory, the cultural constructions of the “good-girl” and “the slut,” and the tensions between them, voyeurism, the inferred preferability of building exteriors over interior spaces, the performative power of the speech act, themes of betrayal in love affairs, religious hypocrisy and the allure of violence reinforce Scott’s desire to create spaces in language for the identity layers of woman to surface and interpellate hegemonic discourses, de-creating patterns that maintain rigid identity-requirements.

Scott deploys strategies and techniques in language practise to refute assumptions about the relationship between identity, language and the body. She investigates accumulated wisdom surrounding the signifiers surface and depth, inviting

the reader to see identity as a wholly unstable category, re-visioning History as a *métissage* (Godard) of contingent, malleable signs. Scott's heroines present carefully-manipulated images to perform the expression of identity. Her writing "dares to think language against itself," using a counterpoint of fertility and vacancy images to unsettle the boundaries between sex and the failed artist tradition. Scott's work employs a *bricolage* of details to muster the performative fabrication of identity, effectively utilizing a dissolving subject, recovering woman's sexual power, and etching new spaces in a cultural spiral, asking the reader to defer closure in order to allow the text to "dangle dangerously on the edge of meaning" ("A Feminist at the Carnival" *Spaces Like Stairs* 131).

### Doing Language: doing identity

I think we create our identities, or actively fortify the identities we seem to be born with, in the same manner and with a similar purpose that a crab excretes the substance that eventually hardens into a shell, its armor. It's *safe* having an identity, it's secure. (Kate Bornstein 30)

During the course of conducting the research for this work, I have come to see identity not as something we have, but rather as something we do. Left alone, identity does not occur. We “do” our identity, in the same way that Judith Butler says we “do” language. In fact, language is one of the sign systems we deploy to perform identity. Dress, movement, association and facial expression are some others. If we want to be known by the world, we have to make our identities happen. We have to perform them. Silence is death. Inaction is erasure. Identity is not found in the body. But it can be performed on the body. And in conjunction with the body. The body is a sign that participates in the performance of identity. The body is, after all, “the site where the individual and society meet” (Minh-Ha 14). The intersection of race and gender identity is performed in, on, and through the body.

The myth of the optimum identity, or “ideal identity,” is dead. Identity configured as in any way fixed or stable is false. Kate Bornstein writes,

The posited ‘perfect identity,’ this powerful oppressive force made up of the composite perfections of all systems of classifications, has a lot of names today. Feminists call it MAN. Jews call it GENTILE. African-American activists call it WHITE. Bisexuals, lesbians and gays call it STRAIGHT. Transgendered folks are beginning to call it GENDERED. In

the binary-slanted world, we keep naming our oppressor (some person or group who has more power than us and is using that power to withhold access, resources or wealth) in terms of some convenient opposite. (46)

The writing of Lee Maracle, Joy Kogawa, Dionne Brand and Gail Scott is important because it reveals the arbitrariness of identity categories. This writing features women taking the initiative to re-define themselves in the face of powerful social institutions and structures; these women do not allow the identities that have been conferred on them to paralyze or subjugate them. The texts I have examined make clear that the most freeing way of performing identity is through *bricolage*: the “new heroine” emerges.

Scott’s “new heroine” acts upon the subject position in keeping with the deconstructionist feminist assertion of “decentering the subject in the same gesture with which it attempts to reinscribe a subject in discourse” (Godard *Talking to Ourselves* 19). This “new heroine” is ripe with possibilities, dissolving just at the moment when she may become fixed, constantly eluding stasis. The “new heroine” is resourceful; she is like our pioneer grandmothers: she makes do with what is at hand. Scott’s “new heroine” reclaims the power of desire and puts together identities that furnish her with sexual agency; she recuperates pleasure. The “new heroine” Scott creates revels in her state of unfinishedness. She keeps moving, slipping out of any objectifying gaze, drawing strength from the beating of “pulsions” and “drives” from her *chora*. Scott brings to life Kristeva’s *sujet en procès* in remarkable ways.

Kogawa, Brand and Maracle also enunciate, in different ways, an unfinished self. Teresa Zackodnik recognizes Brand’s creation of “the black female self as ambivalent



and contradictory” (203). The “new heroines” ambivalence allows them to function in textual space, creatively displacing deleterious myths with alter-stories, as Kogawa does, traversing racist- and classist-clad boundaries, as Brand does, evincing the trace of the other through iteration and orality, as Maracle does.

Embracing contradictions without shame, the “new heroine” can be in the world in exactly the way she chooses to be, at any given enunciative moment. “[G]ender isn’t the only identity one can bend” (Bornstein 64). These heroines recognize that every identity category is open to tampering. They labour to interpolate gaps in those categories, and between them.

I believe these four women writers have moved beyond the problem posed by Winfried Siemerling in the 1995 special issue of *Essays in Canadian Writing on Ethnicity*:

The question of authenticity is one of several problematic areas at the intersection of ethnicity and literature that literary theory has to approach when trying to understand how the term *ethnicity* can be meaningfully employed in literary discussion, and what kinds of problems and qualities it can elucidate in literary texts. (17 Siemerling’s italics)

All four of the writers I treat in this study write **about** the relationship between language and identity, as well as write women characters who **do** language and identity. But they are not bothered by questions of authenticity, because they refuse to be contained by essentialist concepts of identity. They persist in maintaining the instability of the subject

even across matrices of “ethnicity” such as race, colour, class and gender. Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes,

In a critique of liberal individualism, we debunk the supposed ‘stability’ of the individual as category, and yet we sometimes reconstitute and recuperate the same essential stability in the form of an ethnos that allegedly exhibits all the regularities and uniformities we could not locate in the individual subject. (“Beyond the Cultural Wars” 8)

These four women write against the “regularities and uniformities” that constitute stability. Instead, their texts exemplify “the changing same,” using strategic iteration to insert the ambivalent, contradictory dissolving female subject into the interstices of discourse.

They figure identity as an ongoing performance that is enunciated in intermittent gaps, repeating different signs in the same way at times, and the same signs in different ways at other times. These writers put creases in the master discourses that uphold rigid readings of identity, recognizing the important role of (social, historical, cultural) context in any enunciative act of identification. The high level of reader engagement these women writers demand (especially Maracle and Scott) testifies to the inroads they have made in re-configuring identity.

In his article, “Writing Ethnicity: Introduction,” Siemerling writes that “approaches [to ethnic writing] that deemphasize static patterns of difference and identity (defined in terms of pure opposition and negation) promise to continue to be productive fields of research” (18). Such an approach has been fruitful for my research, and it has

been aided by the fact that the texts themselves strenuously resist “static patterns of difference and identity.” The texts I treat in this study witness a new emergence of the female body as sign, as well as a site of discursive transgression, pleasure and “play.” The female body, sexed, coloured, given voice, imbued with language, but never essentialized, issues forth in these writings as a powerful marker of identity construction.

Confronted with ideologically-saturated discourse that excludes or totalizes them, women have always been faced with the challenge of creating their own discourses. Each of these women writers effectively critiques dominant ideologies by deploying counterdiscourses in what Godard calls “the margins of escape, the areas in these discourses not totally predetermined” (“Feminism And/As Myth” 11). As Godard notes, “[t]he work of ideology is to fix meanings as if they were timeless and immutable, above the field of material conditions in which they are constructed” (*Talking about Ourselves* 4). These women writers battle dominant ideologies by construing identity, with the reader, in ways that unhinge meanings.

The critical theory of the First World has been endeavouring to rectify its blind spots, and the writing of women of differing class, colour, economic status and sexuality is finally being analyzed in laudatory ways. Materialist feminist critiques such as Emberley’s *Thresholds of Difference* have begun to extend the field of analysis of the writing of women of colour in Canada by relying on a poetics of difference versus equality. Godard’s contributions have been vital, not the least of which is her invitation for readers to “situate feminist texts in a relational place within a complex dynamized

cultural system that will foreground difference within cultural and historical specificities” (“Feminism And/As Myth” 19).

With the critical thought of Kristeva, Spivak, Bhabha, hooks, Davies, Brossard and Butler (to name just a few), there are now countless ways to read and critique feminist texts “dangling dangerously on the edge of meaning” (Scott), and no reason why scholars can’t continue to write the gap that Arun Mukherjee perceived when she wrote, “[n]ow we hear talk about postmodernist irony and dominants and marginals, but we do not hear any concerted responses to what Aboriginal and racial minority writers tell us about Canada and Canadian literature” (83). What Brand, Kogawa, Maracle and Scott have accomplished is valuable and timely, not only for feminist and anti-racist causes, but for the revitalization of Canadian literature.

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