University of Alberta

As If Women Writing

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Secondary Education

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 1997

Dedication

To all the wonderful and courageous women involved in this study.

Abstract

As if women writing. What possibilities emerge in the subjunctive space of women's writing? This feminist study encompasses three groups of women--teachers, adolescent girls, and retired women--ranging in age from fifteen to sixty-seven, and explores the understandings of identity and the potential for agency that writing embraces. Using primarily an action research philosophy within the structure of writing groups, the women met to write and talk about their writing and related experiences.

Because the literary text has gaps in meaning, it creates a space for writers and readers to involve themselves in engaging experiences and initiates "performances of meaning" rather than actually formulating meaning itself. Such a text subjunctivizes reality; that is, it denotes an action or state as conceived rather than as fact to express a contingent, hypothetical or prospective event. The writer and the reader approach a text *as if* the story can describe the reality of an event or an imagining or a feeling, *as if* language did not remove us a step from the event. The women's texts were such subjunctive sites where both possibilities and limitations could be explored.

Beginning with a consideration of women's position in the Symbolic Order, the research examines how women can question such a positioning as well as subvert patriarchal expectations and deal with the traumas of the Real through the subjunctive spaces of writing. An important aspect of this work includes the influences of group processes through the creation of a particular time and space (chronotopes), the vitality of a "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin), and the destabilizing power of gossip. The women's work

also took them into the territory of what they called "forbidden" or "dangerous" writing as some explored their erotic experiences inside and outside of school and as one woman questioned the boundaries and meaning of her forty-six-year marriage.

Finally, the study considers the research in light of the subjunctive possibilities of the classroom and curriculum, asking how teachers and students can acknowledge and work with the tensions in imagining new possibilities within the chronotopes and heteroglossia of school.

Acknowledgements

Within the subjunctive space of this writing, as I think of each person, it is as if they were beside me just as they were during the writing of this dissertation and long before. I hear their words of encouragement, wisdom, and support all over again and remember how much stronger this work is because of them.

John Oster who taught me the value of asking the right question and then listening for the answer, who shares a passion toward writing, and who reminds me of why I love the prairie.

Terry Carson who introduced me to action research my first day of graduate school and who has always made me feel I have something important to contribute.

Bert Almon who reminds me of the discipline (and the fun) of poetry and who encouraged me to develop the Emily poems into a collection.

jan jagodzinski whose intelligent reading of my work and incisive comments convinced me that I could not settle for the easy way out.

Marg Iveson who shares my love of poetry and who, from the beginning, has been a strong supporter of my work.

Joyce Bainbridge who fostered my first academic publication and whose excellent teaching ignited my interest in continuing my graduate work.

Janet Miller whose presentations at conferences and thoughtful writing have mentored and influenced my own work in many positive ways.

Dennis Sumara who has been a good friend and intellectual companion since the beginning and who continually illuminates for me the deep interconnections between reading, writing, and living.

J-C Couture who started some of these conversations long ago when we shared office space and whose continual intelligent questioning of my work has been both motivating and supportive.

Ingrid Johnston whose generosity with her own work, time, editorial skill and friendship have made my research and my writing stronger.

Margaret Mackey whose willingness to read, critique, and offer friendship have been so important to this work and whose strong and honest reactions have led me to more careful thought and scholarship.

Jill McClay whose eagle eye for grammar has been so helpful and whose confidence in my research and writing abilities has been the true mark of friendship.

Peggie Graham who first led me to Luce Irigaray and whose feminist insights have been a guiding light for this work.

Elaine Simmt who taught me the importance of mathematical conversations even in work such as this.

Lynn Gordon Calvert whose conversations about conversations in our office space were so encouraging and helpful.

The Chix--Shawna Lemay, Lee Elliott, April Miller, Erin Ward, Brea Burton, and Noreen Bell--who met faithfully every two weeks to listen to my poetry and share their own and who were a constant source of encouragement.

My family--Kevin, Sara, and Michael--who patiently support and nurture me in all the ways people who love you do.

I also wish to acknowledge the support offered through Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Fellowship (SSHRC), Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Scholarship, Andrew Stewart Memorial Graduate Prize, and the Province of Alberta Graduate Fellowship.

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Introduction

[W]e imagine ourselves to be whole, to be complete, to have a full identity and certainly not to be open or fragmented; we imagine ourselves to be the author, rather than the object, of the narratives that constitute our lives. It is this imaginary closure that permits us to act. Still, I would suggest, we are now beginning to learn to act in the subjunctive mode, as if we had a full identity, while recognizing that such a fullness is a fiction, an inevitable failure.

(Chambers 25)

The self is not contained in any moment or any place, but it is only in the intersection of moment and place that the self might, for a moment, be seen vanishing through a door, which disappears at once.

(Winterson 80)

1.

A BEGINNING WRITTEN AT THE END

> My pink guitar has gender in its very grain. Its strings are already vibrating with gender representations. That means unpick everything. But how to unpick everything, and still 'pick up' an instrument one 'picks,' or plucks. How to unpick everything, and still make it 'formal,' 'lyric,' 'coherent,' 'beautiful,' 'satisfying,' when these are some of the things that must be unpicked . . . . The writing therefore becomes unpalatable, difficult, opaque, shifty, irresponsible, suspect, and subject to many accusations.
>
> And I could change the instrument (restring, refret, rekey, retool, rehole)
>
> Invent new sonorities
> new probes
> new combinations
> new instruments
> I struggle for a tread. Everything must be reexamined, re-seen, rebuilt. From the beginning, and now. And yet I am playing, I am playing. I am playing
>
> with a string lever.
>
> (DuPlessis 158-159)

In early morning with clouds threatening rain, I hear the rustle of women settling in my study, the fabric of their clothing stirring the air, the whisper of their voices drawing my attention. They challenge me as I challenge myself to consider the writing of this dissertation, to remember that I am telling my version of the research story, but that they also inhabit this version. I am reminded of DuPlessis' question: "how to create an adequate work Of and About women (but never exclusively of or about women), while being By a woman, when strata of previous images of women, some quite culturally precious, suffuse and define culture, consciousness, and individual imaginations" (161).

Looking over this work now, I think that I have not interrupted enough, not upset the apple cart, not restrung the guitar or found a new instrument, even as I have tried to call the issues of women, writing and identity into question. Maybe I have to think of this as a beginning. I have stepped here in this place so next time I can step there in that place.

Balanced along the beam of not losing all the readers, but not giving in to the strong voices of tradition either. At the end of this work, my desire remains: how to call all this into question, how to reshape, restring, reform. Like all writing, the vision, the dream is not fulfilled. The desire dances ahead, teasing, seducing, bringing one to tears and frustration until the writer accepts that this is as far as she can go for now.

My hope is that this dissertation will be read as a feminist text perhaps using Elizabeth Grosz's criteria for judging such a text:

> 1) Renders patriarchal or phallocentric presumptions governing its contexts and commitments visible. It must question, in one way or another, the power of these presumptions in the production, reception, and assessment of texts.
>
> 2) A feminist text does not, strictly speaking, require a feminist author; but it must, in some way or other, problematize the standard masculinist ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation.
>
> 3) Must not only be critical or challenge patriarchal norms but must also facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces--new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms--that contests the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception. (*Space, Time and Perversion* 22-23)

I have come to see feminist research work as a pastiche of methodology. To be responsive to the research situation and to be able to question the patriarchal norms, it is helpful to not fit oneself into any particular research tradition such as ethnography. Rather, by creating a particular way of working designed to evolve through and with the research, the boundaries that have divided methodologies are called into question.

When I first decided to work with groups of women and their writing, I relied on my long experience of writing groups as a way of considering my own writing. Writing groups have been ways for budding and established writers to continue developing their abilities through feedback and work with peers. By inviting the women to join me in such a setting, the only focus that was needed for the groups to begin was a commitment to explore our writing together. The structure of such groups, when I thought of them in a

research context, were reminiscent of action research groups, which support a pastiche of research and include both reflection and participation by the participants and the researcher.

Action research appeared in the United States during the Second World War as researchers sought ways for social science knowledge to be more responsive to significant social problems. Kurt Lewin was one of the originators who developed this participatory research "whereby members of a community could investigate problems . . . while at the same time creating group processes aimed at mitigating the problem" (Carson ii). From this origin, various manifestations of action research have developed, including poststructural action research which developed as a result of the cultural shifts of postmodernism (Daignault). Such research is less concerned about a resolution or mitigation of the problem and instead acknowledges the ambiguity and uncertainty of working within the social sciences. I thought that drawing upon a poststructural action research methodology would offer the space and flexibility that our feminist work needed. Action research offered the possibility of "dismantling the value structure of privacy, territory and hierarchy, and substituting the values of openness, shared critical responsibility and rational autonomy" (Simons qtd. in Elliot 67)[1]. Patti Lather identifies this kind of social research as being where the researcher and the researched become "the changer and the changed" (56). Lather points out that this reciprocally educative process is its most important aspect. "Through dialogue and reflexivity, design, data and theory emerge, with data being recognized as generated from people in a relationship" (72). Lather identifies several interwoven issues that have implications for using such a research design. Two of the issues became most important to this work: reciprocity and dialectical theory-building.

Reciprocity has always been important for writing groups. Writers bring their writing for mutual feedback. There is seldom a leader in such groups, just a consensus of when to meet next, what writing opportunities to explore and so on. For the research

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[1]H. Simons. "Against the Rules: Procedural Problems in School Evaluation." *Curriculum Perspectives*, 5, 2 (1985).

groups, I felt it was important that such direction arise from the group as much as possible. While I arranged meetings and facilitated the housekeeping details, I continually asked the group members to determine the course of the group according to the needs that seemed to arise. The dialectical theory-building developed as we worked together and stepped back from our writing to consider it in different lights and using various perspectives as a way of theorizing about our work. As I describe in this dissertation, reconsidering writing as a site of possibility meant that the women were theorizing about their lives in ways that offered new opportunities or insights.

My study spans two years of working with different groups of white, middle-class women who wrote and spoke of their writing and recounted stories of their lives that unfolded from the edges of pages and catachrestically crept from between lines. The women, as young as fifteen and as old as sixty-seven, were in three separate research projects. Two of the groupings, one composed of English teachers and the other of adolescent girls, met regularly to write or respond to each other's work and to follow the conversations to which such work led us. The last grouping, two women in their sixties, wrote separately over several months, using writing prompts and journal work, followed by interviews. The discussion from all the research groups reiterated how the women's texts were really a confluence of their living, how those texts and our conversations often revealed understandings about our lives that were significant and illuminating, and how our own histories/stories/poetics interacted with culture and politics to co-create meaning.

Imagine the first group meeting during the winter after school. I have turned up the heat since it is so cold outside and have made a pot of tea and prepared a plate of cheese and crackers. Teachers are hungry after school because they've often had to skip lunch. Sidonie[2] arrives first. She teaches high school English in a predominantly white, middle-class suburb and writes novels and poetry whenever she can find the time. She will also participate in the second writing group--the adolescent girls--which is still a year away at this point. When Casey arrives, we're ready to begin. She teaches junior high

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[2]All participants have been given pseudonyms. In the case of the girls, they chose their own pseudonyms with great pleasure.

school English in a small town. She, too writes whenever possible. Both women have taken reduced teaching loads to have more time for their writing and both are active in the local writing community.

The second group meets after school where Sidonie teaches. The echoes of students shouting greetings or yelling taunts, the banging lockers, the thud of books fades away. The intercom to the classroom is temporarily diverted, so the after-school announcements are faint reverberations from outside. The lights have been dimmed and nine desks are placed in a tight circle, ready for the girls to come in and settle down, their journals and bits of paper falling out of their backpacks. Alexis arrives first, bubbly and enthusiastic about returning to work with a favourite teacher and excited about writing. She is followed closely by Dale, who is younger, just in her first year of high school, and a bit shy about her writing. Ayelha arrives next, coming quietly and hesitantly into the room. She too is new to the school having moved many times in her sixteen years as a daughter of a military family. Sophia, Pegatha and Ella-Genevieve show up at the same time. Sophia is confident and outspoken about her writing, while Pegatha is very hesitant about being part of the group. Only the presence of the teacher, whom she admires greatly, relaxes her enough to stay. Ella-Genevieve is also in her first year of high school and somewhat quiet and perhaps intimidated by being in the group. Finally Norah arrives with a splash of bravado and a long speech about why she is late and why she is keen to be involved. Among the girls, as I learn later, are two who are on Prozac; another is mourning the recent death of a parent. Some of the girls feel socially inept and ostracized in different ways; almost all of them feel insecure about who they are. As Sidonie, the teacher, said: "Within the insular world of an affluent, 'whitebread' suburb, the girls are trying their utmost to cope with an alarming number of issues, problems, and volatile relationships. They have difficulty negotiating the complex and confusing signals from peers, the media, their parents, counsellors, doctors, teachers and administrators."

Finally, there are the two older women. They are not a group in the sense of the other two because Hazel lives in the United States. I meet with them individually and communicate with Hazel primarily through e-mail. Hazel has long been interested in

writing and has found workshop opportunities from time to time. My research gives her a chance to focus on her interest again. Carmen, intrigued by my topic, has asked to be part of the research even though she has not written anything but letters since she left school nearly fifty years before. While Hazel lives far away from family and sees writing as a way to explore those connections, Carmen is going through a difficult time in her marriage and, perhaps without even being conscious of this, sees writing as a lifeline.

These are the women of this study.

Then there is me, the researcher. My interest in writing I think is described well by Christa Wolf who notes that "since people have never completely abandoned the labor of writing even in the hardest times, it appears that mere life--life undescribed, untransmitted, uninterpreted, uncontemplated--cannot come to terms with itself directly" (23). She also says that the "longing to produce a double, to express oneself, to pack various lives into this one, to be able to be in several places at once, is I believe one of the most powerful and least regarded impulses behind the writing" (11). In doing this research, writing this dissertation, I have packed various lives into the work: there is my remembrance of being part of each group, my juxtaposing of texts and data to interpret that experience, and the threads of my life lived while writing. These strands mingled with the voices of participants and words of other writers create a "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*) shaped by my intentions. If any of the participants of the study interpreted and worked with the transcripts, she would write something perhaps recognizably connected to this work, but coloured quite differently by her perspective.[3]

In writing this work, I was conscious of the various ways the data and interpretations could be presented. Often research texts are narratives, seamless in their presentation of a story. The reader is presented with interpretations of the data for his or her understanding. But I am not searching through this work for a unifying consciousness for women, but rather to open some possibilities. Can a research text also be considered a place where possibilities are broadened and the text is polysemic? Can a research text

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[3]Each participant has access to the transcripts from her group and all have been invited to use the data for their own writing.

work like a fictional text that subjunctivizes reality? I sought ways to organize my working with three different groups of women, my reading and my considering of the processes and theories of writing, feminism, postmodernism, and literature into some kind of story, a fictional world where elements that do not exist in relationship in the "real" world do so in my text. To bring all this together, I can offer some fictional truths, suggest what is to be imagined and thus create some bounded space for interpretation that is still contingent, hypothetical, and potential. Such a work may raise questions and offer much that is hypothetical but ultimately it will not be the seamless narrative of the one story connected to this work. But this thinking also raises questions about the choices of the writing. Do I demarcate the data as something true? Write it differently from other pieces of text? Insist that it's not imagined? Often a straightforward recounting does not open up the other aspects of the research story that are at work: the themes that are implied, the context of the event, other conversations besides research ones that contributed to the understanding, and the possibility for various interpretations. There is no one true story here, no one way to tell it. Some ways just offer the possibility for richer interpretations.

Whatever my desires as researcher, like my desires as writer, I can never tell the complete story nor even be sure how readers will read the story. My hope is that I have left gaps and spaces for their interpretations, including deciding the way they choose to read this work. For instance, the chapters were not written in order. Although they are laid out in a linear fashion and I provide small segues from one to another, I don't think they need to be read that way. Each chapter can be read on its own. Or readers could also just page through and read only the poetry. The poetry was written during this dissertation as another way for me to engage the theory, and then as a way of resymbolizing that theory for me and as such became an integral part of this work. In a different time or place, the poetry alone, collected together might comprise the dissertation.

Readers could also just consider the research stories at the beginning of each chapter and that would be a different reading experience. Each of these pieces calls into

question, for me, how we represent research. The task of the researcher, I believe, is to describe the research experience (as she's experienced and interpreted it) in a way that most clearly includes the readers of the research in the experience. Using poetry, screenplay format, narrative, dialogue columns and even white space, I try to offer the reader different perspectives of this research and different ways of thinking about the experience, maybe touching you with one scene and not another. I hope that whatever collection of readings readers might choose, like a hologram there will be a sense of the whole, and a raising of questions about the role of writing in our sense of identity. I end this beginning with a reminder from Grosz:

> The relations between text and author/readers is more enfolded, more mutually implicating than either realism or expressivism can recognize.
>
> The signature not only signs the text by a mark of authorial propriety, but also signs the subject as the product of writing itself, of textuality; it functions as a double mark, a hinge, folding together (or separating) the author/reader or producer of the text or product. The signature cannot authenticate, it cannot prove, it cannot make present the personage of the author; but it is a remnant, a remainder of and a testimony to both a living past and a set of irreducible and ineliminable corporeal traces. It is not that author/reader and text are entirely other to each other: the otherness of the other is also the condition of the self-consolidating subject." (*Space, Time and Perversion* 21)

2.

(RE)TURNING TO WRITING

She wakes early to the dark wet of an autumn morning. Somewhere, at the periphery, she hears the rustle of women breathing pages, waiting. She feels loneliness in knowing she must be the one to call out, but rises anyway to make her preparations. A cup of strong coffee, clean paper, soft clothing that falls about her body in warm folds. She settles into the chesterfield corner, the imprint of her earlier figure still there to embrace her while the ticking of the wall clock reminds her, reminds her. Like the tires swishing on the rainy pavement outside. She shakes the grey quillow over her knees and turns on the small light that illuminates her hand holding the journal, the black fountain pen. She begins a slow quiet chant across the page in loops and swirls. She entices them, knowing that what she seeks can only unfold in its own time. Word meets word, fingers touch fingers, a rhythmic dream state that assuages a month long hunger, the hunger of longing in a humid darkness.

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I begin with this ghost of a narrative about a woman trying to write. This narrative fragment from my research journal has taken the place of the fairy tale which I wrote using some of the transcript data from my research. That tale I wrote, rewrote and then finally discarded. For the beginning of this exploration into women writing, such a tale was both too much and not enough. Too much in that the story was laden with tradition and enclosed by boundaries, and not enough in that I could not subvert the story in any meaningful way.

Fairy tales wend through western culture with colourful and enduring threads. Beginning when we are young and continuing into adulthood, we are offered a plethora of versions from picture books and storytelling to Disney marketing extravaganzas and unexpurgated collections. As such, they are a rich source of tropes which permeate and delineate our cultural understandings, and which present a "huge theatre of possibility" (Warner xx). Such boundlessness, Marina Warner suggests, is how we are taught where

the boundaries lie. She explains that "[t]he enchantments also universalize the narrative setting, encipher concerns, beliefs and desires in brilliant seductive images that are themselves a form of camouflage, making it possible to utter harsh truths, to say what you dare"(xxi).

But I wanted my fairy tale to call into question the form of narrative itself and using the form to question the form meant I had to use the story to do something other than tell a story. The effect was irritating rather than illuminating. I kept falling into my own expectations, trapped in a mystical sense of a world created, but unable to follow through because I kept stepping outside to point to what I was trying to do with the narrative, rather than succumb to the *as if* possibilities woven in my writing and reading of the text. I was unable to let the subversive potential shimmer through the "camouflage"as Angela Carter has suggested. She notes that fairy tales or "old wives" stories can become ways for women to share their wit and collective wisdom. Such an effective way, in fact, that in the collection *Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* which Carter edited, she recalls the story "How a Husband Weaned His Wife From Fairy Tales" wherein a husband beats his wife for listening to tales until she associates the beating with the hearing, and no longer seeks out storytellers. According to Carter, this tale illustrates "how much old wives' tales, gossip, and fairy stories could change a woman's desires, and how much a man might fear that change, would go to any lengths to keep her from pleasure as if pleasure itself threatened his authority (xiii-xiv).

This subversive potential of narrative has its own limitations, its own boundaries. My thwarted attempts in writing such a tale illustrated to me that I could not step outside those boundaries and work the story the way I wished. I was bound in the narrative's structure and floundering. Still, what something is can be discovered when one also sees what it is not. My writing had called into question the narrative form for me and a desire to begin looking beyond. So instead of a fairy tale, I settled for the suggestion of a narrative, just a beginning of a story, to point towards narrative for a moment and to begin an exploration of those boundaries.

Her voice disintegrates into dust
between fingers, perfume of honeyed wheat
heats shadowed corners, tantalizes her forgetting
sounds that saturate vibrations

Her words float with harvest winds, southwest, drying
green lushness hardened, sweet juice locked in kernels

She pulls a stalk, catches barley beards on her lips
scrapes the head through her teeth, chews grain into starchy pulp

language dribbles from her tongue

***

Jerome Bruner, considering the character of narrative, describes such stories as "vicissitudes of human intentions" (*Actual Minds* 16) that have a *fabula*, a deep structure of thematic timelessness, and a *sjuzet*, linear incidents that create a plot. Further, he explains that such stories work on a "dual landscape," occurring on the plane of action or "outer" reality and within the subjectivity of the characters' "inner" vision (20-21).

There is a certain disturbing tidiness in this description of narrative, however. How could such a seamless structure hold the possibility for subversiveness or have space for turmoil to push at its boundaries? Yet such a familiar structure could be a hiding place, a site where questioning could peek from behind the expected. For instance, Warner suggests that by wrapping the fairy tale cloak of unreality about their stories and adopting its guileless façade, writers can challenge ideas and raise questions in their readers. She describes how fairy tales have "led the censor a merry dance" during such times as the restrictive measures of Louis XIV and more recently in some Communist states. Fairy tales, such as those written by Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier and Marie-Catherine d'Aulony, have campaigned for women's emancipation while other stories have promoted a more egalitarian, communal, and anti-materialist ethic such as *The Wizard of Oz* (411). Still, working within the familiar structures of narrative can obfuscate the secret or subversive story as the desires of the writer are crushed by the weight of tradition and expectation. Possibilities for the writer may then exist in the disruption of those

structures, in subverting the expected and in surprising the reader.

Carol Shields, in her essay "Arriving Late: Starting Over," which tells of her questioning the traditional structure of story, begins by describing her previous adherence:

> A story had to have conflict, it was said. A story consisted of a problem and a solution; I believed that too. A story must contain the kind of characters that the reader can relate to; well, yes, of course. Every detail provided in a short story must contribute to its total effect; well, if Chekhov and Hemingway said so, then it had to be true. The structure of a story could be diagrammed on a blackboard, a gently inclined line representing the rising action, then a sudden escalatory peak, followed by a steep plunge which demonstrated the dénouement and then the resolution. I remember feeling quite worshipful in the presence of that ascending line. Very tidy, very tight, the short story as boxed kit, as scientific demonstration, and furthermore it was teachable. (144)

Not until Shields found herself caught and frustrated in the middle of writing a novel, did she consider different ways of structuring narrative. She decided to shelve her novel and to experiment with narrative possibilities, writing in whatever direction the work seemed to take her. She describes the resulting year of work as one of the most pleasurable of her writing career. There was a reckless happiness to her writing and a sense that she owned what she was writing: "every word, every comma. The small, chilly bedroom where I had my desk in those days felt crowded with noisy images. Strange images. Subversive images" (245). Some of her stories did not have conflicts and strong, central characters, or they had a disturbing mix of realism and fantasy.[4] One short story, "Home," is about nothing more than the invisible threads of coincidence that link us to others in the world and yet one is left with a deep satisfaction and sense of hope in having read it. This was the power, Shields notes, of the material shaping her stories rather than the theory.

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[4]Here I am using the distinction between fantasy and realism not as psychoanalysis does but rather as defined in literary handbooks; i.e., "*fantasy* is usually employed to designate a conscious breaking free from reality" (Holman 219). In psychoanalytic terms, fantasy is not an opposition between "reality" and "illusion" as the literary definition suggests, but rather fantasy is the "setting" of desire (jan jagodzinski, personal correspondence).

She also began noticing the way women told stories orally and to think about how such practices could shape her narratives. She observed that women tended to sit together and recount episodic events with digressions and little side stories rather than telling linear tales and that they often would throw "their narrative scraps into a kind of kitty and make them a larger story" (249). In her writing, she wanted to embrace such contradictions, the tentativeness, the episodic and the jumble of memories. To her, such writing was more "realistic" than

> the spine of a traditional story, that holy line of rising action that is supposed to lead somewhere important, somewhere inevitable, modelled perhaps on the orgasmic pattern of tumescence followed by detumescence, an endless predictable circle of desire, fulfilment, and quiescence. (248)

The appeal of the random and disorderly narrative for Shields was that it offered a semblance of the texture of women's ordinary lives rather a recounting of personal battles to be won and goals to be obtained.

In her essay, "Craving Stories," Susan Stanford Friedman reiterates such thinking about narrative and identifies four ways in which women's writing has deconstructed and reconstructed narrative. First, she notes, women have resisted what Virginia Woolf called "the tyranny of plot" in an accepted manner. That is, they have used the structure to write their own ideologies, such as Warner describes the use of some fairy tales. Secondly, Friedman supports Carol Shield's work with her explanation that women often reconfigure narrative patterns to structure their writing in meaningful ways. Thirdly, Friedman suggests, women whose cultures rely on a living oral tradition weave strands of oral and written narrative conventions. Paula Gunn Allen has pointed out that much of Louise Erdrich's work is such a hybridity of the oral and the written. For example, *The Bingo Palace*, emerges from an oral tradition with a western narrative gloss as does Allen's own work, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*.[5] Finally, Friedman notes that many women writers have reached beyond narrative to create a collaborative dialogue in their work, for

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[5]Paula Gunn Allen presented these ideas at a public lecture, University of Alberta, September, 1996.

instance between the visual and the narrative or between lyric and narrative. As Toni Morrison suggests, "narrative is not and never has been enough, just as the object drawn on a canvas or a cave wall is never simply mimetic" (388).

Morrison describes the possibility between, through and beyond narrative. To acknowledge such openness, means we recognize writing to be more complex and less easily defined and categorized. Gail Scott writes:

> . . . we keep writing the (poetic) story, the (poetic) novel--further imbued with a little theory: i.e., commentary signifying that place where our writing processes consciously meet the politics of the women's community (as well as contemporary strategies for writing) . . . . Now, I think, for me at any rate, it's precisely where the poetic and the personal enter the essay form that thought steps over its former boundaries. (106)

Friedman also describes the relationship between the poetic and the narrative in her discussion of the intertwining of lyric and narrative where the right and necessity for women poets to claim historical and mythic discourse "permeates the interplay of lyric and narrative in women's contemporary long poems" (38). Within such poetry, she explains, women use direct narrative to tell a story or arrange lyrical sequences that the reader can (re)construct as an implicit story. Narrative can also exist on the borderline of such poems, connecting a series of shorter, lyrical pieces together. In these long poems, Friedman suggests, narrative and lyric "coexist in a collaborative interchange of different and independent discourses" (23).

The blurring of genre boundaries is not what is crucial for women's writing, however. Rather, it is the possibility of multiple choices to write a text that most clearly reflects the experiences about which they write whether they combine the fictional and poetic techniques in an essay such as Scott's "Spaces Like Stairs" or call on the lyric to create a poem like Di Brandt's "the one who lives underwater." Sometimes, being able to move beyond the narrative and the prosaic is the only way of writing as Brandt explains:

> I couldn't write prose because I kept getting stuck in the sentences: once you started you had to say whatever the syntax prescribed. I wanted every sentence to

> have the whole world in it, concentric circles of world, waves and curls of it. With poetry it was the opposite: the lines crumbled fell away, short, broken, twisted, without breath, because of the fear of God (and my father's hand) in it. (14)

Sometimes, too, because poetry attends to the spaces around the words and between the words and the margins, such writing is the only way women can come to understand their own silencing and silences. "Each poem has its own silence," M. Nourbese Philip writes (295). A silence that shapes the text as much as the words and helps to define the poem. A silence that has its own grammar, its own language.

THIN ICE

Silver rainbow
trout swim
below ice
where her large
limbs flail
body bleached
words clogged
in veins sinking
to mud bottom
suckers
in dark caves
sip last traces
of hair gold
tickle blue O lips
encased in
solid bubble

she pirouettes

across tightropes
slides across
gossamer
slicked with spittle
chants
to copper windows
pitches notes
harmonizes
inside crying

frigid waiting
offers no
thing except
crack of distant
branches
in winter
twilight
ember glowing
in her belly
hot for puff
of air
to ignite fire
melt glass
crack ice
floes
set things amove

***

Bruner suggests that it is through the telling of narratives that we construct a

version of ourselves in the world (*The Culture of Education* xiv). Narratives arrange events, summon characters and create metaphors and other tropes which weave a cultural fabric that not only brings meaning to our actions but also creates a milieu in which we can act. If this is so, what happens when a writer chooses the lyric to create a version of herself in the world? Or when she interrupts her narrative with lyrical forays? What happens to self-identity? To this world?

Gertrude Stein, in writing about identity, said that it was "not a thing that exists but something you do or do not remember" (qtd. in Elliott and Wallace 164).[6] This thinking points to the shift away from the idea of a fixed and stable identity; an idea that arose from the modernist notions of a self as the foundation of a personality separate from the body. Charles Taylor notes that humans have always had a sense of self or soul, but not until the Cartesian "I" was that self reified as a "disengaged first-person-singular self" (307). In fact, "I" (meaning the male in this case) displaced God at the top of the hierarchical order of the world. This reification of the subject persisted until the work of philosophers Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty suggested that *men* were beings who act in the world, that their subjectivity is a continual co-creation with the world.[7] The work of feminists and poststructuralists have further characterized *human* subjectivity as being constructed through discourses, which are often contradictory, and serve to shift and rewrite one's identity.[8]

Anthony Kerby, in his book *Narrative and the Self*, develops the idea of the discursive nature of the self further by suggesting, like Bruner, that we develop a sense of

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[6]Gertrude Stein. *Everybody's Autobiography*. New York: Random House, 1937.

[7]See for instance Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Humanities Press, 1978) or Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

[8]Examples are numerous but see for instance the work of Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow, *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994; Joan W. Scott, "Experience," *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York and London: Routledge, 1992; Anthony Kerby, *Narrative and the Self.* Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991.

identity by understanding the discourses that construct us as narrative. "Self," he writes, "is given content, is delineated and embodied, primarily in narrative constructions or stories" (1). We take the parts or "scenes" from our lives and fit them into a sense of wholeness, albeit a whole that is continually changing and extending. This storytelling does not cease although it may not always be as conscious or present on a day-to-day basis. We say that if we don't get that new job, it was meant to be and something better will be coming along. We imagine dramatic scenarios before we break up with a lover and then we "rewrite" the event afterwards, an event that can go through many versions depending on whom we tell and what our memories are. The process is one of "emplotment" where discrete events can be causally connected into a narrative structure that generates our understanding of the past. Kerby writes that "[i]n the case of memory it is a question of reconstituting, as it were, the drama surrounding a certain imagined object or state of affairs (presumed to be from the past), which may likewise refigure the past and quite possibly also resituate the subject . . ." (29).

(Identity is something you do or do not remember.)

However, like narration in fiction, narration of the self can appear seamless and untroubled while hiding turmoil. To overcome this coherence, Jane Flax suggests that the notion of the self should be superceded by the term "subject." This term, she believes, "more adequately expresses the simultaneously determined, multiple, and agentic qualities of subjectivity" (93). We may focus on specific modes of subjectivity, such as narrative, for particular purposes, she explains, but there should be no one definitive quality. She suggests that the desire to explain subjectivity as either a coherent entity or a collection of fragments is a binary that limits our understanding of identity. Instead, subjectivity should be conceived of as multiple and never complete.

> The processes of subjectivity are overdetermined and contextual. They interact with, partially determine, and are partially determined by many other equally complicated processes includ[ing] somatic, political, familial, and gendered ones. Temporary coherence into seemingly solid characteristics or structures is only one of subjectivity's many possible expressions. When enough threads are webbed

> together, a solid entity may appear to form. Yet the fluidity of the threads and the web itself remains. What felt solid and real may subsequently separate and reform. (94)

Like Shield's desire to write about women's experiences in non-traditional narrative structures, like Friedman's exploration of the intermingling of lyric and narrative, and like the freeing qualities of Brandt's poetry, this conception of subjectivity has multiple influences and manifestations. And if women are using the fluidity of writing to express a variety of experiences how does such writing connect to their understanding of subjectivity? Do they see themselves as multiple, as light through a prism that reveals many colours and then blurs to give a momentary impression of one beam, a coherent light? In a dissertation about writing and identity, these become salient questions.

ON

Where is the language now?

words march into little boxes, push at her edges, square her jaw, soften her hips, confuse her. she rummages carefully: smart enough, girl, body, breasts, important, strong, pussy

but

bombarded

hangs onto strong, *drifts toward* smart

too easy to get sucked up.

sent away.

lost

pieces dry

up.

she slaps bits together

flourpastewhiteglue.

no wonder she creaks when she walks

tender and brittle skin

blizzard of flaked words

hides disintegration.

parts float
about the house
tell her where they've been
or not.
how to
continue

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And what of the world? When Bruner writes that it is through narrative that we construct versions of ourselves in the world, he also suggests that it is through narrative that this world is created. These narratives construct a culture that "provides models of identity and agency to its members" (*The Culture of Education* xiv) and a symbolic system upon which an individual draws to organize and understand her world in communicable ways. The interaction between individuals and their culture "gives both a communal cast to individual thought and imposes a certain unpredictable richness on any culture's way of life, thought or feeling" (14). Certainly narratives are important in creating a culture, for culture is a linguistic creation rather than some thing. But they are only part of the story and the privileging of the narrative form neatly elides differences and difficulties within a person and a text or among individuals within a culture. Narratives search for the beginning, the middle, and an end: a coherent package with definable boundaries.

This desire for the whole, for unity, hearkens back to the Enlightenment project of Descartes. Such a desire describes an impossible state of being, a wish to return to a time of no lack, what Lacan calls the "Real"-- pure, unspeakable plentitude. Elizabeth Grosz explains that "[t]he Real has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of 'raw materials'. The Real is not however the same as reality; reality is lived as and known through imaginary and symbolic representations" (*Jacques Lacan* 34). The unexplained, the irrational and the unknown come at us from the Real and so, in the desire for a sense of control and predictability, we create stories to cover over the uncertainty and to function *as if* we had a whole and coherent self. Writing, art and

music, for example, are an Imaginary-screen that helps us with the effects of the Real, but which can only partially capture a sense of the whole. This wholeness of the self becomes the scene of fantasy in the Imaginary in our quest to attain the *objet a* of our desire, to feel w(hole) again, since our coming into language causes a "hole" in our selves. We become "split subjects" where the "I" doing the speaking is separated from the "I" who is spoken about.

Doug Aoki, in his essay "The Thing of Culture," describes how the belief that culture is a thing is also part of the Imaginary. This, he suggests is "a mis/identification by one person with another, an imaging of a gestalt whole, and a chimera." He adds that "[a]t the same time, culture is performatively Symbolic . . ." (406). Culture, as it is traditionally conceived or imagined, has defined external boundaries, established norms, traditions, and models for behaviour which are given presence through its symbolic rituals. This narrative of homogeneity tends to hide the implicit internal boundaries at work in culture, such as practices which establish white, heterosexual males as the norm and exclude women, especially those of colour and visible minorities. The belief that culture can be an inclusive community is a fiction and, as Judith Butler points out, for democratic reasons, it is important that culture not be thought inclusive because like a coherent narrative, the idea of an inclusive and shared culture masks differences and underplays difficulty. This is not to say that since culture lacks presence or is imagined, it's not a real force. Slavoj Žižek explains that "because of these 'fictions' thousands die in wars, lose their jobs . . ." (qtd. in Aoki 52). The stability of culture as a thing, however, is contested by politicizing culture's signification, an "enunciation that converges boundary to discourse" (Aoki, 408). Referring to Homi Bhabha's work, Aoki explains that the Symbolic thus moves across boundaries, dispersing territories and reforming new ones. "Then the internal boundary of culture yields to an immanent hybridity, and the fixing of designations of identity gives way to the continuous passage between them" (408). Instead of one homogenizing force, there is a sense of constant movement and shifting. To recall Flax's words again: when enough threads web together a sense of a solid entity forms, but the fluidity remains.

There are tensions at play between this desire for wholeness and coherence, and the awareness that such a sense is only illusionary and fleeting. We can fantasize that such wholeness in our writing, in our selves, and in our culture is achievable by ignoring the bumps and cracks in the road, the nudges from the Real, as did many of the totalizing narratives of Western culture for the past three hundred years but the strength of such a fantasy quickly fades as the belief erodes that there is one story, one truth. Instead, Kristeva writes, we need

> to demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore, the community of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes. In order to bring out--along with the *singularity* of each person, and even more, along with the multiplicity of every person's possible identificiations . . . *the relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence*, according to the variation in his/her specific symbolic capacities. ("Women's Time" 35)

For Kristeva, language is an open structure which can be transgressed and which continually produces change and renewal through discursive practices. Thus writers like Shields are able to transgress more traditional structures of language and write the fleeting solidity and ongoing fluidity of their particular experiences and understandings.

However, even if a writer wishes to write about her experiences using more flexible structures, she can never achieve the entirety of what she imagines. A writer begins by imagining the fullness and immediacy of the living moments that she wishes to somehow "capture" as a complete experience on paper. For Lacan "this transformation of the Real need [the wholeness] into the symbolic demand [language and semiotics] always leaves a metonymic residue which he names desire" (Samuels 108-109). So the writer is left knowing that she has not reached the ideal expression through her writing and is left desiring to find a way to say more or say it more clearly or to find just the right combination of words. What we desire to describe is always just before us and at the same time is always just behind us in the present moment. Yet this very inability to create

a wholeness in our literary texts[9] is what invites others to our writing. The openness of such texts, the gaps in meaning, offer a space where our readers and listeners can involve themselves in engaging experiences.

How do literary texts offer such an invitation to others besides the writer? Why do we regard these texts as expressions of reality that have some existence of their own in the world? As Wolfgang Iser writes

> fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence. For this reason they cannot have the full determinancy of real objects, and indeed, it is the element of indeterminancy that evokes the text to "communicate" with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to participate both in the production and the comprehension of this work's intention. (*The Act of Reading* 24)

Because the literary text is open, it is able to initiate "performances of meaning" (27) rather than actually formulating meaning itself. Bruner suggests that such a text subjunctivizes reality; by that he means a subjunctive form that denotes an action or state as conceived rather than as fact, and which is used to express a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event. In other words, the subjunctive traffics in human possibilities rather than settled certainties. Bruner uses the term "subjunctive reality" to refer specifically to narrative, but remembering Friedman's explanation of four ways that women both use and move beyond narrative, I suggest that we can consider subjunctive reality for most literary writing. Writing, then, becomes a site of possibility, a place of "as if" that works in multiple ways with, through, and beyond the text. For the writer and for the reader, they write and read *as if* the story can describe the reality of an event, or an imagining or a feeling, *as if* language did not remove us a step from the event. In other words, the reading and writing assume a wholeness in the work that has no residue on its margins. Readers and writers also come to the text *as if* our needs and demands can be met and *as if* we will not be left desiring. What such contingency does is broaden the possibilities for

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[9]By literary, I am referring to a wide range of writing, including fiction, poetry, autobiography, memoir etc.

experiencing, acting, understanding, and creating.

And what if we consider the subjunctive for our thinking about subjectivity and culture? Does thinking in this way open up the possibilities for the multiple subjectivities that Flax presents or the hybridity of culture that Bhabha describes? Thus, another question for this dissertation emerges: How does the subjunctive of writing point to the subjunctive possibilities of identity and culture?

A space for dreaming. Can words create something? In her imaginings she pictures amorphous shapes rising from the breath of words, the fingers holding the pen, the tap of the computer keys and clustering in the air. Words that colour edges where she peers through the fog to see. Words that burn her fingers even as she feels more rising about her from some well of experiencing, a synaesthetic source full of more than she can know at any one splash and ripple. She cups some droplets and lets other dribble through her hands to fall back into the warm, salty water, trailing through the liquid, no longer sure it's even water as she lowers her head to brush her lips against the surface and lick the moisture that collects there until she finds she at last can speak.

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In the previous section, I suggested, following Bruner's notion of narrative, that literary writing subjunctivizes reality. To understand what such a term might mean, I will begin by considering the writing of the women in this study. Their work included memoirs, anecdotes, autobiographies, journal entries, short stories, drama, and poetry although the lines between genres were not as clearly drawn as is suggested by this list. The writing also reflected the women's actual experiences in varying degrees. So, for instance, one of the women considered events in her life quite carefully when she explored some incidents from her childhood through a memoir. Another writer chose to use only a few elements of her experience as a high school teacher to write a novel about the Virgin Mary, giving the character 1990's school girl language and depending on Biblical and other historical research for most of the details of the story. Of course trying to identify which elements in a person's writing have actually happened to her and which have not is

a futile exercise. Rather, I am speaking more about how writers saw their pieces, how deeply implicated they saw their lives being in the work. Because of this connection to their lives, the women saw some of their work less "imagined" than other pieces. But even the pieces where the writers claimed they were "writing it exactly the way it happened," the events still had to be "re-imaged" before writing them and in doing so, writers chose some details and omitted others as well as reorganizing them to suit an anticipated audience. When asked, Sophia, a writer from the girls' group, who had been adamant that she was writing about an event just as it had happened, admitted that she had made up some of the details to make the story "more believable" and "interesting." When we told her she had good imagination in this story, however, Sophia still insisted that "It's not imagined. I mean it's true."

As Sophia's response suggests, "imaginative" is often a qualifying term used to evaluate writing in our culture and with a much narrower perspective than Lacan's understanding of the Imaginary. If someone says, "His short story was so imaginative!" she means that what might be called "everyday" or "ordinary" is made unusual or strange with great success. Thus, someone who is considered a writer of talent, is often said to be "imaginative." Most of the women in the study would shy away from their work being called imaginative. "It's not that good" many of them would say, or like Sophia, they would not see a role for imagination in a "real" event.

However, imagining is connected to our lived objects and events even while moving beyond what we call the "real world" to reconfigure contexts of experience and the experiences themselves. In imagining, we can generate what Walton calls "fictional truths." He defines fictional truths by first describing fictional as that which is to be imagined. With such a definition, imagination is constrained and therein lies his notion of fictional truth. "Briefly, a fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something. Fictional propositions are propositions that are *to be* imagined--whether or not they are in fact imagined" (39). An example, based on Walton's understanding of fictional truths, can be considered in a game of playing house. While it is true that we are playing house, the proposition that we are living in and keeping

a house is fictional. The fact that it is fictional is a fictional truth. Walton adds that "in general, whatever is the case 'in a fictional world'--in the world of a game of make-believe or dream or daydream or representational work of art--is fictional" (35).

The difference between the imagined and the fictional is implicit in Walton's definition in that a sense of agreement is present in the fictional but not necessarily in the imagined. Mary F. Rogers describes this social sense of the fictive as implicit agreements to act *as if* some things are "true, obvious, or at least plausible enough not to necessitate questioning." She adds that the fictive is "a deeply but silently social 'Let's pretend' " (qtd. in Mackey 11).[10] Margaret Mackey, in her study of the temporal processes of reading fiction, relates this sense of the "as if" to readers of stories and to the bounded nature of fiction, but one can also relate this sense of the "as if" to writers of stories and their ability to subjunctivize reality. The propositions of what was to be imagined were laid out by the women writers: For instance, in the research groups, we were to imagine that a story was true in the real world (Sophia's), or we were to imagine it true in a fictional world (Sidonie's story of Virgin Mary). In any case, such fictional truths created fictional worlds where possibilities became more evident and where we could respond *as if* things were true in the real world, the distinction between the real world and fictional ones being in the manner in which they are made.

> A particular work of fiction, in its context, establishes its fictional world and generates the fictional truths belonging to it. A particular biography or history does not itself establish the truth of what it says or produce the facts it is concerned with. What generates facts, if they are our own creations, is not individual pieces of writing but something more like the whole body of a culture's discourse or the language itself as opposed to what is said in the language, or the conceptual scheme embodied in either of these. (Walton 102)

Again, there is the sense of communal agreement, the social "we" that establishes the fictive. We agree to act "as if" something exists. In talking about the book *Tom Sawyer*,

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[10]Mary F. Rogers. *Novels, Novelists, and Readers: Toward a Phenomenological Sociology of Literature*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991. 208.

we say that "Tom Sawyer was lost in a cave" rather than "In the story, Tom Sawyer was lost in the cave" because when we speak of fiction, we speak as if we were referring to a real person who existed.[11] *As if.* The subjunctive.

In this study, when considering how texts subjunctivize reality, there are two aspects that must be considered: the writing of the texts, and the reading and responses to those texts. First, the women created the fictional worlds through their writing and then we became participants in those worlds through our reading and conversations that arose from the work.

To consider the process of writing, for a moment, let's return to the idea of imagining. Walton describes a form of imagining he calls *de se* where people imagine themselves as doing or experiencing something or being in a certain way. This imagining from inside can include either being the one who is central to the action or the one who is observing the goings-on, moving from the centre to the boundary of the scene. Out of such imaginings, can arise fictional truths and a fictional world that recruit a reader's imagination, even if the only reader is the writer of the text.

Kerby suggests that people take up the structures of their lives into conscious understanding, a self-narration where they seek to tie together the more disparate strands into some coherence. He recognizes that this creates a split subject, as Walton implies above in his description; however, Kerby defines the process as a tripartite division of the subject. He describes the *speaking subject* as the material agent of discourse, what Walton might call the imaginer or the writer. Separated from the speaking subject is the *spoken subject*, defined by Kerby as the subject that is "produced through or by the discourse as a result of its effect on a reader-listener" (105). Walton would suggest that this is the character in the imagination. Other literary theorists, such as Umberto Eco, would refer to this subject as the "implied author."[12] Some theorists have also referred to

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[11]Walton explains this example in greater detail, 207.

[12]Kerby also uses this term in his expanded explanation.

the speaking subject and the spoken subject as *énunciation* and *énoncé* respectively.[13] This separation between the speaking and the spoken subject occurs through what Kerby defines as the third aspect of the split-- the *subject of speech* or the purely linguistic subject of discourse. The way a writer thinks of herself or himself is conditioned and restricted by language which sets up a subject of speech, a character involved in a narration who becomes the spoken subject (the *as if* or implied author).

Considering the discourse features of texts also contributes to an understanding of the subjunctive. Bruner suggests three particular discourse features that create such a possibility. First, he suggests that the triggering of presuppositions creates implicit rather than explicit meanings so that in writing there are gaps that the reader-hearer must fill in; the writer means more than her or she can say. The second he calls subjectification, or the filter of the protagonist's consciousness through which the story is told. One can only know the story from that consciousness. Thirdly, is the use of multiple perspectives which behold the world "simultaneously through a set of prisms" (*Actual Minds* 26). Such perspectives are evoked through the verbs, Bruner suggests, where the action of the verb is transformed from a certainty to being psychologically in process and thus is subjunctive.[14] There are other ways of keeping a text open, such as metaphor, but Bruner uses the above three as examples of how a story portrays subjunctive reality as contingent, hypothetical, or prospective. Again, Bruner is referring specifically to narrative structures,

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[13]*Énunciation* and *énoncé* are terms used by Emile Benveniste for one example. See *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Meek. Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971.

[14]Bruner uses Todorov's six verb transformations as a point of departure. Briefly these are 1) Mode: modal auxiliary for the verb subjectifies the action such as must, might, would, could. E.g. *x must commit a crime* 2) Intention: act is embedded in intention such as *x plans to commit a crime.* 3) Result: presupposes intent and leaves open how it all came about such as *x succeeds in committing a crime.* 4) Manner: subjectifies the act and creates an attitude which modifies the action's intention such as *x is keen to commit a crime.* 5) Aspect: marks the progress of time in which action is occurring such as *x is beginning to commit the crime.* 6) Status: opens the possibility of a wish to such as *x is not committing a crime.* (*Actual Minds* 29-30)

including poetry, which also means more than it says, can filter what is said and seen through the consciousness of a character or narrator, and can offer multiple perspectives. (Bruner uses Auden's poem about the death of Yeats as an example of multiple perspective where the poet's death is seen "in the instruments of winter airports, on the floor of the Bourse, in the sickroom, in the 'guts of the living'"(26).)

Our participation with the texts in the research group had us working with these texts individually as we read them and then collectively as we talked about them. To return to Iser's work for a moment, and remember that fictional texts recruit our imagination and initiate a performance of meaning, we first came to understand the possibility of meanings as we read or heard the writing. In our conversations that followed, our verbal participation further located us within these fictional worlds. Walton describes this process:

> When one says things like . . . 'Gulliver was captured by the Lilliputians,' and 'Ivan was furious with Smerdyakov,' it may be fictional that one is recounting events or reporting on states of affairs. Understanding such remarks in this way locates the speaker *within* a fictional world (the world of his game) and has him contributing to it. This contrasts with the usual assumption that the speaker is making a genuine assertion about a fictional world (a work world) from a perspective outside it, that he is saying something about what fictional truths it contains. The pretense construal has the appreciator pretending to describe the real world rather than actually describing a fictional one. (392)

Just as the writer was both participant (spoken subject) in fictional worlds and the writer (speaking subject) of those worlds, so is the reader. The person imagines herself part of the fictional world, plays her role within it at the same time as she further imagines and contributes to this world. The role of imagining--both as writer and reader--contributes to self-understanding and, as Walton suggests, imagining our own place in a fictional world gives us the opportunity to respond to unfamiliar roles and situations. The writing can become a safe place for exploration and expression of dangerous or socially unacceptable emotions as well as a place where they can be purged or reinterpreted (an Imaginary-

screen). Writers (and readers) also discover feelings they have not articulated or come to empathize with the situations and feelings of others.

With the text, readers and writers can explore alternatives for their lives and the multiplicity of their subjectivities in a way that offers a sense of coherence and connection even within their shifting and changing nature. Language, as described by Kristeva, has the very characteristics to offer such possibilities: the potential within the structure and system of language for the signifying practice of subjects as well as the potential for change through transgressing that system and structure. Some feminists have written about their concerns towards such willingness to embrace the elusive nature of identity. As Nancy K. Miller suggests, it may be premature to erase the identity issue for those who are denied subjective status in the symbolic order. "Only those who have it [that status of subject] can play with not having it," Miller writes (75). But do women really want to take on a stable and fixed identity or find themselves with a different status in the Symbolic Order? Might they transgress that order and in that transgressing change it? Can they not begin to forge a new understanding of subjectivity as something that is more flexible and responsive where the "identity rug" is not pulled out from under them and where they are not left without any notion of self? Something subjunctive? Kathleen Kirby suggests a way to begin to negotiate the tensions of such boundaries of self and world that continually move, reshape, and reform. She writes:

> We cannot afford to reify the distinction between "inside" and "outside," though in formulating a politics, we cannot abandon either space but must continually traverse the difference. We must neither collapse the distinctions between all of the forms of space that shape our being nor entirely disengage them; rather, we need to work toward describing occasions on which they converge and reasons for why they diverge. (189)

Spaces of Possibility

She wanders into boundaries
that grab her throat
until her eyes bulge

she falls

through air wishing
to elbow her way through the crowd
heading for a flat-out fall down

plunk
in the middle of wet cement
outlined like every other woman
drying, hardening
permanent

concrete fills her cheeks

stoppers her mouth

3.

WOMAN AS GENRE

FADE IN:

1. EXT. A DARK FIELD - NIGHT OF THE SUMMER SOLSTICE 1.

LONG SHOT as three shadowy female figures cross the field and approach a copse of trees. They arrive from three directions, but move towards each other. There are night sounds, but as the women draw closer together they begin to sing "Song for Gaia."[15]

2. EXT. A COPSE OF POPLARS - NIGHT 2.

One of the women kneels to light a small collection wood. As the firelight flickers and strengthens, CLOTHO, a young woman still in her teens, withdraws a spindle from the pocket of her robe and holds it out toward LACHESIS, a matronly woman in her late thirties, who measures a length three times the span of her arm. The third woman, ATROPOS, an elderly woman in her eighties, snips the thread with her silver scissors. CLOSE-UP of Atropos' wrinkled face as she smiles a welcome to the other two.

3. EXT. AROUND THE FIRE - NIGHT 3.

LONG SHOT establishes that the fire has burned down to a circular glow of embers. The thread which was measured and cut earlier is held by each of the women to create a circle while the trees outside the light encircle the scene in shadow. A slow ZOOM into the scene establishes the intimacy.

CLOTHO
Something evolves from the three of us in this group.

ATROPOS
We'll just see what unfolds.

LACHESIS
Of course, there's the dimension of "we as teachers." How you ever get any writing done.

---

[15]Song for Gaia, Gail Sobat, 1995

ALL

(Chanting)
In between marking planning sleeping marking cleaning
living marking planning eating marking
(Whispering)
We'll tell them we're busy a'weaving.

LACHESIS

Part of my sneaky rationale.

ATROPOS

Because crafty women have to be sneaky, sly, guileful, artful.

CLOTHO

As a way to connect again.

ALL

In the end we'll see what story the tapestry tells though they
may hang it up and call it arts and crafts.

FADE OUT[16]

In many mythologies, stories of the Triple Goddess exist "as the three Fates, rulers of the past, present, and future in the usual *personae* of Virgin, Mother, and Crone (or Creator, Preserver, Destroyer)" (Walker 302). The Moerae, the Greek manifestation of this trinity, were weavers: Clotho the spinner, Lachesis the Measurer, and Atropos the Cutter of life's thread. Thus the female was seen as both the source and the destroyer of life; in her hands was one's fate. During the Middle Ages, the Fates became synonymous with fairies. People appeased them by setting out gifts of food and drink along with three knives for cutting their meat so the Cutter would not be tempted to use her own knife and thus bring death to the house. The Greeks also believed these Fates visited the cradle of every newborn and, to ensure good fortune for the child, the parents had to take care not to annoy the Fairy Godmother. Stories such as *Sleeping Beauty* echo these mythic themes in that Beauty's parents make the mistake of not inviting one of the Fairy Godmothers to

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[16]Adapted from an oral presentation of research transcripts. Performed at *Celebration of Women in the Arts: Womanstrength 1995*.

her christening and the angry fairy casts a spell whereupon the virgin (Clotho, Beauty) pricks her finger on the spindle and falls into a deep sleep. Such a story, however, also shadows the shift from a time when the importance of the female in creation and the ordering of life was acknowledged to a privileging of patriarchy. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the fairy godmother determines Beauty's fate, but only for a certain length of time after which the enchantment is broken by the male kiss.

Threads of change are also evident in Barbara Walker's description of how Aphrodite's trinity was sometimes divided into Order, Destiny, and Peace. She notes that "[t]hese referred to the 'ordering' of elements to form the individual; the destiny established for him by the Mother; and the 'peace' of dissolution as decreed at the end of life by Aphrodite . . . " (302). Even though each aspect of the trinity has distinct and important functions, they are ultimately conflated with "Mother." In Western culture, such a conflation has evolved to where "woman" is identified with both femininity and maternity and, as Luce Irigaray insists, femininity allows patriarchy to cover over the experience of women and mothers. "The law of the father needed femininity--a replica of woman--in order to take the upper hand over the mother's passion, as well as the woman's pleasure" (*Marine Lover* 97). This psychoanalytic interpretation of the shift to patriarchy left women in a position of being outside the Symbolic Order, a negative hole, the Dark Continent.

Luce Irigaray finds another source for the shifting of women's position in Plato's myth of the cavern. Plato describes the cave as a womb where Socrates, acting as midwife, uses his maieutic methods to assist into birth the knowledge of truth. For Luce Irigaray, this story is a fantasized copulation between the mother and father that attempts to remove the mother. "The effect is that the male function takes over and incorporates all the female function, leaving women outside the scene, but supporting it, a condition of representation" (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 106). Plato's analogy progresses from the dark cavern where reflections and echoes of the world flicker to the world itself and then beyond to the realm of Ideas and truth. In three scenes, the cave (Mother) is separated from Ideas (Father) with no possibility of commingling since the world fills the middle

space and prevents their intercourse. Luce Irigaray suggests that since "relations between Mother and Father have been rendered impossible by the metaphor . . . [t]ruth has come to mean leaving behind the Mother (the cavern) and her role in the reproduction" (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 110).

Italo Calvino explores a return to the cave in "The Adventure of a Poet." The story opens with two people described as "Usnelli, a fairly well-known poet" and "Delia H., a very beautiful woman" (103) who are approaching an island in a rubber canoe. Usnelli is paddling while Delia is stretched out "taking the sun" as they travel through the sea water, a transparent screen with its "sharp, limpid blue, penetrated to its depths by the sun's rays" (103). As they draw near the island, Usnelli comments on the silence that can be heard. He cannot distinguish language and cannot discern meaning, but what he hears is the babble of the island world: the rustle of vegetation, animal calls, bird wings; the rustle of the Real. Delia revels in this world as she lies in the boat speaking "with constant ecstasy about everything she was seeing" (103) while Usnelli tries to push away the sensations. "He, distrustful (by nature and through his literary education) of emotions and words already the property of others, accustomed more to discovering hidden and spurious beauties than those that were evident and indisputable, was still nervous and tense" (104). For Usnelli, every flash of blue water or shadow of a fish's fin, points to something higher, farther away, "a different planet or new word" (104).

They paddle into a grotto which begins as a spacious, interior lake, but becomes a narrow dark passage, a metaphoric return through the birth canal. Usnelli watches the reflecting light and sees that

> The light from outside, through the jagged aperture, dazzled with colors made more vivid by the contrast. The water, there, sparkled, and the shafts of light ricocheted upwards, in conflict with the soft shadows that spread from the rear. Reflections and glints communicated also to the rock walls and the vault the instability of the water. (104)

He finds that he is speechless, nervous, and unable to translate any of his sensations into words while Delia calls out and discovers with delight the echo in the cave. She tells

Usnelli: "You too! You shout too! Make a wish!" (105), but he is only able to say "Hoooo" and "Heeey" and "Echoooo" while Delia shouts words, invocations, and lines of verse. The cave becomes a creative power for her even as it robs Usnelli of his linguistic prowess. As they continue, the darkness deepens along with Usnelli's fear and confusion of the unknown and the "alien," feelings which also silence Delia (105). They agree to turn back, aborting their journey and returning to the edge of the cave where it opens onto the sea. They linger at this boundary while Delia goes for a swim. As she moves through the water where Usnelli can see her, she returns to being a fantasy creature for him: "her body at times seemed white (as if that light stripped it of any color of its own) and sometimes as blue as that screen of water" (105). Delia's function, to Usnelli, becomes one of representing that which is outside discourse. "For him, being in love with Delia had always been like this, as in the mirror of this cavern: in a world beyond words" (105). When Delia slips off her bathing suit, her body gives off a "pale blue glow, like a medusa" (106), the "Destroyer" of the Triple Goddess, a veiled character who could turn men to stone, a dangerous and mysterious woman. But Medusa was also an ancient symbol of divine female wisdom (Walker 629) and it seems Delia has returned from the dark centre of the cave wiser. She moves through the water at times like a fetus, sometimes as the mysterious Medusa, and sometimes as a seductress. When Usnelli, in watching her realizes that what he is seeing is beyond language, he becomes "all eyes," the gaze.

> He understood that what life now gave him was something not everyone has the privilege of looking at, open-eyed, as at the most dazzling core of the sun. And in the core of this sun was silence. Nothing that was there at this moment could be translated into anything else, perhaps not even into memory. (106)

The arrival of some local fishermen interrupts Delia's water dance and serves to break the spell of the cavern. Delia and Usnelli are now "in" the world with its smells, noises, and earthiness where Delia enjoys talking to the fisherman, but Usnelli does not. "Usnelli remained silent, but this anguish of the human world was the contrary of what the beauty of nature had been communicating to him a little earlier: there every word failed, while here there was a turmoil of words that crowded into his mind" (107). As they reach shore,

the noise and confusion and sensations of the fishing village bombard Usnelli and he realizes, as the words flow thicker until there is no space between lines and even the tiniest white spaces disappear, that there is no returning to his realm of poetic ideals, that by travelling to the cave, he has lost the orderly distance of language until "only the black remained, the most total black, impenetrable, desperate as a scream" (108). There is nothing productive or reproductive possible; the intercourse between the mother and father is prevented because the world intervenes between the earthy, sensual darkness of the cave and the brilliant realm of Ideas. The father-poet can no longer produce or reproduce. He is impotent.

Usnelli represents the patriarchal fear of a return to the cave as well as a desire to do so. The threat is one of a loss of language and reason for men and a regaining of women's position in the Symbolic Order. The desire is a wish to take over the cave for their own ends, for it to be a place of appropriation. Thus the cave is maintained as a fearsome place of darkness, chaos and the shadowy uninterpretable, but one which men like Usnelli wish to conquer and control. In Calvino's tale this fear and desire is played out through the male poet while the reader is left speculating about Delia still chatting with the local inhabitants amidst their dried reddish seaweed and gasping fish, "the gills still throbbing displayed, below, a red triangle of blood" (107). But in a tale from Delia's perspective, the cave might well become an inviting place to visit rather than a metaphor of fear. For many women writers, the cave is a place to reimagine and to be creatively energized rather than traumatized. Gilbert and Guber suggest,

> Where the traditional male hero makes his "night sea journey" to the center of the earth, the bottom of the mere, the belly of the whale, to slay or be slain by the dragons of darkness, the female artist makes her journey into what Adrienne Rich has called "the cratered night of female memory" to revitalize the darkness, to retrieve what has been lost, to regenerate, reconceive, and give birth. (99)

Patricia Yaeger discovers such journey in Mary Oliver's poem "Mussels." The poem is set in the deeps, in a cave that is dangerous and yet salt-refreshed; a place where the narrator gathers the negative metaphoric potential of the cave, condenses and consumes it

so that positive mythic possibilities can be revisioned. "Oliver's narrator is someone who both *is* the cave and is *in* it, who can move freely about exploring its chthonic powers before returning to the surface to berate and rename this space's negative meaning" (131).

they, who have no eyes to see with
see me, like a shadow,
bending forward. Together
they make a sound

not loud,
not unmusical, as they lean
into rocks, away
from my grasping fingers
(Oliver qtd. in Yaeger 131)

That women may see caves as places symbolically rich with possibility is clear from the adolescent women's responses to a poem by Lorna Crozier. I began one of our writing sessions by reading Crozier's "The Swimming Pool" twice and then asking the group to write for fifteen minutes. Images from Crozier's first two stanzas recall the cave:

. . . surface diving
to the loud blue hum around the grates,
following the lines and cracks
that led to a cave I could
never find the entrance to . . .

. . . There was a
birth-gleam all over me,
a loss of language, my mouth
an anemone that opened, closed,
my sex unfurling in the broken
light that stroked me underwater.
(62)

Crozier's narrator never does find the cave, but the water, which seemingly springs from the cave, births her into sexuality, an experience for which she has no words. When the

narrator swims at night, a strange boy joins her and they explore each other's bodies silently in the darkness. The sense of metamorphosis in this poem cannot happen through language, but only through this physical exploration bathed in water with a boy who may or may not really exist. The narrator speaks with a sense of fantasy that make the whole experience mystical and often beyond language.

Alexis, one of the young women in the writing research group, wrote in her response:

> I could never
> find a man
> that moves with
> me as water does. Is that wrong
> water
> it sends shivers of comfort
> up my spine
> not of ecstasy
> of oneness
> the feat
> we're always
> trying to achieve
> so come and
> join me in
> the water
> it is not the body
> of water
> just as it is not your body
> Not the body, the water itself.

There are, of course, a variety of ways to read this text, but I want to continue reading this piece as I have Calvino's and Crozier's by using Luce Irigaray's reading of the cave.[17] Like Delia and the narrator in "The Swimmer," Alexis imagines the transformational possibilities of water like the amniotic fluid of the womb. Her narrator fantasizes that the water will become one with her, complete her and make her part of the Real with an utter sense of wholeness. She realizes that a man could never fulfill her in the

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[17]Kelly Oliver warns that we cannot apply psychoanalytic theory to texts in order to diagnose the neuroses of authors, but rather that "psychoanalysis can be applied to texts themselves in order to diagnose the psychic economies manifest in those texts" (140).

same way and there is a guilty aside--a question to the Symbolic Order perhaps-- "Is that wrong." She resists the male fantasy figure in the poem, and instead, invites someone else into the water although it is not clear who that someone is. Is it a man who she wants to experience the unity of the water? Or perhaps it is another woman? The text ends too soon for me to understand who the speaker is inviting; however, she/he/it is asked to not differentiate bodies but to become one with the water just as the narrator is imagining for herself. Alexis wrote this piece as a first draft response and, at least during our time together, did not write any more about this. Nevertheless, she writes about a sense of connection and comfort in the water that relates to the imagery of other women writers.

> Ayelha wrote a short prose piece for her response to Crozier's poem:
> Eyes bright and blue like the pools of the sea. Blue like the sky at the birth of spring, soft, delicate and clear. Through the forest, darkness comes about. As I walk along the soft dirt path, the thundering sound of leaves crunches beneath my feet. The sound leads me to a pitch black cave. My heart is breaking in remembrance of the boy I met that day. Crawling on my hands and knees, I enter the warm and protected cave. The summer fresh air enters my lungs it feels so cold. I look up and realize that the earth around me is spinning. I force a sound from my mouth but I am at a loss for words. I notice some small clumps of grass near the entrance of the cave. The sharp blades tickle my soft hands, happiness overcomes my fear. The night is rapidly approaching. Cool winds send me running out of the forest. The moonlight guides my way. I hear faint whispers as I run. For a brief moment I feel the presence of the boy I truly love, but it turned out to be the wind whipping by. Coming out of the forest leaves me unprotected. I feel the wings of the mothering bird let me go. Sadly my eyes fill with tears, they fall like perfect raindrops from the sky. Smashing into my hands with an echoing sadness. I tumble to my knees in the blackness of the night.

Unlike the previous poems, Ayelha's narrator finds the cave in a journey reminiscent of Delia's travel. Her eyes are compared to the sea with blue like the colour the spring sky at

its birth and similar to the clear blue of the water that Delia and Usnelli discover. Like them, she also moves from light into darkness as she enters the cave. However, where Delia found a voice in the cave, this young woman is speechless, her senses heightened by what she discovers there. She has come to the cave to find some way of connecting with a boy she has met, but finds that such a thing cannot happen in this place. The cave leaves her almost breathless and feeling trapped. She is sent away from the cave by the cool winds, being reborn as she runs through the dark forest until she is left outside the protection (and danger) of the cave, alone and lonely in the awareness that her dreams of a relationship are unrealized. Even so, she believes the cave to be a place of warmth and protection, a touchstone, home ground.

Other women writers have seen the cave as just that: a womb where woman is safe and can be reborn. In describing the journey which her play, *The Cave*, narrates, Sheryl Simmons writes:

> *The Cave* was six years in the making--from gestation to birth. That is a long time to be in labour, but perhaps not when what is being born is a new mythology. Eight years ago, I was diagnosed with displasia of my cervix and decided that I needed to withdraw from the external world and spend some time with myself in order to find the source of my 'dis-ease.' I was stressed, out-of-alignment, and felt as if my 'feminine' was dying. The sickness in my most vulnerable place was an accurate metaphor so I set out on a path to Re-member myself.[18]

While I might quibble with her notions of mythological grandeur or question her sense of the feminine and her cervical vulnerability, she does suggest the protective and healing metaphors of the cave found in other women's work. What becomes an important question for me is whether the cave is only a scene of withdrawal, a place where women can "retreat" from the world without changing or taking on the world. Is it possible that the cave could be a cunning and seductive trap to keep women inside the outside, on the margins? Is Ayehla's sense of speechlessness and entrapment a warning about the cave? I

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[18]From the play program for *The Cave*, Edmonton, March 1996.

wonder if women's imagining a return to the cave, to the enriched birth-waters, is a desire that can never be fulfilled. The place where they feel a sense of wholeness and belonging that does not exist for them in the world.

Luce Irigaray does not advocate a reversal of direction for women, a return to the cave. Her consideration of Plato's story is a search for understanding how women came to be excluded from the Symbolic Order, how they became object to the male subject. To rediscover the cave, to imagine one's return is perhaps to dwell in the nostalgic, a desire for something forever lost. Kelly Oliver writes that "Nostalgia for the mother is a longing for an impossible return to the peace of the maternal womb, a return to the earth" (161). If we cannot return to the cave/womb, then, are women's stories of the cave a fantasy of futility? An endless writing of longing that reproduces shadows?

I think, instead, that our cave stories can be places of regeneration where women can practice rituals of protection; where they can discover a lost symbolic to bring forward into the world. The important decision is not to remain and dwell in nostalgia, but to gather the strength and use it to move forward. Such protective imagery appeared in the English teachers' writing group when Casey read a poem about her afghan. One of the stanzas she wrote, reads

> my afghan
> covers me up in the dark
> when i am the only one awake
> curled into a ball
> staring into the night
> the space beyond myself
> i am careful not to
> let my feet stick through the fibres that are
> starting to wear thin

In our discussion afterwards, Casey asked us what we thought she meant. Sidonie replied that the afghan had seemed to be like a womb.

"Well, I thought when I was writing it, I was thinking about protection and that makes sense," Casey told us. She explained that this poem comprised part of a collection that was filled with poems of raw intensity. "I almost felt like I need to be protected in the

middle of it," she said. So, in an effort to respond to that need, she had placed the afghan poem in the centre of her collection. With that poem in place, she was able to take risks with her other, more deeply emotional work. The poem, like the afghan became a way to deal with the unknown, the Real.

The cave, the womb, the circle all work metaphorically as a source of strength for women. In *Mother Wit*, a book of therapeutic exercises for women's healing and growth, the importance of the circle of protection is acknowledged. "This circle is composed of anything that suggests protection to you. It may be light, color or sound vibrations, crystals, mirrors, or semi-permeable membranes. You may also use a comforting image" (Mariechild 4). Although women can't return to the cave, change the story and reverse several thousand years of patriarchy, there are other stories to be found and courage to be gathered so women can return, imagining new possibilities.

The dark
The cave

she finds herself unable to speak
her mouth opens and closes
like a shutter banging
in the wind

she touches slick moisture
seeping from walls
her fingers poke the cracks
hoping for space to wiggle through

she blinks blackness
peering for one ray of light

a click of fear in her breath
echoes in moist thickness
while she waits for panic
to shake her to her knees

but a trickle of water she hears
then touches salty to her lips

follows the stream flow
beneath her hand gushes
over her arms deepens

to float her away
a bath of comfort so

she no longer fears forgets
her longing for light

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Moving beyond the cave, Luce Irigaray analyses how the exclusion of women has been played out in the Symbolic Order, searching for ways to end the enduring phallocentrism of Western culture. She describes women's relationship to the Symbolic Order as one of passivity where they become the object of men's desire: someone whose role is prescribed by male specularization and who is not a speaking subject. Within psychoanalytic interpretation, "woman" has been narrowly defined as virgin, mother, or prostitute, leaving women "homeless in the symbolic order" (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 69). The female function in such an order becomes one of subtending, of representing that which is outside discourse. As a mirror value of and for men, women become commodities.

> What makes such an order possible, what assures its foundation, is thus *the exchange of women*. The circulation of women among men is what establishes the operations of society, at least of patriarchal society. Whose presuppositions include the following [*sic*]: the appropriation of nature by man; the transformation of nature according to 'human' criteria, defined by men alone; the submission of nature to labor and technology . . . . the constitution of women as 'objects' that emblematize the materialization of relations among men . . . . (Irigaray, *This Sex* 184-185)

As commodities, women are assigned the particular social roles delineated above. The mother is ensconced in the father's house with reproductive responsibilities--she maintains the social order without intervening in it. Once woman is "mother," she is excluded from

exchange. Woman as virgin, however, is nothing but exchange value; what Luce Irigaray calls an "envelope." It is through the violation of the envelope (the hymen), that the woman becomes private property, a mother or potential mother, and is removed from the exchange. Woman as prostitute is both condemned and tolerated by the social order. She has value because she has usage which can be exchanged and because that value has been appropriated by a man, but she can never entirely be placed within the economy of the Symbolic Order. These social roles that are imposed on women also establish the characteristics of "(so-called) feminine sexuality" from "the valorization of reproduction and nursing" to "faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's 'activity' [and] seductiveness . . . " (186). But in none of these roles does woman have the right to her own pleasure. Luce Irigaray explains

> That woman does not exist, owing to the fact that language--a language--rules as master, and that she threatens--as a sort of 'prediscursive reality'?--to disrupt the order.
>
> Moreover, it is inasmuch as she does not exist that she sustains the desire of these 'speaking beings' that are called men:
>
> . . . . Man seeks her out, since he has inscribed her in discourse, but as lack, as fault or flaw. (89)

She further insists that women must no longer be positioned as '-A' to the male 'A'; that is, a castrated reflection of a man. Instead, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, "Luce Irigaray seeks an altogether different space for woman, one not defined in relation to men, but in their own terms--a 'B' rather than a '-A' " (*Jacques Lacan* 172).

Change for women is not just a matter of renouncing those roles because, as Luce Irigaray points out, one cannot simply step outside the Symbolic Order. We speak a language that has been structured from a male imaginary and to begin to speak otherwise is more than just a matter of deciding. Women, as much as men, reinscribe themselves into the Symbolic Order. This overdetermining power of language is evident in the conversation which follows. The conversation, part of an earlier research project of mine which explored women's oral stories, took place in a bright kitchen one fall afternoon over

coffee as two middle-aged women reminisced and told me about another woman they knew thirty years ago, a school teacher called Mary. Afterwards, in interpreting the transcript, I followed the traces of their positioning within the Symbolic Order.

Martha stirred her coffee as she smiled at her memory of Mary. "She pretty well got out of teaching because of some relationship with a man."

"I didn't know that," Lois replied, leaning closer to Martha.

"And you know, Mary was sensible enough to carry it very discretely."

"Oh yes," Lois replied. "Wasn't her father a British army officer?"

"Could well have been."

"I heard her father went to Europe one time and they toured all over France and they had a little French Renault, a little car and they both had a great time. Broke again when they came home, Mary said." Lois laughed. "That was the story of Mary's life--being broke."

"Well, that's how she got her job, wasn't it?"

Lois nodded. "Well, I one time wondered why she taught in a little one room school like that. There was nothing in that school. There was the flag on the wall and a map and two blackboards, a dozen or so books and that was the library and she was just so far above that we wondered how in the world she ever got there so I asked her one day when I got to know her better. 'Well,' she said, 'I was going from'--her father lived in Calgary-- 'from Edmonton to Calgary and I was broke. I hardly had a cent in my purse. So when I got here, I remembered that Harry was the superintendent of schools in the county, so I went to the telephone booth and I phoned him up and I said, 'Hey, Harry, have you got a job for me? This is Mary H. I'm broke and in town.' 'Sure,' he says.' And so that's how she got the school."

In this first section of the conversation, Martha and Lois speak of woman as commodity. They identify Mary as someone who has been placed outside the Symbolic Order by having an affair with a married man (with no apparent consequences for the man), but they also identify her with her father, a British army officer. To them, Mary is male-identified, positioned in the order through her father and outside through her lover.

They are not surprised that Mary had to leave teaching--a role that was maternal enough to admit women--because she had transgressed the boundaries. There is a certain recognition of the danger in making such a move in Martha's highlighting of Mary's discretion. Finally, it seems there is an interesting recognition of Mary's dependence on men for a living (her father, Harry) but the continual failure of that to work for her. She did not seem to "fit in." Their conversation continued:

Lois sipped at her coffee, deep in remembering for a few moments before speaking again.

"She had a car and it was always broke down, an old clunker."

"That's the one she bought from the Reformed Church minister," Martha said.

"I didn't know that."

"Oh yeah, she had to retrain it you know. That darn thing was always used to turning into church yards and she had to retrain it to turn into pubs once in awhile."

The two women laughed and shook their heads in amusement.

"Well, she had military service too, didn't she?" Martha asked.

"I think so. I believe she did. Yes, she was in the army, wasn't she?"

"I think that's right."

"It would be the army because I know her father was an army officer and I think her mother was dead, wasn't she?" Lois continued.

"I'm sure."

"And he lived in Calgary and she would never buy her clothes in Edmonton because there were just Ukrainians there. She had to go to Calgary for her good clothes," Lois laughed again. "Anyway, that's what she told me. 'No style at all in Edmonton,' she said."

Martha added ironically, "And Mary had the absolute figure to be stylish, didn't she?"

The two women laughed at the image. "Oh, goodness gracious yes," Lois said. "She was lovely."

Martha added, "Somebody said too she'd gained a lot of weight after she left

here."

"Oh, I wouldn't doubt that."

"She was fairly squarely built anyway."

"Well," Lois said, "she loved such rich food, you know. Did you ever see her putting--she didn't have bread and butter, she had butter and bread."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Oh gosh yes. She was always getting me to get her a few pounds of butter in town."

Mary is again set outside the realm of the "acceptable" because she is not subsumed by a religion and does something few "good" women of that time would have dared to do--frequent a pub. At the same time, she is inscribed in the Symbolic Order by her experience in the army. Interestingly enough, it is at this point that Lois notes that Mary's mother was dead. Although no indication is given when this occurred, the implication is that it has been some time and clearly has affected Mary. This seems to explain why she does "masculine" things--be in the army, drink, etc.--but, because she is also a woman, why she can only be an imitation of the masculine and so accorded no real place in the order of things. This section of conversation ends with an assessment of Mary's body, the two women speaking from a male, scopic gaze. They go on to further examine Mary's reputation in the community.

Martha picked up the thread of conversation. "Something I remember about Mary too -- she had a sense of righteous indignation about Herbert S."

"Oh, yes, she couldn't stand him."

"What was the basis of that, Lois?"

"Well, he was a very domineering person really and she felt he kept Clara sort of cowed down, you know and it was such a big family. They never hit it off, did they?"

"No, I don't think so."

"And she didn't particularly care for Lawrence H. either," Lois added. "All he thought--all those two thought about was the procreation of children."

"And women keep them barefoot and pregnant--"

"and in the kitchen."

"That's right." Both women shook their heads indignantly.

"They were the two largest families and they were so close together, the children in those families," Lois said. "I suppose that was what Mary's idea was."

"And in that way Mary was really ahead of her time."

"Certainly she was in many, many ways. Now, her and Hannah never got along."

"Oh, I didn't realize that."

"No, she was too modern for Hannah."

"Oh, I suppose," Martha agreed.

"Mary would have a smoke and a drink and that was just death to Hannah. She didn't like that at all."

During this section of conversation, the two women seem to speak from a position that both upholds and resists the patriarchy. They don't directly state that they agree with Mary's opinions and yet they imply agreement with their recital of the "barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen" and their realization that Mary was "ahead of her time." They also seem to separate their thinking from that of Hannah, who clearly had ideas about what was feminine and what wasn't. This is the first time in their conversation that there were undercurrents of real agreement and admiration for Mary and the sense that these two women would have enjoyed doing some of the things Mary did if they had been willing to "live outside." There exists a tension of wanting to be inside and outside at the same time. The two women continued remembering Mary's contributions:

"Another thing too I think Mary really added a sense of culture to the community," Martha said, "because she did take off time to go to concerts and plays and things like that, didn't she?"

"Uh-huh. They thought she was pretty frivolous, didn't they?"

"Yeah. You know she would get out of the community to do those things. It was like there was a need in her. I don't think she was particularly talented in music or any of those areas, but she could appreciate it. She'd get into her little old black car and take off for the weekend and I'm sure she stayed in a motel in Edmonton--well, she probably

went to Calgary though. That was more her style. She did have a sense of culture about her."

"Oh certainly she did. She was brought up well."

"There's one thing, too, that I appreciated about her," Martha said. "She was well-educated, you know had a degree which was unusual."

"Oh yes. This is why it always troubled me why she came our little old school. And that was her story."

"I remember there were three of us in the West ATA association during the years we taught--there was Mary and myself and I think Sallie--I'm not sure who the other one was--but we sent out invitations to all the teachers in the west country. We were going to have a wind up picnic at the lake. As it turned out, there were four of us there: John and I, Mary and Sallie. On top of that, this was a typical Mary idea that we were going to have this do, and we had a little bit of booze there and all that sort of thing, and on top of all that it got stormy and rainy and we never could finish the silly picnic." Martha laughed, "That's something that sticks in my mind as so typical of Mary. Nothing daunted her."

"No," Lois agreed. "They had a picnic and she took all the kids down to the beach and the parents went too . Well, Mary had on slacks and women didn't really wear slacks in those days and she rolled hers up past her knees and she had inverted milk bottles for legs and she had a lovely time. And you know they were ashamed of her."

"You know she didn't have any inhibitions at all. A very secure person in her own right."

"Yeah, she was secure in what she was doing."

Martha shook her head. "Well, it's not too surprising she wasn't married, being like that."

"Oh no, she would never have been under anyone's thumb."

"That's perfectly true. Men could not have handled her."

"No, they couldn't have handled Mary. Not at all."

"She would have been very much confined within a marriage too."

"Well, she was all right, I liked Mary," Lois added.

Throughout this conversation, there has been careful admiration but also a rationalization for Mary. Her desire for culture is seen as almost unnatural, but then is credited to her level of education--something not acceptable for many women during the fifties. Again, her unfeminine actions are commented upon: the drinking, wearing slacks, her lack of inhibitions. Mary is finally placed definitively outside the patriarchal system when the topic of marriage arises, but it is interesting the words that are chosen to describe marriage and men: "under anyone's thumb, could not have handled her, confined within marriage." As much as it says about Mary, it also comments on how the two women view male/female relationships. It seems to me throughout their conversation there is an ambivalence in them: they desire some of the freedom which Mary chose for herself, yet have the need to be accepted within a system. At the same time, they don't seem in this instance to have the language or way of imagining something different from the Symbolic Order in which they are positioned. While the two women in conversation did not have time for reflection, Carmen, one of the older women writing in this study, does have time to reflect through her writing. She describes her feelings about becoming a wife in the early 1950s. "I used to be so active," she says. "A real tomboy. And an organizer. I used to organize sports days for my friends and me. When I got married I couldn't believe how passive I became. But that's just what we believed marriage was."

For the high school girls in the study, the writing also seemed to be a way to raise their awareness of position in the Symbolic Order. Sophia brought this piece about Barbie to one group:

> Tonka trucks ran over Barbie's golden locks while moving the building materials from one area to another. As she moved further down the beach, Barbie just laid there, naked, in all her femininity. Although Barbie's eyes had been scratched out by a pen and her hairline was slowly receding, she was still perfect. As all women should be. Unspoiled and waiting for their man to arrive. Too bad Barbie's man never arrived as she was carried out into the disgustingly murky lake water, never to be played with again. Dirty and scratched, her appearance was changed forever.

She did not fit Barbie's mould any more. Nor did she find enjoyment in chasing boys to see who could get kissed first. By the time she was a woman physically, Barbie's ball gown just didn't fit any more. But as she continued to climb trees and build forts she wondered if it was right. After-all, TV said that I should be inside reading books and helping Mommy. But then Mommy had already broken the rules by not cooking and cleaning continuously. She decided that it was all right to dwell in the forbidden. Playing contact sports and not having a boyfriend were OK. This world filled with fun things like trees, grass stains, peeled-back toenails, and scabs was OK. Sure, she had her bits of sugar and spice and everything nice. But frogs, snails, and puppy dog tails were in her too. As she sits in her tree, she remembers the Barbie doll that she had so long ago. She thought of how nice Barbie would have looked in jeans, a T-shirt, and with no hair. She decides that perfection must be altered, even if it is forbidden. Her man will come in time and accept her because she isn't made-up to be what she is not. She is not a Barbie doll and will not settle for being labelled as one. She is an artist and she is free.

After Sophia's reading, the other girls had plenty to say about Barbie:

Have you seen the show about the grown up women who enter a contest to be judged who is most like Barbie.
How embarrassing for them.

There's streetwalker Barbie. Did you know that?
No. Really?
And Happy Barbie, she's like overweight and on the Internet.

Did you hear about that group of guys, Harvard guys or whatever, who broke into toy stores or whatever and they've been doing it like awhile. And they steal like Barbies, only like 25, right, they won't take them all. And then they'll take those GI Joes, the ones who have chips in them you know, that you buy and they'll change it with Barbie's "math's hard you know." And they'll change it with one of the

> guy's that's like "we're gonna go raze them and let's get the army together" and they put them back and they'd be like man this is cool, it would be like a guy's voice. And they'd pull the GI Joe's back and he's like "math's hard and there's a party and everyone's invited."

> We had a huge discussion in English. Are guys more sensitive or are girls more sensitive and stuff. We had a huge discussion. It was like "well, guys have everything girls have except something between their legs."
> And stuff like that. They're the same mentally and it was so funny. Guys are more aggressive.

> *I don't think that guys are more aggressive because I was like raised like beating people up 'cause if all girls are nice and sweet then I guess something happened with me. Because I've never been one to play with Barbie. I would like cut her hair off and paint her face purple and rip off her skirts.*

> I never played with Barbies. My Mom never bought me Barbies. She bought me Lego and I used to build the best stuff. She used to buy me Lego and race cars. It's probably because she dressed me like I was a little boy. People who didn't know thought I was a boy. People didn't know I was a girl until I was fourteen.

The girls were quick to refuse any relationship to Barbie. Sophia's writing reveals a self-consciousness about and an anger toward women's position. The naked, silent form of Barbie in "all her femininity" is not a speaking subject, but merely a body that becomes the site of sexual fantasy without having desires of her own. As Luce Irigaray writes,

> Woman takes pleasure more from touching than looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the 'subject,' her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see.* . . .Woman's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack.' (*This Sex* 26)

Even the violence done to Barbie--her blinding so she cannot see but only be seen and the cutting of her hair--emphasizes her passivity and is unable to disturb the impervious image

of perfection projected onto her. Finally, the narrator resorts to burying Barbie in the muddy lake water, which enables a kind of unsatisfactory rebirth where the narrator feels transformed into a figure that is not-Barbie. Nevertheless, the image of Barbie continues to haunt her and to be a measuring stick by which she judges all her actions. She looks to her mother as an example of how to act within the Symbolic Order, but her mother has "already broken the rules." The narrator decides that she, too, will dwell outside the Symbolic Order, "in the forbidden" taking on some "male characteristics." But even as she resists the prison of perfection that Barbie represented for her, she becomes a pale reflection of the masculine, the -A, still trapped in the Symbolic Order.

In the discussion that succeeds the reading, the pattern of conversation follows the structure of Sophia's story in interesting ways. The girls begin by talking about images of Barbie and iconoclastic attempts to alter her, but then they begin to consider their own physical presence and how they are different from or the same as boys. There is a resistance to being seen as different, but the line "well, guys have everything girls have except something between their legs" has an interesting ambiguity to it. The statement suggests that having a penis may be a disadvantage, yet what is there for males is not-there for females. The boys have identifiable, visible genitalia while women's are unnamed, unseen, even perhaps nonexistent. The discussion ends, like Sophia's story, with the girls reflecting the masculine, seeing those characteristics as the ones that will spell freedom. This story and conversation differed from the one the two older women had about Mary because there was a level of awareness and resistance emerging from the girls. While they have not found a different space for themselves, there is a potential that points to Luce Irigaray's desire that women be able to speak their identity, to speak as women within the symbolic order, leading me to wonder about the possibilities of that space.

"My Ghosts Come Striding Into Their Spring Stations"

-Seamus Heaney

howling new wind shakes lingering fall leaves smooth

branches for green bark when she feels most fully

herself

ghosts stretch her whispers in the background
their ectoplasm crawling through her veins

haunting every bend and hollow of her she can never
marshal them to line up become

cohesive

company instead they slip through her fingers echo
along her hallways tease her body into believing

***

Grosz writes that language "alone is capable of positioning the subject as a social being, because it is a self-contained system which predates any subject and must be assumed by each subject individually" (*Jacques Lacan* 99). While the Symbolic Order essentializes "woman" and inscribes her into patriarchy through language, Rita Felski warns against seeing women as entirely determined by and excluded from a repressive, "male" language. To do so, she suggests, is to ignore "both the flexible, innovative, and creative capacities of language itself and particular instances of richness and complexity of women's language use . . ." (62). For change in the Symbolic Order to occur, Luce Irigaray explains that women must be able to speak their identity, to speak as women within that order. She theorizes that a female symbolic can emerge through the rediscovery of what she calls the "maternal genealogy." According to Luce Irigaray, this genealogy languishes in the unsymbolized mother-daughter relationship, which has a noticeable absence of representation in Western culture. Margaret Whitford, in her

extensive discussion of Luce Irigaray's philosophy suggests what recovering such a maternal genealogy might mean:

> . . . an interpretation of the maternal genealogy . . . would symbolize the relation between the girl-child and her mother in a way which allowed the mother to be both a mother *and* a woman, so that women were not forever competing for the unique place occupied by the mother, so that women could differentiate themselves from the mother, and so that women were not reduced to the maternal function . . . . I hypothesize that this alternative symbolic is not envisaged simply as a substitute for what we have now, but would be a symbolic which enabled the imaginary creative intercourse between two parents to take a symbolic form. It would be a symbolic which, by making a place for the woman, would enable cathexis of the relation *between the two parents.* It would not *replace* the paternal metaphor with a maternal one, but would allow the woman as lover, and mother as co-parent to enter the symbolic for the first time. (*Luce Irigaray* 88-89)

A threat to the patriarchal symbolic order, Luce Irigaray claims, can be made through representing this mother-daughter relation, what she calls the dark continent of the dark continent. Resurrecting this female symbolic would open the way for a horizontal relationship among women rather than one of competition or rejection. When woman's singular role is maternal, she becomes part of the Symbolic Order only by replacing the mother; however, by attending to the vertical relation between the mother and daughter, psychoanalytic clichés of women's relations may be supplanted ("hatred of the mother, rivalry between women, women as women's own worst enemies") by other possibilities (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 78). Luce Irigaray, in her striving for separation from the mother, pleads:

> you put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate . . . . Continue to be also outside. Keep yourself/me also outside. Don't be engulfed, don't engulf me, in what passes from you to me. I would so much like that we both be here. That the one does not disappear into the other or the other into the one. (qtd. in Gallop 114)

I would suggest that the vertical relation between mother and daughter also needs

to be extended further to include older woman. Only by including post-menopausal women, women who have been disregarded because their "mothering" potential no longer exists, can the positioning of woman as mother really be challenged. The importance of extending the genealogy exists in the stretching of story, the telling and retelling of a female symbolic. In her essay, "The Chitlin Circuit," bell hooks describes the importance of the older woman in her early schooling. "It was a world of single older black women schoolteachers, they had taught your mama, her sisters, and her friends. They knew your people in ways that you never would and shared their insight, keeping us in touch with generations. It was a world where we had history" (qtd. in Woodward 103)[19]. Similarly, in her tribute to older women, Kathleen Woodward writes about a memory with her grandmother.

> I was ten and on vacation with my father's parents. My grandfather stayed behind (he always did), while my grandmother and I went down to the beach. It was too cold to swim, it was our first day, and so we walked along the water's edge to the rocks at the far end of the shore. I remember climbing those rocks for hours. What we had forgotten, of course, was the deceptive coolness of the sun. We returned to the hotel, our skin painfully, desperately burned. We could put nothing against our bodies. Not a single sheet. We lay still and naked on the twin beds, complaining, laughing, talking. Two twinned, different, sunburned bodies--the body of a ten-year-old girl and the body of a sixty-two-year-old woman. (91)

What Woodward goes on to say is that the importance of this scene is not that it is a story of mother and daughter, but of young girl and old woman who are not divided by generations, but instead are connected by them. As Sophia told us in one of our meetings: "My Baba. . .came from a strict Ukrainian family. It's like, she well she lives by herself because my Grandpa's in the hospital. And she comes over and we go shopping and I don't know, she's different. She's into lots of things; it's not always cooking and cleaning. So I had that passed down."

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[19]bell hooks. "The Chitlin Circuit." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990, 33.

For the maternal genealogy to be a possibility, we must think daughter, mother, grandmother (to continue in Luce Irigaray's vein). But how does one begin to delineate this relationship of maternal genealogy, to make room for the mother, the daughter *and* the grandmother? We can begin with Luce Irigaray's suggestion that it is through mimesis where first subordination and then affirmation can occur: a woman assumes the female role deliberately and then begins to thwart it. By locating her exploitation within the discourse, she makes it visible by playful repetition. Whitford points out that this kind of mimesis also encompasses the notion of protection for women when Luce Irigaray uses the term *mimétisme*, indicating an animal's camouflage. Working with the dominant form of mimesis, one that is caught up in the processes of "*imitation, specularization, adequation* and *reproduction*" (*This Sex* 131), offers a starting point for resistance and change. The second kind of mimesis that Luce Irigaray identifies is an enclave of the first, but rather than being reproductive, it is productive and comparable to the realm of music. It is in this form that Luce Irigaray believes the possibility for women's writing may come about. She notes that "There are also more and more texts written by women in which another writing is beginning to assert itself, even if it is still often repressed by the dominant discourse" (134).

Judith Butler further explains how Luce Irigaray's notion of mimesis works within the Symbolic Order:

> I will not be a poor copy in your system, but I will resemble you nevertheless by *miming* the textual passages through which you construct your system and showing that what cannot enter it is already inside it (as its necessary outside), and I will mime and repeat the gestures of your operation until this emergence of the outside within the system calls into question its systematic closure and its pretension to be self-grounding. (45)

Luce Irigaray argues that for women to have an identity, for *woman*kind to come into existence at all, depends on transgressing and subverting the Symbolic. Such a change, she notes, will not leave *man*kind unchanged. She believes that woman as speaking subject, what she calls "speaking (as) woman" is something which still has to be

created (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 136). But because the Symbolic Order and the Imaginary are co-determining, there must be a female imaginary as well as a female symbolic for things to change.

> If one attempts to bypass the question of the female at the level of the imaginary, by addressing the question at the symbolic level only--stating for example that women are capable of reason too, or pointing out that the fact that the Phallus is the signifier of difference does not imply any inevitable oppression of women within the symbolic and social order--then one is relying on a most precarious position; the break from the imaginary, which is the structural sense of the symbolic, may not have any support in the social; social institutions continue to support the phantasies of the male imaginary. (91)

Whitford explains the relationship between the Imaginary and the Symbolic further by comparing them to subjectivity and identity. Subjectivity like the Symbolic is a structure, an enunciative position that is empty without identity. Identity is Imaginary but the symbols, the representations it takes on, give it form like a body giving shape to clothing. One does not find the Symbolic without the Imaginary. So although it is important that women work within the Symbolic Order, calling upon techniques of mimesis, it is also important that they begin to imagine possibilities, *as if* they were speaking subjects, *as if* there were a female symbolic. Luce Irigaray points out that the ability to think about one's imaginary instead of being thought by it will have difficulty finding social form as long as there is no real other. For her,

> symbolizing the mother-daughter [and the grandmother] relationship, creating externally located and durable representations of this prototypical relation between women, is an urgent necessity if women are to exist *as women* in the social imaginary. These symbolic representations would constitute an external reality which might block the more damaging effects of the male imaginary and ideally have a creative outcome. (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray* 92)

Luce Irigaray begins to suggest ways of imagining through a shift in metaphor when she speaks of the female body through the elements, thus avoiding the dominant

metaphor of the scopic male gaze. She speaks in terms of space, thresholds, fluids, fire and water, air and earth. Her concern is with finding representations of women in which women can find themselves or with which they could identify, a female genre. In literary terms, genre mediates between singular texts and their status as members of some class. As Elizabeth Hirsh points out, for Luce Irigaray this means that "women among themselves call woman into being, and the mediating category woman permits this exchange" (118). Luce Irigaray's most powerful and most criticized image--the "two lips"--metaphorically represents these voices of women. The two lips can also function as a metonym, recalling the female body or as an image of female sexuality. Whitford also suggests that the two lips could be seen as contiguity between the mother-daughter relationship or the parental intercourse. Luce Irigaray herself dismisses the recourse to anatomy or nature since women clearly have more than one pair of lips. She suggests, rather, that "it means to open up the autological and tautological circle of systems of representation and their discourse so that women may speak (of) their sex" (qtd. in Whitford, "Irigaray's Body Symbolic" 101). Women speaking woman into being.

> Open your lips; don't open them simply. I don't open them simply. We--you/I--are neither open nor closed. We never separate simply: *a single word* cannot be pronounced, produced, uttered by our mouths. Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once. And how could one dominate the other? impose her voice, her tone, her meaning? One cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct. (*This Sex* 209)

Luce Irigaray sees the female symbolic and imaginary occurring both through a maternal genealogy and a female homosexual economy that would permit women to exchange among themselves instead of being objects of exchange. "It is necessary for a woman to be able to speak her identity in words, in images and in symbols within this intersubjective relation with her mother, then with other women, in order to enter into a relation with men that is not destructive" (trans. and qtd. in Whitford, 45). Such work

begins and continues collectively because imaginary identity is structured by the symbolic and is collective and social. The female imaginary is not one thing, one constricting definition for women, but the possibility, as Whitford reminds us, to envision a "space in which women, in all their multiplicity, can *become*, i.e. accede to subjectivity" ("Irigaray's Body Symbolic" 90).

While Luce Irigaray offers a useful psychoanalytic interpretation of women's positioning in and exclusion from patriarchy, there are limitations to extending such an interpretation further, particularly in a study focussing on writing. She does not extensively develop the role of language and writing in her explanation of mimesis, whose aim seems primarily subversive. And in choosing such a focus, Weir notes, "Irigaray thereby rejects the possibility or value of shared understanding, shared meanings--of the identity or *universality* which is essential to mutual understanding" (104). Shoshona Felman also points out difficulties with mimesis when she asks: "Is Irigaray speaking *as* a woman? *For* the woman? *In the place of* the woman?" (qtd. in Moi 142). Toril Moi adds that Irigaray does not seem to see that "sometimes a woman imitating male discourse *is* just a woman speaking like a man: Margaret Thatcher is a case in point" (143).

Even though Whitford broadly interprets Luce Irigaray's understanding of the female imaginary, much of Irigaray's work does not seem to acknowledge the multiplicity of identity nor the influences of context and historicity. For instance, her work addresses primarily a mother-daughter relationship which seems to be a more limiting conceptualization than it could be. While she does suggest that from the mother-daughter relationship, women need to move into relationships with other women in order for change to occur in the Symbolic Order, this love between women, a female homosexual economy, seems to be merely a step along the way to enact that change rather than signify a choice of relationship. While Luce Irigaray suggests that women are repressed and marginalized by the Symbolic Order, she does not consider that lesbians may be further marginalized from the positioning of heterosexual women in that symbolic. Just how much Luce Irigaray makes these differentiations among women is not clear. Questions of sexual orientation, race, culture, and other differences are seemingly not accounted for.

There are many ways to "speak women into being." In order to address the importance of this diversity when considering women and writing, the following chapters will not only build on Irigaray's notions of mimesis and subversion, but also will draw on theories of connection and integration to further explore the potential of the *as if*.

4.

THE LOOM OF LANGUAGE

So many of my dreams involve groups of people--some small and some extremely large. **The modern homemaker has every opportunity to express the charm and cordiality of her household in her dining room.** At these gatherings, I am always involved in trying to organize the food, the sleeping arrangements, babysitting. **This room, with tastefully selected furniture and table appointments, can help give a house its aura of permanence and warm-hearted living.** Most of the times, the event is chaos and I'm working so hard. Things come together and then they fall apart. It's a relief to wake up. **The table settings and food service can be so well chosen and smoothly executed that the personality and graciousness of the hostess will be clearly reflected to all present.**

I have a fear of snakes. *The female serpent was the embodiment of enlightenment, or wisdom, because she understood the mysteries of life.* I remember, when I was young, dreaming of multi groups of snakes slithering under my head. Horrible! ***Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate."*** The moon is not unlike us as people, and not unlike myself as a miniscule dot of humanity in God's creation. I cannot stand on my own.[20]

Mikhail Bakhtin explains that the words of our utterances are always half someone else's. By that he means that language does not arise fresh and pure from deep within us, but that we are born into a language that has been used, changed, and coloured by many others before us. In the reading of my own and the women's writing, I sometimes hear whispers of other contexts, can discover places where these words might have been, and, as with the writing above, I listen to some of those possibilities rise to the surface. While

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[20]The voices from these two texts come from the writing of Carmen and Hazel, *The Encyclopedic Cookbook, The Revised World Bible,* and *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects.*

this particular piece is a greatly simplified example of what Bakhtin is describing (he points out there are languages within languages, overlapping and absorbing each other), it is a beginning illustration of the places words have inhabited and the kinds of shading and tone with which they are imbued. Language comes to us with a history that shapes our stories even as we reshape that language with our own intentions. Unity and division at the same time, in the same utterance, the dynamic of words.

Bakhtin's exploration of language, in particular his work with dialogized heteroglossia, arose from his consideration of discourse in the novel. While he did not examine issues of gender in his work, many feminist writers have found his theories useful, if not controversial, in their discussions of language. As Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow point out in *A Dialogue of Voices*,

> To reject [Bakhtin] on the basis of his gender not only is to act as if gender determines all that one is (other aspects of oneself are excluded or irrelevant) but also is to decide that experience is pure--purely masculine or purely feminine--and thus monologic, closed, dead, a question of static being instead of a process, a becoming, a movement Bakhtin himself would insist on. (viii)

To consider how Bakhtin's thinking is helpful in exploring the relationship between language and identity, I want to begin by distinguishing between sentences and what Bakhtin calls "utterances." A sentence, by his way of thinking, is something infinitely repeatable, a form rather than something said. The preceding sentence could be written over and over again, in the same order, with the same punctuation. However, when one thinks of it as an utterance, something said for a listener/reader in a particular context, then it is no longer repeatable because the exact conditions can never exist again for those words. The context of an utterance arises from the histories of those words, from the stand the speaker or writer has chosen to take in relation to those words, and from her awareness of a real or imagined listener/reader of that utterance.

The history of different "languages"--professional, slang, jargon, dialects and so on--is coloured by the specific ways they have been conceptualized, understood, and evaluated. The language is shaded with a complex of experiences, ideas and attitudes that

Bakhtin calls *srastat'sia*, a term which means to "knit together--to inosculate, or to grow together in the way bones grow together--[which] suggests an organic process of blending separate entities" (Morson and Emerson 141). These languages form what Bakhtin calls the "heteroglossia," a variety of possibilities which speakers and writers draw on at any one time. The relation between these languages Bakhtin calls "dialogized heteroglossia"--an understanding of how words stated in a particular time and place will have a meaning different from any other conditions, and how these languages interanimate each other.

> The word . . . enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. (276)

Heteroglossia encompasses the tension between a centripetal force where multiple possibilities come together in a desire for a unitary language and centrifugal force which destabilizes those possibilities and stratifies language: construction and destruction at the same time. While language is anonymous and social, it is also concrete and specific to the individual. We shape our utterances for our own intentions even while our words answer the requirements of the heteroglossia and are active participants in speech diversity.

> Such is the fleeting language of a day, of an epoch, a social group, a genre, a school, and so forth. It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language. (272)

Di Brandt, in "Catching Each Other Off Guard," describes some of the tensions and discoveries in her collaborative writing projects and how they reminded her of the fluidity of identity and the interplay of "me/not me" that takes place in such work. She challenges the belief that the writer works from a solitary space ("me") and explains how working collaboratively illustrates what language really is--"words being traded back and forth between people, the same words, with slight variations, endless recyclings of the

same stories and rhythms, each one slightly different from the last, with the transmitter's indelible personal imprint on it, and yet recognizably communal, the same" (82).

I experienced similar revelations in my writing a collection of poetry about Emily Carr. While Emily Carr is a famous Canadian artist who died in 1945, her journals, autobiographies, and paintings are still in existence and became a way for me to enter into "dialogue" with her. What follows are excerpts from a reflective paper exploring this dialogic process written after the poetry collection was completed.

Tuesday, January 20th, 1931

> I have been to the woods at Esquimalt. Day was splendid--sunshine and blue, blue sky, and two arbutus with tender satin bark, smooth and lovely as naked maidens, silhouetted against the rough pine woods. Very joyous and uplifting, but surface representation does not satisfy me now. I want not 'the accidentals of individual surface' but 'the universals of basic form, the fact that governs the relationship of part to part, of part to whole and of the whole object to the universal environment of which it forms part.'
>
> -Emily Carr (*Hundreds and Thousands* 25)

How differently I now understand this excerpt from Emily Carr's journal after three years of dreaming about her, revelling in the verdant lushness of her canvases, imagining the life she and others wrote about, and writing my own responses through poetry. I read the passage and remember a creative artist who for most of her life painted among people who not only failed to encourage her work, but opposed it; a solitary woman who wrote of secretive, unrequited love and yet sublimated her sexuality. A woman of great modesty, who bathed partially covered but who spilled her passion onto canvas. A woman of determination who returned to the forests again and again wanting "the ferocious, strangled lonesomeness of that place, creepy, nervy, forsaken, dank, dirty, dilapidated, the rank smell of nettles and rotting wood, the lush greens of the rank sea grass and the overgrown bushes, and the great dense forest behind full of unseen things and great silence" (Carr 26). A woman the Native Americans called "Klee Wyck," Laughing One.

In contrast, my journal entry early in the project reveals a certain naïveté about what this biographical exploration might mean:

> *I read the pages of her writing searching for the key. How did she become a great artist in spite of it all? Certainly there was talent--waterfalls of talent. But there were roadblocks for her everywhere: 'Be British, be genteel, be a woman!' I think I was hoping that there would be some formula I could apply to my life, but I should know better. Formulas don't create artists or women. The one thing I do take away is her passion. The passion to find the life force to feel the need to paint even when not painting, to want to do nothing else. Passion is the secret. Something women aren't supposed to talk about much less have.*

Emily would have called this the surface representation and as with her dissatisfaction with such work, this understanding does not satisfy me now. I had to engage Emily in a relationship--part to part and part to whole--to begin to understand her deep desire not only to feel connected to the world, but to realize and reveal her relationship to the world and in the process, discover my own desire to understand myself as a writer.

Not long ago, I travelled to one of the Gulf Islands off the coast of British Columbia and saw my first arbutus trees. Their smooth amber bark was a splendid beacon in the rain-drenched winter forest, but it was in the pattern of the limbs and branches, right down to the smallest twig that I could see the filigree of connection which Emily had sought to animate through her painting. The arbutus reminded me of how I had begun with just a root fibre of knowledge about Emily. (I could have answered on any social studies test that she was a deceased Canadian painter who liked totem poles. And hadn't she been part Aboriginal and wasn't that one of her stories in the anthology?) But this was not really knowing Emily at all. She was not an Aboriginal although she felt a great affinity for their relationship with nature, and her period of painting totem poles had been an archeological effort to preserve something valuable she felt was disappearing. Emily's greatest work had been in her later life when she spent time in the woods she loved, painting what she thought revealed the rhythms and patterns of life.

> *. . . follow the smoketrail of my cigarette into the woods. Any clear day in summer. Step over the rotted tree boles, the tangle of undergrowth, bracken and sword ferns, the ordered disorder. Stir the hum of lusty life. Crush the ripe raspberry between your teeth. Juice dribbles down your chin. Settle beside me, sketchbook on your lap. Wait to see air move between leaves, shivering the robust. Open until colour enearths you. Feel your body dissolve, chromosomes*

> *into chlorophyll. Seep into the pungent ground, trickle along root hairs. Curl up the solid base, swim with the palpitations slow and easy. Follow the quiver to tree tops and explode into dance among the dense and green, shimmer into the sky. Startle your cerulean and emerald everywhere. (Grey Moon Points Back)*

As I began to follow the trail of cigarette smoke into the woods and the dribbles of paint across her studio floor, my understanding of the complexity of her life and relations began to unfold like the branches of the arbutus, and I came to know Emily more intensely than I had imagined. This knowing, an embodied knowing rather than an answer for a test, was a process of composing by juxtaposing my life to Emily's, by continuing a dialogue that created new images of my life and hers, and by reconciling how deeply interwoven our lives became even though she had died nine years before I was born.

Maria Tippett, one of Emily's biographers, describes her painting of a cedar ("Tree") in the following way:

> Like O'Keeffe, Emily did not paint the entire subject. She thrust her observer against the trunk, leaving the greatest portion of the cedar out of the painting. She attempted to imbue it with life and movement . . . . She juxtaposed light and dark colours, and achieved a rhythmic balance between the slowly curving ascending lines of the trunk and the falling draperies of the background foliage. (182)

Very early in my exploration of Emily, I felt this juxtaposition; there was no way of standing back and observing and speculating on her life without feeling mine bumped up against hers: dark to light, light to dark, prairie to temperate rainforest. I had begun by recording details of Emily's life--her birth and baptism, her thoughts about her family, her imaginings--but the record-keeping felt plodding and tedious; I did not know what I was accomplishing. Then, after a week of this, there was an entry in my journal: *I think the way I am going to write this is to find some parallels to my life.* This realization shifted the entries from biographical details to observations about our lives:

> *Her writing style in her biography is most unusual at times . . . she can cover times and events with rapid swiftness that necessitates my rereading a section and at other times she can give the most minute detail so that I wonder how her memory can reconstruct that so vividly. But then in some ways I think my memory works the same. I remember sensory detail with sometimes excruciating clarity*

and then want to speed through events associated with that image. My voice and stories are reflected off hers as hers are off mine and there is an echoing and an answering at work here. I see the piece being one of voices speaking in different ways and telling a story of being a woman and being an artist . . . knowing this, I have a focus for what I want to do . . . I think I would like to use some of my poetry/stories in answer to her paintings/writing.

I am getting a sense of power building here. Of two voices speaking back and forth while other voices enter the conversation. I am enjoying this process more now that it has begun or that I have recognized that it has begun.

In my early poems, while I had established that two voices would energize the work, there was far from the "rhythmic balance" of Emily's juxtaposing. There was a tentativeness, a reluctance to cross boundaries, and a persistent individualism. How could I presume to put my voice next to Emily's even if that voice were imagined through poetry? And there was a sense of hesitancy about the risk, too; an intuition that to begin this conversation would raise difficult questions and pose interesting challenges. Still, there seemed to be no way of really knowing Emily Carr without moving in close, of acknowledging my voice in this dialogue.

Moving closer was not easy, however. As I continued to read her journals and stories, I grew impatient with Emily's voice to the point where I would have to stop reading. But I began to learn that this was a pattern of our relationship; I could not just read and nod my head. Emily challenged the difficult bits of my life and it was this discomfort that was initiating some of the best dialogues, spanning a passion for artistic work to the demands placed upon a female artist.

I feel out-of-sorts. For two or three days now. A cork on water, leaves on the wind. Aimless, wrung out. I don't want to sit at my computer; I don't know how to start. There is a disconnection, my phone call keeps getting the busy signal. I'm afraid of losing the writing . . . . It is my breath.

I do not understand this great obstinacy, wanting and won't all in the same moment. Seems as though I am chained up and have to wait to be loosed, as though I got stage fright, scared of my own self, of my blindness and ignorance. (Carr 263)

*

> This morning an artist of Budapest visited me. He found my work more like a man's than a woman's. He thinks women find it harder to separate things from themselves, to forget themselves in their work, to concentrate. (Carr 237-238)
>
> *Writing time is derelict time in some ways to me--stolen, sneaky, precious times hiding beneath bridges and under chairs just to be with the writing. It is fine to say that the writing should take precedence above all else and that I should devote my life to it, but I have teaching, children, a husband.*
>
> I am always asking myself the question, What is it you are struggling for? What is the vital thing the woods contain, possess, that you want? Why do you go back and back to the woods unsatisfied, longing to express something that is there and not able to find it? (Carr 28-29)
>
> *I think that writing is so important to my idea of myself and how I relate to the world that I haven't touched it for a few days. There is a sense of distance and a fear that I will lose it. There is a side of me that longs for the comfort of knowing that I will always be able to write, that I can always do it. At the same time, there is this edge of desperation that puts a bite in my writing and I don't want to lose that.*

Through this talking back and forth, the writing began to move from more distant and distinct dialogues to poems where ideas began to be embodied through the images. My responses to Emily were starting to encompass an understanding of the pattern of relationship between us and of the multivoiced nature of dialogue.

As Bakhtin has pointed out, dialogue is never just about two people speaking to each other. A dialogue is formed both within, without, and between utterances, and is coloured by many voices from many places. For instance, Emily's voice was influenced by the Victorian and Edwardian strictures of the society in which she was raised, the critical suggestions of male artists, the admonishments of her family, and so on. My response to her carried with it the conversations I had had about writing, the words of my critics, the current discourses about women, and many more that are indistinguishable. To consider the singularity of our dialogue would be "at best an illusion, at worst a silencing of the many experiences and contexts about which and within which women have spoken through the ages" (Hohne and Wussow ix). As a mix of varied and opposing voices enter

into dialogue with us, we develop a sense of ourselves as distinct from those voices even while being entangled with them. Bakhtin writes:

> Within the arena of almost every utterance, an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. The utterance so conceived is a considerably more complex and dynamic organism than it appears when construed simply as a thing that articulates the intention of the person uttering, which is to see the utterance as a direct, single-voiced vehicle for expression. (354)

In my exploration of Emily's life, I was in dialogic relationship not only with many voices, but also with voices across time.

> *It's a curious effect to read a journal, day after day, of times that happened before you were born. You get caught up in the daily life until it also begins to feel like your life and that you live in two places at once. It gives one an odd sense of leaving linear time behind . . . a feeling that not much on the basic, human scale changes, just the players. It also has the effect of stretching me over my own life so I dip in and out of different times. There's a sense of threads being tugged and then woven back into the picture.*

As my work continued, the complexity of intertextuality with its multiple voices became more evident. Intertexuality, Claudio Guillen suggests, falls between the coordinates of citation and significance. Citation directly evokes other texts for the reader, a horizontal reading. Some of those texts were identifiable for me:

> *As I worked on the poem today, I got the strong sense of how intertexuality works for me. As I began to work on the baby stories from Emily's life, I remembered a poem about a baby that was in my novel and this was based on a photograph in the book* The Last Best West *which was about pioneer women on the prairies. That seemed to fit the tone of what I was trying to do. Then I remembered the story about the child whose legs had to be broken to fit a coffin . . . that story came from somewhere I don't remember but I used it in my novel as something happening to a character and then I used it again in a slightly different form this time. As I was writing this, I could feel texts flying through my head from all over and connecting to the work I was doing. It was almost visceral.*

Significance is a vertical reading which affects the semantic structure of the writing. Unlike the citation axis, the intertextuality of significance mingles words, themes,

and contexts with the writer's intentions and thus is less attributable to specific sources. Intertexuality that affects a poem vertically begins to blur the boundaries between the "fictitious and the natural, the novel and the autobiography, the original and the replicated, the self and the other, written and read, broken and whole" (McHugh 71). We can no longer tell with any certainty what has arisen from texts or experience and what has been constructed in a new context to enrich the words with a different meaning. The writing moves beyond imitating texts to finding a unity of its own.

As the boundaries in my work became more and more blurred, the poems sounded more coherent and unified; however, the boundaries between myself and Emily were also blurring. I was not always sure who was speaking in the poem, and this uncertain subjectivity was raising questions of who I was and how writing contributed to shaping my identity. Through my interaction with Emily, I was calling up and rewriting my memories, but I was also using "scenes" from her life. I was creating new memories of her and me together. The resituating was happening as I struggled with the complexity and multiplicity of my own subjectivity that was being revealed through the writing. I felt a sense of disorientation because, as Kerby suggests, "The author is . . . a confluence of intertextuality" (103). This confusion resulted in several poems about my elusive subjectivity. The knots in this project were tugging at my flesh as the words wove through my body; the language was creating me as I was using language to create Emily. As Emily Carr once said, "Extract the essence of your subject and paint yourself into it . . ." (Tippett 101). I had written myself into Emily's life and written her into mine, and my life had changed irrevocably because of it.

*

What kind of intimacy can be imagined on the page pencil touching paper the press
soft and firm persistent urging secrets to be opened a relentless matching
between fibre and lead like the return of warm air against snow
spring thaw the push toward growth circling every insistent
zero in with a certainty that answers are to be found here
outside my window

silly sparrows twitter and sing
at the lengthening light
and the hopeless search for
poetry

***

Since language always comes to us with the flavour of its previous interactions, Bakhtin explains that language "crystalizes" its earlier interactions and contains "congealed events" that we draw on as a starting point for our exchanges. Ways of speaking become what he calls speech genres-- "the residue of past behavior, an accretion that shapes, guides, and constrains future behavior" (Morson and Emerson 290). While we draw on these speech genres, our utterances use these resources for new purposes that express our intentions in a refracted way. And, because the history of interactions resides in that language, it becomes possible to consider some of the power relations inherent in its usage. Understanding this possibility, Laurie Finke points out, is important for feminist explorations of language. "The feminist analysis of dialogic speech genres begins to examine the complex dynamics of social relations by unpacking this largely invisible, yet powerful network of social relations and institutions that both promote and limit heteroglossia" (18). Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow suggest developing a feminist dialogics from Bakhtin's work that describes a feminine *être* rather than a feminine *écriture*. By this they mean a way of living, an ethic as well as an epistemology, that considers the struggle between socio-linguistic points of view. "Feminine *êtres* would emphasize the relationships between race, class, gender, time, and space, rather than simply the multiplicity of voices and strategies for utterance through which women make themselves heard" (xiv). Rather than just realizing the dialogic possibilities for women's voices, then, feminine *êtres* suggest the need for critique and analysis, for exploring and describing the context in which the language is found. But how can one begin such a critique? I can read a piece of research text, a section of prose or a poem and imagine that I trace the different voices, find colouring in the language, speculate on sources, but what does that really accomplish? Without some interpretation, it becomes a game of "find the

words." Instead, I am interested in thinking of the text as a site of interpretation. When reading a complex novel, my understanding goes far beyond what can be found on the page and what speculations I may have about the author's presence in the text. As I described earlier, literary texts invite readers into the *as if*, that place of potential revision and possibility, and readers accept these invitations as expressions of reality that have some existence of their own in the world. The literary text is able to initiate "performances of meaning" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 27) rather than actually formulating meaning itself. How can the research text also perform meaning? What *as if* conditions exist there?

In an earlier paper where I explored a piece of transcript from the teachers' group,[21] I chose to write and then read and reread the research text using three categories suggested by Robin Usher and Richard Edwards in *Postmodernism and Education*: con-text, pre-text, and sub-text (153). Usher and Edwards suggest the importance of acknowledging reflexivity in educational research, which considers how researchers are *part of* rather than *apart* from the world they research. But being aware of the operation of reflexivity goes beyond the personal, they note, in that through such investigations the place of power, discourse, and text in the research is revealed (148). The framework which Usher and Edwards propose for interrogating textuality and foregrounding reflexivity in the writing and reading of research texts draws on Derrida's notion of the " 'general' text which subsumes but goes beyond specific texts" (153) and includes the three categories listed above. Con-text (with the text) considers the situatedness of the researcher/reader, including embodiedness and embeddedness. Pre-text (before the text) attends to the language and signification, binary oppositions, writing and textual strategies, as well as the cultural and interpretive traditions within which the research occurs. Sub-text (beneath the text) examines the professional paradigms, discourses, and power-knowledge formations at work.

In what follows, I have used Usher and Edwards categories first as a way of considering, reading and interpreting the texts that were written and spoken in three

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[21]See "Reverberating the Action Research Text" in *Action Research as a Living Practice*, eds. Terrance Carson and Dennis Sumara (New York: Peter Lang, 1997)

research situations, and second as a way of constructing those research moments within this text. I have attempted to embed both the transcribed conversations and the textual products from that time within a research narrative that considers our situatedness and draws on some of the connections that arose outside of the conversations (for both me and the other participants) all the while trying to contextualize the work and leave it open to interpretive possibilities for the reader. The first research story describes an interview with Carmen and a look at her writing during a time when she was considering leaving her marriage. The second and third stories recount writing sessions and conversations with the adolescent girls.

After she had been writing for several months, Carmen and I met to talk about her writing. Because Carmen and I had known each other for years and were quite comfortable with each other, I assumed that she would have not had any hesitation in talking to me about her writing. But she had not written much besides letters since she left school nearly fifty years ago and so was nervous about what she has done, evaluating her work by the lessons she learned in school long ago. "At first I went slowly to make sure I was writing proper sentences," Carmen said. "I was never very good with nouns and verbs, so I wanted to make sure I wasn't making mistakes. I was trying to be very structured."

She was waiting to see what I would say. I felt uncomfortable that I had put her in this position. By giving a very open-ended set of possibilities and even giving her a sheet which described flow writing as that where "the writing just flows which means you don't have to worry about correct sentences or punctuation. The idea is just to let language flow out . . .", I believed that she would feel free to write whatever she wished. Of course, what I had not taken into account were the years of school where Carmen had learned the lessons well that writing had to ascribe to an outside authority's wishes, that it had more to do with giving the teacher or the expert what he or she wanted rather than being an opportunity to explore her own understandings.

When I reassured her that I was not going to be reading her work for correctness in the traditional sense of the word, that, indeed, I wouldn't read any of her work unless

invited, she relaxed and told me that she had managed to stop worrying about such matters to some degree already. Besides, prior to this conversation, she had checked with me several times about what she should be writing or what I wanted. Each time I had reassured her that I had no expectations about what she would write and that she could write any way or about any thing. I had given her some flow writing prompts as ways of getting started and she finally decided to begin there. Using such prompts as "I remember" or "I dream" or "When I was a child," she had begun to recall events from her past. One of the effects of this work was that, for the first time, Carmen began to reflect on the directions and patterns in her life. She remembered that she had been a tomboy as a child. "I was a little devil," she said. "I thought I had control of my life and could beat up every little boy in town." She also began to remember some long forgotten leadership skills. "I loved organizing stuff and I couldn't believe when I got married, I became so submissive. Yes, I'll have supper on time and yes I'll do the dishes and yes I'll do all these things."

When I asked her why she thought she had changed, her lips tightened and there was a hint of anger in her voice. "We believed all that stuff about being a romantic bride. After you walked down the aisle, you thought everything would be perfect. That was the story."

"When did you begin to realize that this was not going to be the way?" I asked her.

"Not until in my thirties did I start doubting that this was the way," she said. "He was expecting a clean, white shirt every day. He was expecting the kids to behave themselves. He was unhappy because everything wasn't orderly. I was beginning to think this was ridiculous. He didn't want me to drive. Because then he had control of the car. He would take me on Saturdays. We took the kids in the car and they would fight and holler and scream in the car while I rushed around and got groceries."

She continued by describing how his various illnesses over the years had exacerbated the already demanding role expected of her. "When he was in the hospital, and visiting hours were two to three, he would expect me to get a babysitter for the kids, take the bus for visiting hours, stay from two to three, then go home and make supper

then get another sitter and go back for evening hours."

I recalled Martha's and Lois's conversation about Mary and how they had realized that she could never be married because marriage "would confine her." During the 1950s, the expectations for women within marriage were more clearly laid out, the discourse of the housewife definitively stated. I remembered my mother complaining to me at one point about my father's lack of support in the running of the house. When I asked her why she didn't request his help or why she hadn't begun this tradition at the beginning of her marriage, she told me that role expectations had seemed clear cut and definitive when they were married in the early 1950s and that it was "hard to change the rules in the middle of the game." Carmen's life had been shaped by the same era.

Beverly Jones, in writing about marriage and motherhood, describes the kind of language used by husbands to control their wives' behaviour. She is threatened by expulsion with threats like "If you do, you need never come back." Or he chooses guilt-inducing metaphors like "This isn't a marriage, it's a meat grinder." Or, as Jones notes, "he may simply lay down the law that goddamn it, her first responsibility is to her family and he will not permit or tolerate something or other. If she wants to maintain the marriage she is simply going to have to accommodate herself."

> There are thousands of variations on this theme and it is really very clever the way male society creates for women this premarital hell so that some man can save her from it and control her ever after by the threat of throwing her back. Degrading her further, the final crisis is usually averted or postponed by a tearful reconciliation in which the wife apologizes for her shortcomings, namely the sparks of initiative still left to her. (46-47)

In her writing and later interviews with me, Carmen was exploring some of the language that controlled and constrained her life. In one of her notebooks, Carmen begins with a daily diary of the trip she took with her sister. The entries mention interesting visits, "adventures" with the motorhome on the road, delicious suppers with friends, and forays to different shopping sites. The travelogue ends with Carmen writing: "We really did enjoy travelling together and got along extremely well. We joked and laughed a lot--were both

flexible--and were determined to have a good time." As she returns to her tension-filled marriage, however, the writing changes. The lines of control visibly move back into place. There are descriptions of her husband's efforts to bring her back in line; i.e., catering to his needs. She writes of all the activities with which she fills her time in an effort to get away, but in spite of that her old sense of inadequacy returns. For instance, she writes that she goes back to her weight group and is pleased that after five weeks she has lost "one-half pound!" Later, feeling the old constraints slipping over her, she writes "Why try so hard for over 40 years to help him and wait on him and chase him and lose sleep over him, etc., etc . . . . He has used the whole family and tried to dominate us all for his power of control. We've all given in so we can keep peace. It's easier to give in than to listen to the complaining. He says he loves us--I don't know if he knows the meaning of the word."

Bronwyn Davies reflects on growing up during the 1940s and 50s in her look at the stories that shape women's subjectivity. During that era, when a war had just ended and future wars seemed ever looming, definite distinctions were made between male and female roles. Men were the heroes who went off to bravely defend the country while women stayed back, waiting at home. "Their position," Davies writes, "the antithesis of heroism, was one of unknowing, patience, privation, hardship, and namelessness" (60). She describes how she searched for alternatives to this position, deciding that a nurse would offer a more active role. But when she listened to her parents talk about nurses, their description revealed their belief that nurses were the wrong kind of women. "In the eyes of my father, nurses were sexually available and therefore not, according to my mother, in the category of woman who could be respected or accorded any value other than sexual. Sexually available women could not be wives" (61). At the same time, Davies notes, it was clear that her father prized sexually active women and bemoaned the fact her mother was not one of them. Searching for a way to live within the contradictions of being a good woman, sexually active, and heroic, Davies read voraciously where she "repeatedly came across the pattern of female heroism that combined a fear of not being worthy or loved with an extraordinary capacity to sacrifice oneself for others and to care

for them, particularly if they were damaged or imperfect in some way" (61). Thus she found herself, at age twenty, married to a violent man who had been released from prison into her care and with whom she stayed until she finally realizes, "The story lines through which I made sense of my life were a nonsense in the face of the damage done by the prison system, and no amount of feminine care and self-sacrifice could restore the damage" (61). Such romantic story lines, she believes, maintain a male/female dualism where "the desire to correctly constitute oneself as woman entails taking up as one's own oppressive subject positions that none would ever rationally choose" (61).

Like Davies, Carmen was questioning the romantic story lines that had affected her life by writing memories and discovering some of the discourses that had so profoundly shaped her experiences. There was a tension between the desires that such stories had engendered and the obvious failure of those fantasies to deliver: there was seduction followed by disappointment.

After our conversation, Carmen continued to write. In fact, her writing became a daily touchstone as she moved out of her home and began to cut her ties to her husband. The writing not only records her daily activities, but becomes a location for her to write her anger and reveal some of the many voices that have limited and structured her life. Reading her writing from one twenty-four hour period just as she was in the midst of moving out, I read about the strings which her husband tugged and pulled to control her:

> I arrived home at about 2 p.m. L. [her husband] was trying to organize a trip to the MediCenter--he has broken glass in his big toe. I dropped him off, came home and put potatoes and pork chops in the oven. Went back to pick L. up . . . Then someone from Homecare came to make L. supper, which I had started and didn't know she was coming . . . then I had to get L.'s antibiotics at Guardian Drugs. Turned into an exhausting day. S. invited E., H. and I over to supper . . . The nurse came and sorted out L's pills. She also helped him with a bath . . . L. wanted a new telephone answering machine. I had gone to Sears to pick it up. Now he decided that the old machine still worked, so I had to take the new one back . . . L. wanted me to pick up some Travel Aids at Superstore and then I came

> home. L. had a note on the cupboard that I had better move everything of mine to M.A.'s. [the house she was moving to.]

I get dizzy just reading the litany of requests and orders that are put upon her. When she has finally left for good, her husband phones her one morning and threatens to commit suicide because she had upset him so badly. Carmen writes: "He hung the phone up before I could answer. I didn't know what to do and fell into the guilt trap he set." She chronicles her efforts to get outside help and not to go back home, which she realizes is what he wants her to do. At the end of the ordeal, she writes:

> I am desperate to make L. understand how unhappy I am and have been for 25-30 years. I've been unhappy about the way he treated and yelled at the kids. I've been unhappy about his control over all of us. I've asked him to treat us like he treats the neighbours--he's good to them . . . . Even if he committed suicide, it would be his choice--not mine. I am not responsible for his actions. I have covered for him and made excuses for him for so many years that I will have to keep telling myself -- "it's not my fault."

The stories continue, and since I have been so closely connected to Carmen for so long, I find the reading difficult. Still, the writing is a story of hope as with every page it seems she becomes clearer about what she is leaving and what may lie ahead. In an entry written not long ago, Carmen writes: "I get so depressed at times and feel really beaten. Upon looking back, I think these feelings are becoming less of a burden. I like to be in control of my life and rarely have been."

In her writing Carmen moved from remembering the past and how she had been an independent young woman and a dependent wife to focussing on the present. The writing became a way of sorting out the conflicting voices and feelings which inundated her daily.

The tilt of the earth bends my head
toward pellucid light
sharpened with new sun

I see differently now light has changed

Eyes crisp like the edge of old snow
melted and refrozen
sing as I shovel ice

Chunks of muddy crystal float
towards the gutter
waft through off-key serenade

Intensity no longer percolates

Steam rising to chill into drenching rain
before all boils over
rushing toward grey pavement

Scattered by tires of unconscious cars

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In creating the research text around two meetings with the adolescent girls, I am again relying on Usher and Edwards categories, but with a difference from Carmen's story. I begin with some of my earlier work on popular culture's influences which backgrounds the work with the girls before describing two sessions where Sidonie and I worked with the girls to consider the text of popular songs, their own responses to those songs, and the connections to their lives. While we did not identify such work as using the three categories, I think it can be said that within the research group, we used sub-text, con-text, and pre-text to read our interpretations. Thus there are a number of levels of interpretation at work here including the understandings generated in the group, my later considerations, and the meanings the reader gleans from the text. I begin with some of my pre-texts.

Susan Douglas, in *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with Mass Media*, describes how the images, metaphors, and stories delivered by the media about women have left them feeling wooed as consumers yet rejected as people.

> We have grown up and continue to live with media images not of our making, so, on some level, we will always feel like outsiders looking in at a culture that regards us as unknowable, mysterious, laughable, other. But we are insiders too, having been formed by this very same culture, our desires researched to the hilt and then

> sold back to us in a warped, yet still recognizable fashion. (271)

She describes, for instance, how women's rising desire for control over and autonomy in their lives was co-opted during the 1980s. To sell cosmetics, companies used words such as "performance," "precision," and "control" to promote products such as "Swiss Performing Extract" or "Niosôme Système Anti-Age" (253). "Cosmetics were sold as newly engineered tools, precision instruments you could use on yourself to gain more control than ever over the various masks and identities you as a woman must present to the world" (254). But, in order not to sound too high-tech and remote, the producers also ensured that the names had a European flavour. So, for example, system was usually spelled as *système*. "Several product names simply went for broke," Douglas explains, "as in this little gem, Crème Multi Modelanté bio-suractiveé . . ." (255).

There are a myriad of contradictory messages like these circulated for and about women. While the contradictions may have seemed deceptively clear at one time--good girls do this; bad girls do that--the possibilities presented now seem more fragmented. As Douglas points out

> One piece might be from *Roseanne*, another from *Thelma and Louise*, another from those noxious Oil of Olay ads. And we still find ourselves riddled through with "on the one hand, on the other hand" responses to Hillary Clinton, reports on date rape, *Glamour*, Cher's face-lifts, and Madonna. We feel our insides to be in a constant state of roiling suspension, our identities as women always contingent. (294)

Prior to beginning my doctoral study, a colleague, J-C Couture, and I initiated a small research project where I interviewed, on videotape, three teenage girls and one boy about advertisements in teen magazines. In particular, I focussed on a controversial Calvin Klein ad, which showed young adolescents wearing jeans in various stages of undress; one was even fashioned after the centrefold style of *Playboy*. J-C's project focussed on his work with young men and women in a Career and Life Management Class where they explored the media's role in shaping and influencing young women's sense of body image through a number of viewing assignments. During the conversation with my

group, the teenagers clearly identified how the advertisements were being directed toward them and also what other sources were being called upon. At times they were eloquent in describing the interpellative powers of the advertising text. Yet there was an uncertainty that came through their comments. They knew how these texts worked, but some still desired what was promised. There was the sense that while they knew they were being "set-up"and that desires were being created for them, they wanted to be seduced; they wanted to believe. The power of the consumer discourse assailed them. One of J-C's students said it well:

> What I like about looking at how the media constructs an ideal or perfect body is understanding why our society values "beauty." Yet I don't understand something we discussed in class--that somehow this is wrong. Last month I got a job waitressing over two other girls who applied. I heard from a friend that the boss likes girls with long hair and loves short black skirts. So guess what I wore to the interview? So what am I supposed to do--tell society it is wrong? I needed the job--does this make me a bad person? This "body image" stuff is for losers sometimes. I choose not to be one of them. I'm sorry for them but what can I do? (Couture & Luce-Kapler 10)

While I had been quite blunt in asking my first research group for their opinions about advertising and what positions they may have taken up for themselves, with the adolescent girls Sidonie and I had agreed that our work would depend more on the girls' initiative. We wanted them to take turns leading the group rather than depending on us. During the early meetings, they were tentative about doing anything other than what we suggested, leaving Sidonie and me disappointed. We invited their comments and suggestions, but felt we made little progress. The transcripts reveal spaces of silence with the girls waiting, uncertain what to say and where to go next. Their reluctance to read or speak seemed to come from a fear of risking such personal disclosures. For instance, several of the girls would only read if we would agree not to look at them during the process. When Sidonie and I reviewed the group meetings, we realized we kept leaving spaces for the girls to participate without really clarifying that this was something we

hoped for and without explaining that this was not a traditional group where the adults were the leaders who had all the answers. We described to the girls how we had envisioned the group while announcing that we would no longer be the only ones to steer the group and inviting them to lead with whatever activities they wanted to try. This seemed to work. At the next meeting Alexis brought a popular song and suggested a writing activity that we could do afterwards. The song, "Clinic" by Crash Vegas begins

> got to go to the clinic
> just to see myself undone
> body's got this trouble
> keeping down what's keeping in
> just wish i could feel something
> this isn't murder
> this is my ticket out of here

Alexis asked us, after listening to the song twice, to choose our favourite words or lines and use those as a writing prompt. Our responses showed varying interpretations. Some thought she was pregnant and heading for an abortion. Others thought she was committing suicide and some believed she was talking about eating disorders. The varied interpretations, however, led into talk about how the images of the body for women are so central to our responses to popular culture and its responses to us. Alexis told us how hard it would be for her to be as thin as the models in magazines. "I have chubby legs," she said. "Like I don't know, like from doing sports and stuff you know. I don't look like that." Dale announced vehemently that women who were too thin were worse than people who were overweight. "It makes me want to puke," she said. "These really thin women who are 100 pounds, like yuck. I'd rather look at a 400 pound woman." The girls were surprised, too, that Sidonie and I were still affected by images. "Even at this age in my life," Sidonie told them, "I still fight it all the time. Fight the images that are thrown at me every day."

From there, the girls began to talk about songs as if they were a subtext for much of their lives.

> You remember things because memory is so attached
> to music and you remember oh the guy you broke up with and--

There's always like a line even if I'm listening to,
you know like heavy metal,
like a rock song.

A song by Boyz to Men, "Do you want me to . . ." Because I heard
it in the summer. 'Cause it was the song that was playing
all the time when I was with Brad.

He was a model wasn't he? He was a model?

He'd be in one of those like Calvin Klein ads or whatever?

Yeah, he was in a jeans. I e-mail him all the time.

I listen to Tori Amos a lot.

Oh, she always makes me cry. That's what I was going to say.

And Sarah McLaughlin.

I like anything by Garth Brooks.
I'm like going to marry him.
I'm serious.

I've got that album "Born in the USA" downstairs
and he looks good you know.

And he wears such tight jeans too.

Oh I know. He does.

I always cry to all of Tori Amos.
My sister has the tape so I always borrow
it for like weeks on end.

I write down lyrics of songs, like I collect all the songs. I collect them

and there's two songs--that I really want to bring.

It seemed that popular culture had provided the right venue for the girls to talk and write because in the farewell moments of this meeting, Norah complimented Alexis on her suggestion and then looked at the other girls. "You know what I was thinking is that I think we should do this again because there's a lot of times that I write when I listen to a song, you know. We should."

So, for the next meeting, Dale picked a Tori Amos song, "Me and a Gun," which described, a cappella, the rape of a woman and led to some different responses from the girls. Dale asked us to pick two letters of the alphabet and then listen to the song again. Afterwards she asked us to write, being sure that each line of our writing had at least one word that started with either of the letters we had chosen. At first I was sceptical; it sounded like an ineffective exercise to me in response to such a powerful song, but I kept my reservations to myself and let Dale continue. I realized, however, when we started to read our responses to the song, how that simple constraint of having to use a particular letter had sharpened the intensity of the writing into a strong "talking back." For instance, Sophia wrote:

> Asshole, pulling me down
> pushing me further to the edge
> making me answer for the same
> stealing my dignity
> and watching me fall apart . . .
> When he laughed playfully
> and helped me pick up
> all my wretched pieces. . .

Dale wrote:

> Disease gnawing at the soul
> tormenting and blacking out the hurt
> Days and nights full of hate
> timeless the violation. . .
> Daughters, mothers, sisters
> they all feel the pain
> dreaming that justice will be done.

Dale then told us that she had chosen the song because such an event had happened to her sister. "The first time I heard it," she told us, "was with my sister. She'd moved out and she moved back in and I didn't know why and then we listened to the song and she said 'hold me' and whoa. She's okay with it now because she's married. But it was her boyfriend she was living with before who started stalking her and then she started going out with her now husband. And he kind of beat him up and almost got arrested for it. She talks to her husband about it a lot. And she's like, comfortable with it now because she kind of feels safe with him. Like he's a big bulky man."

We talked about how it's too bad her sister can't feel safe with herself and how all our writing in response to the song has been some expression of not feeling safe ourselves and being angry about that. Sophia is surprised at her response: "I found it hard to write about something like that because that kind of thing hasn't happened to me, but my anger still comes through."

Each of us had spoken at some time to other women about being afraid to go into parking lots at night or being afraid to walk in the dark. We described ways of protecting ourselves, such as threading your keys through your fingers as a weapon. But when we ask the girls if writing helps them deal with such issues, Alexis tells us that it "feels fake." What it seems she meant as we talked about it further was how such fears can ride below the surface without any concrete form, being difficult to describe and articulate, touches from the Real again. The talk that arose from the writing attempts worked better at clarifying and contextualizing those feelings than the writing itself. Sidonie then told the girls about how it had taken her nearly twenty years to write about a scary event in her past. "It takes a long time to produce those words," she told them. "So if you feel inadequate and not ready for the task, it's okay."

Leave
traces
of my
body
on the page

sweat
from my hand
flakes of skin
curve of pen

colour of day
sleep of night

Even if I come back to this page tomorrow
I will be somewhere else and
forgotten the angle of light
in my eyes
that reminded me
of these words
and not others

I will have forgotten
the quality of night
a page from a book
the grapefruit for breakfast

yet it lingers in spaces
spiders through language
somewhere

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While Carmen seemed to find interpretive possibilities with her ongoing writing a daily text, at least for making changes in her life, the girls did not see such possibilities for their writing until it was contextualized by conversation, especially when it was juxtaposed with Sidonie's and my comments. We thought if we could give some direction for how they might consider their interpretation of experience through writing and how they could reinterpret that writing, they could become part of the theorizing about female lives in this society and would begin to see how larger issues are embedded in the particulars of everyday life. Such theory would resonate with "lived concerns, fear and aspiration" and serve an "energizing, catalytic role" (Lather 61). We did not, however, want our sessions to turn into a critical analysis of writing where the old, schooled patterns of trying to interpret the meaning of the text would emerge. Rather we needed something to interrupt

such a pattern and move them away from the cathartic power of their texts toward an illumination of those texts.

The work of German feminist and sociologist Frigga Haug offered some direction. Haug, as part of a group of women, met over a period of several years to write about the sexualization of females. The group wrote about their memories of body/sexual experiences (for example, breasts or legs) in the third person and then read aloud these works to the others. The other women would respond generally, asking questions and making comments. Then the writer would rewrite her piece, trying to explore the experience more fully.

The aspect of the study that seemed most useful for us was the discourse analysis that was part of the women's search for understanding.[22] The words from the memoirs were broken into categories of wishes or dreams, actions, and feelings. Breaking apart the traditional text and seeing the words in clusters stopped the usual response to narrative and allowed the writer and readers to see more clearly the historical, cultural, and social traces in the writing.

After asking the group if they wanted to try this technique and hearing their desire to continue, we discussed a focus for their writing. One theme that had continually arisen during our group meetings was the notion of forbidden writing, i.e., "good girls don't write about sex," or "good girls don't write bad stuff," etc. The girls were eager to try writing around that theme, but they were not clear about what we meant by "forbidden writing"; they had not thought of their earlier responses in that light. Sidonie suggested that we look at several pages of Jeannette Winterson's essay, "The Semiotics of Sex," which takes on the issue of women writing the forbidden and then have a discussion. Once the girls realized that we were not talking about forbidden writing as pornographic, but rather as their broaching everyday issues that "good girls" did not write about, they agreed to write something in the third person before the next meeting.

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[22]Brigitte Hipfl from the University of Klagenfurt explained this aspect of Haug's work to us. She had done a research project with Haug where this kind of discourse analysis was used.

When the girls read their narratives to each other, we realized the importance of asking them to write in third person; there was an immediate distancing that made the next step, the discourse analysis, an easier transition. The girls also seemed more ready to respond to written work in such a voice because it seemed they could have been talking about someone else. As the group worked through the texts, we realized how such a process was "opening up" the writing for interesting, new perspectives.

For example, Pegatha wrote a short piece about the artist. "The artist is not divided and she is not for sale," she wrote quoting Winterson, and then continued in her own words: "She hides beneath, in the shell that has been created for her. She must create the crack which will give her the freedom she needs, wants, and deserves . . .". Pegatha's writing was a determined manifesto of a self. She was resisting the image that the world had given her and revealing the strength beneath. When we broke apart the narrative for the discourse analysis, the words revealed a tension between societal expectations of her ("childish, hide, forbids her to write, to express") and her own desires ("create a crack, breaththrough and prove, freedom to imagine and express.") The way Pegatha was perceived in the group as someone vulnerable, quiet and fragile was belied by the strong desire for expression and determination of strength that appeared in this writing. The group identified some traditional feminizing influences in the words, the focus of her resistance, and found traces of the feminist texts she had been reading in class ("The Yellow Wallpaper" for example) as well as ideas from conversations and discussions that affirmed different ways of being female. Pegatha's work also reminded us of Virginia Woolf with her criticism of the marginalization of female writing as "confessional."

Alexis wrote about a childhood incident with a neighbourhood boy that began as seemingly innocent, but in retrospect was an invasion of her body.

> He laid his navy blue kangaroo jacket neatly on the ground and was sitting next to it. With a look of anticipation on his face, he gave the ground an inviting pat. It was a grandpa wants you to sit on his knee pat. He is nice, she thought, he put his jacket down for me so I would not get dirty . . . She looks back now and realizes he was probably covering his own ass. He tried to unzip her pants, but his hands

> were shaky and the zipper got stuck. He tugged at it fiercely; finally he just slid his hands into her panties and touched her in her private place. It went on for less than a minute . . . .

As she sorted through the actions, feelings, dreams and wishes emerging from the text, the girls noticed an interesting trend. Sophia said, "When you read it, it sounded like it was from a child. Reading it here, it sounds more traumatic." They noticed the violent words juxtaposed with words of reconciliation: playing guns, stung, caught, warning, keep quiet, stop, throw, tear, screaming, crying, cursing, struggle. Then understands, kisses, whispers. And the feelings: freedom, worry, terrifying, healing, dumb, silly, sad, anger.

The ambivalence that Alexis still felt about the event became clear when she looked at the lists of words. She claimed that the incident had not made her feel bad, but writing and talking about it, so that other people became part of the experience, was what was difficult for her. She continually insisted, too, that we should not think that "all guys were this way," even to the point where she wrote a postscript to her story about a boyfriend who hears the story and understands. She ends with the lines: "And so she says to him, not this boy, this boy is hope. He holds her in his arms and kisses her gently. This boy *is* hope. He is reassurance that some men in the world are safe. With his tears she would finally forget."

What became clear in working with the girls through this kind of analysis was the complexity and contradictions of their lived heteroglossia. In some ways, our group added another layer of complexity to their lives by coalescing some of the feminist discourses that had previously been quite fragmented for them. At every meeting, there were statements that either Sidonie or I made declaring our own feminist perspectives and reinforcing the feminist character of the group. The meetings became a time for girls to make comments and declarations (feminist in character) that they might not make so vociferously in other places such as comments about body weight and Barbie dolls. At the same time, the group became a place to explore their real or desired heterosexual relationships where some of the girls teetered between declaring their independence and self-determination and collapsing other hopes into the attentions of a young man. The

discourse of the group, developed within this context of a feminist perspective, also became a location to highlight the contradictory nature of women's lives, developing as a kind of "speech genre" of ambiguity. Even as we talked about how the media, our culture, our stories influenced and shaped us, we could not stop the siren calls that moved us to longing. Wendy Hollway suggests that within competing and contradictory discourses, one will take a position in a certain discourse rather than another because there is an investment or *cathexis*; in other words, there is some possibility of satisfaction or a payoff even if that is not fulfilled. I wondered, sometimes, how often the girls chose to take a position in the feminist discourse just for the comfort level of the group. In any case, I realized the difficulty of reshaping language with "our own intentions," as Bakhtin describes, when it is often so hard for young women to even know what those intentions are. My earlier work with the teenagers and advertisements had also revealed such confusion. They "knew" the discourse which should critique the ads, but they also couldn't deny the longing for what was offered. In comparison, Carmen had taken forty years to begin to sort out her intentions and to feel some control in her life.

Yet Carmen's experience reveals how the interactions between circumstances and her writing helped clarify those intentions and led her to action. The same possibilities were evident for the girls. Through the work of the group, we had begun to raise an awareness of their language, the *as if* potential, that they were beginning to shape with their own intentions as a way into action and creation of a story of their own. The clearest indication of this occurred during the last month or so of the group when several of the girls agreed to read their pieces of "Forbidden Writing" publicly at a cafe and when two of them wrote a play for an upcoming teen festival about love, including a lesbian relationship. Despite some concerns from adults in the community and calls for censorship, they went ahead and produced it anyway. Pegatha describes how some parents of other actors yelled at her: "They were like 'what the hell are you doing?' And I was like, 'it's just a play. It's okay.' And my grandmother who's not very open-minded was like yelling at my mom for letting me do this. I was like 'okay. It's not that big of a deal.' And besides that our friends were like, 'yeah, go ahead.' "

After the group had ended, Sidonie and I gathered several of the girls together to see how the play had gone and to hear their feedback about the group. The girls were surprised to realize that we thought we might have been too structured or had agendas that did not match their own. Instead, Pegatha had sensed that there were no guidelines at all and that being in the group "set us free for sure." She suggested that the group was a place where she could come and be herself, doing what she felt she needed to do. "It was scary sharing your stuff," she told us, "but usually I walked away really clear headed. You'd have a bad day and all day at school you'd try to keep this image and then you'd go there and totally be yourself and you'd write and you'd bawl and nobody would care if you did and then you'd walk away and go like 'all right'." Alexis felt that the group had been a place where all participants made choices and took risks saying that, rather than leading, Sidonie and I had been representative of what the girls could do. They had seen us as examples or possibilities rather than directors. "You know--like--you're not just saying this stuff," she said. "You actually do some of it. And uh you know, you don't bull crap people and stuff like that." She had found that writing and working in the group, in combination with her acting, had given her a lot of confidence. "I don't really care what people think anymore," she said. "I'm just like--you know." Pegatha, too, described the sense of confidence she developed from being part of a group where she felt encouraged to make choices. Recalling her experience as part of the writing collective for the play, she said, "I just remember us saying 'let's do a lesbian scene. It will be so funny.' And then we're talking about it and then I remember eventually saying, 'Well, why couldn't we? It ties in with everything. It's not that big of a deal. It's not like we're going to have sex on stage or anything.' And then it was just like we were 'hey if we wrote it and worded everything correctly and got the right actresses to do it then it could work'. "

While the girls seemed to have developed some clearer sense of their intentions, I was still uneasy about their declarations of "empowerment." I kept feeling there was more going on. Just looking at any of the writing groups' language left something slipping between the cracks. While there were certainly acknowledgements of gender questions, the issues of race and class (mostly white and middle-class) seemed transparent and

unquestioned. Focussing on the language diverted the attention from the fact that we were female bodies in particular spaces, together. Somewhere in those spaces was the semiotic chora. If I was going to consider a feminine *êtres*, like Hohne and Wussow describe, then I would have to look further, consider the bodies in all this, consider Elizabeth Grosz's suggestion:

> If we take antihumanist critiques of personal identity seriously, feminists can meaningfully talk about women as an oppressed group or a site of possible resistance only by means of specifying the female body and its place in locating women's experiences and social positions. As pliable flesh, the body is the unspecified raw material of social inscription that produces subjects as *subjects of a particular kind.* (*Space, Time, and Perversion* 32)

I needed to make some clearer connections between language, the body and the space they created.

5.

PRACTICES FROM THE BLOODHUT

The bloodhut, a place where women gathered and were waited upon and cared for; a place where women, set aside from normal time and life, could talk freely.
(Hallquist, et. al)[23]

Norah
I skip pages. I always write on the first page, you know, then there's a bunch of blank pages. Then I noticed, I like the way you guys write one after another.

Sidonie
I don't.

Norah
You don't.

See?

You leave them just in case?

Yeah.

Do you date them?

Yeah and I also notice when my cycle is. I've been keeping track of that for about three years.

Really?

From the earliest human cultures, the mysterious magic of creation was thought to reside in the blood women gave forth in apparent harmony with the moon, and which was sometimes retained in the womb to "coagulate" into a baby. Men regarded this blood with holy dread, as the life-essence, inexplicably shed without pain, wholly foreign to male experience.

Great Goddess Ninhursag . . .taught women to form clay dolls and smear them with menstrual blood as a conception-charm, a piece of magic that

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[23]In the left hand column of the writing which follows, the pieces are from a research meeting with the adolescent girls. In the right hand column all excerpts are from Barbara Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia* 635-645.

Yeah, because I do believe that my cycle affects how I write. In the end, I'll take a look a see.

At the end of what?

Oh at the end of the my life.

Right before she goes to the grave. Well, I was regular for about three months. Thank goodness. Laughter *I have no idea when I get mine. Like I just get it and all of a sudden I'm just ahhh.*

Norah!

Should I keep track of when I get it? Well, the only time I'd worry, is you know, if it took too long like two months or something.
I'd be worrying all the time like I'm a day late. Oh my god. See, if I just don't know then I'm like ah that's all right.

underlay the name of Adam, from the feminine *adamah*, meaning "bloody clay,' though scholars more delicately translate it "red earth."

Odin acquired supremacy by stealing and drinking the "wise blood" from the triple cauldron in the womb of Mother-Earth, the same Triple Goddess known as Kali-Maya in southeast Asia.

Medieval churchmen insisted that the communion wine drunk by witches was menstrual blood, and they may have been right.

As any flower mysteriously contained its future fruit, so uterine blood was the moon-flower supposed to contain the soul of future generations.

Styx was the blood-stream from the earth's vagina; its waters were credited with the same dread powers as menstrual blood.

In the 17th century A.D., Christian writers still insisted that old women were filled with magic power because their menstrual blood remained in their veins.

Rebecca

One of the interesting things that I've learned a few years ago is how different women are and how individual everyone's cycle is. The way they talk about women is like you're young, you get your period and then you get menopause. It's like they talk as if it's same for everybody. And, it's not. And it changes from month to month and year to year. And they never talk about it. I finally talked to the doctor about how my cycle wasn't like it used to be. She said "That's normal." I said, "They never tell you that, that your body changes and that things change.

This was the real reason why old women were constantly persecuted for witchcraft. The same "magic blood' that made them leaders in the ancient clan system made them objects of fear under the new partriarchal faith.

Just as primitives attributed beneficial powers to menstrual blood along with its fearfulness, so medieval peasants thought it could heal, nourish, and fertilize.

Sidonie

And from cycle to cycle changes.

I do know now when I get your poems I see a little ov in the bottom.

Pre-moon and moon. Women used to anticipate this time. It was a magical thing and a magical time and they weren't ostracized. PMS was seen as a source of strength, a hypersensitive strength, a special time.

The Talmud said if a menstruating woman walked between two men, one of the men would surely die.

Well, women, I'm not sure how true this is, but women used to menstruate with the moon because they were closer to nature. And women who live together will get on the same cycle.

Has that ever happened to you?

Yeah.

One of the "demons" born of menstrual blood was the legendary basilisk with its poisonous glance.

Have you been with a bunch of girls and you have the same rhythm.

Norah
Leslie and I always always get it at the same time. That's how I know that--

Rebecca
Oh, so you let Leslie look after it.

Yeah, well I say do you have yours right now. And she's like, yeah I just got it today. I'm like okay, I'm getting it.

Sidonie
Norah, it is your body. You relinquish control.
No, but I don't mind. I don't mind at all you know.

Pagan rites.

At the present time just as in the Middle Ages, the Catholic church still considers itself on firm theological ground by advancing, as an argument against the ordination of women, the notion that a menstruating priestess would "pollute" the altar. This would not preclude ordination of post-menopausal women, but different excuses are found for those. The holy "blood of life" used to be feminine and real; now it is masculine and symbolic.

One of the most striking experiences for me working with three groups of women was the sense that each grouping created an enclave, a place of some safety where we could read our tentative writing and discuss sensitive issues that perhaps did not have a forum elsewhere. With the two teachers, the meetings in my warm living room during a cold winter provided a place where we could find time to talk about the relationships between our bodies and our writing. With the adolescent girls, meeting in a classroom vividly decorated with feminist posters, with the lights dimmed, and with our desks in a circle, created opportunities to discuss relationships and body issues such as sexuality, anorexia, and menstruation. The two older women offered different opportunities. Both had close connections to me and both had asked to be part of my research after I had begun my work. Until they asked to contribute, however, I had not thought about including older women in my research, but their observations and writing broadened the perspective I was bringing to the work. Unlike the other two groups, my contact with them was ongoing both through the research phase and the writing of this work. Carmen and I most often met in my office or living room while Hazel and I primarily communicated by e-mail. This created an interesting contrast for the work because I had to read her writing and her responses to my questions only on a computer screen. I realized the extent to which I relied upon, and indeed, enjoyed, the embodied responses that I experienced in the other groups through this exchange. Hazel's words were simply less compelling to me because the body that had produced them was not present. This feeling was particularly evident with the series of questions she answered for me, similar to those I asked Carmen. Whereas Carmen's body postures and expressions coloured the conversation, there was no such interpretation available with Hazel's responses on the computer screen. And whereas Carmen's responses triggered new ideas or questions for me that I could ask immediately, Hazel's lost the spontaneity and mutual creation inherent in a conversation. This is not to say that one always has to be in the presence of the writer to enjoy a piece of her or his work; however, it does suggest to me the importance of community in our interpretations of reading and writing and how mutually constitutive the

conversations and the writing were for the research. While the subjunctive was at play in our individual writing and reading, our sense of the subjunctive became more three-dimensional when our embodied interactions and conversations intermingled our sense of possibilities.

In each group, we established practices that created spaces and times of greater intimacy for writing and speaking than are usually available for women in more public places or circumstances. In the past women found ways of gathering to talk (the bloodhut is one example, a coffee *Klatsch* or quilting bee another), but with more individuals living anonymously in city neighbourhoods and with more women working and moving into the public sphere, the practices of creating space for women's talk has had to become more deliberate, but no less important. Within such a space, language can become transformative if, as Kristeva suggests, that language is understood as a dialectic between structure and practice where structure is both produced through and changed by human practice (Weir 146). In this chapter, I want to explore those practices of creating space through and for language, beginning with some of the rituals of writing and then examining gossip as a practice that changes and is changed by structures.

Moments of difficulty. Where to begin. Where to leave off. Fear that she will search for the words and not find them. Again. Resistance to staying somewhere so deeply.

She reads her e-mail. Cyberglow, talk spill over her. She lights the eucalyptus candle. Draws closer. Opens the black bound journal. Pencil races across blank page. No matter what is said.

Outside optimistic sparrows chatter from within a cedar tree, mistaking chinook air for an early spring.

She clicks the computer icon. Finds the file and is back in the text, words appearing on the page, buffeting thoughts, shaping the skin of her body.

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Grosz describes how Luce Irigaray uses Kant's conception of space as the mode of apprehension of exterior objects and time as the apprehension of a subject's interior. This western conception of time, Luce Irigaray believes, is masculine. Man is a subject, a being with an interior. Space, she claims, is associated with femininity since femininity is a form of externality to men.

> Woman is/provides space for man, but occupies none herself. Time is the projection of his interior, and is conceptual, introspective. The interiority of time links with the exteriority of space only through the position of God (or his surrogate, Man) as the point of their mediation and axis of their coordination. (Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion* 99)

Carmen described how this conception played out for her in everyday terms. During the 1950s, when her husband was hired by a large insurance company as an insurance agent, a representative of the company came out to the home to interview them both. As "the wife," Carmen had to promise, before her husband was given the job, that she would be in the home at his beck and call. She was expected to make sure that he had a clean white shirt and a pressed suit each day and to have lunch ready right at twelve so he could come home, eat, and be back selling insurance. Suppertime was to be ready and waiting at 5:30 so the husband could come home again, eat, and go back to work again by six o'clock. In whatever way she could, the wife was to become the receptacle of the husband's difficulty; she was to clear the way so that his time could be devoted to the company and all would unfold smoothly. They were a "package deal." "I actually had to promise to do all this," Carmen said, shaking her head in disbelief.

As more women moved out into the workforce, they adopted this notion of time--devotion to the employer, limitations on one's choices of how time was used, and the connection between time and money--while still carrying the expectations of creating a space, a home for the family. Thus there have been numerous articles and explorations over the past few years of the "superwoman" phenomenon where women try to be stellar workers at home and in public to the detriment of their own health and happiness. Finding

time was of greatest concern to the teachers. With their days filled with marking, planning, teaching, and extracurricular demands, they found it hard to squeeze any time for their own writing. Since I had tried to succeed at both teaching and writing before going back to graduate school, I had a real appreciation for the kinds of temporal and energy demands they faced. Here's a snippet from our discussion during the first meeting.

I do more writing, but in snatches.
Caroline says to me
you have to put aside
Caroline in her way says
you have to put aside half an hour everyday
or one hour everyday
and then I'm:
putting aside one hour to find time to go for a walk,
to find time for a nap,
to find time to read a book so I'm ready
for what I'm doing tomorrow
and there's so many hours
I put aside
I don't have anymore hours for writing.

So what happens is that I get invited to something
and I don't have anything new
so I'm pressed for time and I whip something up.
Which isn't bad because
I work okay under deadline but
this takes more time
This takes crafting.
The deadline.

I agree. I can't--I can't
just sit like I couldn't
just sit down last night
and write something
for today
because I just had too many other
things
going on in my head
and it's not,
it's not my real writing,

it's not real.
I don't know.

I had only minutes to write
I like some of those pieces,
but they are really
bereft of imagery.

I think anyway.

this year
I've had time to spend with
Emily.
So I think what you're saying
about time is really
an important thing.
That being able to be there
and yet I mean I've struggled
with this for so long–
how to find the time and still
live

and-
raise a family and–

I don't know. I just don't
know
how to do all the things. I
don't know. I just
don't know
how to do it very well.
Sometimes
there's little windows
like right now for me
where I can do it,
but I know this won't last.

So how can
I guess you learn to write
under those constraints.
I mean–look–
out of incredible horrible circumstances,
great literature is born
but my god.

We are still thinking of time and space as existing one particular way. But as Grosz points out, once Einstein reconceptualized space, time and matter as interconnected and interdefined, different kinds of space and time proliferated. Alan Lightman's book, *Einstein's Dreams*, explores some of these theoretical realms of time through thirty short fables. In one, he writes about a world of two times: one that is mechanical time and one that is body time. The former is rigid, regular and predictable while the latter is unpredictable and ambiguous. People who believe in mechanical time rise at precisely the same time, eat lunch at noon, and supper at six. "They make love between eight and ten at night. They work forty hours a week, read the Sunday paper on Sunday, play chess on Tuesday nights" (25). People who believe in body time listen to the rhythms of their moods and desires. "They know that time moves in fits and starts. They know that time struggles forward with a weight on its back when they are rushing an injured child to the hospital or bearing the gaze of a neighbor wronged. And they know too that time darts across the field of vision when they are eating well with friends . . ." (24-25). Lightman concludes this fable by telling us, "Where the two times meet, desperation. Where the two times go their separate ways, contentment. For, miraculously, a barrister, a nurse, a baker can make a world in either time, but not in both times. Each time is true, but the truths are not the same" (27).

Bakhtin, developing a sense of time-space from Einstein's work, was interested in how all contexts are shaped by the kind of time and space that operates within them. Time and space vary in qualities, he suggests, and different activity and representations of those activities presume different kinds of time and space. (Morson and Emerson 367). These differences between particular time-spaces he called chronotopes. "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84). Bodies moving through time create space. What interested me was thinking about how the activity of coming together as women to write both required a particular kind of time and space even as it created such a time and space. Bakhtin describes how chronotopes are not so much

visibly present in activity as they are ground for activity (Morson and Emerson 369), and I wanted to explore the "ground" of the groups as a way of considering some of the activities that engaged us.

While Bakhtin primarily focussed on chronotopes as they functioned in literature, he also recognized that it was the actual chronotopes of the world which served as the source of representation for those created in literary works. His conception of chronotope arose from his understanding that organisms relied on a variety of rhythms that differed from each other and from those of other organisms. "Furthermore, different social activities are also defined by various kinds of fused time and space: the rhythms and spacial organization of the assembly line, agricultural labor, sexual intercourse, and parlor conversation differ markedly" (Morson and Emerson 368).

Like heteroglossia, chronotopes may interact dialogically, as suggested by Bahktin's term "heterochrony." In the groups, each woman came with her own particular sense of time and space, her own chronotope, as well as that of her writing, which offered a subjunctive space and time of possibility. In the varied-timeness and language of these individuals, a chronotope of the group was created just as they also developed a particular dialogic heteroglossia. Part of the chronotope of the group was shaped by the rhythms and practices of writing--both those we performed on our own and those within the collective.

Part of my writing ritual includes using some kind of journal. The shapes of my poems arise from phrases, images, and characters who inhabit the pages. In the teacher research group, journals were also part of our writing. Casey describes how her journal works for her: "Well, some of [my writing] comes out of my journal. Like basically I just take some stuff out of my journal and put it together . . . . most of what I write does come out of my journal, so basically I just edit it. Edit sections." The girls had also used journal writing as a beginning space for writing. After a few meetings where Sidonie and I brought our journals, most of the girls brought theirs too. This event elicited a discussion of the kind of journals each preferred. Some liked binders or books into which they could shove loose pages, others liked lined, hardcover books, while still others chose artistically

appealing books with pictures and aphorisms.

Connected to journalling is the practice of flow writing, which begins with a writer choosing a phrase, a word, a picture or some other focus of attention (Luce-Kapler, *Illuminating the Text*). The writer then begins a "flow" of language without being concerned about structure, grammar, logic, form, or the sense of future that comes into play when shaping pieces of writing. The practice is immediate and usually sensory and concrete. At one meeting with the girls, for instance, I asked them to write about a memory after describing how the buttons in my grandmother's button jar triggered memories for me. I showed them my grandfather's workshirt button and told them how it reminded me of the hot summer day when we ate lunch in the grainfield where he was swathing. As we talked about how objects evoke and contain memory, I spilled the buttons onto the table and asked them to choose one, writing about whatever memory it triggered for them. At another meeting, Sidonie brought a bag of objects and asked us to close our eyes and examine the three objects she placed in front of us, using our fingers, our noses, or even our tongues. We then wrote with our eyes still closed, describing the objects. The activity attuned us to the importance of calling upon all our senses in writing. As the group progressed, the girls brought writing prompts (usually popular songs) and led the group themselves. With the older women writers, because we were not meeting as a group, I gave them a sheet of prompts with phrases such as "I remember a place . . ." or "A dream I'll never forget . . . and suggested that they also could use photographs as beginning points for their writing. They were not restricted to this list, but encouraged to use the practice as appropriate for them.

Opening up spaces and time for writing widens the possibilities, but also increases the sense of risk. This was never clearer than in Carmen's experience. She had finally, after months of worry about her abilities, established a ritual of flow writing every evening for herself, but then another worry appeared. "When I wrote down how angry I was at my husband," she said, "then it suddenly seemed true. I wondered if he might find this." She discovered hiding places for her journals and during one of our interviews, we made arrangements that I would receive and destroy her journals should anything happen to her.

"Writing is different than thinking these feelings to yourself," she said. "But I'm glad to be doing it now. I think I cheated myself out of memories by not doing it before."

Hazel developed a ritual of writing every morning as a way to survive relocation from Canada to the United States:

> Writing became more important because [the move] was a total lifestyle change: country, culture, climate, job. Writing at that time was reflective and autobiographical, and often nostalgic. It was an attempt to put the past in place and reconcile the uncomfortable, unfamiliar and unusual in California.

Conversations with the girls revealed that they were dealing with issues of risk and safety with the spaces of writing as well. Sophia told us that she envied the character in the movie, *The Lives of Girls and Women*, because "she just sat down and wrote and whenever I want to write, I can't write, so I just thought that was weird because whatever she felt she wrote it down."

Alexis elaborated with some of her difficulties writing. "Sometimes I have time for writing. I go through spurts. Sometimes I write three times a day. I just write when I feel like it like two in the morning. Then I'm tired the next day . . . . I have a book that I carry around with me. I feel tormented a lot of the time though. Because I can't say what I mean and I can't get it out. And it always seems stupid to me and then my friends read it and oh--"

Sophia interrupted her to finish what she had been thinking. "Some of my poems I'm going to write about something that I feel or about this other person whatever and someone's going to read it or I'm afraid someone else is going to read it. So I don't--that's another reason why I don't write. I write in my mind like whenever I'm walking to school or whatever. You know like when you dream before you go to sleep well I do that constantly and I make up what I'd like to happen so one day I dreamt I was at this fish and chips restaurant or whatever and this robber came in and I beat him up and you know that would never happen but I just dream about that and then I fall asleep, but I would never write something like that or I never write down what I think of."

Ella-Genevieve also described similar experiences. "Whenever I pick up the pen,

whatever I'm thinking I distort it and it comes out on the page all wrong. And then I go back and read it and I go this is what I'm feeling. You know. How do you put it into words? It's--I don't know. I only really write when I get frustrated or am sad. Basically I write to ease my pain kind of, like um I write journals. Like I used to write journals all the time, but I stopped. So now I'll just write about whatever. When I do."

Writing is a risky business; our thinking shaped on the page for others to ponder, consider, judge. So much of our experience, our imagination reshaped, existing in a space of its own. Writers struggle with the desire to write as much as they struggle not to do so. Women, especially, who are searching for a way of writing that questions patriarchy, must overcome their own resistance first. Then, when the courage is found to write and perhaps subvert canonized structures, there may be resistance from others. Gail Scot describes how she moved away from the plot-climax-resolution structure of writing to write stories "shaped" more like her only to have male editors and writers tell her that "nothing happened" in her work. Perhaps rituals offer some way of beginning, a sense of safety for the first step, a metaphorical cave. Dolores LaChapelle explains that, "For us in modern times, one of the most important, immediate effects of ritual is that it reduces the more or less continuous inhibition, which the left hemisphere of the neo-cortex exerts over all the rest of the brain" (qtd. in Dooley 97). If writing is imbued with some ritual practices, then one can begin to write, communicate what was imagined alone.

Ritual also became important for the establishing of the spaces where the two research groups met. The winter that the teachers met at my house I lit a fire in the fireplace or turned up the heat and pulled big chairs with comforters close together for every meeting and made tea, crackers and cheese. The women looked forward to coming because, as Sidonie noted, it was the one time in a very busy schedule when she could do something only for herself, when she could feel the luxury of spending time in comfort focussing on her writing with friends. With the girls, because we met in Sidonie's classroom, she continued the ritual of creating a comfortable space for writers. She dimmed the classroom lights, put the desks in a close circle, and asked the school secretary to turn off the intercom in the room. The girls found that such an atmosphere

invited some respite too. We also reinforced regularly the requirement that what was said in the group was not to go outside; that one could say whatever she liked without fear that it would be said throughout the school. As the meetings progressed, and the girls honoured that secrecy, they took greater chances with what they would say. Yet, since we were still meeting in a school, within a school-sanctioned extracurricular activity, with a teacher, the chronotope of "school" continually intruded on our space and reminded us of other constraints. We were different enough from "school," however, because there were "outsiders." I was a researcher from the university, Alexis had graduated and was working, and Sophia attended another school. The chronotope of school became part of the mix and fragments of the diversity that was intermingling to create the space-time of the group. Within both groups, sooner in the teachers' group, there was a character to our coming together that felt like a space where time was made to listen, to tell stories, to take risks, to support. The rituals, the reassurances, the willingness to wait in the silences created a space that was different from anything else, that had its own flavour and personality, and where interesting ideas and activities could unfold.

My Grandmother Told Me Stories

Use a copper bottomed pot this size no bigger
You were so precious when you were born
after three sons to see a girl

Wash the rice carefully to rinse away extra starch
Taking German like I did in high school
until 1917 when we entered that war

Add twice as much water as rice
That war took Joe from us
my first beau sweet as pie

Use a tightfitting lid and do not peek for fifteen minutes
We were both virgins when we married
both of us so glad

Sweet and sour spareribs go nicely with rice.
There 's your grandfather now

leaning his head into John Sharlow's truck
(I hear him laughing and wonder)

***

The groups provided a space and time for women to talk to each other. The writing was a reason to come together and it often provided a focus of activity, but the conversations (including storytelling and gossip) that preceded, circulated through, and inspired the writing often revealed the most interesting data. Trinh T. Minh-ha writes about the importance of the oral story:

> The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. (121)

The oral stories of women have been able to float beneath the surface of patriarchal controls, the whispers, the secrets, the understandings passed on from one generation to the next.

With the girls' group, storytelling was most often used at the beginning of the research as Sidonie and I worked to change the dynamics of the group. The girls were so quiet at first we found ourselves telling stories of our lives so they would come to know us differently from our roles as teachers and researchers and so they would be encouraged to begin thinking about the stories of their lives. The stories in the teachers' group were also used as a way to develop intimacy and to come to know each other, building trust. For instance, one of our early meetings was spent describing how Casey and I and then how Sidonie and I had come to know each other. The storytelling with the older women was also a way of creating a place for the teller, of recounting attachments and deepening ties. This sense of connection was important to Hazel. She made a point of including personal notes with her writing and responses to my questions over e-mail. Initially, when she had asked to be part of the study, she spent the afternoon with me, retelling the story of my

birth, recounting the roles of everyone involved. My mother had nearly died giving birth to me. Hazel had been her nurse and she described to me how my mother had been sedated so as not to disturb a potentially fatal blood clot. Since letting her milk dry up would have induced too much risk to her, Hazel had held me at my mother's breast to drink. After hearing this story, I was not surprised at the affection we have always had for each other.

Much of this kind of talk, particularly when it has been done by women, has been labelled "gossip," a word whose meaning was demeaned in an attempt to regulate and marginalize its power. In tracing the etymological roots of the word "gossip," one can discover the increasing desire to control verbal "looseness." Originally the word meant "god-related" and was designated to godparents of either sex and then further enlarged to include close friends of the new parents. In the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the word began to change when a second meaning of "tippling companion" was added as well as this third choice: "One who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in." Now gossip was more firmly connected with females, not surprising if one considers the Christian belief that Eve brought sin into the world by foolish listening and speaking. In 1811, gossip became a kind of conversation described as: "idle talk, trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle." Today, *Webster's* first meaning of gossip as a verb is "to run about and tattle; to tell idle, esp. personal, tales." (Spacks 25-26). From an intimate relationship to unpredictable silliness. Yet, no matter what is said about gossip, the intimacy and connections that it forges remain. Melanie Tebbutt notes how gossip is a way of strengthening a group, of including or excluding others. Because gossip can create such boundaries--making one feel closer to others or threatening one's attachments, it can seem dangerous, beyond social controls, as unpredictable as Janus. Gossip also works to blur the boundaries between public and private and to interpret public information in private terms. Patricia Meyer Spacks writes:

> Gossip, [social scientists] tell us, is a catalyst of social process. It provides groups with means of self-control and emotional stability. It circulates both information and evaluation, supplies a mode of socialization and social control,

> facilitates self-knowledge by offering bases for comparison, creates catharsis for guilt, constitutes a form of wish-fulfillment, helps to control competition, facilitates the selection of leaders, and generates power. It provides opportunity for self-disclosure and examination of moral decisions. (34)

Using the range of possibilities that Spack delineates above, much of the talk in the research groups could be considered gossip. The storytelling, which focussed on the particular stories of the teller, developed a climate where stories about others, gossip, could emerge. For instance, consider the discussion that emerged from Alexis's song mentioned earlier.

"I know somebody who likes you. You know Carl? He thinks you're really, really cute. He says, 'Oh, she's so charming.'"

Laughter and squealing erupt with this statement and there is a sense of relief among the girls that this is something they know how to talk about.

Norah clasps her hands and rocks back and forth in her desk. "Oh my god, I love Carl. Good work. That's awesome. I've never heard him talk about a girl except for when he's--"

"He does. Sometimes," Pegatha quickly interrupts her.

I have a momentary question in my mind. What about Carl?

But Norah continues unabashedly. "He never talks to me about girls. Maybe because I never let him talk all the time. Oh what a guy. Perfect."

Pegatha looks around the group. "Don't say anything. He will kill me."

"Everything is sacred in this room," Sidonie reassures her, reminding everyone of their promise of secrecy.

Norah has more advice to give. "Make sure you don't tell Carl that she knows because then he'll be all awkward and embarrassed."

"He would kill me. He would kill me," Pegatha says matter-of-factly.

"Our class is like the Love Boat," Norah says whereupon Sidonie sings the opening bars of the theme.

"That's it totally," Norah says. "Hey, I love that Greg, guys." She giggles and

Sidonie looks at her sardonically.

"This is why Norah is in my class. The only reason."

"Well I was going to your class except when I knew he was going to be in there it gave me the final push over the edge. But the thing is I was thinking about him all last night. I'm thinking maybe what if he thought about me you know today." She laughs, clearly wound up by the thought. "You should see me. I can't even talk around him."

"Okay," Sidonie says, "I'll put you in the group together."

"Me and Greg in the group together. He's so shy. He needs a girl like me. To bring him out of his shell. This is the first line I say to him okay? And I don't get nervous around people, you know? I don't. I sometimes do. I got nervous during my poem and stuff but it's just blah-blah and so I was sitting there and the first thing I say to him and I'm like okay, I can say hi to him, this is your opportunity, you came to this class for a reason. Okay, so this is what I do. I turn to him and I go 'hi' and he goes 'hi and instead of saying 'Hi, I'm Norah' or 'Can I borrow your notes?', I go 'I'm going to apply at Roger's Video today.' " She laughs along with the group. "I was so embarrassed, you guys, I've never said anything so stupid in my life."

"You know the first thing that I said to Dan was?" Alexis adds. "Hi, nice shoelaces."

Norah laughs again. "I normally don't get nervous. I'm not a shy person. That's exactly what I said and he just looked at me and I looked at him and he's like 'oh-uh-oh.'

Then I come to class he's probably like 'who's that freak?' I want him so bad."

The above conversation, full of self-disclosure, includes information about the two love interests within the group as well as an evaluation of Carl's and Greg's worthiness as potential partners. This information became a means of socialization--there is the suggestion that heterosexual partnering is the preferred option and control is implied by indicating who will be paired with whom. The girls take the opportunity to express some of their fantasies and desire for wish-fulfillment, and there is also a "hands off" message that hovers beneath the surface for others who might be considering the boys. Social control is also evident when Pegatha demands secrecy and feels guilty for having told

Carl's secret, and Norah's disclosure requires some reassurance from the group. Has she acted inappropriately in front of this guy? Do we think he'll still like her? Has she "blown" it?

As well, gossip became a way of checking out ideas with Sidonie and me or eliciting information from us such as socialization questions and moral decisions. Our responses became a basis with which they compared other adult responses, particularly those of their mothers.

The gossip was also relational. Rather than just being left with numerous questions that they would try and sort out for themselves or with friends, the group became a forum for the girls to "try out" ideas. There was a sense that they were speaking "as if" they believed what was said and "as if" they could lead their lives in the ways suggested in the group. Often, there was a faintly erotic and voyeuristic flavour to the talk. Spacks describes such gossip as

> A relatively innocent form of the erotics of power (we mostly don't expect to affect the course of people's lives by talking about them--or we don't consciously acknowledge any such expectation), this excitement includes the heady experience of imaginative control: gossip claims other people's experience by interpreting it into story. Voyeurism, shared secrets, story-telling: these private forms of power supplement the more public ones involved in circulating rumor and shaping reputation. (11)

The girls told stories about themselves and others: some were actual experiences, some were unfulfilled wishes or fantasies, other were purely speculative. What would happen *if*? Or what is it like to speak *as* a feminist?

The gossip within the group highlighted the tensions present within heteroglossia: the group works to be cohesive and to control the members, Bakhtin's notion of a centripetal force where multiple possibilities come together in a desire for unity. At the same time, the gossip served to subvert and undermine some of the discourses from outside the group, a centrifugal force which destabilized unitary possibilities and stratified language. We can broaden this thinking to include not only the language, but also the

centripetal forces of our social and cultural lives which try to order our actions. In our responses to such forces, we reevaluate with new meanings and tones, which ultimately threaten the wholeness, the seamlessness of any language or cultural institution. It is a process where we write and rewrite as we are written and rewritten. I find this dynamic of writing and rewriting hopeful. As the young women questioned the language and cultural images that influenced their lives, sometimes we could see their actions change; sometimes their responses were different. They began to take some risks with their writing, going more public with their more "radical" thoughts. From their comments it seemed that they sometimes acted with more awareness about what they might be resisting or accepting

As a follow-up to the long meeting, Ayelah brought a piece of writing, which expressed some of the ambivalence we had experienced that day. She wrote:

> I have been trained, just like a puppy, not to act inappropriately. "Act as a girl and in the proper manner," I remember being told. Curtsy like a princess with beautiful long, white hair. Don't play in the dirt. Wear the pretty and extravagant pink and white dresses with pretty little gloves and bows. Couldn't play with the boys' toys. Oh no, oh no. Here's a little purse and some make-up. Try to look pretty and silent. "You are meant to be admired not heard" as if I had no mind of my own. "Watch Mommy, be like Mommy." No time to play. Be polite and courteous, as always a lady should.
>
> So conditioned as a child that the forbidden never crossed my mind. Not for a second would I stray from that pretty little girl I tried so hard to be. But now being older I see there is more in my mind where I shouldn't wander, wandering towards a door that has been shut for an eternity, wandering blindly reaching and reaching but never finding the handle. Feeling the heat, the burn of getting nearer. What will it be like in the bad, bad world of the forbidden. Dirt and dust suddenly fills my mind and clouds it, my pretty dress covered in filth my eyes red and bloodshot, short of breath and gasping, propelled forward with tremendous force and smashed down to the ground, my clothes ripped. I lie naked in a whole new world. Yet everything seems so familiar. Going to class as normal but something

> is not right. The man I once had a crush on, he must nearly be 40, welcomes my affection. What is going on? A marriage ring on both our fingers? I don't know where I am, terrible words running from my mouth. I know it's wrong but it seems to flow, some things so wretched I have never heard before.

Ayelah's anger and frustration, as she read this piece, was revealing; she felt trapped in the identities which society had offered her. She expressed through her writing the dichotomies that many of the girls were experiencing in the group: they could come and express their outrage at their treatment, they could offer opinions that might be seen as radical in a more public forum, and they could think through some of the demands of their lives. But the group was no safe haven where difficulty was smoothed over and things made right. It did not take away the pressures of living in a still largely sexist society.

Outside the group, Ayehla betrayed her friendship with Pegatha by going out with a boy she knew Pegatha loved. Dale struggled with her parents' divorce and a difficult relationship with her mother while trying to sort out a sense of womanhood for herself. Ella-Genevieve who said that she did not believe in happy endings continued to struggle with the death of her father. Norah, who spoke the most vociferously about men, swinging back and forth between approval and disgust, admiration and condemnation, was desperately lonely. She brought a piece of writing that began:

> So it goes on and on and they watch some T.V. and they're friends or so he thinks, or is it her that thinks so? And he doesn't call for a week or so. Better things to do. Maybe. But for her to ask would show more than she wished. For him to call would show more than he wished. She hopes that's why he doesn't.

She told us after reading that she

> just figured out what it really is, what is really going on . . . . Like I wrote down what I thought was going on, you know, like Jesus that's what's going on you know and it sucks. Like of course I thought about it and stuff but then when I wrote it in third person and then read it over and then I imagined like it's not me you know? When I'm reading. It's like somebody wrote it and it just makes me

like sad you know?

The gossip in the teachers' group seemed less an experimental ground for possibilities and more a reconfirming of beliefs and a sharing of information. Such talk was closer to the intimate end of the continuum, which Spacks says

> takes place in private, at leisure, in a context of trust, usually among no more than two or three people. Its participants use talk about others to reflect about themselves, to express wonder and uncertainty and locate certainties, to enlarge their knowledge of one another. Such gossip, like the other forms, may use the stuff of scandal, but its purposes bear little on the world beyond the talkers except inasmuch as the world impinges on them. (5-6)

However, like the girls, the talk arose primarily from the writing that the group was engaged in. When Sidonie read the first installment of her book about the Virgin Mary, we talked about the erotic nature of her writing, which led to this discussion:

> *One of the young women in*
> *my poetry group wrote--she*
> *writes*
> *poems that are quite*
> *sensuous*
> */from time to time*
> *and it didn't dawn*
> *on me until yesterday*
> *what was going on*
> *the men in the group*
> *have kind of branded her*
> *as the one who writes about*
> *sex*
> *in the class and they bug her*
> *about it. Yet some of us older*
> *ones write*
> *about sex all the time*
> *in different ways I guess,*
> *but I came up to her after*
> *class*
> *and said to her to keep*
> *writing*
> *about that. I said*
> *women need to write about*

this.
She said
well I really toned down the
poem today because I don't
want people to start thinking
of it.
I said
Look, next time you write a
poem about sex and those
guys
say anything, I'll light into
them
and tell them that they are
shutting you down.

Yes, because they are.
It's a form of censorship.

Yeah. Uh-huh.

It's a form of censorship
and it didn't dawn on me
until class yesterday
but I think that I was mad at
myself for not recognizing it
sooner,
but I think that voice
is in all our heads.

Uh-huh.

It is.

That only bad girls talk about
sex
and good girls don't.

I find it really hard
to write about. You know.
I start and my internal censor

is shutting me down all the time.

And here's Mary. The holiest of holies. I mean it's wonderful.
I really like it a lot.
The ironies are just wonderful.

The sense of "trying things out" that was prevalent with the girls' gossip occurs more in the writing while our talk about that work threads the fiction or poetry into connections with our own lives and beliefs as our discussion did above. Throughout the group meetings we tried to push our writing into provocative forms and contents while reaffirming the importance and difficulty of such work through our talk.

Gossip with Carmen involved just the two of us. Every comment about her writing led into speaking about others from her children, to community supports she was in contact with, to her estranged husband. She was questioning her place in the world since many of her expectations had been shaken. Spacks suggests that gossip depends on and fosters intimacy. "It exemplifies the power of one-to-one talk: a mode not of domination but of linkage" (57). Carmen was trying to sort out where she now belonged in the world both through her writing and through her talk.

In reviewing the kinds of gossip that surfaced in each group, I realized that each group also had a distinctive chronotope of gossip. The girls, for instance, gossiped about the present and the immediate future. They were deeply involved in the moment-by-moment of their lives. The teachers, on the other hand, ranged from some reference to the past to current happenings in the writing and teaching community. Carmen, however, like Martha and Lois, tended to gossip about events that had passed either recently or long ago. While a consideration of how these differing senses of time influence the women's interpretations of their experience is beyond the scope of this study, this is an interesting question raised by the kinds of gossip that arose from the writing in the groups.

She was alone for too long no
one to speak with and so she began
to sing to walls watching
for her notes to peel
paint and crack plaster

Instead foundations vibrated
for the first time birds came to fill
trees in the neighbourhood bright
cardinals while laundry flapped
in the breeze waving
music across waiting garden

Until the wall crystalized
shattered
shards piercing her throat

She. No. Without.

Yes did you I did alone.

No. Not. You mustn't.

But if it's possible imagine

Yes. I can. If you will.

***

The storytelling and gossip that occurred in all the groups was a way of sorting, a way of inscribing who we were through language as well as finding something in common. Such talk was part of multiple and shifting identities that sometimes seemed in conflict]with each other, especially for the girls, and that challenged and explored the discursive practices that worked to establish social control. But we are all subjects in process, as Kristeva notes, and the talk in the group intimately connected to the writing and to this ongoing process of subjectivity.

Often the talk focussed on issues about women's behaviour or actions: what was proper or acceptable versus what was over-the-top, out-of-control.

And there's a part of me that
goes '**bad girl**, bad, bad, bad.'

She's like you know you shouldn't be having sex.

It shouldn't be the good girl/bad girl kind of thing.

I would organize sports days.
I loved organizing stuff and
I couldn't believe when I got
married. I became **so**

submissive. Yes, I'll have
supper on time and **yes** I'll do
the dishes and **yes** I'll do all
these things. In my thirties I
started doubting that this was
the way.

That gives us permission.

I like the way she recreates words too.
Well, '**cunt**' is one example. It's been **vilified.**
That's what happened to the word.

That's great because the one
I wrote last week was really erotic
and I didn't read it
and it's not here **ha ha.**

I'm glad I shared my **shameful** experience with you.

Nice girls don't.

my **silly** little poems

I can't even talk around him.

That's pretty **bold.**

She said, "**I want to be naked with him.**"

She has to know. There's no way **she can't not know**.

The difficulty for women in trying to garner a sense of identity has been the paradoxical choices available for them. Kristeva describes how this has been particularly evident in the images of the Virgin Mary in Western culture. In *Stabat Mater*, she explains how sacred motherhood has been glorified while excluding relations with other women and with men. Mary is suffering and pure. To be erotic, to acknowledge one's sexuality is to be no longer without sin, leaving women in an untenable position. Allison Weir explains that the Virgin represents the semiotic order--the order of psychosomatic drives and pre- and extra-linguistic expression, which is associated with the mother--and reconciles this with a patriarchal symbolic order, under God the Father. (174)

For Lacan, the paternal metaphor sets up a "metonymy of desire" which moves the child's attachment from the maternal body (nature) to the paternal culture. Thus motherhood "exists on the borderline between nature and culture, body and language" (174).

Both Luce Irigaray and Kristeva criticize Lacan's model: Irigaray rejects it because she believes it emphasizes metaphor over metonymy while Kristeva rejects the model because she sees that it emphasizes metonymy over metaphor.[24] What Kelly Oliver suggests, in her search to describe a new feminist ethics, is to consider the necessity of both metaphor and metonymy, to not privilege one over the other, and to understand that needs cannot be separated from demands and desire, nature from culture, the biological from the social. They are mutually constitutive. "We don't have to speak as/out of loss or lack to console ourselves," she writes. "Rather, by using both metaphor and metonymy we can speak as/out of excess . . ." (175). The language with which we describe our bodies also serves to shape and define those bodies, so by using different metaphors and metonymies, a new image of the social mother can be constructed, one who is desiring. Kristeva, too, has argued for the need to open the discourse of motherhood, one which does not repudiate or desire to merge with "the other woman," but one which recognizes our mothers as singular subjects, different from the archaic mother and ourselves. "For only once we can recognize our mothers' difference and complexity can we recognize our own" (Weir 180). In the struggle for identity, Weir maintains, we must

> sustain and in some sense reconcile multiple and often conflicting identities, and to understand, criticize, and reconcile multiple and often conflicting interpretations of those identities. Not to mention the capacity to live with and somehow reconcile all the ambiguity and complexity of our lives that does not (and never will) readily lend itself to this identity work. (186)

The research groups became places where some of this identity work could take

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[24]This is Kelly Oliver's interpretation of Luce Irigaray and Kristeva. "Whereas Kriesteva argues that Lacan makes desire operate according to the logic of metonymy and overlooks the metaphoric operations of love, Irigaray argues that Lacan makes desire operate according to a logic of metaphoric substitution and overlooks the metonymic operations of true bisexuality" (171).

place. After a time, through storytelling and gossip, there was a certain sense of trust that seemed able to sustain more conflicting and exploratory talk and writing. This kind of work was possible partly because the groups were organized in an action research style where there is no clearly defined leader, but where the researcher acts more as a facilitator and participant. In earlier research, Dennis Sumara and I had compared such a group to a "writerly" text.[25] Using Roland Barthes distinction between readerly and writerly, where a readerly text is more structured and defined and a writerly text leaves more room for a reader to interpret and "write in" the text, we found that conceptualizing the group in this way, led to ever-evolving understanding among the participants. The collaboration was not comfortable work (the roots of toil and labour exist in the word collaboration after all); rather the meetings were often ambiguous and unpredictable. But, as we noted in the earlier research, "the engagement with the writerly action research . . . can prove to be enlightening, satisfying and productive"(394). The possibility of difference, conflict and confusion is an important part of identity work. Identifying the self through identification with and recognition of separateness from others is part of what Kristeva calls "the thetic," a process of identifying and separating.

> For Kristeva, the goal or meaning of the development of self-identity is seen as the achievement of a capacity for symbolic interaction with others--and hence, a capacity for participation in a larger social world, beyond immediate relations between parent and child. (Weir 167).

While one can never positively pinpoint cause and effect when considering human relations, it is possible to say about the groups that they became a space for the girls and women to voice ideas that might have been risky in more public places. They had the time and opportunity to write what they may have only imagined or fantasized about or to offer "dangerous" writing in a forum where they can hear a variety of responses. The groups were also an opportunity to reconcile some of the contradictory and multiple discourses in

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[25]See Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kapler, "Action Research as a Writerly Text: Locating Co-labouring in Collaboration," in *Educational Action Research, 1*, (1993) 387-395.

the society that influence and shape identity. While the teachers could not necessarily find more time nor the girls smooth over the ambiguity between wanting to be "not-Barbie" and still being desirable to boys, the writing became a way to explore some of the contradictions, to use the *as if* to consider and imagine some possibilities. In the next chapter, I will explore how writing and talking within the writing groups created a chronotope of resistance.

6.

The Fruitful Forbidden

This writer haunts me
I've been thinking about her a great deal
both within my own teaching
also within the context of this group
Ayelha knows her because the writer
was censored from class last term
Her name's
Jeannette Winterson and the book
censored from my class
was *Sexing the Cherry*.

Complex emotion is pivoted around the forbidden.

So *Sexing the Cherry* is I guess
dangerous
A woman named Dog Woman
who has a boy named Jordan,
who's named after the river
and we go between Renaissance England
and 20th C England
Between real time and not so real time.

Art is the realisation of complex emotion.

In it there are angry passages where the Dog Woman
does some dangerous things

but it didn't strike me until the letter I received
condemning the book, most of it from the pages quoted
in the letter of protest and I didn't
even think of the book as dirty,
you know, ever!
Because I don't think she's a dirty
writer at all. I think she's very moral.

I do not think of art as Consolation. I think of it as Creation.

I came across this essay called "Semiotics of Sex"
which is about *Sexing the Cherry*
And about writing forbidden things and about writing
about devious things
and I think we talked a bit about the good girl complex
we have, you know. I still have trouble writing about things
my father probably wouldn't like me to write
since he didn't like the nose ring
I still have trouble allowing myself
to say things good girls don't
And she gives me permission.

Art makes it possible to live in energetic space.[26]

As women, we live in a culture that demands attention to our bodies, often to obsessive degrees. Women worry about their shape and size, how their bodies are clothed, the cosmetics that colour their skin, brighten their eyes, lighten the hair. They

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[26]Italics are from Jeannette Winterson, "The Semiotics of Sex" and the other from research transcripts with Sidonie.

nip, tuck, snip, smooth, enlarge and diminish various parts of their body, depending on the beauty standard that is required. In such a way, women are controlled and their behaviour circumscribed. If they feel inadequate about their physical appearance, then their busyness at making it "right" will keep them preoccupied, within the gaze, manageable. Yet women can never be entirely subdued in this way; there is always leakage. Some women choose to ignore, disregard, or subvert such expectations while others, in their obsessive responses to such demands, slip away into a darkness through anorexia or bulimia. Susie Orbach explains that

> Such psychological symptoms are the understudies for the unspeakable. They express both the rebellion and the accommodation that women come to make in the context of a social role lived within circumscribed boundaries. The starvation amidst plenty, the denial set against desire, the striving for invisibility versus the wish to be seen--these key features of anorexia--are a metaphor for our age. (24)

These kinds of responses are not new in phallocentric societies where women have been subject to various strictures and sanctions. During the Victorian era, women responded to their "imprisoning" female roles through what Freud and others labelled "hysteria." During the Middle Ages the church constricted the female role in spiritual life and religious work until women were effectively cloistered in religious orders. Some of those women responded, however, by claiming mystical experiences and by relaying words inspired by God, which served to open up space to speak within a patriarchal and misogynistic society. While some of the mystics went to extreme self-punishing measures--including flagellation and starvation--it is how they found the possibility to enter into public discourse that interests me in the context of this study. Using Laurie Finke's study of the mystics, I want to consider how their responses offer an insight into the kinds of space for speaking and writing that women found within our groups.

Finke describes how medieval Christianity construed men as spirit and women as body and, since religion was the dominant mode of expression in that society, this thinking had considerable impact. Mysticism became a way for women to stretch those bounds and to turn the dominant discourse to their own purposes. "The discourse of the female mystic

was constructed out of disciplines designed to regulate the female body and it is, paradoxically, through these disciplines that the mystic consolidated her power" (Finke 78). Finke describes these practices as "poaching," a term used by Michel de Certeau to describe the strategies that "parasitically undermine hegemonic cultural practices and enable the disempowered to manipulate the conditions of their existence" (10). Such strategies deflect the power of the social order without challenging it overtly. The visions of the mystics served to free them from conventional roles assigned to women, created opportunities for them to be genuine religious figures, and gave them a public language that could even attack injustice within the church. While the mystics could and did subvert clerical authority, the Church also strictly defined and controlled the nature and content of the mystical experience. The mystics were still cloistered in a setting where life was structured by the liturgy and rituals of the Church because women were "fleshly evil" and needed to be enclosed, restricted, isolated.

> The grosser, more material aspects of 'the body' were displaced onto the 'grotesque body.' Women--along with other marginal social groups, specifically the lower classes--were constructed by the dominant culture as the grotesque body, the low other, whose discursive norms include heterogeneity, disproportion, a focus on gaps, orifices, and symbolic filth. The grotesque body is at once, feminized, corrupt, and threatening; it is a reminder of mortality, imperfection, and the wretchedness of human existence. (88)

The alternative to the grotesque was the classical body: specifically male, homogeneous, harmonious, proportionate and representing a sort of disembodied spirituality. For the mystic, the body became a contested site of cultural discourses where her sexuality indicated her degradation and unworthiness while her excessive indulgence in the body, in the mortification of the flesh, allowed her to transcend her sex and refashion her grotesque body into a classical one (90). But why would they go to such extremes of self-abuse? Finke suggests that "[m]ystics took disciplines designed to regulate and subject the body and turned them into what Michel Foucault has called the 'technologies of the self,' methods of consolidating their spiritual power and authority, perhaps the only

ones available to women" (94). What is interesting about this, Finke continues, is that "[t]he mystic's pain--her inflicting of wounds upon herself--allows her to poach upon the authority of both Church and state, enabling her to speak and be heard, to have followers, to act as a spiritual adviser, to heal the sick, and to found convents and hospitals" (95).

In returning to a consideration of the writing groups, I am dismayed to think how little some things have changed for women. Their bodies are still seen as a site of excess (flesh or sexuality or energy) in need of containment so that they will not "make a spectacle of themselves." I remember my mother and other women urging me to not draw attention to myself by loud or impolite behaviours, by wearing inappropriate clothing, or by putting myself forward. As Mary Russo describes in "Female Grotesques,"

> For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap--a loose dingy bra strap especially--were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn--too young or too old, too early or too late--and yet anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. (53)

The issue of woman as spectacle, Russo explains, has been connected to the discourse of the carnival or the carnivalesque which draws from the work of Bakhtin. This connection has been helpful because the "masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society" (62). While the carnivalesque can hold danger for women--in the everyday world certain bodies are already transgressive and the carnival can make them more so--Russo suggests "an ambivalent redeployment of taboos around the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body), and as unruly when set loose in the public sphere" (56). She elaborates further that Carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and

cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal (62)

Russo refers to Luce Irigaray's strategy of mimesis to describe how women playing with the representation of the female body allows for the distance necessary for articulation. Like the medieval mystics who poached from the discourse of religion to have a public space for speaking, women poach the social order's constructions of femininity. "Acting like a woman" becomes a "take-it-*and*-leave it *possibility*" with the potential for calling into question the category of feminine. "To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off" (70). But this raises the question of the possibility of "taking off femininity." Butler warns that "feminist resistance to the symbolic unwittingly *protects* the father's law by relegating feminine resistance to the less enduring and less efficacious domain of the imaginary" (106). "Taking it off" is not without effect, the traces of the performance remain and the question of what is underneath seems salient.

While I do not think the "acting like a woman" is as easily enacted as Russo seems to suggest, there are still moments of poaching that call into question the feminine. In returning to a closer look at my own work and that of the writing groups, I will search for such moments and for the peeking through of the carnivalesque as well as the times we played with the grotesque, acknowledging this construction of the female body even while trying to undermine it.

"Words entering almost the sense of touch"
-Seamus Heaney

the tilt of bodies uncrossing
arms welcome
language in the body so
when words are spoken
already they are familiar
already half yours
mouth shaping language
even as it reaches
your ears

words and the body of words
shape new thoughts standing
on the brink

***

Di Brandt writes about how our bodies carry and are marked with the truth of our experience. I can trace the marks of childbirth, bicycle accidents, too much summer sun, and the shape of my mother's hands emerging from my own. The moon-shaped scar beside my mouth reminds me that my grandfather's dog attacked and bit me when I was four. But my body also remembers the times that it was put aside, ignored, wrapped in constraint. There are days when I sit in my comfortable sweat pants, legs splayed, and I will hear the voice of an older woman--my mother, my grandmother, my aunt, the neighbour--saying "keep your legs together. It's more ladylike." And my body has an immediate response as I cross my ankles, knees together. There are other days when I find it difficult to tell my doctor about the functioning of my body because I learned that those things were private, secrets that ladies did not share. Sometimes, in public washrooms, I remember my grandmother's admonishments to never "sit on a toilet seat because there are dangerous germs there" while I still try to figure out how we, let alone women in the 1950s in girdles and other paraphernalia, could hover above the toilet and still use it. My point in this is to suggest that in being marked, in being constrained, we forget how to respond to our bodies. After the layers of constraint are wrapped around our skin, we sometimes can no longer hear or sense what our body is doing. When we lose the ability to listen, Di Brandt explains, the body finds ways of talking back. We get sick or feel deeply dissatisfied or unable to function in some way. The body finds some way of getting our attention, of speaking.

In the teachers' group, as we grew to be comfortable with one another, we talked about the body, especially the erotic body. Juxtaposed with our sensuous and sometimes erotic writing were our stories of school and the very unerotic body of "teacher." The limitations, the frustrations, the particular kind of identity we felt we had to have as teachers became part of our considerations. During one of our meetings, I remembered my responses when I was interviewed by our local paper after one of my short stories was

selected for inclusion in a province-wide anthology of writers. The reporter and I had a pleasant chat over tea about my writing career and then he focussed the discussion on the piece that was to be published. The story was about a woman so deeply unhappy with her life, she spends most of her time in a Jacuzzi, which becomes the location for all her fantasies and dreams. "It is quite a sensual story," the reporter told me. "I really enjoyed it."

I was not sure how to reply, but felt uncomfortable at what I thought his interpretation of the story might be. "I think the story works as much for what is not said as for what is said," I told him, trying to be vague.

"Uh-huh," he replied. "Now, you're a teacher at the junior high. Would you read this story to your students?"

His question startled me. I considered my writing to be for older readers; the thought had never occurred to me to bring this story, where the focus is clearly around the woman's body, her fantasies, and the surge and brush of water over her skin, into my classroom. Would I read a passage such as this to students?

> Her hands stretch through the water, push back, her palms cupped for swimming. She walks her buttocks to the centre of the tub and then slides forward, extends her body and swims with one stroke until her head bumps the edge. She twists and rubs along the smooth sides with just her head above water, her eyes closed. The bubbles soothe and caress, slide around and in and out. She hears only the gurgle of water, smells the earth, the flowers. ("Beneath Jacuzzi Waters" 83)

Although I was certain that I would never read this particular story to my students, I also realized that I had not shared any of my writing with them for some time. Several years earlier, when I had read my students one of my published stories, I had overheard two of them describing how boring it had been. I was hurt, but had also thought at the time that I was wrong to inflict my writing on them. Since then, I had chosen not to bring my "real" writing for my students to read.

But now, here was this reporter asking if I would read it to my class. "Of course not," I told him, surprised at my prim voice. "It would not be appropriate."

The next week the interview was published in the paper with this headline: *Teacher's Story Judged One of the Best in the Province But She Won't Read It to Her Students*. The reporter had gone on to say that my story was too "hot" to be read in a classroom. I was mortified that I had been set up in such a way and of course my students rushed out to buy the book, despite their parents telling them that there was "no way they were going to let them read that story." Fellow teachers--all male--enlarged the news story and posted it in the staffroom, further adding to my embarrassment. In their eyes, it seemed, I had gone from being a colleague to a woman whose sexuality was "out-of-control" and an object of amusement. I had made "a spectacle of myself." Rather than confronting them about their teasing, I chose to hide away and hoped by having a low profile I might become a "good girl" again.

I also was angry at being duped by the reporter, but as I thought about it more, and imagined what it would have been like to read the story to the class, I came to understand that some of my anger arose from the realization that I would have been uncomfortable revealing my imaginings to my students. What if they thought that's how I felt in the bath tub? What if they realized that the sensuousness of living was as vital to me as the intellectual enjoyment I shared with them in the classroom? What if they laughed or thought it was gross that I could feel the kinds of erotic sensations that their bodies were so attuned to. With their writing, I continually told them to make it more concrete, more connected to the senses, but here I was unwilling to let them see me as someone who could imagine the sensuous. Teachers weren't supposed to be sexual, like your parents weren't sexual. But to draw their attention to the fact I was a sexual being, to pull their focus towards my body felt dangerous. I preferred to appear in my smart teacher dresses and suits, using clever watches and enchanting jewelry to divert them from my skin, my shape, the rise and fall of my chest as I breathed, spoke to them. The challenge of the reporter had seemed to bring my private thoughts into the public classroom and I felt exposed and tainted.

And yet we were living, breathing, sensing bodies in the classroom together where the erotic exists, even if it is held at bay. In D.H. Lawrence's novel, *The Rainbow*, Ursula

experiences the opening of the erotic space in school as she regards her teacher, Miss Inger.

> Her voice was just as ringing and clear, and with unwavering, finely-touched modulation. Her eyes were blue, clear, proud, she gave on altogether the sense of a fine-mettled, scrupulously groomed person, and of an unyielding mind. Yet there was an infinite poignancy about her, a great pathos in her lonely, proudly closed mouth. (317)

This awareness between teacher and student grows until

> Winifred Inger felt a hot delight in the lessons when Ursula was present, Ursula felt her whole life begin when Miss Inger came into the room. Then, with the beloved, subtly-intimate teacher present, the girl sat as within the rays of some enrichening sun, whose intoxicating heat poured straight into her veins. (317)

When Ursula decides to become a teacher herself, she imagines and romanticizes the experience, her senses heightened by the possibilities: "where the sun shone softly, she came out of the school in the afternoon into the shadow of the plane-trees by the gate and turned down the sleepy road towards the cottage . . ." (431). In reality, as she begins to teach, the experience starts to confine her, limit her feelings, and affect her sense of self as she gradually changes until

> Her soul decided it coldly. Her personal desire was dead for that day at least. She must have nothing more of herself in school. She was to be Standard Five teacher only. That was her duty. In school, she was nothing but Standard Five teacher. Ursula Brangwen must be excluded. (371)

The structures of the institution of school repressed and confined Ursula, her colleagues and the headmaster being the clearest enforcers of these until her identity as a teacher bore little resemblance to her identity outside the classroom.

Boundaries are erected to keep separate the love of knowledge and the knowledge of love until, Erica McWilliam believes, " 'erotic' is usually understood to be the same as 'overtly sexual,' and the history of pedagogy in the erotic arts has been lost" (346). Teachers are confused and concerned about "going too far," or "stepping over the line"

when they are not even sure where that line is drawn. Underlying this wish to sanitize teaching is the belief in the wickedness inherent in the simmering sensuousness of bodies, particularly the bodies of women. They are bodies whose eroticism and sexuality need to be constrained, controlled.

As teaching became increasingly feminized over the past century,[27] this need to control the sexuality of women also moved into the classroom to divide body and mind; concrete and abstract; sense and thought. But, as Di Brandt observes, "[o]ur bodies carry the truth about our experience, and wish it to be spoken, even if we don't want to listen" (46). I could sidestep the erotic in our classrooms by dressing and speaking in particular ways and by approving particular kinds of texts, but I could not control the erotic. It was always there, peeking through the interactions and contestations of the bodies in that classroom especially in the midst of powerful teaching when, as Erica McWilliam reminds us, the desire that is mobilized in both teachers and learners cannot be contained as a purely intellectual response. Powerful pedagogy can *eroticize* the learning context. My belief that I could control the circulation of the erotic in my class revealed an instrumental attitude toward curriculum as being something that could be picked, ordered, set to one side, or manipulated like an object. I did not realize that curriculum was the relationships and interpretive possibilities unfolding in my classroom and the erotic was on that curriculum whether or not I welcomed it.

But acknowledging its presence is risky. The staff room is hardly a place where one might ask colleagues about the erotics of teaching. Indeed, it was not until such issues arose in our teachers' writing group that I even dared to consider my responses to the erotic in school. During our meetings, Sidonie had been reading the first section of her novel which was a look at the adolescent Mary. Because Sidonie had chosen to use the talk and concerns of the present-day teenagers in her high school as the voices and dilemmas of the characters set in Galilee of the past, there was no secrecy about Mary's sexual desires and many of the scenes Sidonie wrote were rather erotic and became a focal

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[27]See Madeleine Grumet, for instance. *Bitter Milk.* Amherst, MA: University Press, 1988.

point for our discussions about bodies--particularly teacher bodies. She was poaching the language of religion and, rather than using it to transcend to the classical like the mystics, she subverted it to emphasize the grotesque, the body with orifices and desires and messiness. She often read us excerpts from Mary's diary like the following piece:

Dear Diary,

Last night was too perfect! Everything worked. I wore my white shift which looks great with my tan which makes my skin even darker than usual, and put my scent on all the right places, if you know what I mean. I slipped out the window without a sound and tore off to Jez's. Abigail was already there. I don't know how that girl beats me there everytime . . . .

The music was great and the incense was intoxicating. Jez throws the best parties. Well, I guess it is part of her business. But she sure knows how to mix business with pleasure and I'm just grateful to even be invited to her place.

Anyways, Abigail met up with that Aaron guy I told you about and I hung around nursing a drink and waiting for Jeremiah. Unfortunately, the only damper on my evening was that annoying gnat Joseph. Finally, I sent him for another drink and while he was gone, in walks Jeremiah.

God is he beautiful! He has curly dark brown hair and blue blue eyes. They see right through you in an unnerving way. That is when he looks at you at all. Which he finally did. He looked terrific in his camel-colored shirt which was open at the neck to show his chest and tufts of curly hair. What a body. He's about six feet tall and broad-shouldered. I can't believe how much I like him.

Joseph buzzed back and whined something in my ear, but I shooed him away as soon as Jeremiah noticed me. Which was almost right away! I couldn't believe my luck. I've been trying to get him to notice me for months!

He got himself a drink and sauntered over to me. I tried to act casual. He was very close when he spoke.

"What's your name again?"

"Mary."

"Oh, yeah, right."

"We were introduced in the summer."

"Oh yeah?"

"And I told you again on Friday."

"Right."

"And once before at another party."

"Really?"

"I guess you don't remember."

"Not really."

"Did you come with your friends?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

It went pretty much like that for a while. Then the music slowed down.

"Uh, Sarah?"

"Mary."

"Oh yeah, Mary, you wanna dance?"

Like only since I first met you, Jeremiah. I couldn't believe my luck. He pulled me onto the dance floor and took me in his arms and held me real close, pressed his hips to mine and I felt a shock go through my entire body. He felt excellent, I can tell you. Better than I'd imagined a thousand times.

"You smell good."

"Thanks. You too . . . Jeremiah."

We kept dancing, even when the song stopped. He looked at me with those eyes and he must of been able to read my expression because he held me even closer. It was getting hard to breathe.

When the band took a break, Jeremiah led me outdoors behind the building. We looked at the stars for a bit and then he took my face in his hands and kissed me. It wasn't my first kiss, mind you. But it was my first kiss from a *man*. He kissed me gently at first, just brushing my lips and then harder and then he slipped the tip of his tongue in my

mouth. I couldn't believe it!

I pulled away, and he kind of grinned at me. I felt reassured and I kissed him then. And then I got the hang of it. And he was pressing me against the wall and kissing me deeply and then he put his hand on my breast and I thought I'd die of longing right then and there. We stopped then because someone was coming down the street, and went back inside and danced all the slow numbers . . . .

At the end of the evening, well actually morning, I told him I had to get going and he walked me part way. He kissed me again and this time rubbed his hands up and down my body. I was breathing hard I can tell you and had trouble getting to sleep thinking about him and wanting him in my bed.

I'm going to have to burn this diary.

I am dead meat if my mother find this.

Or worse yet, my father.

I'm in love.

After her reading of this in our group, we had the following discussion:

You write this stuff really well.

Yeah you do.

(Laughing)
The slutty stuff?

There was no sense of this being forced or cliched or a problem writing it . . .

No.

I mean it's very convincing. And the erotic part is wonderful. Brilliant. All those details remind me that this is a Bible story and yet it's so different.

I'm afraid I'm going to lose her
voice.
But not so far.

Did you notice
Was there a problem
with reading it to us?

No.

Good. Okay.
I don't want you to lose
her voice
because you're reading
it to us.

I wrote about a week or two
of stuff.
A week of her life
not mine.
(Laughing)
Yeah. I wish.

She's having a great week.

I don't know what's going
to happen next.
Even though
I've got this plotted
all the way to the end
she just surprises me.

So how--
when you were writing this
did you feel uncomfortable
writing this.
I'd be interested in this.

I get--uh--
here's a completely honest statement--
turned on.
And then
I know it's working.

Yeah.
It's good.

Oh. I'm so embarrassed.

No. That makes sense.
I find it very difficult
something like that.
I find it--
I keep shutting myself
down.

When I was working
on a novel about a female
photographer being
interested
in this German guy
only by being attracted to him myself
could I write the kind of scenes
I wanted to. I know exactly
what you're saying.
You shouldn't feel
badly.

Maybe we should all
write something
erotic.

Wouldn't that be fun?

Yeah. I'd like that.
I'd have to practice
for awhile. But not for
next time.
Okay?
I can't think of any words
though.

Of course
if something just happens
then you write at the same time.

Oh yeah
well that would be nice.
In the middle of class
oh excuse me you guys.
I just got an idea.

Students sitting there
watching you write
erotica.

Listening to the tapes from this session, I heard myself suggest, just after this conversation, that maybe I "should not transcribe this." My tone is one of amusement, but I was only half joking. We were wandering into territory that seemed too personal, too revealing somehow. What would people think about us as teachers if I did transcribe this section? Was it okay for teachers to tremble with urges in the dark as long as they never admitted it or even better forgot about it the next day? Here we were, making spectacles of ourselves, talking about bodily desires. On tape, you can hear the fascination with tripping into the forbidden: the desire to continue mingled with the desire to push it all away. There is a sense of admiration in our conversation about Sidonie's daring, a wish that Casey and I could do the same and a wish to try. Suddenly the text becomes a place where we can explore the erotic feelings that are hidden in our daily work.

In listening to our conversation again and rereading the transcript, I search for what I am sure must be there. I thought we had described a physiological response to writing erotica: how our breath would increase, how wetness would seep between our legs, how we might twitch at our keyboards. But I cannot find it, and I no longer know if it is my continued fantasy from that scene, if I thought it that day while describing the radio program but didn't say it, or if it has vanished from the tape in a puff of smoke. Nevertheless, the appearance of the erotic scrambled our usual way of working and questioned the controls that as women we so carefully maintained. We had been well trained not to be "loose" or "slutty." Sidonie even mentions the fear of losing Mary's voice if she makes her "too bad." Playing with the carnivalesque pushes at the boundaries, questions authority and predictability. When we thought of ourselves as teachers, these

admonishments seemed even stronger.

When the erotic breaks through our conversation, we sound as if we teeter on the brink of something dangerous, that if we push too hard all will fall away. The tension between the centripetal desires for order and unity and the centrifugal force towards chaos and change were evident in those conversations. It is the mention of school that "brings us back." Once Casey imagines the erotic in school, our conversation takes an immediate swing into more pragmatic concerns. We had been led into a fantasy where school was not remembered and did not exist, but the shift in subject abruptly reminds us that we're teachers with no place for the erotic in our discussions of Sidonie's prose and the structures of her novel.

Still the erotic lingered about our group. At the next meeting, Casey revealed that she had begun to read Evelyn Lau's book of short stories. Lau, at age seventeen, after living for two years on the streets in Vancouver, wrote a bestseller, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid.* At age twenty-two, she wrote the book of short stories. Casey described her amazement:

> But this book, *Fresh Girls and Other Stories,* oh my god.
> Like it's about all this--not all--it's about prostitution sort of but not really.
> Some of them are much more subtle than that.
> There is finesse to this writing that is unbelievable.
> Poetic sex. Unbelievable.
> And some of it perverted poetic sex.
> Not at all pornographic.
> But you're thinking oh my god, the picture I got in my mind is nothing
> like the language on the page it is so well written. My husband was reading it last night and he says and he saw this book and he says
> what?
> He looks at the jacket at the back and it says,
> Evelyn Lau has done for sex what Anne Rice has done for vampires.
> That's what they've got on the back.

And he's looking at the back and saying,

Holy shit, what is this?

I said to him that actually it's so well written.

You've got to read it. Beautifully written.

Well there's this one--what does she call it--a dominatrix.

She's got his studded--like she wears these leather clothes

and she's got this studded collar and she's whipping this guy's ass

and the whole thing of it--and yet the language is this beautiful silk.

We're not surprised this time that we veer into the path of the erotic. Sidonie expresses how good this kind of conversation is. We're having fun talking like this; there's nowhere else, we agree, that such things can be said. We can be "bad girls" together. But each time our forays are short, and we don't really explore how the erotic intersects or informs our teaching. Each time we remind ourselves that we are teachers and the conversation changes. Sidonie describes how her Mary book will likely never be published: it's too risky, too over-the-top, and remembering the content, we agree that it certainly won't be part of the curriculum or find its way into high school libraries. Sidonie confesses: "I'm still fretting about the sex. I'm not sure why. Must be my good girl complex. Then she adds: The 31st is the Celebration of Women in the Arts New Moon readings. The first of every month. And so I was invited to do this [read a piece of the novel]. So I'll see what I can find out of this. Mary is moving beyond our circle. But I'll have to see if there are children in the audience."

Always it comes back to the children and the teaching. The group gives us a place to explore, "let our hair down," but not to forget we are treading the outreaches and brushing up against the boundaries, unable to question the erotic in our classrooms. Still it is a beginning. For us as female teachers to even explore the erotic through our writing and our talk, especially with a tape recorder going felt risky. The focus away from teaching and toward our private thoughts and writing was the only place we could start. We were opening to what Kristeva calls the semiotic, "the organization or disposition, within the body, of instinctual drives . . . as they affect language and its practices (*Desire*

in Language 18). The semiotic represents what the symbolic cannot order, revealing the failures of the symbolic even as the semiotic co-exists with and works through it. Shari Benstock describes the semiotic as "a necessary (and unavoidable) remnant of an archaic state prior to gender, anterior to sexual difference and the entrance into subjectivity" (25). The semiotic can be expended textually, Kristeva believes, marking poetic language with archaic inscriptions of the body. "[The energies of the semiotic] are the traces of the *experience* of differentiation which is intimately and immediately tactile . . . olfactory . . . gustatory . . . and rhythmic" (27) all of which can be erotic. Through our writing, the semiotic disrupted the symbolic, loosening the strictures of language, offering different opportunities, describing the murmurs of our bodies. Even by giving ourselves space to talk about the erotic and the encouragement to write erotically, we were increasing the possibility that the erotic might disrupt the symbolic in our classrooms, that it might open some new possibilities in our teaching, open some public space.

Of the three of us, Sidonie was the most comfortable with the erotic and was the most open with her students in acknowledging the existence of bodies: hers and theirs. But this created difficulties for her, mumblings from the administration and some parents. During a guidance class with grade eleven students, where they discussed comfort levels of body awareness, she suggested that they could choose a new option for their essay assignment. If some of them wanted to explore a time when they had felt very comfortable or uncomfortable with their bodies, they could do so. Several parents were angry about the discussion (even though this was an approved topic for this class) and told her that she should not make students write about their bodies. (The parents either didn't know or chose to ignore that the assignment was optional.) Like other of Sidonie's assignments, some parents and the school administration saw this as an opportunity for her to "promote her feminist views," not a positive teaching choice in their view. The administrators could not deny how much students responded to and trusted Sidonie, nor could they do without the quality of her teaching, but her openness to so many issues was disturbing for them. In order to try and curb some of her *joie de vivre*, they "persuaded" her to take on an enormous drama production that filled every spare moment and totally

exhausted her because, it was noted, the school needed the kind of quality artistic production Sidonie could achieve in order to attract students and the funding that came with them. It was another example of what McWilliam describes as the need in contemporary school systems for teachers to be both "worldly (entrepreneurial) and unworldly (un-sexed, un-sexy)" (342). By focussing the energies of Sidonie's body toward the "good of the school," she would have less time for her radical and disturbing notions of what her students needed to know about life. Overloading her with work was a controlling mechanism to subdue the erotic. An erotic that is seen as dangerous, "not because it's destructive, but because it locates us in our bodies and in our real lives" (Brandt 17). Sidonie's experience reminded us that physical pleasure--including what is and is not sexual or erotic--is always mediated by society, especially for women.

But what happens if we admit that erotic bodies teach school? Concerns of abuse and harassment are, of course, real and disturbing. Teresa Ebert describes some of the dangers of erotic pedagogy where seduction replaces understanding and enticement, and excitement replaces explanation and transformation. She cites a dedication in Jane Gallop's book *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory,* as an example of such pedagogy: "To my Students: The bright, hot, hip (young) women who fire my thoughts, my loins, my prose. I write this to move, to please, to shake you" (800). This kind of pleasing/pleasuring erotic pedagogy is disturbing to many students and can create an intimidating work environment for them, Ebert claims. She reminds us that "the professor-student relation is not a 'free' space outside institutions and domination. The negotiation of power in an 'unequal relationship' is always a negotiation in which one with (institutional) power sets the terms" (803). Such abuses of power are not only present when teachers offer unwelcome advances or confessions, but also when students are asked to discuss their personal experiences in class in the confessional style of some student-centered pedagogies when they would rather those thoughts remain private.

While such abuse is always a real possibility in classrooms, it arises from power relations and does not happen only because the erotic is or is not acknowledged. To believe so is to again "conflate erotica with sex-as-weapon," McWilliam suggests. She

admits that eros in teaching is dangerous because "exciting teaching is ambiguous, always threatening to tip over into oppression and/or abuse." Still, in relating to our students, she believes "we need to indicate what pleasure we have in making ethical choices about our own gendered identity." She is not advocating a return to the "personality cult of the teacher" nor for "letting it all hang out" in a classroom. What she is suggesting is that "self-denial, nurturance and learner-centeredness can constrain the very capacity of teachers to enjoy their discipline and to convey that pleasure to their students or engage in particular sorts of instruction of students *about* pleasure" (346-347).

In our group, acknowledging the ambiguous and duplicitous presence of the erotic increased our discomfort with how our teaching selves had been constructed and how, without even noticing, we had chosen to take on the identity of teacher as non-erotic being. But in beginning to write and talk about ourselves as sensual outside the classroom, we could begin to realize some of the issues of power relations and constraints that circulate around the erotic in the classroom. Sidonie's writing provided an example of how we could begin to poach the language and use it to question the authority in which worked. By refusing to deny that we were women with bodies as well as teachers, we could disrupt some of the centripetal forces of schooling's institutions, but not without, as we saw with Sidonie, some response in return. The tensions of change that the centrifugal brings are not accepted readily or easily.

I smell the roses painted on her belly
dusky crispness of petalled flesh
curls of chrysanthemums about her ears
I lick petal by petal
taste of yellow bark puckering
my tongue until
she shakes bluebells from her hair
sprinkles dew on my lips I speak
the trellis of honeysuckle down her back
the soft rise and fall

***

Di Brandt describes how, in her experience as an artist-in-the-schools, the girls she works with write primarily about love and their great anxiety around that subject. "It's a particular kind of love," she writes. "It's highly conventionalized, abstracted, full of wispy clouds and unicorns and fluffy kittens and fluttering hearts and, running through everything, a deep sense of loss, grief over the beloved's absence" (15). In the girls' group, love was also a familiar topic. Ella-Genevieve brought a poem to the group that went in part

I remember a couple of months ago
I met him
We sat at a little table all night
In a restaurant across town
It was New Year's
And I was still getting over my
first boyfriend
He seemed so nice
I liked him for a long time after that
And he was only 17
For sure he couldn't pull the
"But you're so YOUNG!"
No
He pulled the
"But I'm friends with your sister!
How could I go out with you?
Besides . . .
I'm in grade 12."
In other words
Basically the same thing
I just smile and laugh
You can bet that hurts . . .

Like Brandt, my first response to such poetry is to want the writer to be more concrete, to make me see what she is seeing, feel what they are feeling through physical detail. This language is detached; we hear only the words of conversation, not the body responses. But as Brandt also points out, students have just spent a number of years in school learning how to think abstractly and learning how not to attend to the body. I realize, too, in talking to the girls how hard it is for them to actually express concrete body responses. It feels strange to them, embarrassing.

I wonder why they write about the romances they write and how they are often so laden with sadness. I ask them to compare this to the movies and books that have a happy ending.

"I find it's superficial to write happy endings," Ella-Genvieve says, "because it seems so fake. Because life's not really like that. Everything doesn't end in a happy ending. So most everything I write is sad."

Sophia agreed that none of her stuff was happy and Alexis said hers wasn't either because she wasn't very happy. "Mine might not seem so grim," she added, "because like I really really hated the bad stuff in my life but if you read it you won't know what I'm talking about. It's not just saying like right there 'I feel it sucks.' " It seemed they saw their writing as more of a protest, a rendering of the dream that patriarchy had handed them coloured by the recognition that it was all imaginary, that no one could love them as totally and perfectly as promised. But still threaded through their writing is the hope that they may still find love. Norah wrote:

> So it goes on and on and they watch some T.V. and they're friends or so he thinks, or is it her that thinks so? And he doesn't call for a week or so--better things to do maybe but for her to ask would show more than she wished. For him to call would show more than he wished. She hopes that's why he doesn't. Then he starts again and comes over after a jog and she's feeling her heart pound. So unlike her. She's feeling her hands fiddle, so unlike her again. She's not to blame for this whole thing. And he looks at her and she knows, knows, knows, and he comes in. Why, why, why again and says she looks good and she never hears it from anyone and she always tries to look good just in case this is the day it will start again with him. It is and he looks at her again and they go and watch some T.V. and she knows and he knows she does so he tries to kiss her and this time she's too tired of it all; this time she tells him, with half her tired heart, through her tired eyes that she's had enough. And the way her voice sounds and the way her eyes look down make him laugh. She makes him laugh at her. She wishes she could make him cry. And she knows the bullshit puritanism, the false gods. Fuck societal guilt. And she

> cries in her mind and she smiles at him for she can't be weaker and she can't give in. And then he goes home and the next day he'll stop by maybe eat dinner with her family since he's like that--a real respectable young guy. But he'll never mention yesterday or tomorrow and she'll fall a little more each time he doesn't and she'll hide a little deeper each time he comes and then goes. And she's trying you know but she's so tired, so very tired. And then a week will go and she'll hear about another and then two will go and she hasn't heard. Then he'll show; he always does. There he is and here she is. But where are we? Where are we?

In her story, Norah knows the dream, the promise, the desire, but the young woman feels caught in a cycle of empty dreams, like a recurring nightmare. So why write about romance at all? Why retell those stories? Di Brandt suggests that

> These young women, on the cusp of adulthood, didn't want to acknowledge the betrayal of the world, of boyfriends and fathers, and of men in general, so they wouldn't have to acknowledge self-hatred, deep down, so they wouldn't feel worthless, abandoned, discriminated against, threatened, because they were women. (Brandt, 16)

Norah is caught within the "story of romance," tired and jaded because of it, but unable to consider any alternatives for the character in the story. There just seems to be no other choice in the way the world is constructed for her.

Janice Radway, in her study of women who read romances, suggests that women return again and again to that genre as a way of satisfying needs created by a patriarchal culture that is unable, at the same time, to fulfill those needs. Radway describes how their reading was also subversive in many ways. With the girls' writing, it seemed that they both saw the romance as a story available to them and as one that would not be neatly resolved. In their stories, the tensions of centripetal and centrifugal were at work--even as they searched for unity and happiness, they undermined its possibility and the reality of it happening. As Sophia noted: "We don't write happy endings because it doesn't happen that way in real life. The way I see it is that people who are writing romances are writing for the moment because a lot of women will get sucked in and they're just giving them the

fantasy all the time. They want to be happy, but to try to sit down and write something like that with a happy ending? No way."

Within the girls' romance writing lay the possibility for further writing that called into question some of the societal roles assigned to women. While they did not necessarily see their writing as undermining the romantic story of patriarchy, their choice of how to tell such stories, suggested that further imaginative writing might open up different possibilities for them to consider. The poet Ted Hughes suggests that "All imaginative writing is to some extent the voice of what is neglected or forbidden, hence its connection with a past in a nostalgic vein and the future in a revolutionary vein" (51). We wondered if by challenging the girls to go further in their imaginative writing, they might move beyond the romance story and write pieces that had some revolutionary possibility for their future rather than the sense of entrapment their romance stories held.

Towards the end of our group meetings, a I mentioned previously, Sidonie brought an excerpt from Jeanette Winterson's "The Semiotics of Sex," and spoke to the girls about how the essay was a call to write what the writer felt must be said. We read aloud the section which begins

> How much can we imagine? The artist is an imaginer. The artist imagines the forbidden because to her it is not forbidden. If she is freer than other people it is the freedom of her single allegiance to her work. Most of us have divided loyalties, most of us have sold ourselves. The artist is not divided and she is not for sale. Her clarity of purpose protects her although it is her clarity of purpose that is most likely to irritate most people. We are not happy with obsessives, visionaries, which means, in effect, that we are not happy with artists. Why do we flee from feeling? Why do we celebrate those who lower us in the mire of their own making while we hound those who come to us with hands full of difficult beauty?
>
> If we could imagine ourselves out of despair?
>
> If we could imagine ourselves out of helplessness?
>
> What would happen if we could imagine in ourselves authentic desire?

(116-117)

We encouraged the girls, then, to go home and write the forbidden whatever that might mean to them. What happened was that they returned to the group, somewhat amazed by what they had accomplished. This group of, for the most part, shy and quiet girls then decided that they would take part in a public reading held at local cafe. They would invite their parents and their friends and would read their pieces of "Forbidden writing." Di Brandt suggests that we need to give students the opportunity to leap into the volcano, to explore their real feelings, but that we also have to give them a map to get back out. That map had been established by the safety in the group; they read their pieces, had them acknowledged and accepted. Now they were willing to give public voice to their words. The language that constrained them, influenced their lives in profound ways echoed in the cafe.

Be polite, curtsy well, love men your own age,
never fight or swear, respect your elders. You
are a girl. Nothing more.

power to create room for us, the dispossessed
emotion around the forbidden
to worm into the heart and mind until what one
truly desires
had been encased in the dark walls of what one
ought to desire
to hear clearly the voices that have whispered at her
for so many years.

You dominate my dreams
But everything is not as it seems

> The world around her forbids her
> to write, to express. It is considered
> childish and considered reaching for
> something that is not there. So they
> are saying that she is denied the
> freedom
> to imagine and express . . . She
> refuses to live like this and stands up
> against all the
> criticism and discrimination.
> There are no limits for her,
> no rules, and if any,
> she breaks them all.

As she sits in her tree, she remembers the Barbie doll that she had so long ago. She thought of how nice Barbie would have looked in jeans, a t-shirt, and with no hair. She decides that perfection must be altered even if it is forbidden.

Writing offered an opportunity to poach--to take language and manipulate the possibilities of existence. For the girls, this meant writing beyond just the sad ending to express their anger and frustration at the heterosexual romance as constructed in our society. For the teachers, writing reconnected them with their bodies and reminded them of the presence and power of the female body, particularly in the classroom. For Carmen, in her writing, the manipulating of the conditions of her existence became so overwhelming in clarifying her difficult marital situation that she had to stop writing for a time just to deal with all the emotional possibilities that confronted her.

The writing from most of the women in various ways called into question the condition of their lives from the controls and restrictions put upon women's bodies to the heterosexual romance that attempts to structure much of society. Much of their writing could be called unruly or subversive or forbidden or dangerous; much of it could be seen to contribute to a centrifugal force. While the changes created may have been small in some cases or the realizations only dimly figured, one cannot underestimate the power, I believe, of even the smallest of ripples. In the final chapter I want to explore this potential of writing to enact change within the lives our students, our classrooms and our curriculums.

7.

AS WOMEN WRITING

What if space to imagine.[28]

[28]In *Postmodern Culture*, Barbara Page writes about women writers and hypertext. "One frequent mark of this new writing," she notes, "is the introduction of silence, partly as a memorial to the historical silencing of women's voices, but also as a means of establishing a textual space for the entrance of those 'others' chronically excluded from the closed texts of dogmatists and power interests" (2).

The rain is falling as I begin the ending just as it was last October when I began the beginning. Then: An early autumn morning. Now: A wet spring night. Rain in October soaks dry leaves, sogs them into blankets of mulch to protect bulbs and seeds buried in the earth while in spring, rain washes away snow mould, prepares the ground for flowering.

All winter long this dissertation has been stirring on my computer, emerging from pages for my eyes only, waiting for spring rain to clear a path into the world. But even as I distribute this writing, anxious for the readings of others to nurture its growth, I hear the rustle of questions that have emerged through this study; questions that leave me wondering how entangling myself in this work has changed my thinking about women, writing and teaching. What possibilities emerge from the subjunctive? How does a woman write? Is there a feminine aesthetic? A feminine sublime? Can the subjunctive space survive in school? Through this work I have begun to shape a way of thinking about these questions, of making further queries, of continuing to wonder, even as the search has most clearly shown me the cracks. And the spaces grow wider even as I try to fill in the gaps.

As if.

I.

The Real resists even as it compels the symbolization which we use to create a "screen" to protect us. But still, there are moments in life when our screens fail, when we are "touched" by the Real, when the unexpected and traumatic interrupt the smooth working of our lives. As Judith Butler writes

> This trauma subsists as the permanent possibility of disrupting and rendering contingent any discursive formation that lays claim to a coherent or seamless account of reality. It persists as the real, where the real is always that which any account of 'reality' fails to include. The real constitutes the contingency or lack in any discursive formation. (192)

Touches of the Real remind us that we are not as we imagined ourselves to be; the

story is interrupted. Writing works through these traumas, tries to smooth over the cracks.

The adolescent girls turned to writing before and during the research group as a way of coping with the stresses in their lives. As Ella-Genevieve said once, "I only really write when I get frustrated or am sad. Basically I write to ease my pain." Another time, Ayehla wrote a long poem about her great-grandmother's recent death. She had been shocked to see the old woman in a nursing home, mostly forgotten by the family and had been appalled about the lack of feeling the family seemed to have at her death. Her poem was a litany of her love for her relative, and an expression of her wish that she could have been there for her. Norah, too, wrote about dealing with the death of her Nana. Several lines from her poem are indicative of the tone: "And by thinking to fly I will soar/And there will never be less always more." When she read us the piece, she pointed to her poem. "I'd just rather be here," she said, and then looked around the room. "Than *here*."

Their writing tried to give shape to the uncertainty and the fear as they hoped to discover the coherent story, to interpret explanations and discover understanding. Some of their writing dealt with difficult relationships with men and boys; some addressed the sense of confinement as expectations and roles seemed to become more definitive for them every year; some explored the images of women that were perpetuated by society and the media while others focused on their growing realization of the difficulties of living. The writing was a way of making sense, of trying things out, of searching for possibilities.

The teachers' and older women's writing was not much different. Casey's collection of poetry continued to work through her father's death; hence her realization that these were poems of "raw intensity." Sidonie's writing was in part a working through the difficulties of teaching within a non-supportive and hindering administration. For Carmen, the kind of wife and mother she had believed herself to be, the size of house she lived in, the number of belongings she owned, and her relationship to her community were all changing. Her writing was a way of chronicling the life she was leaving but also to explore the new life she was beginning. Hazel, on the other hand, wrote against the loneliness of moving so often and living far from extended family.

The writing served to "screen" the Real, but it also pointed to the Real and to the continual possibility of disruption and trauma. Writing could not continue endlessly as a seamless, coherent story and thus was a practice of repetition that the women returned to, gathering up the threads that were torn and continuing the story.

2.

Because I can't say what I mean and I can't get it out. And it always seems stupid to me and then my friends read it.[29]

3.

As if. The play of possibilities in the subjunctive. If writing helps us cope with the Real by creating a screen, what effect might it have on that screen, the symbolic? Butler describes the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains, what she calls "performativity." Since the material effects of discourse include what is outside, women, who have been excluded from the symbolic, are at the same time part of it. Butler suggests that "The task is to refigure this necessary "outside" as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome. But of equal importance is the preservation of the outside, the site where discourse meets it limits . . ." (53).

The tensions of the "inside" and "outside," which are co-determining, are reflected in the tensions of the centrifugal and centripetal. The centripetal, the official and supposedly unified force, is continually impacted by the centrifugal, a heteroglossia, that registers and responds to the diversity of daily life. Each impels and sustains the other.

When one writes, imagining and exploring the *as if*, how can this subjunctive space influence boundaries? Butler's explanation of the formation of body is useful in thinking about such possibilities. She describes how descriptions of the body are imaged. "First

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[29]Alexis

psychic projection confers boundaries and, hence, unity on the body, so that the very contours of the body are sites that vacillate between the psychic and the material" (66). Imagining changes and shapes the boundaries. If women imagine their bodies as characterized by a patriarchal discourse (Carmen, for instance), the boundaries of those bodies are different than if they are characterized by a feminist discourse.

Of course, the imagining that creates such materiality is never entirely our own creation. Our exploration of the "as if" is conditioned by the heteroglossia which continually shapes our intentions. For instance, the teachers' group explored the erotic, but still were confined by the discourses of "the teacher" as a non-erotic being. The adolescent girls condemned Barbie even while still setting limits to their body size. Then, too, there were the influences of Sidonie's and my open talk about women and feminism. How much did our opinions add to the girls' ambivalence in their taking up of feminist opinions while they tried to negotiate being acceptable to men?

4.

I have to say that writing definitely played a part in my deciding to leave my husband.[30]

5.

The possibility exists that within the subjunctive space we could take up the hegemonic imaginary and subvert that imaginary through mimicking or poaching. The danger with mimicking is that one can be absorbed into that imaginary or can serve to re-establish it. At the same time, if one fails to loyally repeat the imaginary, is that not subversion?

Sometimes, though, mimicry can be a repetition that merely seeks to avoid the Real, a *Wiederholen* (Foster 132). The writing becomes less a search for possibility and action and more a tactic of delay or avoidance. Carmen began her journal writing by

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[30]Carmen

simply recording her mundane chores; the girls sometimes wrote rhyming poetry that used abstract words such as love and hate, distancing the work from any physical and sensory connections; Hazel occasionally focussed more on the nostalgia and less on the underlying loneliness. In the teachers' group, we would simply avoid writing altogether, citing busyness as an excuse.

But when the writing confronts the return of the Real (*Wiederkehr*)[31], the subjunctive space of writing means that women can consider alternative imaginary schemas and can explore the shape of possibilities. In so doing, they are "forming living."[32]

(We imagine ourselves to be whole.)

When we recognize this imaginary as fiction, an *as if*, we can acknowledge both the limits and the possibilities of our selves. We can imagine what Deleuze suggests: "subjectivity is the folding of the outside into the inside, and the past into the present, for the sake of thinking the future . . . (qtd. in Pile and Thrift 38).[33]

6.

Beware! Now I know a language so beautiful and lethal
My mouth bleeds when I speak it.

-Gwendolyn MacEwen

The language I have learned. Not many new words but new recognitions. A breath intake where there used to be a sigh. Sometimes I can hear the speed of my breathing as my lips shape those words with new determination. Cautiously sliding them

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[31]Foster 137-138

[32]This term arises from personal correspondence with J-C Couture. He was exploring McRobbie's idea that research should not impose abstracted forms of theorizing on forms of living from her essay "Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies" in Grossberg, et. al, eds. *Cultural Studies.* New York: Routledge, 1992, 719-730.

[33]Gilles Deleuze. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

down my tongue just to see what they will do in the world. Will they work in new ways without me running along behind them, a leash in my hand, urging them to heel or sit? There are no certainties here. I can colour the syllables, emphasize the accents, chant the iamb or dactyl, but still have to let them go to hook up with who knows what in their next incantation.

7.

In *Literature and Gender* there is a series of excerpts from literary works each of which asks the reader to identify the piece as having been written by a man or a woman. Working fairly confidently, assured that I could pinpoint the subtle cues of language that would reveal gender, I tried the exercise. To my chagrin, I was wrong on nearly every count. I reassured myself by thinking that a paragraph carefully chosen from a much larger work could be very difficult to identify whereas reading the entire work would be more revealing. What was interesting to me, however, was not whether the pieces seemed coloured by the gender of their writers but my confidence that I would be able to tell. Such thinking was naive, I realized. Words are enriched by so much more than gender since each time they appear in a new context, as Bakhtin and Derrida have pointed out, words acquire a slightly different meaning. And where do the words end and the context begin anyway? The moment I identify a boundary, I see something out of the corner of my eye slipping over the fence, destroying my sense of knowing for sure.

So even if I deliberately set out "to write like a woman" (and how could I do otherwise) nothing assures me that readers will identify the work as female, feminine, feminist, or any of the other terms that attempt to distinguish the writing of women from that of men. What criteria distinguishes a text as feminist or feminine? Can it be distinguished from the patriarchal or phallocentric mainstream? "What is distinctive about it such that we can say that it is subversive or transgressive of its representational milieu?" (Grosz 10). I may have begun this study with the sense that there might be some unifying characteristics to women's writing and a way of identifying a distinctive feminist aesthetic, but I found nothing to convince me. The theories that suggested there are such

characteristics or aesthetics tended to essentialize women, maintaining them in the intuitive and reproductive roles that Luce Irigaray warns against.

So I believe we cannot lump women's writing together and call it "women's writing" as some kind of identifiable category any more than we lump men's writing together. Such large categorizations based on the sex of the author are not particularly useful. However, writing from one's experiences of being marginal in the culture or writing against a supposedly transparent narrative voice that is often assumed to be male begins to show the particularity of one's writing. Writing as a relatively privileged white woman is different from writing as a man (of any race) or a woman of colour or a woman living in poverty. Rather than searching for categories, a more useful consideration is to think about what our own writing reveals to us and what purposes it can serve in our living. Does it help us become more mindful, more attentive to our circumstances so we act more deliberately, more consciously--speak words with our own intentions? Can writing help us break through experience rather than being confined by it?

8.

"Writing should be grasped in this context as a social practice which *creates* meaning rather than merely communicating it; feminist literature does not reveal an already given female identity, but is itself involved in the construction of this self as a cultural reality" (Felksi, 78).

Still I do not say this is who I am when I write. There is no self as a predetermined figure. Rather, the writing is who I think I am at that moment, "a complex tissue of texts, experiences, evolving in the very act of writing" (Scott 11). Writing does not pin me down. It's where I might have been, could have been, might be, or where I want to be. I stay in the subjunctive, unwilling to be tied to my writing but still trying to define the text even as it defines me. In attending to the language that I use to describe my experience as a woman and conscious of the heteroglossic nature of language, I begin to shape a sense of identity and choice without claiming I write only on the basis of experience that is the result of patriarchal subordination (as if there were no other experiences). To do so

would preset a limit on my writing, suggest that it must always arise from oppression and resentment, that is must always be reactive. There is more--much more--that can be written.

"Write your self. Your body must be heard" (Cixous 250).

9.

So how do our bodies sound? Do they whisper with two lips as Luce Irigaray suggests? How to find the language that traces the shape of our bodies, the rhythms and murmurs of the semiotic chora. There are always threads below the language of the text that are in excess of our intentions, of our readers' intentions. Something is always slipping away.

> It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded--which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. (Cixous 253)

10.

not two mouths but three!
slipping one over on polarity
slippage in the text
you & me collabi, (to slip together)
labialization!)
slip(ping) page(es)
like notes in class

-Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland

Early morning and I don't know what's on my mind yet. Spilling the flow of language onto the page to see. Just to see. Since I was little--I don't remember when exactly--this stream of language has been in my head. I cannot remember before I had words: light, crib, catalogue, Mother, Father. I have to have a way of saying memory. 'This is what it is. This is what I call it.' Then it stays. Even briefly. Tracks of language across my brain.

Before language. Before memory. Does my body remember? If language were not there can there be memory?

Too many things cry out to be known even as they remain elusive. The welling behind my eyes. The aching in my body, the soreness of my jaw from grinding my teeth at night. Where has the poetry gone? I need to 'go out looking for a metaphor,' as my good friend says. Look for something to describe the tenuous heart, the aching head, the tremulous hand. Settle the mud-stirred water. Confront the Real.

11.

At least the potential is there (in reaching towards the ineffable). This is what i want in poetry, all poetry.

-Shawna Lemay, personal correspondence

12.

When I sit down to write there are always the murmur of voices, concatenations of poems, and imagery and rhythms. In my mind the palimpsest of women writing over centuries of men, searching for a new colour, a different shading, a fresh page.

> The page is never blank. It is (even if apparently white) already written with conventions, discourses, prior texts, cultural ideas, reading practices . . . . All our words are ringed by Words, all our rings are encircled by another powerful, fecund circle by whose flux and outpourings we are at times seduced. The double position of being outside and inside, critical and complicit marks the sequence. (DuPlessis 151)

I write both within and outside tradition. If I try to write differently from more

masculine traditions, I still must understand what those traditions are so I recognize an outside--or at least the illusion of one. And how can I not use threads from that work? When I write within the growing tradition of women's writing, I sense differences, but there are not one or two things, something identifiable. Is it possible to offer a critique of patriarchal tradition while continuing to be influenced by its ideologies and frameworks?

Perhaps such a critique is possible because writing facilitates this outside/inside position. In writing, even when describing "I," a character is created that is distinct from my material body, a process Bakhtin calls "exotopy," translated from Greek to mean "finding oneself outside" (qtd. in Todorov 99). Through recognizing this other, Bakhtin explains, we find ourselves in a mutual reflection and perception. The I who writes can trace some of the complicity and influences in the I who is written about. The speaking subject; the spoken subject. In writing, the writer can test some of her assumptions, put some dreams up for grabs, be someone else and "herself" within the text at the same time.

13.

only something that may be nothing
more than darkness has begun
softening the definitions of my body, leaving
-Eavan Boland

There seems to be no poetry here: eyes not seeing the delicate shadow beneath the green leaf that reminds me there is always darkness, death floating below the surface of life. The desire for certainty, the search for comfort and order is always scattered by the wind that blows shreds of cloud, covering and uncovering the sun. A catch in the breath, a pause in time, a dog's paw stopped in mid-rise. They all interrupt the smoothness, remind me of the intermittent possibilities of living. I hope for more in this gray season.

14.

Rita Felski suggests that women consider the political function of art, that their work could disrupt the structures of symbolic discourse through which patriarchal culture

is constituted. The experimental and innovative text, the avant-garde, is one way to disrupt the conventional, the expected, the unquestioned. In avant-garde writing, the semiotic dimensions become more predominant. But, Felski points out, 'fragmentation and subversion of patterns do not in themselves bear any relationship to a feminist position and will be perceived to do so only if the themes explored in the text bear some relation to feminist concerns--if, for example, the text seeks to undermine an obviously patriarchal ideological position" (32). What women have to say and how they say it are both important.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis talks about a new kind of textual space, not an otherness but an "otherhow" where a plethora of "polygynous practices teem" (152). Gail Scott describes her inspiration for different structures coming from her dreams, which mocked the convex surface of what she thought the 'real' to be. Her spare writing left spaces indicative of gaps in the culture where the feminine should be.

> the problem is in the space the problem is in the space between ideology and consciousness (old systems new awareness in this space was born the sentence) the problem is in the space between the conscious and the un-conscious (once thought poetry's pure source) out of these two spaces in fusion has come the text but what in rising above the others has the text left? has the text left behind sense? has the text left behind innocence . . . .
>
> (107)

Virginia Woolf, always asking how women can write, also suggested breaking apart the sentence in order to overcome women's sense of inferiority and awkwardness in writing. For her, the novel as the newest form was women's best hope. Poetry, as traditionally conceived, was too laden with patriarchal influence.

Scott, in wondering how women actually choose a form in which to write, speculated that there was a connection between the form women choose and the circumstances of their lives. I think back over the writing of the women in this study:

-Sidonie, torn between the pleasure of teaching high school students and the frustrations of school structures, writing a novel that questioned the patriarchal stories of the Virgin Mary, using the language of her current students.

-Casey mourning through her journal, using stream-of-consciousness writing that became poems.

-I, busy with writing academic papers but also studying women's lives, writing poetry about Emily Carr.

-Carmen, returning to writing after many years and in difficult circumstances, writing furtive, intense entries in journals.

-Hazel, needing family connections, writing memoirs of growing up on a farm.

-The girls writing quick and direct responses to songs and their daily concerns.

The forms ranged from journal entries to poetry to short fiction, but always the sentence structure reflected a certain kind of breathing as the emotion spilled over the words and cascaded into the gaps and pauses in their work.

The importance of form seemed most clear with the girls' writing. Although most of their writing was first draft, where form had been instinctively chosen and not polished or reconsidered, when we asked them to "take apart their writing," the effect of those forms on the overall piece was evident. As explained in an earlier chapter, we were inspired by some of Frigga Haug's work with writing as a way of exploring the girls' feelings, hopes, dream, and wishes. Changing the form by listing words in categories rather than leaving it in prose or poetry gave us a new way of considering what they had said. The lists cleared some of the emotion and stopped the rhythms, so the words, in this new context, seemed different somehow but still with traces of their former intentions. Some of those intentions seemed surprising when revealed in such a way. At the same time, clearing some of the influences of the semiotic chora from their language also reinforced for us how much more is revealed through the writing than just the language that is chosen. The rhythms that are created from particular words being in proximity to each other, the silences, the line breaks, and the punctuation create sensations that are difficult to describe in language but that can be clearly felt when the words are read. So it

is not only our words that reveal some of our intentions, aspirations, designs or aims but also how we choose to say them.

But that said, a cautionary note needs to be added here lest I leave the impression that one can entirely determine another's or her own intentions through reading her writing. In reading or writing, one can perhaps come to reflect on and see her experiences in a different light as Carmen did in the study. Or such as the girls did when they experimented with the discourse analysis and began to have a sense of the words they were choosing to describe themselves which provided some insight into how they were understanding their identity. But our texts always say more and less about us than we or our readers can ever know. A text and its writer are not isomorphic. Nevertheless, writing is a site of possibility where we can learn things about ourselves, where we can imagine different choices, and where we can reconfigure our experience.

15.

For the past few months I have wondered why the only poetry I've written echoes the themes of this dissertation. Have I not lived any other life? But of course I know how this works. I have tried to categorize my life before, sanitize my writing space, but everything keeps bleeding into my words. What I am thinking about in this dissertation influences my poetic imagery just as that imagery shapes the dissertation. And yet there are things spilling into and off the margins of this page. The writing does not tell you everything. Who's to say what's true and what's not? What has been lived in my kitchen and what in the kitchen of my imagination?

16.

And so I write these poems hoping that there is something more than catharsis happening. If not, I will use them myself, devour them like breakfast and insert catharsis into the construction of me that is my writing.

-April Miller, personal correspondence

17.

Everything we do now contains the seeds of its own unfolding.

-Gwendolyn MacEwen

I find myself tracing backwards through poems and journal entries trying to decide where this story began, where it should end. Even when I do find a kernel, there are fine tendrils--sometimes only one thin, white hair, that burrows through rich and complex soil to other tap roots, other hairs, a cluster of leaves opening beneath the sun. I don't know where this purple delphinium came from; it clashes with the orange poppies that are ignoring the row markers and spreading out everywhere, fuzzy stems alert to the wind. The only thing I know for sure is that there are flowers and they are blooming.

18.

In thinking about form, I find myself coming back to Virginia Woolf and her words about the writing of *The Waves.* "I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot . . . though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw to the reader" (*Letters III* 204). Hearing old words in a new rhythm may mean we hear them differently.

Barbara Page, in writing about postmodern women writers, suggests that they do not simply reimagine writing as weaving, but rather they think of it as taking apart the fabric of inherited textual forms, reweaving it into new designs. One of the possibilities she sees arising from these women's writing is the metaphoric as well as actual use of hypertext. I wonder, in reading about Page's playfulness with the text, what it means to create a text so open that it is easily appropriated and subverted through hypertext, but then perhaps hypertext is just a physical manifestation of what readers do with texts they read anyway. Maybe instead I need to think of how stories can become a game of "Pass It On." I create a version of one of my stories in hypertext, someone else adds to it, changes

it, reconfigures it, passes it on to someone else. Meanwhile another person has been reading my version too, rewriting it, sending it on. A web of story tendrils growing. Someday the story may come back to me, but even if I have kept a copy of the original, that will no longer be my story and I will have to change it yet again like the dynamic of heteroglossia that Bakhtin talks about. Language coloured with others' intentions; language we can only shape for the moment before it is gone. Language we cannot contain and keep like a butterfly pinned to a display board, the colour slowing fading. The potential in hypertext, Page believes, offers writers the opportunity to articulate formerly repressed or dismissed stories within the rearticulation of textual forms and codes. She explains:

> Even in the handful of hypertextual fictions that have been written thus far, the potential for projects of radical change in representational art is evident. Especially for women writers who self-reflexively incorporate thinking about texts into fiction and for women who wish to seize rather than shy from the technological means of production, hypertext--which peculiarly welcomes and makes space for refraction and oppositional discourses--can be inviting, even though it rightly arouses suspicion that its assimilative vastness may swallow up subversion. (17)

But I wonder about the welcoming of hypertext for women. Hypertext assumes a certain level of literacy and usually some experience of computers. At least one has to have a way of envisioning the spaces and connections of hypertext. Such an understanding corresponds to opportunities in education and financial security. But these concerns are no less valid when one considers other forms of writing for women. Virginia Woolf's recognition that women needed a room of their own and the luxury of time to write is still valid. It is much easier to write when one is rewarded for writing, for taking risks with work that probably has no long term repercussions. For some women, even if they do have time to write, find the risks in exploring the subjunctive great, the "as if" too tenuous. While Carmen had the support of much of her family for her new life changes, exploring the possibilities through writing and then acting on them fundamentally changed

her life. What this means in the long term for her is uncertain. For many women transgressing the Symbolic Order can be dangerous in very real ways.

This is not to say that women should not be encouraged to write or that we should not find ways to give them the opportunities to do so. It is merely to remember that creating new imaginary schemas can have material consequences that are as risky as they are enabling.

19.

The body has an ebb and flow in the current of living, waves marked upon our skin from breeze and blood. We trace ridges of experience in our folds of skin, telling stories that splash words against the shoreline, eroding deep into the landscape of our flesh until we walk differently, hearing a sound we've never heard before. The rhythm of time changing.

20.

Through the work of this study, I have a new understanding of the popular term "to find a voice" through writing. For years I have avoided speaking of writing and voice in the same breath and have been clear that in writing classes I was **not** helping people to find a voice. There was something limiting about that whole notion I thought. A voice. As if we could speak in one way and would always speak in one way if we could just find it. There was something patriarchal about this, too, as if a voice could be bestowed. That it was disembodied. As if the voice could be detached from the body, from the context of experience.

But I have begun to repopulate this phrase by thinking of it differently. My new awareness has come about through this work where I began to see what it meant to women to both write about their experiences and then be able to understand their lives in a new way. The "finding of voice" is not so much discovering a register in which one can write, but rather finding the strength to use words and to shape writing into forms that reflect experience, that say what it is the writer wants to say, that reveal the conditions of

her life. Within my writing I can see what it is that might be, how I might act, how I might think differently about past experiences. A space of possibility emerges. Such an understanding of voice also moves away from the singular and fixed interpretations of voice for it reflects back to Bakhtin's notion of "intention." I shape the language with my own intentions, but must recognize that the language is always coloured by many voices.

Janet Miller, in her work with five classroom teachers, describes the importance of both teachers and students using their own voices to tell their own stories while acknowledging the collaborative process.

> Thus, I have realized that I did not need to do the total creating, nor did I have to remain on the edges of the spaces to watch others create. Together, we have worked and reworked our perceptions of our separate and collective projects, not only in terms of individual problems and questions, but also in light of others' interpretations of the personal as well as the collective." ("Academic Repositionings" 97).

Miller's comments also point out the political implications in such creation. As the professor/researcher, she worried about the inequitable relations between herself as primary interpreter and the participants. Such work, she points out, usually occurs in some formal or institutionalized contexts where there are layers of assumptions and expectations and unrecognized forms of oppression. Still, by the very act of interrupting agendas, of creating space for different voices to be heard, the habitual can be challenged. Voices from the centrifugal that disrupt the centripetal. Voices that offer different imaginary schemas.

Madeleine Grumet sees such possibilities as a call to action. "Perhaps it is time for women who call ourselves educators to question our participation and practice in schools," she writes (57), reminding us that teachers can and do change schools.

21.

The hint of colour in these trees deepens during our days
in that pink room with the yellowed walls smelling of age
and hundreds of female bodies before us

Our talking, our movement in and out of that room
through its many echoes, deepens the choreography our bodies share
words and gestures bind us, strengthen contrapuntal tones
enriching the air, cracking the plaster
in lines of gentle darkness that connect our breathing
wander about our dreams with a new language
neither of us has heard before but both understand

22.

If we want to move beyond just "schooling" students and instead educate them we need to do more than replicate the status quo. We need to explore the possibilities, *wonder* and *wander* about the "as if." Magda Lewis writes that

> Teaching and learning can have effective human outcomes only so long as we acknowledge that experience itself is not linear. Our moments of experience transform our ways of seeing not only what is to follow, but as well what has gone before. They re/form our consciousness at the moment of their generation, uncover understandings, and generate constantly new visions of past events and future possibilities. (15)

Writing can be the space where "moments of experience transform our ways of seeing." Writing can be more than just a measure of learning, an endpoint of a process.

In this study, in particular our work with the girls, we explored ways of interpreting writing differently, looking at our ideas and calling thinking into question. We were less concerned about where the girls ended up with the writing than what they read and spoke about with that writing. Interpreting writing in a group setting revealed possibilities.

Now I know that the groups we worked in were relatively safe occasions for people to talk about their writing and themselves. School is a much riskier location for this kind of work. But such work can creep into schools. Janet Miller writes that "it is within the activities of our daily lives, in the gatherings in the hallways and classrooms and offices and counseling cubicles of the school buildings where our forms of emancipatory research and pedagogy must take place" (*Creating Spaces* 172).

In school, as in our writing groups, first draft flow writing should be meant for no one but the person himself or herself. How we teach students to then work with, interpret, and resymbolize that writing is where it can move into a more public venue. As Mary Rose O'Reilley explains

> The first goal of education--if we think it has anything at all to do with values--is to bring students to a knowledge of the world within: its geography and anthropology, depths and heights, myths and primary texts. To foster this process, you don't even have to put your chairs in a circle.
>
> Our second goal should be to help the student bring his subjective vision into community, checking his insights against those of allies and adversaries, against the subjective vision of the texts he studies, and in general against the history of ideas. The classroom, then, must be a meeting place of both silent meditations and verbal witness, of interplay between interiority and community. (32)

The world within and without, the interplay. What Deleuze says about subjectivity could be echoed with writing: *Writing folds* "the outside into the inside, and the past into the present, for the sake of thinking about the future" (38).

23.

In writing we imagine the possibilities and create conditions where we can become other than what we are or have been. My work, my "story," as a writer and a teacher depends on this kind of imaginative possibility, the imaginative vision of the *as if.* These rich, *as if* hypothetical worlds (our own or those of others' creations) reconfigure experience and make it less familiar so that we can become conscious of "what is not yet, of what might, unpredictably, still be experienced" (Greene 92).

But what are the difficulties of thinking about writing differently in school? Classrooms are often chronotopes of both docility and resistance. Students are required to attend (often reluctantly) and learn how to perform appropriately in the various subject disciplines even if they do not achieve or refuse to achieve the expected standards, as they

struggle against the discipline and control of school. How the student performs on increasingly standardized assessment measures determines his or her success or failure in school. Individuality, on the other hand, rises from the bottom-up and creates an identity that is the product of one's history, family, relationships and experiences. These identities in the classroom may be in conflict with the individuation processes of school and become sites of resistance. Yet as classrooms work to homogenize the messy heteroglossia that inhabits such a space, students often comply by learning the most acceptable language, especially for assessment purposes. Such language is what one young man in my former study labelled as "schooly" (*Never Stepping in the Same River Twice).*

This official language, a centripetal force, is continually challenged, however, by other strands of the heteroglossia such as gossip and the speech genres of various groups. Margaret Flinders, in her study of adolescent girls' literacy, found that the girls distinguished between texts for school that demanded adherence to sanctioned practices in order to be successful and reading and writing that was "for me" and was considered private and guarded to protect one from self-disclosure. Flinders notes that such distinctions between the public and private created obstacles in the classroom and that social roles beyond the classroom directly influence those within. She highlights the importance of interpretative literary practices which use a sociocultural approach to reading that "would place in the foreground both the social strategies that readers bring to the texts *and* what the text bring to readers" (128).

Can teachers acknowledge and work with such tensions in their classrooms? Often it seems teachers work hard to "keep a lid" on the messiness that lies beneath the surface of most classes. One comment I heard from colleagues when I tried to encourage them to bring laptop computers into their English classrooms was that students would have to sit at tables, often facing away from the front of the room, and thus the teacher would lose control of his or her class. The same evidence of control appears in the infamous five paragraph essay that is practiced in preparation for the government examinations. What does it mean to always have students write such essays? What would happen if they worked more often with hypertext or avant-garde writing? What if we taught students to

experiment and search for language and forms that best represented their experience? Teaching in such a way would call into question many things: power structures, relations between races, cultures, genders and sexual orientations, canons, the overdetermining of society. A colleague who has marked many of the government exams described to me how the students who write perfectly acceptable five paragraph essays often get average marks. The student who ventures into different territory, who writes with confidence and a sense of his or her own intention often gets a higher mark. Still, for many teachers, there is discomfort in "turning students loose" to discover such writing; it seems too improvisational instead of structured. One cannot be sure of the outcomes of such writing; perhaps it is better to risk average than to risk uncertainty.

But if we as teachers recognize the importance of such writing from our students, how can we foster conditions for its creation? Individuation, as Fiske points out, is a vertical process while individual identities can break through to form horizontal social relations, ones he calls *communitas* whose purpose is "to produce identities and relationships that are in the control of its members by means that are denied to them by the dominant social order" (68). The last few years I taught English, I created such groups in my classroom. Like the writing research groups, I had four or five students around large tables with their own laptop computers. Over the course of the year, these groups grew into their own small communities that made decisions, assisted each other, and dealt with difficulties. The majority of their time was spent talking and working with their groups. The students were creating a place for themselves, a *communitas*, or what Bourdieu defines as a *habitus:*

> the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations . . . a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perception, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks. (Bourdieu, qtd. in Pile and Thrift, 31).[34]

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[34]P. Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

But of course teaching in this way called into question my role. I had to consider my habitual way of teaching and for a time nothing could be comfortably done without conscious thought. Initially, too, the students, used to the centripetal forces of schooling, were confused and unsettled; I had to learn to work more slowly at making changes, giving the students time to try out new structures. Students still wrote "schooly" of course because the work was being carried out within the larger setting of the institution of school, but there was a greater measure of speaking with their own voices and of exploring possibilities when I compared these classes to my former ones. Backing away, letting questions and messiness do its work, opened up the heteroglossia in ways that had not happened in my classes before.

Someone asked me in the midst of this research when I was presenting some of the findings if I understood how what I was advocating would deeply change the structure of schooling. "Maybe not everyone would think this change is a good thing," he suggested. I agreed. Probably some people would not think it was a good thing. Many even. But as a teacher part of my work, I believe, is to offer possibilities for living. Before people can choose from the possibilities, they have to be able to see them or imagine them. I think it's important to increase my students' awareness towards language, its power to shape them, and their power to shape and use it. If that means that they then begin to choose differently from the expected choices and make decisions with more awareness, then such teaching is more than worthwhile.

If we remember that our language is always "half someone else's," if we acknowledge the various and diverse voices in our classrooms, then there is no telling the shape and colour of the words that will fly from our schools or the texture of the world they will create.

24.

Outside the rain has stopped; the sky has cleared. The sun of May has arrived. For the moment, the writing ceases, listening to the silence.

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