

## Introduction

I have written this thesis in a way that opens up, rather than covers over, questions of knowledge production, bringing my own embodied knowledge *visibly* to bear on the consideration of alternative understandings and practices in the social construction of meaning, and inviting other subjects into this process.

The emphasis on intersubjectivity arises from the belief that it is through engagement with other(s), subject to subject, that in fact we experience the profoundest sense of self. The difficulty for a woman in this respect may be that she either experiences *too* much sense of the other, as overwhelmingly alien, separate and powerful or has difficulty distinguishing between self and other. I am indebted to those women who have in one way or another participated in negotiating, constructing, speaking alternative possibilities of relationship. This document can only represent a small part of a process I have found to be enormously rewarding and enabling.

In Chapter One I bring forward autobiographical material to sound the usefulness of various theories concerned with the production of voice. Placing myself self consciously in the process of writing 'thesis' I consider first the desire, the drive to create and its powerful appearance in the form of images. Here, my experiences as an artist weaver, producing images, objects and a possible identity, offer the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between different productions and to locate that which extends or constrains my own capacity for production.

Informed by feminist theorising with a strong emphasis on poststructuralism and the work of Kristeva and Irigaray I make connections between personal experiences of "splitting" and the problematics raised by rethinking a female self in relation to language and "other". Notions of babble provide a way in the difficult terrain of "difference" and at the same time I make the link between differently sexed bodies and language.

In Chapter Two I draw on my experiences of migraine to raise questions about what possible relationships there can be between body and language. I consider what is involved in speaking the body "like the boys", what difficulties arise and what alternative strategies might enable me to negotiate those difficulties. I ask not only what role the physical body might have in the production of language, but also how concepts of body might themselves be problematised in the process, and in referring to my own experiences of migraine and to accounts of those of the medieval mystic and writer Hildegard of Bingen I suggest that we think and speak with our (differently sexed) bodies as much as our minds.

Chapter three describes the project of entering into conversation with two groups of women. I introduce a number of the women who participated and talk about our various difficulties with each other, a certain mutual suspicion, as well as our pleasures and productions. My remembered experiences of our first approaches and meetings helps to clarify many issues for me. The desire to locate and name the strangeness within the familiar re focuses on the impossibility of constructing a different relationship between self and other without radical changes to the self. I begin to understand the need to locate and own that which is both personally and culturally repressed in the production of speaking subjects.

I begin to analyse the data in Chapter Four, relating my own previously unacknowledged relations with m/other and my specific mother to the women's presentation of themselves as mothers, and to circulating discourses of Mother where women themselves are absented. I refer to theories of embodiment which deal with notions of absence and how everyday experience of bodily phenomena can lend itself to misinterpretation by dualistic thinking. How do women speak themselves, I ask, in the face of these absences? Locating the way women draw the normally absent material body back into consideration, and sites where agency and desire are strongly spoken, it becomes clear that the women in these conversations make highly productive use of a space between mothers and children and children and mothers.

Chapter Five draws on Winnicott's child developmental theory and feminist readings of it as I explore both the spaces of mothers and children and that of our conversation itself as a space of play. In such spaces meanings can be re negotiated and I ask how the women define, shape and change the limitations of their options. I explore the use of paradox and contradiction and a striking use of the abject, aspects of our bodily flows and products that although normally understood as invoking disgust, here are put to work in critical reworkings of the self. From this space arises questions not only about different notions of mothering, but about the means of transmission, or otherwise, of notions of mothering, of identification between mother and daughter, of femininity and female desire.

In naming the space of production in this way, as a space-between that refuses dichotomous categorisation, other questions arise about the transformation of categories. In the concluding Chapter Six I gather up the experiences of the research that will be useful in further shaping and addressing these questions.

## Feeling for a voice? Voiced with feeling?

I try to imagine the sky with all its constellations, the Dog, the Bear, the Dragon and so on, as an extension of myself, as part of my further being. But my knowing that it is sky, that the stars have names and a history, prevents my being the sky. It rains and I say, *it rains*. It thunders and I say, *it thunders*. The Child is otherwise. I try to think as he must: *I am raining, I am thundering*, and am immediately struck with panic, as if, in losing hold of my separate and individual soul, in shaking off the last of it from the tip of my little finger, I might find myself lost out there in the multiplicity of things, and never get back (Malouf, 1978, 96).

This "thing", this thesis confronts me, or at least a certain material absence of it does. I could go on reading, and thinking and dreaming and imagining, and understanding and trying to understand how I understand, but infinite regression drives one mad. In the hall of mirrors panic sets in. A movement is required, an act of will. Time to leap off the roundabout. Time to move myself.

I put the thing, or rather, things, up on my study wall. All the bits that somehow mattered during the last eighteen months. Somewhere between mattering and pleasure, I cannot help myself embellishing, with the odd silk scrap, the assembly—blueprint images of my mother, a small cardboard coat-shape, photographs, plastic folders with mini-texts, a paper weaving denoting the importance of a play, *Woven Hell*, scribbles and stark words and careful lists. As I mark and name these things - flagpins on a map - I feel the connections taking form and find some tightly twisted black silk thread to track them. These threads are soon criss-crossed, all the time adding their own thickness yet not accounting for an overwhelming overlapping, and I am torn impatiently between the excitement of this sense of depth and emerging pattern and the desire to chase fragments of meaning that seem to break loose from the taut lines as images begin to form, dissolve and reform. Now I am sliding off the wall and into a box. A box with lid, a covered box - face blueprinted on lid, body on box and inside, insides? Images need printing, painting, stitching. I am sliding off the wall into an exhibition of woman's work - in a shopping mall, community hall? A running background of conversations reel to reel? I am sliding off the wall.

And speaking the experience of these images to others as possible production, planning what might be made and how and when, I feel empowered, clearer, excited, somehow

credible. I have been struggling with student/'theorist' of late and how different it feels to say I am, have been at least from time to time, also artist. In another city, at another conference I am the most comfortable I have ever been and it is in this voice, with some slight consciousness, I make new relationships, new connections with possible futures - but most noticeably feel the shifts, the elaboration and layering of existing ones. Within the web of space and food and talk I am aware of defining myself in relation to other with much less self doubt than usual, and how productive this seems to be. Barbara shares some of her writing and a text on women's mythmaking in art and poetry. Susan lends me *Hildegard of Bingen*, and, before I leave, Barbara offers, as a treasure, a book of paintings she is sure I will love. I take these back, these cocoons, to the country, trailing silk threads.

*Unexpected Journeys. The Art and life of Remedios Varo.*

*It is just as Barbara thought. The pleasure starts immediately I pick up this book. Outside, on the cover, in dreamlike surreal imagery a determined female figure travels on lapping waves through a flooded wood. Her strange yet comfortable vessel seems to be a cross between a waistcoat and a womb - a container for her and yet an extension of her? Her bowler hat becomes the back of the waistcoat/coracle and while she is secured by cords it these same cords she uses to direct her vessel, with its bustle - like rudder, lapel sails and a pair of mechanical wings overhead. Ahead appears what might be a destination. A small table is set in a hollowed tree. From the table a goblet spouts clear fluid into the river. The colours are rich and warm, medieval; the forms magical, mystical. Inside, in visual narratives of metamorphosis and quest, among landscapes ripe with natural and supernatural, the same heroine moves to unsettle boundaries of inside and out.*

So much to savour. I ought to be doing something much more thesis, but there is an underlying excitement in the resonances of these rich images. I am reminded of Virginia Woolf's self as a sealed vessel afloat the sea of reality, with critical moments of leaking and seeping and flooding as memory defies the sealing matter. I think of her struggle to speak a *self deflected* in contradiction of the rational unitary being and I wonder what it is I have immersed myself in at the beginning of writing?

There is a heady mix of colour, shape and sound, both material and imagined. Varo paints music of the world on shafts of sunlight, and in her world, "the properties of the organic and the inorganic, the animal and the vegetable, the natural and the technological overlap and merge. It is peopled by owl - artists, insect geologists, crazed botanists, and magical astronomers, who overturn our arbitrary assumptions about how things ought to work" (Kaplan, 1988, 7). On compact disc the glorious sounds of Hildegard's music, a chance, borrowed background to the reading of a life eight hundred

and fifty years ago. Sabina Flanagan's *Hildegard of Bingen. A Visionary Life* is the study of an extraordinary woman of the Middle Ages - a visionary, mystic, poet, musician, naturalist, healer and theologian. Medieval metamorphosis, female mystics speaking their dreams, their bodies, their experiences as such sites of transformation. Their voices are ecstatic - speak out, stand out, go out into the world, and inevitably invite me to examine my own capacity for production. In speaking my story of images and art to others there is no doubt I was, and am empowered. I was heard and heard my story spoken back to me. Incorporating myself in a discourse of art I re/member myself as an artist I only half believed but hoped to be. In what way can this narrative of "artist" lend me a writing voice?

The work space and the space of creation is where she confronts and leaves off at the same time a world of named nooks and corners, of street signs and traffic regulations, of beaten paths and multiple masks, of constant intermeshing with other bodies'—that are also her own—needs, assumptions, prejudices and limits (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1991, 26).

### **Portrait of the Artist**

Telling one's story gives meaning to the past from the point of view of the present and future, and "deeply gives meaning to the past in order to give meaning to the present life of the person" (Bertaux-Wiame, in Richardson, 1990, 126).

### **Worms and Fairies**

Laid out on the edge of the Glasgow Herald to be counted, like so many snipped white threads - just a little wriggle and then nearly impossible to see. I always knew there was something better about the Herald. "A 'quality' paper, Dad said.

It was on the edges, the margins that I learned about life. My mysterious, invisible life - giving inner self, as well as worms. Mum told the story in little diagrams in the space between the print. Later I knew she knew because she was a nurse. Then, she was my mum and she could draw. She was an artist. It was one of the nicest moments of togetherness I can remember with her. The best bit, the best bit was turning those delicate drawings into fantastic fairies. Ovaries and uterus, for that must have been what they were, became swans and ballerinas and fairies with gauzy wings. People might not quite understand, she said, if we leave them as they are, lets turn them into something else. And I was allowed to choose, to help.

And my womb, well it was neither here nor there after two children, and when it had to go, it didn't bother me a bit. They described it to me afterwards, as if they were afraid

my nonchalance was feigned and I would grieve for it after all. It really had to go, you know. Not only retroverted but doubled up, folded in half, and twice its normal size. I try to picture it now, but it won't fix, won't gel. No matter. I could draw you a fairy though. Didn't you ever lie in bed, getting better, with all ten volumes of Arthur Mee's encyclopaedia for children? Fairies who guide you over piano keys and black and white pictures with captions like - THIS PICTURE SHOWS EXACTLY WHAT THE FISH SEES AS IT LOOKS UP. Sometimes even now I give talks like "Wool, the magic fibre".

It was probably after this time my brother starting experimenting with our bottoms. I wanted to look for worms.

## Lesson 2

It was my mother's idea I should make a portfolio. It made it real, proper. Real artists had portfolios, she said. It was just the place for keeping things like the Christmas wrapping paper that got ten out of ten, top of the class. Little drawings where I practised copying my mother, with one of her quick and easy sketches alongside. Years later the sketch of my baby sister, entangled with her "softly shunk", causes a small pain for my own, grown, child. His comfort blanket had been the Shetland shawl ordered for my sister's christening, finally arriving years after the event, so that it was still there intact, unused when he came along. When the web of wedding ring fine warmth was reduced to the grubby little string of hardened knots, like a thread of popping seaweed, he moved into my angora cardigan. On his last brief visit, home from university, I found him so mellowed, fuzzy, delectable, I wanted to spin him.

So we drew together, painted together sometimes, perhaps on a Saturday in the summer. Our library lent reproduction paintings but *National Geographic* was our greatest resource. My folder still has a carefully rendered copy of a young female Asian face and each time I drive down onto the Liverpool plains, their extraordinary flatness, their textured grid of cultivated pattern, I see my mother's paintings, paddy fields, the watercolour blue and grey of mountains, the same clouds, the same quality of light, and just a hint of lavender drying in the linen cupboard.

There were stories too from my mother's Quaker country - how she had won a scholarship to a prestigious art college in London and was not allowed to go. As the eldest of three girls it wouldn't have been fair to the others. They couldn't afford all to go, so none would, Grandfather had said.

For my birthday once my mother took me to Glasgow, a visit to the Art College, the Design Centre, the Gallery perhaps? Some places were shut, and there was an effort required to make the day go well, some strain upon us both, but we looked through windows when we couldn't go in and had birthday tea in a cafe. We had my mother's

favourite, cod's roe on toast. Go on, you'll love it, she had said. And though I tried I could not overcome my disgust.

In the end there was another message, or something shifted, hardened, some stifling, some putting away of all that and I didn't go to art college after all. There were long talks about repaying educational debts to society and how art wouldn't do. Or perhaps already there was a sense of loss, of having missed some vital point, by the time I had to decide. The portfolio that would be required for entrance consideration needed some other art, something (conceptual?) I couldn't quite grasp, beyond the shapes and forms I had come to know and trust - zygocactus and monstera deliciosa, (warm hours alone in the municipal greenhouse on Wednesday afternoons).

Years later I tried the stuff again, after a taste of caviare, but there seemed something treacherous, something unforgivable in bringing the fork down upon that neat fillet of countless un-lived fish lives. A momentary guilt mashed quickly out of recognition, but still I could not eat.

### **French and English**

There was only one bookcase in the house, four small shelves, although we used the town library all the time. There used to be more books, would have been, my father said, if it hadn't been for you kids, destroying everything. It's true some had the odd scribble.

I found a notebook once. It seemed to have been forgotten and wasn't hard to take into my possession. On the inside cover it had my father's signature in elegant copperplate and contained a number of pasted newspaper clippings, articles and a few short stories, one or two poems, a letter. It started with a piece on "Keeping Terrapins ", much the most interesting of the articles, and though there were some funny little anecdotes, I liked the moving ones best, when my father was getting ready, training, to go to war. (There was a little bit the newspaper had printed at the top of my favourite story, how good it was to hear from our young men and underneath he had written, very neatly, the date and the name of his barracks).

I always cried when I came to the bit where the soldier gently held the dead body of the little mouse that had been his friend. I tried it out in English first, with a few changes, because it was *such* a good story, and although the English teacher was a bit suspicious I brazened it out, convincing myself it was alright because I loved it, and somehow it ought to be respoken. French was a bit harder, with all that stuff about the cupboard and everything, and I couldn't be sure it would come out the same, but it was ok, really, and nothing happened. Except after a while I couldn't read the notebook anymore and it became something of a burden, a worry that by some obscure chance someone might

come across it and find me out, and it had to be put away, forgotten. Until it turned up in surprise, and with such rawness one day, I destroyed it.

**Crapponne-sur-Arzonne 1972/Tissage**

My mother has been dead for one year.

I have been married for one year.

I have just completed my English degree.

I have come here to weave. Un stage de tissage a la main.

Each morning the class, all adults, help each other to take the looms outside. We sleep and eat in the big barn, wash next door in the cow trough, weave outside in the sun.

Each night we pick up stray threads under our teacher's sharp eye, and wood grown mushrooms for an evening meal. I struggle with French and inside. There are feelings I can't quite explain. I came to Alice's school, but mysteriously it is her husband who teaches, who tells us all to sit up straight at dinner while the family's young children are nonchalantly smoking, who throws his cigarettes wrappers out of the car window. And when at night his littlest child creeps in beside me and asks "have you got a baby in your tummy?" I am tired and have trouble finding the right words, even though it should be simple to say no.

The experience of (re)narrativizing - like the experience of biographical time itself - is open-ended and polysemous, allowing different meanings and systems of meanings to emerge (Richardson, 1990, 126).

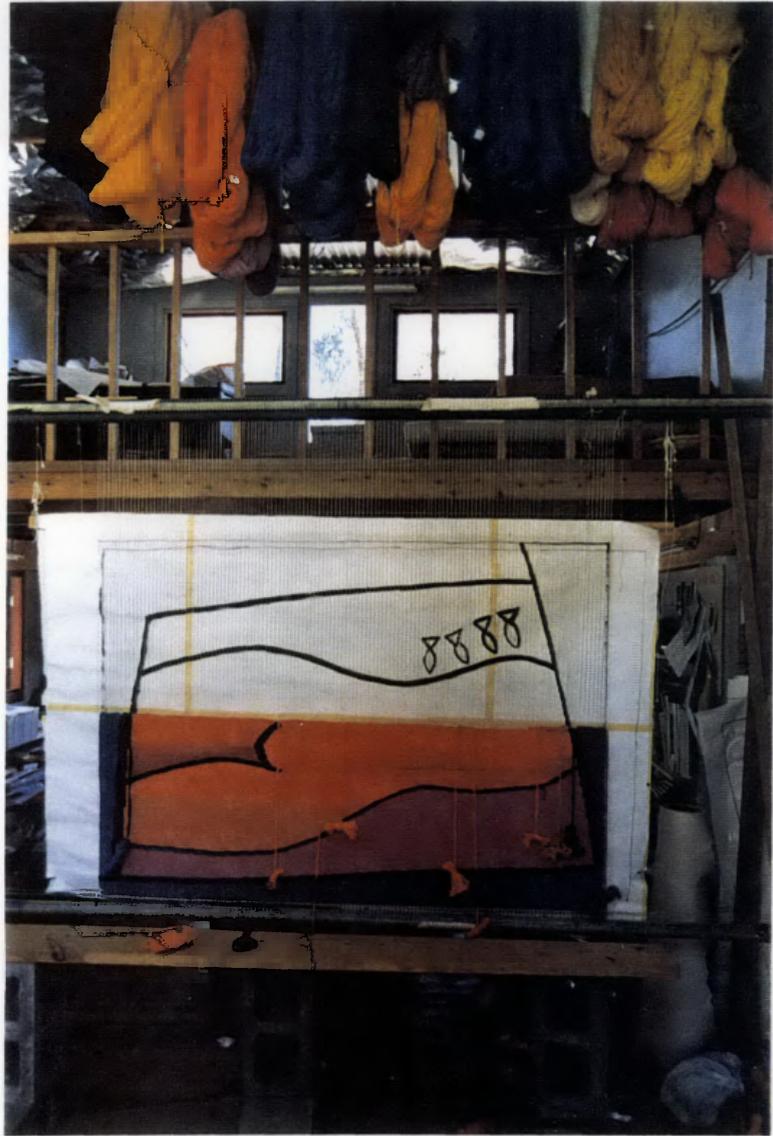
As soon as I move to substantiate my 'identity' as artist, to her/story "Laura as artist", I am immediately confronted with not one, but many selves. Not only do I have to clear away (somewhat reluctantly) the caterer, the teacher, the pig farmer, to reach a past in which I can confirm/construct anew that artist, but even that identity refuses to coalesce. It is fraught with contradictions, will not rest itself in any one temporal location, and most critically finds itself engaged with oppositions, not only between father/ mother, words and images, but unnamed tensions internal to those categories. Works I have produced, or sought to bring into being, now seem to resonate themselves with such tensions which, prior to returning to university and a Women's Studies course in 1991, and at a time when I was thinking of becoming a full time fibre artist, I could only understand in very limited terms of personal success or failure. Now their meanings multiply in all directions. They, also, become the topic of a conversation between past selves and more recent selves; a self informed by feminists theories, theories of representation, and perhaps can now be asked to speak again, differently.

### *Bliss*

A series of tapestry woven rugs called *Bliss* is central. This series evolved around a simple female form, speaking an emergent sexuality, pleasure and desire, in response to the powerful images and impact of Peter Carey's book, and film of the book, by the same name. It seems clear to me now how much that weaving was about my own desire, but at the time I could not name it, or own it. I could only speak of the adventure of a different scale, a boldness of colour and form I had never before attempted, and an insistence that these were not intended to be set apart on a wall, but to be fully engaged with, walked, sat upon.

*I remember now how it was, how tentatively I set off. A huge act of faith, this curving voluptuous form framed with her three fishes. Starting with a certain coolness, she seems a little stiff at first, embedded in her rug - but edged here and there with warmer yellow and orange, and creeping slowly from rug to rug, a pink blush begins to appear and streak the skin as the form moves, softens, rolls, warmer and warmer. And weaving, weaving, weaving through the nights, the cool nights, through the hot summer days. She moves again and the colours are hot and strong, red and black and purple. But I want, I want - this dyeing has become so critical. I know exactly what it must be for this last, although I cannot speak it all - the bloom, exactly the bloom of perfect berry fruit, perfectly ripe raspberry. And still there should be something else. Against the contour of her hip I take, for me, extraordinary risks. No time to undo this choice of colour, no going back, I trace the surface of her skin with the thinnest of electric lines.*

Completed, brought to fruition, successfully presented in a major exhibition, the *Bliss* tapestries were the means of my entering the public world in a fuller sense than ever before. Their materialisation continues to be a source of satisfaction, of energy and empowerment and yet they also make palpable by contrast a number of unresolved, unfronted questions about public voice, about ways some voices are legitimised and others excluded, and about the ways those cultural hegemonies are both internalised and resisted.



The *Bliss* series in progress

I had hoped to complete, for the same exhibition, a work I called *The Magician's Tent*, which had been in my mind for some time and seemed to arise from my experience of oscillation between words and weaving.

*I imagine a large tent-like structure, probably of medieval style and scale, certainly big enough to walk and sit in. But first you have to enter. The outer layer (it has many layers) is of a gauze material, marked only by a sprigged design, lets say a fleur-dy-lys, familiar and small enough to pass over, to take for granted. Each subsequent layer a new surface, silk or satin, fine lawn, soft, crisp, rustling, requires some interaction on your part. You may have to untie ties, fine rouleau ribbons, unbutton tiny buttons, but gently, you cannot force your way in without damage. And then you are inside - a room, a space, a ceiling printed with sun and moon and stars, a room full of words, heaped/overflowing, but not whole words, letters, every colour, shape, size and texture, stuffed and stitched and carved and cut out, letters big small soft and hard, embroidered. You may stay as long as you like. You may touch; you may play; you may write and read. As you leave the tent you realise the motifs are tiny printed texts.*

There is some hope inherent in this work that I might begin to understand and undo these perennial oppositions between words and images, words and colour, texture, inside and outside, language and embodied desire - but it remains barely begun. Perhaps it is significant that the letter/words are bagged up, stored and waiting some new momentum, a commitment to the much larger and challenging construction. However, I start another project for a smaller exhibition space. This time a collection of painted floor cloths.

The existence of such domestic objects which blurred the boundaries between art and craft, between paint and textile, between that which is revered and that which is trivialised, was enormously appealing. Discovering that these floor coverings were prized by the early colonists and originated in my homeland, in a location so very familiar and 'knowable' to me, seemed to offer further, if illogical, support to an enterprise that for me was decidedly risky, since I had no formal training in paint. Perhaps it is not surprising that the first of these pieces, *Sir Gawain*, can be read as a struggle to articulate and engage with questions of authority, my relationship to the male "canon", in both literature and art.

### *Sir Gawain*

It is 1988 and there is a national appeal for a plethora of cultural/artistic expressions as part of the Bicentennial celebrations Australia wide. I cannot resist taking up the resonances of the green and gold official theme, which so reminds me of my old undergraduate hero, medieval knight of Arthur's court, Sir Gawain. As for any good

soul searching for the Holy Grail he endured many tests- something sexy, something scary, something about to happen, which was always prefigured in the text by the appearance of green and gold. It started as a whimsical idea, a chance connection, but once made it became demanding, a need to have him here with me. I ought to be able to bring him to Australia, I thought, something of my past, a hero from the homeland, into the present, this adopted country.

It proves very difficult to bring Sir Gawain. He does not like it, will not be set down among the bleached gums and dry grass. I look out from my workshop (I have built it with many windows) and frame the view. I try to visualise what it is he sees. What might the view of my paddocks look like, I wonder, through the windows of an Italian villa, a Spanish casa? I end up, after all, with Ned Kelly, becoming medieval knight. And that Gawain didn't work - I take to be a lack, a failing on my artistic part. Good idea, inspired, but I can't execute it, and this other does not seem to be what I meant at all.

### *Songlines*

*Running upstairs again and again so I can look down on this piece from the balcony, paradoxically trying to find a perspective, a distance from which I can critically view it, when I am not at all sure what it is I address. Only layering the paint - thin, thin -trying for translucency and depths that have no hierarchy, and shapes that overflow the border in deliberate defiance of containment.*

Bruce Chatwin wrote in *The Songlines* of entirely other ways of knowing and communicating, of a network of songs and pathways all over Australia, which account for and at the same time create the very land, its topography, its features and inhabitants. In a period of convalescence, I had been reading novels voraciously and whether it was Salman Rushdie's *India on the eve of independence* with its telepathic narrators of fantasy, myth, religion and politics<sup>1</sup>, or tales of astral travelling, I felt I had stumbled across a phenomenal interest in a different potential of being, temporally and spatially. With no other words, and no conscious framework of personal belonging I attempted to touch this sense of connection and palimpsest, of layers in time and space.

And in the others? I remember a kind of defiance and adrenalin thrill. I took cloth that I simply loved. I loved its sheen, its almost plasticised surface, smooth and highly polished. Polished cotton - the thread, the weave and the act of polishing- such a thing to do to cloth! And the colours - dark, exciting, lush, exotic, nothing simple - unnamed unspeakable mixtures and combinations.

I cut the cloth into strips, intuitively, and reweave them back together as samples for the larger pieces. How outrageous! I am a weaver who dares to pick up paint who knows

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<sup>1</sup>*Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie.

nothing about paint, yet I want to participate, to partake of these unnamable colours beyond my knowledge. I don't want to 'copy', I want to risk being a complete stranger here. So I re weave the strips together to form a new whole and welcome the pleasure/danger of whatever arrangement, whatever colour; relying on my own *sense*, my own pleasure. I make small six inch woven squares. I note the juxtapositions, the intersections - the cutting and remaking of shapes, splotches, slashes, swellings, and thus make my way into a new relationship with the work - whatever combination arises I will trust/risk. Playing and guessing, mixing by trial and error, I arrive at the colours denoted, and as I transfer the small plans to metres of stretched and gessoed canvases, a conversation begins - an addition, a subtraction, a compromise here and there, an inspired new shape or colour.

I called these pieces "Parrots".

There's always, somewhere, a patch of shifty precious ground, a secret one knows of oneself, which stays secret, as a flame or a cry, a fragment of tenacious 'want', to make of something something else - a venue for an erotic pleasure, realizable in imagination, or in the act of production, or in the realm of the physical body, the site of an ongoing repetitious rise and fall of energy, sensual, erotic, and pornographic. The body stretched deliciously (Walker, 1992, ii).

And I am sliding, slipping, tumbling into a tape, a transcript, a room full of chattering women, an outline for a chapter? I am whirling around in the thesis. (A friend said to me yesterday, excitedly, I feel like I'm in a washing machine cycle - please don't let it go into spin.)

When Malouf's exiled Ovid in "An Imaginary Life" recognises his alienation both from the world and from his native Latin /the symbolic he seeks a language that he believes will reconcile him with the universe, a language from childhood and the "edges of memory". His journey towards that elusive self and language is however a journey toward death, and it is only in death that Malouf allows a full reconciliation.

I recognise my own sense of exclusion, division, frustration, and a desire for reconciliation - for even as I tell it I am seeing the Magician's tent again, waiting, wanting to be done. Somewhere between being lost in the immediacy and multiplicity of things and a language of constraint I struggle to speak, but paradoxically to speak of the movement between, a desire for a coming and going with no fear, no closures, not death but life.

## PARROTS

I am never quite alone as I write this. Throughout the day I register the presence of resident King Parrots. They have a shrill *wheep wheep* at this time of year while they are feeding young (the field guide says the male gives a far carrying piping whistle) and no matter how often they call my consciousness is not closed to them. They seem to be quite unperturbed by human presence and so they have been delightfully accomodating in my birdwatching efforts. They feed messily in silver wattles above my head and their complex mumbling murmur and chatter was what engaged me when I first came here. Visually they are stunning, large parrots of brilliant solid scarlet and green, living in small flocks; a flurry, a streak of colour through the trees, a breathtaking intensity face to face, should we come upon each other by surprise.

My intense pleasure in their sound and image (for each evokes the other) is tinged somewhat with guilt. A guilt I have difficulty in expressing. It feels even a little like shame, and then again hurt, exclusion? As I sat weaving my Bliss rugs and pondering Sir Gawain in Australia I was re/minded, made aware of how little I knew about the other beings with whom I share this piece of land. The more focussed in my solitary occupation, the more conscious of a myriad of life forms buzzing at my head, nesting, mudding up the cracks and crevices of my looms, scuttling between baskets and boxes, chattering and calling at the door. My recent engagement with feminist theorising brings my relationship to place, this very specific locale, into critical relief. I track my foreignness and a deep seated desire to belong at some primary level. I become aware of the intersections of class, race and colonising in the construction of the desire and the possibilities of "owning a bit of dirt" in two such different contexts as Australia and Scotland. Most difficult here, now, I experience the politicising of naming and knowing and speaking.

*King Parrot - Alisterus scapularis, family Psittacidae.* A momentary idea that I might somehow be able to know, to learn to know and belong simply through my intellectual efforts with the categories of my field guide is soon displaced. This kind of authoratitive specialised knowing seems more to do with separation than connection, more likely to render me unknowing, inadequate, unless I take great care. I think of Eliot's Magi, between an old knowing and a new one not yet fully discerned. I can no longer take for granted, as transparent, unproblematic the words with which to speak my experience and I sometimes wonder not only how I might now speak of and to others, but how I can speak at all.

As for King parrots, both words and feelings are already imbricated, interleaved with green and scarlet feathers, and a soft gentle babble in the trees.

you may or may not understand my dialect  
 i may or may not understand yours  
 in this, at the very least, we admit  
 how little understanding has been exchanged  
 when difference is denied  
 by the illusion  
 of a shared language

in naming our selves  
 we finally accept  
 our babbles' necessity  
 (Warland, 1990, 33)

In the early days of this thesis, having been asked to show work-in-progress, I produce a poster paper which tracks my experiences thus far, including my engagement with poststructuralist theories and my attempts to identify points of tension or disjuncture, points which might perhaps be useful in constructing a speaking site. My text literally spirals around a personal experience which inspired my research project and I include a version of my paper as a Möbius loop<sup>2</sup>, complete with printed textile images, inter-textual references and quotes, and I invite readers to engage not only by reading at a distance but by handling and turning the texts.

Wanting to speak is important, but why do you speak in poststructuralist parrot speech? What is liberating about a perspective which is fundamentally idealist? Where is the potential for change? First we have to change the way we think about ourselves? Why do I feel you are being self indulgent? (Rachel Sharp, May, 1992).

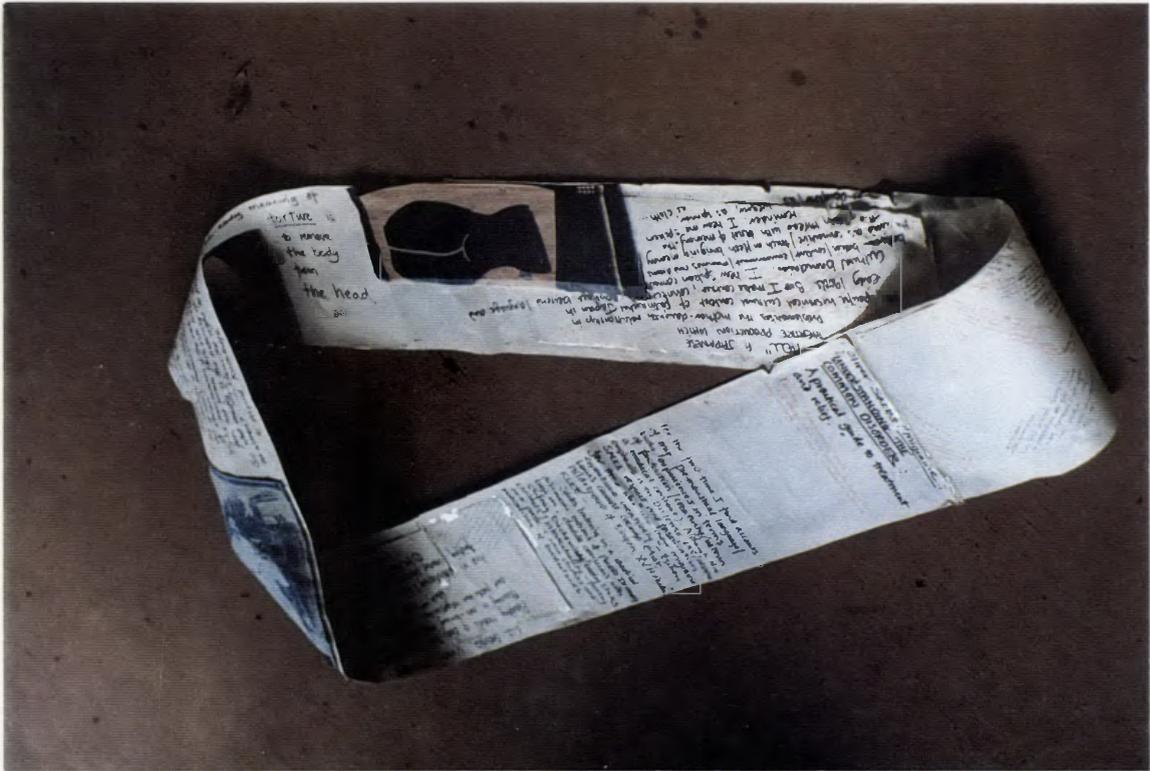
The pleasure/danger of actually constructing the posters in that manner very much mirrored the intensity of the lived experience of the many other contexts of the research—pleasure, a sense of empowerment and excitement in taking responsibility for my own being and ways of knowing, anticipated excitement in examining how this might fit, or not, with other women's knowledges in their daily lives, as well as with broader feminist theoretical and political frameworks, and of course the challenge of speaking this in the public/academic world.

Elsbeth Probyn has spoken of a "double articulation of the self":

on the one hand, to speak of and to one's self thereby transforming the self;  
 and on the other, to put forward voices and selves in relation to a theoretical  
 and actual horizon, thereby transforming the practices which constrict selves  
 as well as the horizon itself (Probyn, 1993, 133).

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<sup>2</sup>I first became aware of this concept when Elizabeth Grosz, wanting to explore models by which we might understand the body "as a kind of cultural artifact", "no longer ahistorical, simply biologically given", introduced it in a paper at the Body Politics Conference, Sydney University, June, 1991. I refer to it in more detail in chapter 2.



The Möbius Loop Paper

And much of French Feminism, (by no means a cohesive, unified body of work), has addressed not only the relations between language and subjectivity but a "deeper analysis of the interrelation between language - conceived as phallogentric, and sexually specific types of specificity" (Grosz, 1989). Such questions are raised around different subjectivities and differently sexed bodies and language that it seems no longer possible to change the way we think about ourselves without critical attention to representation, as well as bodies and the concept of difference itself.

Terms such as mimicry, repetition and "doublings", babble, become increasingly invested with competing meanings as we struggle with, in Trinh Minh-Ha's words, "the complexity inherent in any speech act" (1991, 11). The attempts to unsettle old paradigms are described as displacements which

involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities, of pleasures, of intensities, of relationships, which also implies the continuous renewal of a critical work that looks carefully and intensively at the very system of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1991, 19).

Some claim this implicit critical work as overt and confident strategy.

Aesthetic strategies of rehearsal, quotation, and masquerade have been a characteristic feminist response to the objectifying representations of femininity in mass culture and high art. This work of double deconstruction, common to some feminist and post-colonial discourses, plays a tricky game of mimesis and disruption, unsettling and displacing the familiar. In feminist hands the old images of sexual and social identity do not resemble themselves any more (Moore, 1994, 7).

But Paul Carter reminds us, through his attention to the "verbal gestures of first contact, the stumbling mimicry of the other person's speech" (Carter, 1992, 12), that our sounds begin in dialogue, not monologue. "They signify people orienting themselves towards each other" (14)

in the mere mimetic exchange of sounds which precedes trading in metaphors, swapping unlike for unlike, we are looking to give our own movements human rhythm and reference (Carter, 1992, 12).

Mimicking or "parroting", echoing anything that might, by chance, have meaning—a syllable, a phonological unit that is seized, guessed at for some remote echoing connection with our own tongue—produces "sound in-between", what I might call babble.

Such a sound is not then simply a performative strategy. The mimicry it employs is not meant to parody communication, to undermine assertions of authority. It is a historical device for keeping the future open, for delineating a space where, in future, misapprehensions and differences can begin to form the basis of a new cross-cultural *argot*, one based on the incremental convergence of sounds and gestures (Carter, 1992, 12-13).

It has been my project to bring different of my selves into conversation with groups of other women and I think of our ensuing babble, our talk, as analogous to Carter's "sounds in-between". Like these "units of meeting" it often "occupies the borderline between what can be said and what can only be acted out" (Carter, 1992, 16) and of course is not one discrete unit, but a series of 'first' meetings—where bodily feelings/senses/ emotions/images meet words, conversations are taped, tapes are transcribed, and transcripts enter into dialogue with other narratives, theories and a thesis text - all within a web of contested power relations. And what I would like to focus on are the spaces and moments when there seem to be no apparent referents, nothing "self evident", except perhaps a kind of wonder at the strangeness between this self and other, and the anticipation of some possible mutual negotiation for the grounds of future recognition.

To write is impossible (it sometimes appears). One may only read—that is hear, register, interpret. The production of more (of that kind of thing, words) is made into a municipal version of the larger, world-encompassing activity, understanding voices of others, of self, of the others in the self, that is, of living inside the social and psychic conditions of dialogue (DuPlessis, 1990, 117).

I remind myself too about pleasure, a pleasure that resists notions of self indulgence, a pleasure of an autonomous female experience, a pleasure that is not entirely about the production of object but also about process.

Instead of seeking a meaning beyond, within or through the art work, to focus on its manner of material existence, the mode of materiality of the artifact, which implies, among other things, seeing a text or artwork, not as a means subordinated to some end (political, aesthetic, representational, meaningful etc) but as a process and a pleasure for itself, a pleasure not because of one's mastery of concepts through it but at its very materiality, textuality, specificity (Grosz, in Moore, 1994, 152).

## Voice and Body

Identity is a way of re- departing. Rather, the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals. Since identity can very well speak its plurality without suppressing its singularity, heterologies of knowledge give all practices of the self a festively vertiginous dimension (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1991, 14).

In a way one of my departure points was very much already a vertiginous space. The germ of this particular research relates to certain premenstrual /migraine experiences many years before I became involved with Women's Studies or Feminisms. My experience was profoundly exciting and creative and had to do with language and cognitive shifts at the premenstrual stage (often ending in a migraine.) Although I was intrigued by these cyclical events it was not until I was advised to have a hysterectomy that I appreciated how important they were to me, and fearing I would no longer be able to access this way of thinking and speaking, I sought an explanation of what was happening.

The sensation was that of an unstoppable flood of images, ideograms and speech, with a profound sense of interrelatedness, of fluid movement, between my physiological flesh and mental activities. Even though I could recognise myself as 'being in one of those "states" there was no thought of intervening in the momentum, which was spring-like, a compression sensed through every part of my body and then release of some accumulated and dizzying energy, expressing itself in cerebral activity that was extraordinarily productive, constructive, and connective. Especially in and during conversation, ideas multiplied endlessly and openly, networks of meaning forming within and amongst ideas, suggesting, almost simultaneously it seemed, possible overviews/positions/solutions to problems and further tangential notions. A whole network of ideas, theoretical and imagistic might be experienced as condensing into the first draft of an artwork, for example, whilst engaged in animated dialogue. Even my vocabulary changed, as if I had a different dictionary for this time, extended and instantly accessible. No struggling for words here, astounding myself with articulation that seemed, to me at least, clear but complex, imaginative and unproblematic. I considered the migraine which often concluded such states as a small, if painful, price for such an orgasmic experience.

An exploration of medical and scientific literature on menstruation, and specifically pre - menstrual syndrome provided me with a beginning understanding, not of my experiences, but of powerful discourses and practices which posit women as physically and emotionally handicapped by their reproductive system, indeed as reducible to their

pathologised anatomy. When I asked of the medical/scientific discourse what it could add to my understanding of my body/language experience, I found only lack or disfunction; illness, madness, disease. Within those discourses I found other underlying powerful discourses which support a mode of thinking—accounts of truth, knowledge, power and subjectivity—through which my experience is transformed beyond recognition or made to disappear.

Even referring to them now, thinking I ought to give an account of them here, brings me to a halt. Despair. Caught up in a logic of order and accountability which seems impossible to fulfil.

Susan Griffin has talked about the voice of despair as the voice of patriarchy and scientific doubt.

And at the same time I became aware that the whole impulse to science in western civilisation must have been born of doubt. Indeed, all the great questions of science (what is the nature of matter, what is the origin of life, what is the cause of all motion in the universe, what is light) all these began as religious questions, and remained essentially religious until the nineteenth century. So one doubts the feeling of presence, the feeling of unity with all beings, in oneself; one seeks instead of proof, 'scientific', quantifiable (Griffin, 1982, 231).

"When one writes *about* a phenomenon one's words begin to mimic that phenomenon, to become that which they describe" (Griffin, 1982, 232). Trinh Minh-Ha explains further that "'speaking about' only partakes in the conservation of systems of binary opposition (subject/object; I/ It; We/ They) on which territorialised knowledge depends" (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1991, 12).

If the body is such a territorialised site, how can it be spoken differently? From a feminist perspective there is little doubt as to the "extent to which a woman's sense of her own body and the location of a woman's body in the world, literally, geographically) are determinative for her understanding of life" (Newman, 1990, 20), yet this other kind of mimicry seems the most difficult to abandon in learning another way to speak.

Griffin believes "it is because women symbolize nature to a culture which denies natural power, that what we (women) have to say is feared" (1982, 186) and that from the Christian church's silencing of women to Hegel's view that we are "not fitted for science or 'certain forms of creativity', there are many symptoms of this deeper condition. I think what I would want to argue is that this very issue of a 'certain creativity' is at the root - is the unspeakable thing that one comes back to again and again, that still remains after all the deconstructions. Underneath patriarchal rationale, says Griffin, "is fear of the loss of control and fear of death".

*I want to explore and express a specific experience which involves an apparent relationship between my menstruating body, images and language.*

*I need to spit some things out I need to let go I need to stop censoring myself I need to cry I need to find pleasure in my body I am so afraid so unable to write so afraid of emptiness of imitation of parrot talk that signifies the nothingness of my speaking when I love parrots and don't want to contaminate their lovely babble with such thoughts and ANGER I am angry I am made angry by stupid stupid men and women doctors who silence me through other women. My anger at their superiority their lack of understanding their fear their lack of reaching out to other. I am angry at struggling to give some global or at least neat and tidy stories about global or at least orderly and rational ideas about global or at least phallogocentric lacks - bodies that aren't there, empty philosophies - words and words and words about things that I tell myself need to be said but which don't say quite what I want now although they have been invaluable before. Where am I in this what fears of being totally pedantic and self indulgent how they work on me how I allow them to work.*

Saturday night at a barbecue. Somehow talking about the Pope's influence with a male friend - a gentle man, I like him - and I am bringing in the recent case of infibulation of two little girls in Melbourne this week. What's infibulation? And I spell out the surgical removal of the labia, the clitoris, the sewing up of the mutilated vaginal opening so that only a small slit remains to perhaps allow the urinal flow and the menstrual blood to perhaps escape.

Oh, you mean female castration. I knew it as female castration.

Or female circumcision? How often have I heard it named as that? For the last few days I have allowed my anger to express itself in thinking through these male terms. Firstly, my anger that even though I can understand that there might be a momentary political advantage in using a male experience and a male term to engage the imagination and attention of some sensitive male to the situation and experience of mutilated females, I have to insist that it is unproductive in the end. That it probably doesn't engage imagination in a useful way, rather it provides a dead end. Male castration in this particular western society is an imaginary event largely? I could believe that most people's understanding of the event of castration has more to do with Freudian concepts, symbolic rather than any actual mutilation. Where are the actual mutilated men in this society? How many would think of something like Nazi experimentation in this instance? If the victim survived his un-anaesthetised butchering, do the repercussions echo the ongoing trauma of an infibulated, mutilated girl? I want those who use the term female castration or circumcision to stop and consider a reversal: instead of using a male image to describe a female experience, let's try to follow the female experience and

translate it into an imaginary male experience. Take a flaccid penis, preferably your own if you have one and pull back the foreskin. Now take a slice off the top of the glans. Imagine the equivalent amount of flesh that will be sliced off—think what is removed from the girl child and try to estimate an equivalent amount taken from the head of your penis. Now stitch up the foreskin, leaving only a small slit which might allow the exit of urine and ejaculate. Think about the consequence, what that penis feels like erect, flaccid. Think about its movements and possibilities. Think about penetrating with that stitched penis, think about ejaculating with it—three weeks later, three months later, three years later, thirteen years later? Think about the smell the infection the pus the blood the pain ripped flesh tearing stitches. What misrepresentation of Being is it when a menstruating body is no body at all has no voice no matter, when matter simply doesn't matter.

*I am afraid to come into my room and write because I insist on censoring on making right talk and right talk is not what I want to say - it excludes me yet again. And of course two girls in Melbourne hardly constitutes a widespread experience of female mutilation in this particular culture and what right have I to use this as a vehicle for my anger and what is going on when I set out to express an immensely pleasurable and creative experience that it should evoke such anger and talk of oppression, that is equally problematic in its representation. What's the difference between my act of imagination and those who speak of female castration?*

Wanting to tell and connect and see oneself among the many, and the many reflected in oneself. To commune with others in this truth telling. Hungering for an image of one's life that corresponds to what one feels.

Knowing that without this resonance a range of knowing and feeling seems to die, gets buried inside oneself, like an old grief, and tears away at one's insides, until all that is left is an old tired bitterness, and an unspoken complaint; *no one will hear, it is of no use* (Griffin, 1982, 189).

But if I can listen past this voice, inside is another voice - accused of laziness and childishness and too many emotions- who wants to speak, who is overflowing with language, and whose words, in some unpredictable ways, always afterwards, after they have been spoken, seem necessary to reason (Griffin, 1982, 234).

I am trying to feel my way towards this 'listening', 'reading' practice Griffin offers, drawing on the strength of her "spirit wanting to tell", struggling to acknowledge and allow my own "gestures of presence" (Carter, 1992,15). That denial of being as presence is exactly what I most resist and Griffin's notion of the sense of organic connection what excites me most. There is excitement when the scientific touches poetically, thrillingly close, in Sacks and Bucci, for example; when I find a wonderful

icon such as Hildegard; or Grosz attempting to refigure desire as product, not lack; desire as two surface coming into contact; touch as product, resonance—and how I would like to find the words to talk of sound as touch, reclaiming it from some metaphysical or mental realm which denies it's quality of contact striking stroking flesh, and what was I chanting in childhood of sticks and stones that break your bones, but words that never hurt you?

*All the discourses. I want to take little bits from each that somehow seem to matter and not get stuck with these homogenising accounts of the big picture the big picture doesn't work for me, the cracks and inconsistencies and snippets of hope here and there do. In order to talk about my experience I have to dart here and there and pull in bits and pieces and juxtapositions. It's the crumb of something from Sacks beside a glimmer of something from cognitive psychology and a bit of quantum theory; just little stitches and loops carried along the back of the work, colours carried over, dangling on bobbins, caught up here and there so that they are in the right place when I need them, when they interlock with another colour. I think about the risk of those last Bliss rugs, and want to be there.*

*I want to invoke the sense of Somer Brodrib, the hints and coming nearness of Sacks, the excitement of questions touched, brushed by, the lightest contact, but contact made, which sends off a frisson and electric charge. Merleau-Ponty, Bucci (how close she comes, how exciting the touch there - but not quite, and thinking now, how strange, that after all, the space itself, that charged "gap", is the exciting thing?).*

Griffin's talk (as the birds sing, sing sing and talk each day. I am amazed and moved at their immense range and piercingness of their song, it enters me and I think of those wheep-wheep calls of parrots, so insistent - *their* singing is not stopped) returns me to a renewed trust—"Synchronocities, the voice of trees, rivers, the wind, coincidental opening of books" (Griffin, 1982, 236). And I gather up some threads to take with me.

From DuPlessis,

Reading "it"—the unknown, the unconscious, the past, the language, woman—by the endless invention of "it".

It speaks. It writes and it listens. It is the sum total of all pronouns, it is the foreignness and sense of distance in all, between language and thing, between thought and rationale, it is the space, it speaks.

The space speaks, and some subtotal of that possible space is seeing (hearing) the speaking, can do and does a reading ( Duplessis, 1990, 116).

And from Griffin's *Notes on the Writing of Poetry*,

Thus changing the beat from the expected rhythm just slightly. So the music bends back on itself, letting you catch the ironies, making you listen hard (1982, 224).

(I think of folds pleats chiasma, herrison)

And the off beat like a second thought. The speaker interrupting herself. The image behind the image. Doors slightly askew, ajar. To be jarred. Did I hear that? What  
     did I  
     hear?

things and dreams. THOSE WERE REAL THINGS I DREAMED (225).

Poetics? What is that?

This *thing* frees me

This is the essential act of art. The beauty, for me, this ritual through which my feelings become real (226).

## **Borderlands: Body and Language**

Writing meant learning not to spend; it meant erasing as I went along all that had been inscribed on the slate; a sharpened memory would compensate for the loss of signs. My body, at the time, was losing nothing yet, my periods would come much later, yet everything was preparing me for it. Learning to exchange blood, milk, tears in the loss of the body, learning to flow, and remembering the traces on the day when they had been erased. For me words have always flowed as freely as the signs on the writing slate. I did not learn about the powers or the rights associated with them. Copyrights, rights of survival or immortality, the power of what is written down and remains, the obsessions with translations or with death, I, a woman, don't understand much about all this. I have learned to efface myself a thousand times and each time I return triumphant with pleasure. For me death is daily and monthly, it comes and goes. It doesn't mean ONE unique death to be feared; ever since I started to exist I have been dissolving into all that disappears and comes to life again (Madeleine Gagnon, 1981, 179-80).

### **Migraine**

Vicki Kirby, in a paper given at Sydney University, June 9, 1991, alerted her listeners to the potentially profound displacements of dualistic thinking that can occur when the borders between nature and culture cannot be readily determined.

Her examples were the religious devotee who pierces parts of his body with metal spikes in the Hindu festival of Thaipusam and fails to demonstrate any bleeding, scarring or trace of the perforations, and the hysteric patients of Charcot who under hypnosis cause bleeding words to appear on their flesh. Oliver Sacks, in a now almost canonical text, attempts to address such mysteries in a much more common, and for me, familiar, context of migraine.

the aura of migraine: here inside us, is a veritable Africa of prodigies: here by experience, exploration and reflection, we can chart a whole world - the cosmography of oneself (Sacks, 1985, 55).

Sacks admits his initial interest in migraine was entirely neurologically focussed, but that the complexity and ambiguity he uncovered in his studies caused him to radically rethink his approach. Although still very much contained within dominant medical discourse, he struggles to understand the way in which migraine, although physiological, is not *just* a physiological event.

Compact and clearly defined at its center, migraine diffuses outward until it merges with an immense surrounding field of allied phenomena. The only boundaries that exist are those which we are forced to adopt for nosological clarity and clinical action. We construct such boundaries and limits, for there are none in the subject itself (Sacks, 1985, 53).

I believe that migraine's dramatic landscape offers a space in which to begin elaborating possible relationships between body and writing/production, other ways of rethinking the dualisms of inside and outside, mind and body. It has the potential to connect imaginatively and "*rhizomatically*"<sup>1</sup> with other departure points, extending out to many familiar and taken for granted 'dis/orders', the rhythms and cycles of women's daily lives. There are always traces of resistance and variation, Kirby reminds us, which point to the potential volatility of that which we think of as "bedrock", to b/Biology itself as a discursive effect. Perhaps I can interrogate Sacks afresh and with the resonances of Elizabeth Grosz's Möbius strip model which she employs to rethink the mind body division. The Möbius strip, the inverted three dimensional figure eight,

provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside (Grosz, 1994, xii).

### **Aura**

Of particular interest in the complex field that can constitute the migraine experience, is the phenomenon of aura. It is commonly believed that migraine consists of a particular type of headache often accompanied by vomiting or nausea, but the headache is never the only feature and might even be absent altogether. Migraine may be seen as a sequence—of a preliminary, "forewarning" state,—attack proper,—resolution and rebound, although one need not necessarily experience the whole sequence. The early stages may entail a certain knowledge or perception, often referred to as the aura of classic migraine, and these experiences are far from uncommon and highly significant, Sacks says,

because many aura phenomena are exceedingly strange - so strange as to transcend the power of language; and good descriptions are made rarer still by the presence of something uncanny and fearful, the very thought of which causes the mind to shy.

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<sup>1</sup>"The ability to imagine is not necessarily couched in pain; remembering personal experience is, however, a precondition for the capacity to articulate rhizomatic lines that touch and connect with the aspirations of others"(Probyn,1993,148).

the subject of migraine aura is touched with the incomprehensible and the incommunicable: nay this lies at its very centre, its heart (Sacks, 1985, 56).

Sacks lists aural symptoms under general headings.

- a) specific visual, tactile, and other sensory hallucinations
- b) general alterations of sensory threshold and excitability
- c) alterations in level of consciousness and muscular tone
- d) alterations of mood and affect
- e) alterations of higher integrative functions: perception, ideation, memory and speech.

These symptoms can be experienced as a number of extraordinary feelings, the most strange of which are "feelings of sudden familiarity and certitude (*deja vu*), or its opposite, feelings of sudden strangeness and unfamiliarity (*jamais vu*)" (Sacks, 1985, 89). Sacks recognises that everyone experience such moments occasionally but that there is something exceptional in the intensity and duration of the migraine experiences. And while there may be many other related feelings disrupting one's sense of time, of the state of the world, or of self, what demands attention is "**in all cases, the feeling that consciousness has been doubled**" (Sacks, 1985, 89), my emphasis.

We are reminded that Freud, who suffered classic migraines, believed the uncanniness of doubled consciousness experiences such as *deja vu* was attributable to the return of repressed material. That which "transcends the power of language" is obviously deeply disturbing to Sacks himself. He elaborates emphatically on fear, angst, horror in aura experiences and their difficult articulation. Talking generally, he says that the most acute forms of fear may convey a sense of immanent destruction or death, and specific case studies of the following nature speak 'volumes'.

It is not that half the world mysteriously 'disappears', but that I find myself in doubt as to whether it was ever there. There seems to be a sort of hole in my memory and mind and, so to speak, a hole in the world; and yet I cannot imagine what might go in the hole. There is a hole and there isn't a hole - my mind is utterly confounded. I have the feeling that my body - that *bodies* are unstable, that they may come apart and lose parts of themselves - an eye, a limb, amputation - that something vital has disappeared, but disappeared *without trace*, that it has disappeared *along with the place it once occupied*. The horrible feeling is of nothingness nowhere (Case 77 in Sacks, 1985, 70).

Assuming the Freudian notion of one universal body image for all, as it were, and one constructed on a particular stability, Sacks is not surprised to find feelings of ego "dissolution", or "depersonalisation", with its sense of splitting, common during migraine.

The sense of "self" appears to be based, fundamentally on a continuous inference from the stability of body image, the stability of outward perceptions, and the stability of time perceptions (Sacks, 1985, 93).

There are many problems with such notions of corporeal schema. Lingis, (in Grosz, 1995, 285), "makes it clear that the body image provides the subject with an experience, not of its own body, but of the ways in which its body is perceived by others. The subject's experience of the body is irreducibly bound up with both the body's social status and its status in the eyes of others".

Sacks' awareness of other selves or other possible images for bodies is scant. "A few patients may experience a sense of mild pleasure or delight in the course of their auras, and on rare occasions this may be exalted towards states of profound awe or rapture". The tantalisingly dismissive way in which Sacks refers to creative forces, which form for me some of the most intimate and profound aspects of my being and doing, generates a dizzying, yet exciting sense of dis/connection. There, in between the nightmare, the terror and the 'forced thinking', fragments of my life glinted, sparkled, took me by surprise. "Forced thinking" is the nearest Sacks comes to naming an experience like my own. He uses it to refer to the unsolicited flows of ideation, memory and speech but the case studies are neatly categorised into different groups of dysfunction, so that my experience is scattered like splinters of glass on an unrecognisable ground. I try to assemble the story of my own double consciousness - that particular creative energy welling up; a doubling that speaks not of fragmentation, but of integration, of multiplication rather than dissolution. A presentiment that engages not with fear and nothingness, but with an acuity of being and potential, a pregnant presence. And far from dysfunction - a flow of articulation.

*(and remembering now how the doctor told me, that since migraines are supposed to go away in pregnancy, I must have a superwoman complex and be setting myself unreasonable goals. I felt humiliated, patronised, and then rage the next day when he sent his good charismatic wife round to visit me, check on me, show me the way?)*

There, in snippets, I could detect a trace of my eccentric access to a profoundly exciting vocabulary, syntax and imagery, not only the 'pre-headache' cognitive mode, but sometimes of early morning waking, and my walk/talk, and premenstrual rhythms and, with luck, sometimes when I am struggling to understand. A way of thinking and knowing that is experienced as an almost simultaneous construction of a problematic, all the connective and interrelated issues, complete with resolution, with ways forward, opening out into multiple other sequences that can remain with one in lasting and meaningful coherence long after the event, especially if one trusts to the experience enough to write it down, or to accept there will be a residue.

The migraine sufferer knows directly what he experiences - *he* is the authority on his own experience. He does not know what goes on beneath the level of experience (Sacks, 1985, 1991).

Within the broader framework of feminist critiques of medical and scientific discourse which help me reflect on Sack's claim to a superior knowledge, and his links to an *ex nihilo* mindset, ambivalent feminist attitudes towards psychoanalytic discourse are a particularly rich resource. Elizabeth Grosz in particular, her changing points of departure, intersect here with an uncanny timeliness to challenge perception(s) on multi-levels. Having had a considerable investment and professional involvement in psychoanalysis, Grosz as I understand it, has now radically distanced herself from the fundamental difficulties inherent in a project based on male bodies, masquerading as neutral. Her recent work eloquently points to the absence of female constructions in the critical notions of 'body image', before one even arrives at 'ego' or 'sense of self'. In a paper at the University of New England, May, 1992, Grosz explores/queries, with the work of Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray, the extent to which one's sexed body informs and is implicated in the conceptualising of body, in the hierarchising of the senses, and consequently the experiencing of experience itself. Her current project of refiguring lesbian desire is a positive, innovative one which sets out to write a different trajectory for women's desire, one of presence, not absence; desire as a creative force, not a lack, and of a notion of body as surface rather than exteriority/interiority.

Looking to the medieval visionary Hildegard brings an unusual historical perspective to the articulation of a particularly female desire and experience.

The visions which I saw I beheld neither in sleep, nor in dreams, not in madness, nor with my carnal eyes, nor with the ears of the flesh, nor in hidden places, but wakeful, alert, and with the eyes of the spirit and the inward ears, I perceived them in open view and according to the will of God

(Hildegard, letter to Guibert of Gembloux, circa 1170's; Flanagan, 1989, 196).

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1180), has become known as one of the most remarkable women of the Middle Ages, her visions and visionary writing having provided an unprecedented public entry, for a woman, into the male world of theology and philosophy. Extraordinary in any circumstances, Hildegard becomes even more interesting, to hagiographers and Sacks as well myself, as a migraineur. Her own accounts of her visions and accompanying illustrations are considered by the medical profession indisputably migrainous. Discovering a physiological experience (and a disorder, at that) inextricably embedded in the prodigious public output of a woman raises difficult questions for conventional 20th century thinking that has largely

abandoned recourse to the authoritative discourse of God, and has ambivalent skewed attitudes towards both the body and the imaginary.<sup>2</sup>

While Hildegard's definition of her visions could easily be said to resemble a modern understanding of the imaginary, the presence of "migraine" as a signifier for "matter, materiality, body" totally disrupts and confuses.

Sacks, while interestingly having to construct

a sort of continuous double vision, simultaneously envisaging migraine as a *structure* whose forms were implicit in the repertoire of the nervous system, and as a *strategy* which might be employed to any emotional, or indeed biological end (Sacks, 1985, xvi).

can only go so far in accounting for this extraordinary interface. Hildegard's beautiful and explicit visual images are "really" showers of phosphenes passing over her visual field, and her experience of heavenly voices, of a concentrated understanding, merely an elaborated interpretation, with Hildegard bringing exceptional intellectual and literary powers (those of a "privileged consciousness") to bear on migrainous experiences. Thus from a medical perspective it is difficult to talk of Hildegard's visions and interpretations as other than literary devices, which covers over the integrated, cusp-like nature of Hildegard's experience. To hagiographers the stress on literary skills and the cultural component of Hildegard's imagination is also very disturbing, greatly straining Hildegard's credibility, "and leads to the conclusion that the circumstantial details with which she bolsters her visionary and prophetic claims are merely fictitious" (Flanagan, 1989, 199). She was forty-two in fact when, Flanagan explains,

she experienced a particularly striking vision in which she felt that she had been instructed to make known that understanding of the basic tenets and inner meaning of her religion which she had long been accustomed to receive in visionary form. Such experiences and the understanding she drew from them were not new, but the impulse to write them down was (Flanagan, 1989, 57).

Far from confining herself to mysticism, Hildegard's range included natural history, medicine, cosmology, music, poetry and theology. Not only did this scope surpass most of her male contemporaries, but, Flanagan says, "also outshone them in visionary beauty and intellectual power" (xi).

The argument that Flanagan constructs is that Hildegard had for some time wanted to communicate her understandings, was a frustrated writer, but, given her medieval circumstances, required some radical authorisation to speak. Flanagan cannot accept the

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<sup>2</sup>I have chosen to use Lacan's concept of the imaginary rather than imagination which is heavily weighted in the symbolic. Lacan's imaginary refers to "the world, the register, the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined. In this respect, "imaginary" is not simply the opposite of "real": the image certainly belongs to reality..."(Sheridan in Grosz,1989, xviii).

divine as the source of Hildegard's experience, yet wants to retain Hildegard's credibility. The medical model is substituted for the divine—something inherently enabling in the migraine/vision of 114 allows Hildegard a seamless connection between both her previous experiences and this one and the construction of a prophetic self, understood by Hildegard as a divine sanction. This has its own problems for Flanagan, as, apart from her distinct visions Hildegard claimed that the light was always with her, a *shadow* of the light she experienced in such visions. Bringing in my own experience and Sacks' notion of "forced thinking" and a relation to the unconscious, what becomes fascinating rather than problematic, is the nature of the "moment" of migraine and the way Hildegard discovers she can link that specificity to a potential way of being in general.

Hildegard says that the words that she experiences in her visions are not audible in the usual sense—"I see and hear and understand at one and the same time" (Flanagan, 195). This is neither the logic, language or time frame of the symbolic, it seems, however much Sacks would like to privilege that. Hildegard was frequently asked to provide visionary responses to problems and questions. How could she do this on demand? A possible explanation for Flanagan is that Hildegard saved up such questions till she found herself experiencing a migraine attack or isolated migraine aura. (Some petitioners apparently complained about the delay or even complete lack of response to their questions).

Possibly we could interpret this as meaning that by the time she made this assertion, Hildegard had discovered a technique for tapping the source of her knowledge at will. Whether this means she could produce an aura of the elementary 'photism' kind, or simply that she was so convinced of the reality of her source of knowledge that a conscientious meditation on the question produced the *subjective* effect of a migraine, is impossible to say (Flanagan, 1989, 208, *my emphasis*).

Speaking of migraine experiences as doubled consciousness reiterates a fundamental split, the body looking at its own double. At least some migraine sufferers affirm another experience altogether, that of knowing, at least from time to time, the very interface of body/mind, experience and representation, inner and outer, without "dissolution".

Very recent thinking has suggested that migraine may not be dysfunction in quite the way it has previously been thought, but that it is an experience, a perception, of normal processes and states that are not normally accessible to our consciousness. While this medical talk refers to flows of blood, digestive processes, I would also like to think of it as opening up questions about an embodied and very material quality to the 'stuff' of the imaginary.

relationship between cyclical variations in hormone production, and the ability to retrieve and communicate nonverbal imagery, as reflected in the style of the dream reports" (Bucci et al., 1991, 273). This is a considerable move, the authors point out, from "Freud's (1900) characterization of dreams as the royal road to the unconscious", to a potentially much more complex notion of the production of verbal and nonverbal representation and the interaction of physiological, emotional and cognitive events. The authors raise the possibility that hormonal fluctuation might affect the nature of the contents of the dream, or the generation of imagery or narrative in the construction of the dream contents, or the subsequent verbal expression, or all of those! "Dream mentation constitutes only one case of the general function of emotional information processing, so that we would expect to find related evidence of cyclical effects on other mentation of waking life" (Bucci et al., 1991, 275).

This is no return to the 'essentialist' body, nor a suggestion that "body" should or can be reduced to hormones, genes or any other systematic "truth", nor an attempt to merely replace the privileging of an outer reality with an inner, or vice-versa. It is not a suggestion that the (biological) body writes/speaks itself (Trinh Minh Ha, 1989, 41). It is an attempt to gather together some of the discrepancies of experience which suggest that different bodies come to speaking differently, that "we write —think and feel—(with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts" (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1989, 36).

### **Body Talk**

To make sense, we have to make knowledge with our experience, and if, yes, forms matter, it is also true and significant for our worldly desires, that matter forms (Brodrib, 1992, 147).

Sacks implies one has to go to the 'masters', to the canon, for an adequate historical parallel to Hildegard - to Dostoyevski, that is. Dostoyevski describes his occasional ecstatic epileptic auras.

There are moments, and it is only a matter of five or six seconds, when you feel the presence of the eternal harmony... a terrible thing is the fearful clearness with which it manifests itself and the rapture with which it fills you. If this state were to last more than five seconds, the soul could not endure it and would have to disappear. During these five seconds I live a whole human existence, and for that I would give my whole life and not think I was paying too dearly (Sacks, 1985, 108-9).

("Who can keep on living completely exposed?", asks Trinh Minh-Ha, when she talks of 'writing your body' (1989, 36) - "it takes time to be able to tolerate greater aliveness.") The move to great men of art and letters is not surprising given women's long historical exclusion from most fields of public creative expression. But in any case Dostoyevski's particular expression of his experience does not take us nearly as far as Hildegard's. Other 'privileged consciousnesses', to use Sack's term, interrogate the experience much more interestingly. The artist Maurice Escher often has his work described as visual paradox, work which achieves its effect by disturbance, by describing something we know to be impossible, illusion as opposed to reality. But Escher's reality also included classic migraines and while his works can be conventionally read as 'double consciousness'—I am thinking of his drawing of two hands drawing each other, for example—they can also invite us to rethink our attitude to paradox, to the watertight and oppositional categories of "illusion" and reality", to consider a possible interface, a space between.

Lewis Carroll translated much of his migraine experience into *Alice in Wonderland*, and it is somewhat ironic that that is now folded back into current medical discourse as "Alice in Wonderland syndrome" when the visual metamorphosis "in patients with migraine, epilepsy, drug use, schizophrenia, hyperexia, cerebral lesions and infectious mononucleosis" are said to be similar to Alice's dreams, (as well as functioning as a not uncommon intertextual but unelaborated reference in feminist literature and art texts!)

There are a number of patients in whom periodic or sporadic migraines are experienced which seem to embed, and (in the oblique terms of a physiological drama) to enact and "work through" an accumulation of emotional stresses and conflicts. I have the impression that many menstrual migraines (and other allied menstrual symptoms) do exactly this, condensing, as it were, the stresses of the month into a few days of concentrated illness, and I have observed, in a number of patients, that curing them (depriving them) of such menstrual symptoms may be followed by a release of diffuse anxiety and neurotic conflict into the remainder of the month (Sacks, 1985, 204).

Sacks's approach is predictably ambivalent, and leans heavily on notions of women as inherently dysfunctional if not pathological. His construction of migraine as basically recuperative, the biological body in passive retreat, however, is the nearest he comes to my experience of it as a generative, creative resource, and does raise interesting further questions about the work, not only of migraine, but of visions, images and the imaginary. Sacks says,

We have already intimated an analogy between migraine and sleep, and this analogy is dramatised by the sense of extreme refreshment, and almost rebirth, which may follow a severe but compact attack. Such

states do not represent a mere restoration of the premigraine condition, but a swing in the direction of arousal, a rebound... In the words of Liveing "[the patient] awakes a different being". Rebound euphoria and refreshment is particularly common after severe menstrual migraines (Sacks, 1985, 33).

Emily Martin catches glimpses of "other ways of living, other ways of using time", other body knowledge, in women's daily lives, especially in regard to birth, menstruation, menopause. Here are some of the reports she includes:

A sculptor described her special abilities when she is premenstrual "There is a quality to my work and to my visions which just isn't there the rest of the month. I look forward to being premenstrual for its effect on my creativity".

When I am premenstrual I can write with such clarity and depth that after I get my period I don't recognise that those were my thoughts or that I could have written anything so profound.

I dream very differently during my period; my dreams are very, very vivid and sometimes it seems that I hear voices and conversations. My dreams are very vivid and the colours are not brighter but bolder, like blues and reds and that's also very interesting. The last three days I feel more creative. Things seem a little more colorful, it's just that feeling of exhilaration during the last few days. I feel really great (Martin, 1987, 128).

Vision begins to happen in such a life  
as if a woman quietly walked away  
from the argument and jargon in a room  
and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap  
bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps,  
laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards  
(Rich, 1978, in Martin, 1987, 202).

Martin explains that until she heard such stories the only way she knew how to evoke alternative visions was to look to poetry. Julia Kristeva offers words and concepts with which to explore further these relations between body and language. "Madness, holiness, and poetry" are important sites for Kristeva, sites where that which she calls the semiotic overflows, rupturing temporarily the order of a social economy and language that is masculine, oedipal, phallic—the symbolic. Understood as the unregulated drives and impulses of a pre-oedipal, pre signifying body, the semiotic is both space and energy, maternal and unrepresentable. Forming the necessary material conditions for representation, this maternal semiotic must be constrained and harnessed for signification to take place and yet while ever it threatens to overflow, to resist a certain organisation, it constitutes an ongoing dialectic. Religious and artistic discourses, in their different ways, Kristeva claims, allow for and attempt to either contain or exploit

such visible excesses. New visions, new energies, new arrangements of the social order thus become possible in a limited and managed way (Grosz, 1989).

The resonances between Kristeva's thetic, as the threshold between semiotic and symbolic, and the extraordinary pivotal experience of migraine were so materially exciting I wondered what body links David Halperin would make, when in a lecture, 1993, at the University of New England, he spoke about ways of focussing on the body and its pleasures, rewriting subjectivity from the position of queer sexuality. He spoke persuasively of discourse strategy and one which seemed to offer an identity that would escape erasures. In the attempts to counter contemporary homophobia gay theorists have learned, Halperin says, "to analyse discourse not in terms of what it says but in terms of what it does".

we learn from him (Foucault) not to allow the truth or falsity of individual statements to distract us from the effects they produce or the manner in which they are deployed within particular systems of discursive and institutional practice.

Using personal and legal accounts provided by Eve Sedgwick's "Epistemology of the Closet" Halperin elaborates how "homophobic discourse is incoherent, but its incoherence, far from incapacitating it, turns out to empower it." His claim is that it in fact operates by means of logical contradictions, that it contains

no fixed propositional content but is composed rather of a potentially infinite number of different but functionally interchangeable assertions such that whenever one assertion is falsified or disqualified, another one even with a content exactly contrary to the first one, can nonetheless be effectively substituted for it.

I am most impressed by the careful walk Halperin takes through the dispute "over whether or not homosexuality constitutes an immutable characteristic". He uses several very grounded examples in that long history, and then Sedgwick's solidly embodied stories, dilemmas of specific gay teachers, for example, silenced in one way or another by homophobic educational administrations, demonstrating that "the closet is an impossibly contradictory place. You can't be in it and you can't be out of it". This offers me the clearest understanding yet of the problematic of the body in feminist as well as patriarchal discourses. The kinds of double binds, as Halperin puts it, that ensue from these manoeuvres are familiar to many feminists who have engaged in the sex/gender, essentialist/non-essentialist debates in recent years. The "indeterminate field" that circumscribes the gay body also seems to define women in relation to body and language.

I want to consume Halperin's words, hoping his conclusions will be as useful to me; hungry for his proposal to manage, move out of, make use of, impossible contradictions. He talks of several counter strategies and I recognise equivalent feminist work which I have found enabling in its "creative appropriation and resignification", or "exposure and demystification", but his main move in constructing a position from which one can know, which one can exploit and explore, hinges on use of "things that are closest to us". In the pleasure of this contact I forget myself, and begin to conflate his thinking with mine, thinking nothing could be closer to us than this matter of our bodies. I forget that Halperin is talking to those who feel marginalised because of their sexual practices, and that the development of a "Queer" identity, "an eccentric positionality", comes out of the contradictory impossibility of the male homosexual. I discover this depends on the removal of any bodily specificity, certainly any talk of differently sexed bodies.

the homosexual is an impossibly contradictory creature, not a natural reality but a phantasmic projection, an incoherent construction that functions to stabilise and to consolidate the definition of heterosexuality by encapsulating everything that is other than or different from it. So the homosexual then is defined by negation and opposition, defined as everything the heterosexual is not, and what that means is that homosexuality is an identity without an essence.

What I understand from this is that Halperin as male theorist feels he can afford to overlook the particularity of his male body, indeed of any body, assuming it makes no difference what body is in question. He goes on to say that *knowingly* claiming this "identity without an essence" and giving up any positive facts, stable realities such as the positive fact of homosexual object choice, is what marks "Queer" from "gay", and makes "Queer" the position from which to envisage restructuring the axes of power, truth and desire. Sexual identity itself can now "be constituted not substantively but oppositionally, not by what it is but by where it is and how it operates. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers".

I am falling into holes. Erasures of bodies and women. For women who have been either historically positioned as mere essence and nothing else, or more recently, creatures whose very essence is to have no essence, this operates in the same way as Halperin's "opportunistic field", another double bind. What cost is involved in this way of creating "a whole horizon of possibility whose precise extent and whose heterogenous scope cannot be delimited in advance"?

if women cannot be characterised in any general way, if all there is to femininity is socially produced, then how can feminism be taken seriously? What justifies the assumption that women are oppressed as a sex? (Grosz, 1990, 341).

Somewhere between the groundedness of his early explication and the nomination of a positioning I have lost my way. I try to retrace my steps through language that now seems impossibly slippery and feel only more alienated, excluded. I feel increasingly disturbed by a sense that this is more than just a challenge to the "norm" of heterosexuality; that it is unacceptably violent in a way I don't yet understand. My images are all of entrapment, being enmeshed, seeing, hearing, knowing, but somehow stunned and unable to speak.

*Tuesday 8th May 1994*

*Walk this morning late and hot again. Working late leaves me sluggish and headachy the next day and it is hard to get out going. I lit the first fire of autumn last night. It was so cold. But the days are very bright and clear and walking the twenty five acre paddock is warm work by even nine o'clock. I am getting to know the breath of this paddock too - the different movements of air around it's slopes and wrinkles - so much so that what started as cool relief has become frissons of pleasure. And the wind, the wind.*

*The scabby fox the dogs killed the other day is beginning to crumble, smelling so pungently that I take a different route around the quince. Today a group of bowing crested pigeons are performing some complex ritual on the bare branches of the part dead 'stage' tree. Although I know this performance is not for me, it seems to be a popular site, exposed and exposing - watch tower, resting stage, dance site. Ninety percent of the tree has died back after mistletoe invasion, but one limb is making a comeback now that the mistletoe itself has died.*

*Walk talk—Robert Dessaix's fantasy land compared to my walk talk—so many possible spaces in which to make meaning. Speaking on the radio recently Dessaix tells how he processes his lived experiences, including those of other countries, other cultures, in an imaginary land, an island of his own invention, with its own language. And what makes his fantasy so compelling is the almost obsessive detail, that he knows the bus timetables, the rates at the health farm, the sunniest benches in the parks or the best cakes to eat in a certain cafe in a certain town. Margaret writing, exploring - Aboriginal place, - beach, house, desert<sup>3</sup>. I digest and extend my thinking as I walk round the paddock. I think of literary sites, texts which perform the same function as Dessaix's imaginary island, and what do the women in the arts and crafts group do?*

I remember a conference where a speaker claimed that **all** writing was violence. When asked to elaborate she turned to a large empty whiteboard behind her. It's white, isn't it, she said. And we took in the very whiteness, studied it for several moments, felt ourselves trying to assimilate it through it's shape, it's proportions; it's smoothness,

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<sup>3</sup>I am indebted to Margaret Somerville for sharing her work, and for many generous conversations and exchanges of ideas.

mattness; how enclosed and defined by the metal frame. She took her black marker and in one quick movement radically altered the meanings I had been making. The power of a single black slash to effect such changes, displacements, a profound sense of what was covered over, reconfigured, was indeed a violence. So much so I cannot retrieve which conference, which speaker. Only the image remains.

The true representation of power is not of a big man beating a smaller man or a woman. Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter (Heilbrun, 1989, 18).

### **Seduction.**

This nexus of power/violence seems to underlie Halperin's text and my interaction with it. It has taken on nightmarish proportions for me. I have tried to extricate myself by seeking out the cracks in his argument, blaming him for seduction. It's too slippery. I turn on myself, my own errors, misrecognitions, perhaps my own desire to co-opt his thinking. In itself, I know this does not wholly account for my state. There is something then that needs to be explored about the momentary coincidence of our desires, Halperin's positionality and my desire for the ultimate vantage point, to make a neat structural argument of my own. The impulse to "pin down", to give the all inclusive definition, is the very thing that destroys, obliterates that which we seek to represent? Recognising it, I now want to resist it, move away from it. I begin to compare my desire to be seamless, to flow, with Halperin's talk, which, when it becomes disembodied, abstract, covers over exclusions and closures.

*As I struggle with expressing my own forms of knowledge there are two almost surreal interruptions to my working days. Two visitors, a week apart, add to my frustrations. My partner has obligations as a host towards visiting scientists and the first is a middle aged, jolly, Japanese man. He dispenses pieces of wise advice discretely, good humouredly. I feel I have to work hard to be included in the social discourse, apart from the work I have done to prepare the meal we are sharing, but that would be hard to 'prove'. Only when he has concluded a sort of paternal overview and comparison of the financial and logistical lay out of our respective families, do I know clearly that I, for one, have been totally omitted from the picture. I study at university, too, I insist. But the fact that feminism might be any part of any academic work is non-sense to him. Who isn't a feminist, he asks.*

*Another meal, a week later. Our guest is a middle aged Korean. I have gone to considerable trouble to prepare a sustaining meal in accord with his vegan, Bhuddist based dietary regime. I have spent a morning taking him shopping. He has to feed himself for the next two weeks, something he has never done before. He cannot cook, but his wife has written some very basic instructions, which he takes round the*

*supermarket with him. Someone has told him that all our bread has egg in it, but he is afraid to believe me when I tell him otherwise, that I make bread myself, and I know. The other lives are so much more important, he tells me. This is the lowest life there is. This flesh, this body is immaterial. "It's nothing. Just like a coat you take off. I meditate for three hours every morning. You think meditation is for a peaceful mind, yes, but that's not really what it's for—it's to leave this life, this body. This is not a philosophy. This is the truth. Very few people know the truth."*

*Crying in bed that night. Another day gone, another day that was to be the day I would get out of these endless circles, move on; tears of angry frustration.*

it is there in the institution that we must locate ourselves in the discourse in order to write credibly. For it is true that if we read/write/speak of women, very few will attend to what we want to say, even if the women referred to are not feminists. So that the objection to leaving male theory behind expresses a real fear of being silenced; unless you read/write/speak the boys, no one will listen to you. You will be outside the defined and policed arena of discourse (Brodrib, 1992, xxvii-xxix).

Somer Brodrib claims that "sudden discontinuity and a dynamic in which opposition is essential" is a feature of an epistemology and ontology of annihilation; the fearful mark of an ex nihilo mentality (Brodrib, 1992, 33).

The preoccupation "with the precarious nature of being, with the seed of death in life" is one which Brodrib persistently tracks through the work of a number of male theorists. Foucault's posing of a system of meaning and non - meaning, his questions about the nature and practices of discourse is inevitable underpinned by a single certitude of death (Brodrib, 1992, 51).

Tracking the way Freud's model of male orgasm is abstracted to the "fundamental principle of life itself: the constancy principle, and indeed the pleasure principle" Grosz (1995, 293) also teases out the links between desire and death prevalent in men's representations. A "closed energetic system, an hydraulics" (293) based on the tumescence and detumescence of male orgasm readily lends itself to anxieties and ambivalence over bodily boundaries and flows, an anticipation and attempted deferment of the gradual depletion and ultimate breakdown of the organism in death. In this model, Grosz says

Libido or the life drives produce self preservative and pleasurable (respectively, instinctual and drive) processes which aim to protect the organism from without and from the unpleasant accumulation of energies from within the organism. In this sense, they allow the death drive to take its own course and time: they protect the organism from outside dangers, so that it can be carried towards death by its own immanent processes (Grosz, 1995, 291).

And although the transition, the slippage, from violence to seduction is not immediately obvious I sense this happening in Halperin, and understand it better for having participated, if briefly, in a seduction based on male desire. Halperin wants to use these political struggles to focus on "the body and its pleasures", to develop an ethics based on the aesthetics of pleasure—'aeskesis', community founded in erotic practices. I want to ask - erotic for whom? Which body and what kind of pleasure? I don't know how to articulate generalised ethical/political concerns without being prescriptive, but I don't want to give up caring. I certainly don't want to subscribe to a system of co-dependency where, in the impossibility of speaking my desire, I am compelled to understand power relations only in terms of pleasure, someone else's pleasure, or my body in terms of a neutral, that is male, body. There must be other ways of reconstituting desire and the "other" of desire without objectifying them or making them invisible, without '*mastering*' them.

Guyatri Spivak, as a thinker in the post colonial realm has talked of "negotiating enabling violations" and when I explore her work further I find that what I have been doing with Halperin is "affirmative deconstruction". Affirmative deconstruction involves saying 'yes' twice to a text. Spivak explains how this shift between saying yes, first of all from seduction, to saying yes after realising the seduction - thereby exposing it AS a seduction, translates into a strategy of reading, a strategy of giving assent.

This is one paradoxical way of saying "yes' to the text, but it certainly entails understanding from within, as it were, so that the moments that lend themselves to the so called misappropriation are understood in the text's own terms. It is then that one can begin to develop a politics of reading, which will open up a text towards an as yet unknown horizon so that it can be of use without excuse. Let us now call this: negotiating with structures of violence (Spivak, 1989, 212).

Spivak says that affirmative deconstruction is something "like the difference between the desire for an impasse and negotiating with an enabling double bind".

And while this is a useful insight into reading strategy and perhaps gives me a certain permission to go on and risk saying what I want to say, I want to pursue further the relationship between sexed bodies and problematics of reading and writing, reception and production.

As another worker in this post colonial field Trinh Minh-Ha seems to go beyond Spivak, who despite her post colonialism seems content to stay within Western theory, with its difficult and sometimes privileged language. While Trinh Minh-Ha acknowledges her affinities with contemporary western thinkers, especially those who seem to offer less exclusionary practices than humanist traditionalists, she is concerned to bring out the way in which their theoretical openings have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by

thinking that has come from elsewhere and that has in fact been in existence in other cultures for a very long time.

Although Trinh Minh-Ha also sees reflexivity as a critical problem, theoretically and artistically, her exploration of this across cultures, how language is used and addressed, reaches out caringly towards an/other in a way that challenges the dualistic relation between subject and object. She does not focus on the 'marginal' and 'oppositional' in quite the way that Halperin does but aims to write "with many ears and eyes" (1993, radio interview) so that even if she doesn't mention one particular group, other people can pick up the argument and use it on their own terms. Language, she says, is "a skin with which I caress and feel the other, a body capable of receiving as well as giving: nurturing and procreating" (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1989, 37). The challenge for her is to consciously offer a site of change in her articulation, which tries to tune itself to different cultural possibilities without implying anything hierarchical. I want to explore active, creative, connective, mutually productive possibilities of power and pleasure and care, in a celebratory way, without ignoring the reality or 'positivity' of violence that can come from understanding body and 'being' differently, from an *ex nihilo* philosophy. It is with a sense of joy that I hear her affirmative voice.

Displacing is a way of surviving. It is an impossible, truthful story of living in-between regimes of truth. The responsibility involved in this motley in-between living is a highly creative one: the displacer proceeds by unceasingly introducing difference into repetition. By questioning over and over again what is taken for granted as self-evident, by reminding oneself and the others of the unchangeability of change itself. Disturbing thereby one's own thinking habits, dissipating what has become familiar and clichéd, and participating in the changing of received values—the transformation (with/out master) of other selves through one's self (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1991, 21).

The idea of transformation of other selves through one's self in this way both offers me a way forward and makes so much sense of where I have been. Trinh Minh-Ha elaborates on the transformative process in a way that I can apply specifically to the transcribed conversations which constitute my data, as well as a possible way of viewing my relationship to the project as whole and to the women in particular. Talking of movement in between borders, the diaspora, and the kind of knowledge production it can potentially generate, Trinh Minh-Ha calls on two notions that the lived experience of border crossing offers—the crossblood person, that is the *mestiza*, and translation. The *mestiza* translates in English as "the translator's son or daughter" and Trinh moves from the idea that your position is that of translator, that you are constantly translating between two worlds, to the complexity of translation itself. Asking questions of one's own place *at the same time* as reflecting on another will always be something of a dilemma, but

it's very enriching if one can politicise oneself to it. You live the predicament, you live that difficulty and then you also turn it into an enabling practice (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1993, Radio National, interview with Nicola Joseph).

Taking a cue from Trinh Minh-Ha's 'impure' approach to disciplines and boundaries and heeding her claim that the only thing new is how one articulates it, I look forward to exploring the personal, experience, body, not only with transcribed conversations but also with voices from different disciplines, different performances, different times.