

## Parrot talk

Perhaps an improvised babble of voices is less able to express inner states of mind than a richly nuanced literary language. But in compensation it may be more attuned to outer states, to those vibrations that originate elsewhere (Carter, 1992, 20).

We cannot take the broad lines of existence fully into our cultural hands and bend them as we will. This is not because history is predetermined or, in the case of gender, that our biology is our destiny, but that the way life articulates itself has as much to do with the responses of other nonhuman beings, with the currents of the earthly and skyly environment, and with temporal contingencies, as it does with our subjectivist cultural wills (Bigwood, 1991, 60).

*Sunday 17th. April 1994*

*Walk talk this morning with the dogs made quite a pattern. The digestive process, like the enzymic one, coming unasked, unprompted, and as satisfyingly productive. It makes a beginning of my day, like breakfast, but this Sunday the sun is already high and warm. Subconsciously at first, I put together two scenarios and replayed them imaginatively - dealing in the process with digestion of several different events and concerns. One was the meeting of the women's group that took place on Friday and the other a version of a long gone occasion when a friend and student colleague quite painfully 'put me down'. An understanding of how each occasion's effects had arisen and how in combination they help me reflect and articulate how the women's research group would ideally work for me, emerges as I walk. Another turn around the quince trees and these reflections run into yet more, of Margaret's talk of performance and transition, how that reflects on my data and methodology, as well as an attempt to imagine where my friend might be "at".*

*All this as I walk around the paddock in the morning sun.. I am too hot in my jumper and take it off to wrap around my head turban-style. I am still too hot but walking in and out of a consciousness of my surroundings sometimes slipping out of Friday's seminar room in my head to the pleasure of two hawks poised in the tree ahead.*

*So against a background of the very recent women's group and a notion of it as, perhaps not yet fully articulated, a safe place, I orchestrated a version of the time I was criticised for the clothes I was wearing, for my appearance as not politically correct. It was painful - a criticism that felt like a small attack. I felt for that moment belittled and all*

*the more hurt that it should come from one I regard with love. I imagined, through a compilation of other smaller similar occasions perhaps, my friend's response if she were called to account theoretically for her action. And I imagined she would say that somehow of course I would know on an emotional level that she wasn't intending to hurt me, that I ought to be able to separate out experience on an emotional level from the politics of what she was saying, and that in effect my feelings were false, separable from politics and therefore not valid. Even if she argued that she trusted that my sense of our friendship would transcend any superficial or wrongly construed hurt, there seemed in all events, I imagined, to be a double standard operating. The women's group based on an understanding of feminist practices, on praxis - the integration, the inseparability of practice and theory and how that informs our concepts of subjectivity- in- process? I was led in my imaginative performance to articulate more fully than what I saw as the women's group 's responsibility—to make some sort of commitment to practicing feminist theory in the interpersonal relations of that group; to be prepared to ask ourselves and each other to attempt those practices to the best of our ability, knowing that of course it's always in process and we are not - nor likely to be - perfect beings. But the 'safeness' of a place is that underlying assumption for me that we all have a conscious commitment to those principles and practices which allow difference, which involve each of us attempting to put ourselves imaginatively and caringly alongside each other, thereby inviting, offering, the possibility of creative risk. And that would necessarily involve the sort of care NOT to slip into old dualisms and oppositions, not to separate theory from practice; not to support the notion of experience, especially emotional experience, as in any way either separate from intellectual or political meaning or subservient to them and certainly not to use notions of political correctness to score points for some sort of power base or construction of superiority. It seems just now very scary and sad - that one can sometimes articulate and speak clearly such ideas and yet also live them erratically in the context of friendships and other close relationships. I think of myself living these contradictions and the question shifts again. How do I use this understanding in the context of feminist practice? How do I use this meaning I have made constructively? Let me follow it, bend it back on myself in a general way or, more usefully, to what I should be concentrating on today - my methodology chapter. Perhaps now I can articulate more clearly what was then a muddled sense - wanting to collect data in a way that I hope the women's group would operate; trying to listen, trying to hear difference, and asking to be heard reciprocally whilst still acknowledging that inevitable complicity in and impulse towards colonialism; trying to understand the possibilities of relationship between experience, theory and politics.*

## Approaching

In a small country town (population 3000) in central New South Wales, I was about to ask a group of local women who met once a week to practice their art/craft if they would allow me to come and talk with them for an hour during that day - for approximately six weeks. I would explain something of my recent feminist academic background and that as part of my research I was interested in participating in group conversations with women focussing on material bodies, and that I envisaged using talk about the senses, for example, as a way of locating the talk in each of our bodies.

Several of the women in the group I was approaching I knew from a variety of contexts ranging over the seventeen years since I had first arrived there as a foreigner. I was very nervous, made apprehensive by a certain formality which I thought proper to this particular stage, and yet which was so unlike our more usual casual interactions, and different again from classroom situations where I had been teacher and they students. I was in many ways impatient, still exploding with the possibilities of empowerment that a course in Women's Studies had offered, wanting to tell and share it all at once and at the same time almost overawed by a sense of responsibility to behave/perform according to feminist principles. An understanding that the feminist politics of the personal included the relationship between the researcher and other participants in the data made me acutely aware of residual contradictions inherent in the position of researcher.

I believed that having a number of voices involved over a series of conversations would provide greater possibilities for intersubjective interactions. This seemed one way I could, as researcher, at least recognise and attempt to minimise elitism. The presence of many voices in these ongoing conversations would encourage listening for and acknowledging differences and how they engaged with each other; and as part of the process, a participant myself, I might also be heard in the interplay. But in my anxious last minute private rehearsals I was not engaging with difference so much as imagining I could pre-empt "difficulties", "get things right" (from my perspective) in a well thought out statement before we had even started. In the moments before entering a rather austere church hall, where a motley group of women in the midst of trestles and black plastic were engaging with paints, pastels and wool, I had no way of fully appreciating that I had to enact/perform/live the data collecting, immerse myself in it, as part of an ongoing process, in order to even attempt the kind of feminism I was theorising.

As it turned out, articulating my interest and my position was in fact made much easier, almost unnecessary, by the conversation that was already in full swing when I arrived to put my proposition. A television programme on rapists had been screened the previous evening and in the atmosphere of anger and a solidarity, which I was immediately

invited to join, against such acts of violence as rape I spoke my desire to understand the why and how of women's oppression.

Thus unexpectedly contextualised my rehearsed speech gave way to something which felt at the time much less coherent and rather more passionate than I had intended. After describing how I thought the series might work, my need to tape, with their permission, and transcribe the conversations, the possible different foci for body talk we could use, I talked of some of the ways in which I saw women's knowledges and experiences discredited, disallowed, particularly in the public world.

Slicing their comments into the cracks of my speech women begin to intervene. My monologue is quite displaced and the talk is folded back to rape, judges, juries (their behaviour is abhorred); the need for women judges to try rape cases, what they said to each other about this in the car this morning. Other voices direct the flow, opening and closing with authority.

*Neen:* But Norma, they've proven, they've proven, though, that if you have women, on a jury, judging a rape case, **most** women will condemn the woman in the dock!

*several:* Oh? Really!

*Neen:* We judge women very harshly. Women, as women, judge other women very harshly.

Our talk weaves in and out, taking turns, in women's compliance, passivity, but in rather general terms, and I am bursting with examples of the material effects of historical and conventional medical knowledges and practices on women's bodies and experiences. I want to tell of leeches and hysterectomies, puerperal fever and lying-in hospitals, the history of male intervention in childbirth.

When Sandi tells a story of the high forceps delivery of her first child, it threatens to erupt quite differently in a number of directions and other productions—the "bad" patient, the silencing of her own body knowledge, the painful mystery of the nurses' complicity in this. Most tantalising, however, is the powerful sense of rewriting and resisting those discourses through an image of bodily "excess" which has to be heard above or despite them, and which she has come to claim positively as her own.

*Sandi:* They don't take a lot of notice of you, I feel. I felt very guilty when I was having Grant, because I was, I felt I was a dreadful patient. When I look back now after having had Brad, I, I realise that maybe I nearly died? Maybe I wasn't such a bad patient after all, and they just didn't take any notice of me, because for about two hours I pleaded with them that I needed to go to the toilet - urinate - and they told me that was just the pressure on my bladder?

*Laura:* and you couldn't

*Sandi:* and I couldn't go. And they kept letting me try: they kept putting me on all the time, and I couldn't go. I was, I was really stressed. I'm a stressful person - and the stress was making me accumulate urine. This is what

happens to me. I've known it ever since. But they wouldn't believe me. Until I was nearly hysterical, with the agony. I said my bladder is going to burst - I was really almost screaming by this stage. So they put a catheter into me, and it overflowed a proper size bucket.

Small conversations break out all around, babble in all directions, multiplying.

### **Introductions: Making the Familiar strange**

The Coonabarabran Arts and Crafts Society to which these women belong is one in which I had once been a very active member myself. Although it has always been open to anyone there are no practising male artists in the group. Most of the women are unwaged, mostly mothers with grown families, pursuing their art or craft for pleasure and relaxation more than for profit, exhibiting in their own group shows and at the local agricultural show. Two or three are recognised as having achieved a level of excellence and having talent that would have "taken them far" in other circumstances.

After a number of years of involvement with the group I had moved on in my own arts field to exhibit and work outside the local. I joined a group in a larger regional centre two hundred kilometres away, a group of twelve who had similar frustrations with the lack of opportunities to develop more professionally. For two years I worked and subsequently exhibited with this group in a major funded project, and again the following year four of us produced a group exhibition. Our contact had been sporadic since, but by sheer chance, I received a phone call to say that some of my old colleagues and some other artists had recently begun to meet casually each week to work, talk and stay in touch, and I was invited to join them when I could. The call came only hours after I had completed my first full session with the local group, and as I was processing a sense of double disappointment. I was feeling that I had failed to make contact on an equal level, and that as a research project, it was looking pretty miserable. I decided to multiply the dialogical possibilities, and started negotiating a second group with these colleagues in Tamworth.

While this second group did eventuate and was an invaluable part of the research process for me, it nevertheless remained as a secondary group when it came to analysing the large and complex body of transcript material produced. In the space available it would be difficult also to introduce every woman who participated in the conversations, so I have chosen to say a little about the structure and dynamics of each group, but to focus introductions on some of the women of the local group. While I hope the reader will come to have a sense of the embodied personalities of these generous women, as their words appear in the text, I would like to introduce them through their art work, since this was their primary reason for being together on these days.

The Tamworth group was in some ways less stable than the local group. Although women were meeting to work in company one day a week, the space and time they set apart on this day did not seem as critical to them and they had come together individually rather than through a particular organisation. The venue was casually arranged and was either someone's home or studio. More of this group were more publicly identifiable as part time practising artists or craftswomen whose skills were financially rewarded, and for some the Tuesday meeting was an opportunity to focus on 'bread and butter lines' that were not particularly demanding but which would fund their other artistic endeavours. This was not the case for all however, and several women found the talk of primary interest. In the event of the shifting nature of these 'working days', due to both casual attendance and the loss of several members, (moving away, lengthy travel, major, if temporary, commitments elsewhere) a much smaller 'talking core' formed which ultimately replaced the working bee, at least for the remainder and purposes of data collecting.

In the local group the working day at the hall had been instituted by a smaller sub group of the society who were determined to mark out a time and space for themselves after art classes, along with any other vestiges of 'non-vocational' activities, were finally completely deleted from their Tafe college programme. Eight women regularly worked there, with one or two coming from time to time or for a part of the day. Our talking took place in the last hour of rented time, before they packed up and vacated the church hall for the junior dance class, and after they had had a chance to achieve their goals for the day.

As the conversation recording went on, other society members began to turn up just for the talk and at times we had as many as twelve participants. It seemed the hall was filled with passionate talk, smaller conversations separating out sometimes, overlapping and reconverging. On one occasion we were so absorbed nobody noticed the gas fire was not working until the fumes sent us rushing and coughing to throw open doors. But transcribing the tapes allowed me new memories and it was then that the persistent whirring and occasional clacking of a spinning wheel, the clink of brushes in water bottles and the strange soft scrape of pastel on paper reinscribed themselves more insistently as part of the event.

It was October when we started and most of the group were working on their handpainted Christmas cards. There would be enough for all their personal needs and some left for a stall or the tourist centre. By the time we had finished I had agreed to run a two day silk workshop and I was rostered to help in the annual exhibition at Easter, an event I had not been involved in for many years.

Done up in Sunday best at the exhibition opening my companions looked totally different, and their work too was both strange and familiar. Framed and hung, titled and

priced, were pieces I had previously only glimpsed, or works that were the outcome of an exercise, an experiment, a Thursday project.

Norma's watercolour exhibit was a quiet and satisfying riverside scene. A grey/bluish day with only the movement of water, trees and sky. The subdued tones evoking for me a calm pleasure. In the oil/acrylic class, she presented "The Wedding" - a church entrance with figures of bride and groom, backs presented to the viewer and partly obscured by the bridal veil in the moment of a kiss it seemed. The church wall and door are almost crudely represented, the human figures rather wooden and stiff. The colours are heavy, moody and muddied. The felt weight of this piece seems in direct contrast to the watercolour work and I was surprised they are both the work of one artist, but I also remembered trying to grasp the relationship between Norma and a younger woman who had been at the hall one day, assembling and decorating her wedding album. I had been curious of this careful work in the midst of all the pastel dust and paint, since it was obviously a project that demanded clean space and intricate arrangement. She was Norma's daughter.

When Neen came to the hall it was often to attend to administrative details for the sake of group 'housework' rather than her own particular work. Her skills in setting up and using the group's printer meant that she would facilitate the printing of the Christmas cards, and art stationary for the tourist outlet, or exhibition tickets and banners. For the exhibition she worked a large advertising banner that hung above the highway, and as her own exhibit she entered an "Heirloom christening gown". A dressmaker all her working life she had sewed to support herself and children, and the gown was clearly an articulation of both her skills and her pleasure in the materials. She was not afraid to say that the \$50 section prize was the main incentive, apart from a certain pride in "whipping up" the piece very efficiently in a couple of days, and being able to give her own creative energy play in a way that was quite different to paid jobs. She won first prize.

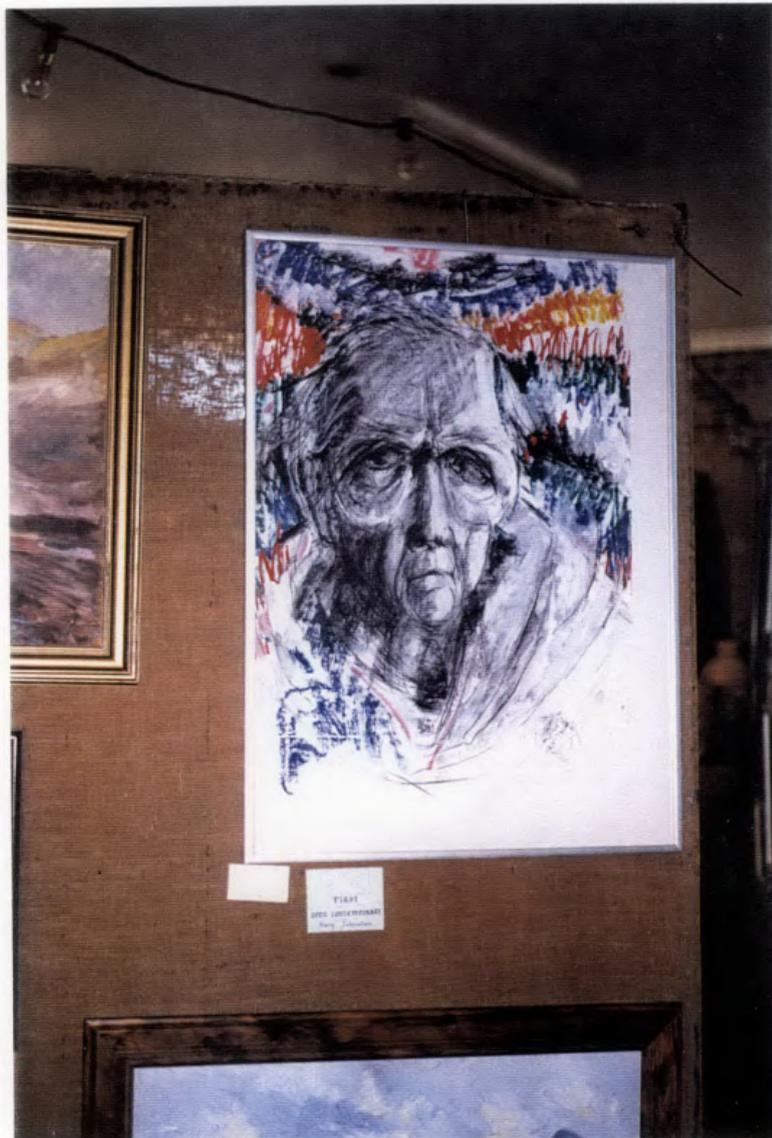
Rita's work ranges across several different media but with a strong sense of underlying connections and interests. Her photographic work spans commercial wedding photography, experimental manipulation and layering of techniques, and areas where photography hybridises with paint and textiles. As an only child, not the expected son, she tells me, she was taught to do boy things anyway and represented Australia in rifle-shooting when she was a young woman. Her prizes for photography sit with her earlier shooting trophies in the glass cabinet and when I visit for lunch she shows me with delight the visual pleasure of her rows and rows of preserving. An ongoing major project is the construction of an immensely complex family tree, with photographs and an elaborate cross referencing system, and many hours of travelling and tracking. Her extensive knowledge and fascination with native orchids appears in many of her works,

printed, painted, photographed. Her cyanotype "blue-printed" supper cloth had images of several generations of her family and although it didn't win a prize a visitor to the exhibition gave it his vote for the most popular piece saying it was the most imaginative piece in the exhibition.

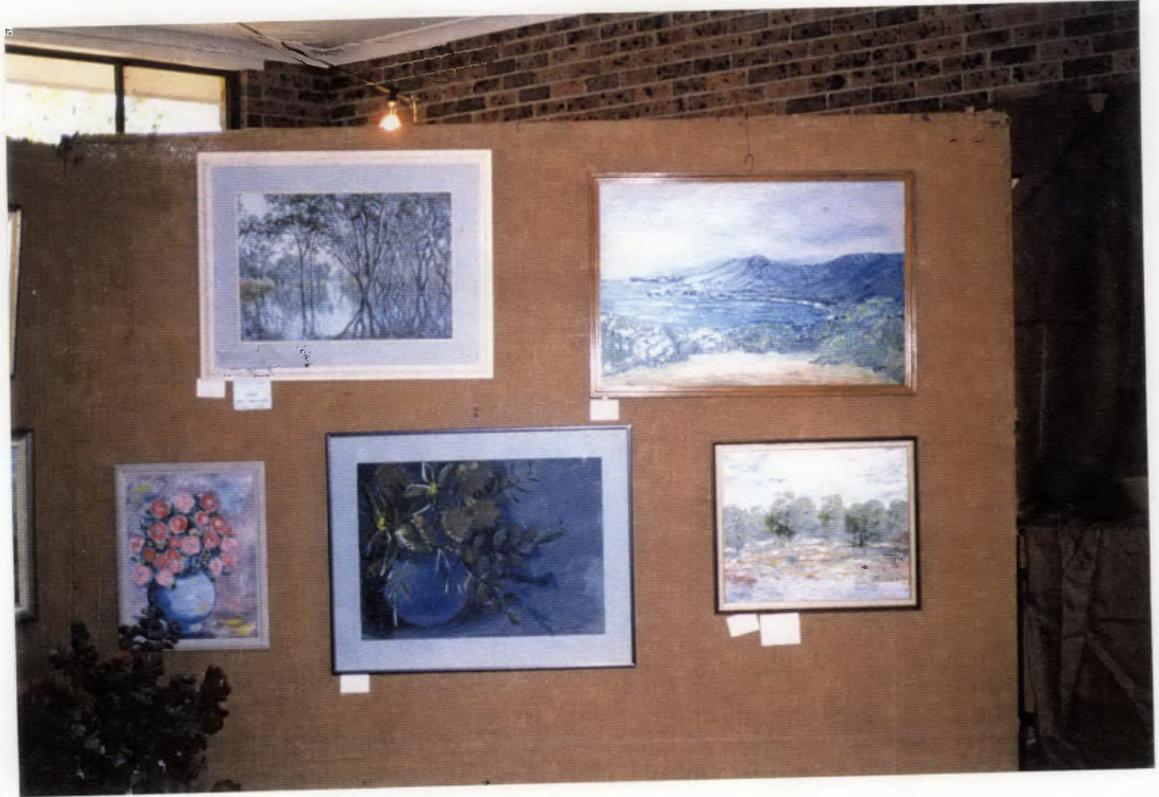
Shirley G's painting was awarded the Shire acquisition prize and she was genuinely surprised, and of course delighted, although her work is much respected. This exhibit is large and almost abstract, a landscape that demands thought. There is nothing facile about it, not a gum tree in sight, and the interplay of colour, texture and movement reach beyond the visual to a more comprehensive sensuality. She works in miniature too, but whatever scale or medium she uses, the same integrity of the work is evident. She consciously strives to be better able to express, and her work goes on increasing in richness and depth. In her seventies, Shirley is the oldest member of the group.

I knew Sandi's work with wool from earlier times: spinning, knitting and even 'painting' - using the naturally coloured fibres to compose framed landscape images. Her sheep farm adjoins our little block of land and our contact had been neighbourly, children or wool based, but I had never seen her paintings. When I saw the colours of her watercolour cards, on my first visit to the hall, their sharp freshness and lightness took me by surprise. They were marked out in a grid, a large sheet of cartridge ruled into maybe eight separate scenes. Their translucency was just right for the inland summer heat that is our Christmas experience and each new landscape was materialised with competent ease. Most of them, dozens, she would use herself, she said, - writing lively, newsy anecdotes of life on the land to her network of distant friends. Although she competed in the exhibition, none of her larger works seemed to me quite as vital or as pleasurable as those first images.

Yvonne had been one of those who always kept on working while we were talking, keeping her comments to a minimum. I had never seen her work with anything other than pastels, and her table space was a great delight of colour- boxes and trays heaped with stub ends and sticks of every imaginable colour and tone. The dust rose around her as she worked and reworked landscape forms, pushing them to their geometric limits on a long scroll-shaped piece, some shaft of gully or rainforest ravine. On the exhibition opening night Yvonne was much involved in readings from the local writers group and was represented in the writings displayed. I looked hopefully for the completed 'gully scroll', but it wasn't there, although a smaller abstract, bright with jelly bean colour and shape had been entered.



Coonabarabran Arts and Crafts Exhibition, Easter 1995



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had tried to avoid the baggage by avoiding such a concrete term, thinking it would be alienating. Now I had to ask myself whether this was just a form of intellectual dishonesty, superiority or at best insensitivity. Clearly, that which I chose to play down was critical to the way this woman construed the credibility of the project and therefore her contribution. Naming "thesis" ended the problems between us. Indeed she was more than helpful and went to particular trouble to give me gifts of stories and information and put in her point of view, with a good deal of authority still, but in an expansive way, making sure that she was heard and that I understood.

The echoic opportunity afforded by the arrangement of two groups was very useful in clarifying, locating and naming the theoretical. The problematic of the public/private dichotomy, with notions of gabble and gobbledygook, raises not just questions of who could speak where, for whom, and with what authority, questions which consistently and strongly recur throughout the conversations, but questions about the production of the speaking subject, the effect of notions of the self as watertight, the kind of erasures both of self and other that can accrue, the kind of relationship to language that is possible from this perspective. Expressing my ideas of how knowledge is produced, making meaning intersubjectively, problems of dualistic thinking, my understanding of what I believed to be my own circular or spiral, rather than linear, way of knowing met with such radical suspicion from a woman in the second group that I was unable to proceed with recording our first session, despite two preliminary sessions and, I believed, an adequate account of the conversational approach.

Driving home later, tired and frustrated, bursting with all I had been unable to tape and the conviction that it represented a central critical issue, not only in my methodology but in relation to my research question of how to speak the body differently, I stopped to record my impressions.

*It annoyed her immensely to have to be any party to this she said. She choose to talk as simply and directly and clearly as possible, it was an absolute commitment of hers and any other way of communicating was an anathema to her. Although she did say that there were different kinds of communication such as poetry and standing in front of a painting and getting a great sense of another sort of communication - a great buzz that couldn't be spoken and shouldn't even be attempted, belonging to a realm of non-speaking.*

*She talked of her need for to have total control over what she said and how it was received. She would be happy to talk in this way as amongst friends, to me as a friend, provided it wasn't being taped, that it wasn't going out into the world, that it was constituted as having no meaning. Within the group as private friends she would be able to speak in "mad haverings" and that is exactly what they would be, she said - haverings*

women? What sort of corporeality can be spoken that affirms the creative potential of women's desires without devaluing the subjectivity of others; without trivialising or excluding by aestheticising pain, suffering or victimisation, or ignoring the reality that "some bodies **are** desensitized to pain, do eroticize suffering or reproduce disintegrating anxiety?" (Newman, 1990, 21-29).

Aspects of my research practice continued to evolve from these early experiences. Usually before each session I would consciously reflect both on my initial experiences of the previous meeting and on my second responses after listening to the tape of the same event. My digestive practices of early morning walk/talk were critical to the process; the product of this more subconscious mulling-over of recent events, their intersections with current readings and other cultural experiences, being what most vividly informed and shaped my approach each week, within the very loose framework of 'topics' I had set. The conversational nature of our talk also determined how and when particular topics were taken up. The framework was simply talk around each of the five senses, with a potential list of topics which could function as connections between body talk and talk about creative/productive drives and processes. This included - caring for the body, pregnancy, dreams and ideation sources and strategies.

Expressions of pleasure, interest and challenging stimulation were made variously by both groups, or sometimes indirectly a third party would volunteer generous and positive comments about "what they had heard was going on". For both groups there was a sense of some loss when the sessions drew to a close. "What will I do without my weekly pleasure? Marg V. asks, "I look forward to it so much".

By then approximately sixteen hours of conversation has been recorded. One taped session from the local group was unfortunately lost, but, after very challenging transcriptions of most of the remaining multiple voiced tapes, around four hundred pages of transcript were produced. The sheer volume of total transcript material along with the complexity and density of the conversational style became overwhelming in fact and led me to concentrate largely on transcripts from the initial, local group. The dialectical relationship between the groups that I was aware of at the time of taping the conversations nonetheless continues as an enriching, if unelaborated influence in my analysis. By the time the second group talkings were under way, there was something of a time lag between what each group was considering, so that the process was much enriched, for me, by the opportunity to further reflect and relay to some extent responses between the two groups. The traces of movements, displacements, felt differences and similarities both between the groups and between myself and each group offered me many opportunities to reflect on my own previously unacknowledged "place", my prejudices, assumptions and "comings and goings".

to an underlying sense of a 'return', of having previously distanced myself from aspects of our shared past, and had to admit that that distance had been measured in some unacknowledged way by a sense of superiority.

On another, but closely related level, I wanted to use the term to focus positively on the everyday, the ordinary, and particularly the domestic, personal everyday, as a way of revaluing that which was made invisible in the public/private dichotomy. Although I had once been challenged by the criticism and advice commonly given to textile artists to become more concerned with "life's larger issues" if they wanted to be taken seriously, I soon began to suspect that it was not so much the use of the personal, private, particular as such, that constituted a problem, but that a patriarchal culture reserved the right to exclusively define *all* of those terms. Since a postgraduate Women's Studies course with a feminist poststructuralist approach, this had become much clearer but also more complex. That the difficulties for women in having their experience validated, were due in large part to the successful and concealed hierarchising work done by binary oppositions seems to make it even more challenging for me to make theoretical meaning of my experiences. My initial strong resistance, for example, to going to women who already had an obviously securely established public forum for articulation made me wonder whether I was constructing **these** women as somehow particularly representative of the 'domestic' and thereby was actually perpetuating the dichotomy. My recourse to a second, somehow more 'knowable' group only added questions. To what extent was I hierarchising, "othering" in a patriarchal way, constituting the groups as either more or less able, more or less articulate, thereby making exclusions? It seemed I needed to explore, through my own contradictions, the cultural opacity of female experience and meaning, and to ask *what in fact is it that is made/deemed invisible?*

The difficulties of dis/covering underlying social and political assumptions, exploring the social production of knowledge whilst inextricably part of that same society were, says Martin (1989,11) the problem of "how to find myself a vantage point from which to see the water I had lived in all my life".

Often these assumptions are deeply buried, not hidden exactly, but so much a part of our usual experience of the world that they are nearly impossible for a member of the same cultural universe to ferret out (Martin, 1989, 13).

I was already finding that what might be "ferreted out" about my own production was the recurring problematic of contradictions between political and theoretical beliefs and a deeply entrenched desire for some sort of pure positioning that would resolve or transcend these contradictions, a desire not simply for a vantage point but for a position

beyond reproach. Recognising, confronting, moving with and despite this desire has been, and is, one of the hardest aspects for me of this work.

I was, however, quite clear about my use of the familiar in regard to the body. As that which was eminently familiar to us as subjects, a material body seemed also to have been the most taken for granted, knowable, and consequently untheorised aspect of our being. In a long history of Western patriarchal discourse women have been equated by the most brutal reductions with the body and nature, ending up at the bottom of the heap as meaningless immanence to be transcended by male rational thought. "The brute matter of woman's embodiment and the immediacy of her lived experience provide the corporeal substratum upon which man erects himself and from which he keeps a safe distance" (Kirby, 1991, 5).

While explorations into language, discourse and power were exposing the way "meaning and value are produced rather than simply given" (Kirby, 1991, 5) they were also of course introducing me to notions of the subject-in-process, and though, and perhaps also because, I was trying to come to terms with a certain loss as well as the gains implicit in a notion of a thetic self<sup>1</sup>, I was missing more and more the presence of tangible matter in the shape of a body and began to look for it slipping from the scene. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that this preference for "notions metonymically related to the body — subjectivity, self, identity" is understandable; either feminists are very wary, from past contaminations, of dealing more directly with a body so limited by patriarchal discourse, or, in their enthusiasm for the undoubted usefulness of many theoretical paradigms they have also taken on the "supra-corporeal" qualities of those paradigms (Grosz, 1991, 1). The denial by some feminists of a material fleshly body can be absurdly complete, as Vicki Kirby illustrates. Seeing this "improper" body being carefully excised from a discussion of Irigaray at a philosophy conference, Kirby wants to ask "What *does* the nomination "biological or anatomical body" refer to?" and tells us that

the speaker dismissed me with a revealing theatrical gesture. As if to emphasize the sheer absurdity of my question, she pinched herself and commented, "Well, I certainly don't mean *this* body." (Kirby, 1991, 7).

I realise now just **how** entrenched are habits of dualistic thinking, and how well they mesh with my desire to speak unproblematically, even when what I want to speak is my strong sense of my material woman's body as a creative and exciting place. In the attempt to elaborate a notion of the familiar which could somehow include a theory of the body, the embodied selves of the women in the group and my relation to them, I tried to rethink "the everyday" and "ordinary experience" and the way these intertwined with

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<sup>1</sup> The thetic is Kristeva's name for 'moments' or phases of unification when the fundamentally unstable drives and impulses of the body are unified and harnessed to provide organisation, structure and order — the symbolic (Grosz, 1989).

the "exotic", "Otherness" and "subaltern". I tried to think through how debate on a politics of equality based on difference meshed with exciting analyses of the supposed essentialist/non essentialist distinction.

On the way, as I sought the ultimate "vantage point", I uncovered many of my own prejudices but found myself again and again at an apparent dead end, wondering "how to speak without the comfort of a preliminary gesture toward the shared ground of women's common oppression" (Probyn, 1990, 177).

I had imagined I would be able to plan each conversation around one of the senses, and ask nothing apparently more complicated than that we might say whatever we wanted about smelling, touching, tasting, hearing and seeing. I was quite unprepared for the dynamics that defied discrete topics, any sort of ordering or containment, that spilled, criss-crossed, and multiplied, making a life of its own. "I'm amazed at what I hear, the directions you all go in. It's fascinating", says a woman who helped transcribe some of the tapes. A conversation on smell leads to perfumes, relations with husbands, granddaughters and selves, homosexuality, constructing identities and sexualities, exhibitions and installations, gardens and lingering memories of the dead. On the way home a woman stops behind a shed to inhale, sniff starvingly, consume by smell, a newly baked loaf her diet denies her. We talk of painting and cooking, cutting up rabbits and children, depression, dreaming and the difficulty of articulation, of putting ourselves in the picture.

## Mad Haverings

In her statements - at least when she dares speak out - woman retouches herself constantly. She just barely separates from herself some chatter, an exclamation, a half secret, a sentence left in suspense - When she returns to it, it is only to set out again from another point of pleasure or pain. One must listen to her differently in order to hear an "*other meaning*" which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilised. For when "she" says something, it is already no longer identical to anything. Their distinguishing feature is one of contiguity. They touch (upon). And when they wander too far from this nearness, she stops and begins again from 'zero': her body sex organ (Irigaray, 1981, 103).

The logic of this playful dialogue is not determined semantically: the aim is not to translate or interpret, not to find a common meaning - if the meaning of the dance could be written down, there would be no need to go on playing but to find a system of communication where the greatest differences can be expressed simultaneously, and instead of cancelling each other out, be instantaneously transferred from one side to the other (Carter, 1992, 180).

*I dream I am on a train, an old British train where the carriages are linked, and can be traversed, through difficult and unconvincing spaces of swaying rubber and steel. I sense others in the carriage with me, but am aware particularly of a figure seated writing at a desk, with back towards me. I know the figure is male. I understand that this carriage is to do with academia and maleness and that I am leaving. But I find that the sliding door has become concertinaed with folds so thick and close that I have to present my shoulder first and force my way through, sliding, head first it seems, down a chute to where women are waiting for me in the next carriage.*

This is the kind of dream that, had it been recounted to me, I would have had difficulty taking seriously. Something in me would have wanted to problematise it, in the same way that I balked at notions of milk and honey, fluid mother connections I found in some French feminist writings, my own mother connections having long tasted bitter. Indeed, although I must own it and account for it, clichéd as it seemed, I continued to resist its meaning for a long time. Margaret says she was very clear about bringing the maternal into academia, so determined not to ignore or allow to be made invisible the knowledge, the many years of her life as mother. In order to make words for maternal experience I have had to re-enter the world of the maternal, instead of denying and repressing it and am only now learning to move between carriages. This is painful, as I

am still subject to moments of paralysis which threaten to contain me for ever in a space-between; but I suspect that it is a difficult crossing for most, for a multitude of different reasons, and I am only beginning to understand something of my own.

### **Movements**

Chapter beginnings in particular are spaces in between for me. First the pull of the universal position, the vantage point, the urge to leave the embodied moment and cast out for world opinion. Then the knowledge of it's impossibility and the tug of another way of speaking. But this other way is one to which I cannot readily surrender. Nancy Miller writes of "the tension between personal and positional modes of authority in writing", the ways in which they can be "both the same and different" and asks "How can we speak personally to one another and yet not be self centred?" (Miller, 1991, 16). I understand this to be a question of movement, but what kind of movement? The point, Carter has said, is that

any performance that does not make the physical body, and the space contingent on the body's gestures and voice, the central event merely represents the past and as such, has no greater claim to authority than the literary description on which it is based (Carter, 1992,184).

But given that expression of the materiality of bodies was so integral to my conversations with the women, I am now confused that being in another moment makes it so hard to put myself back into the conversations. Margaret's talk of layers in space and time is enormously useful. You have to start by inhabiting a moment, a space. But if you do it anew each time, how do you draw in all the other moments: how do you organise them without adopting the disembodied or bird's eye view? Always the question of how to begin, finding myself at that critical intersection Modjeska describes.

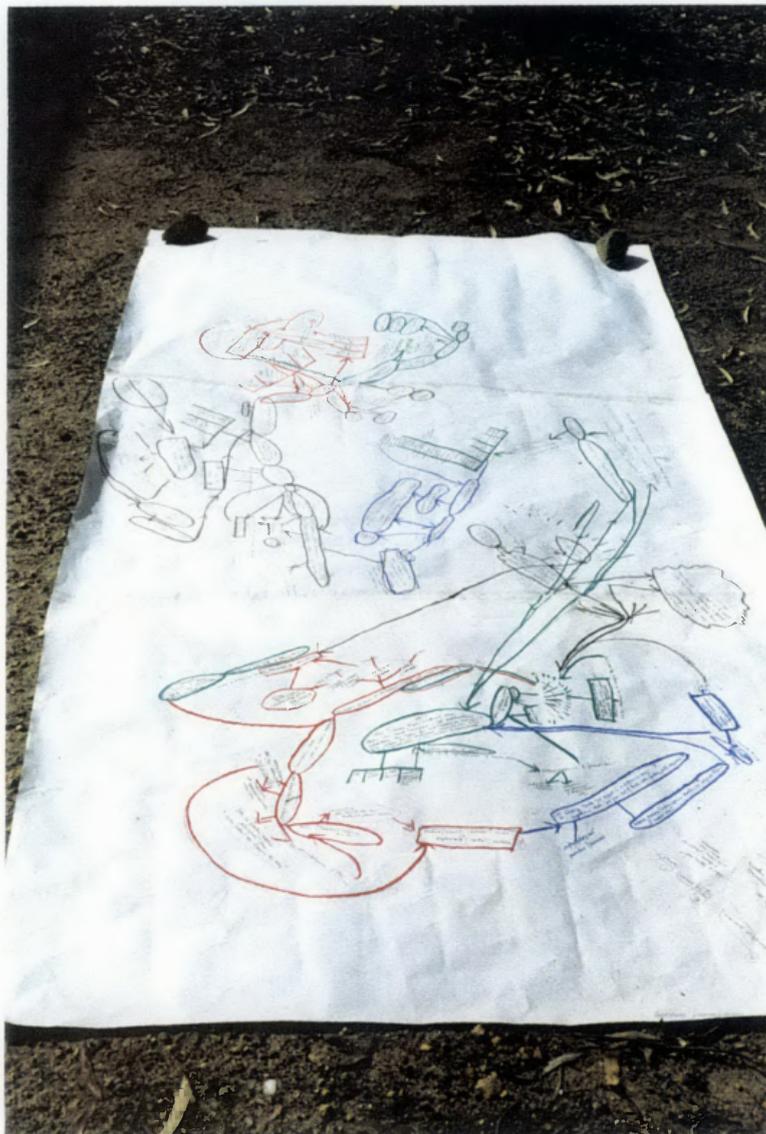
A man writes "I" as he sees, and in writing it is therefore seen. The relationship is clear. When a woman writes "I" she must reconcile seeing with being seen, and negotiate the transposition of the first term to her own use. How is she, the object who is seen, to see herself, both seen and seeing? She cannot assume the same authority when she begins the sentence (Modjeska, 1994, 140).

*Last night I looked at the printout of my last chapter spread on the floor - pristine for a while, until the dog walked over it dripping her menstrual blood in bright gashes, reminding me of all that I feel I have not spoken so far. As I lay in bed I tried to access some of the creative force I felt after working my way through "opposition", complicity and then Trinh's economy of movement and desire that seems altogether different from male economies. Revealing the absence of my desire in phallogocentric texts I have been*

*infatuated with from time to time has been empowering, but now I want to gather in, engage and utilise more wholeheartedly that creative force. And when I awoke this morning I felt I was back at the beginning, looking at the wall with its silk threads and web of images and ideas, feeling that surge of creativity, the desire to make connections - and to be connected? Is this my desire?*

At one point, in order to help give the reader a sense of what the conversations were like, how they felt, I attempted to make some maps. Drawing a careful map of the first conversation, it becomes one not of positions but of movements, so that it seemed more like choreography perhaps, although I have no dance skills. I see the dead ends, and remember how in the early conversations these felt like snubs.

*I reach for words. We are dancing round a black hole, Margaret, I said. We talk of metaphor, though, and no, I do not want to be swallowed into that dark place. Instead I spread huge paper sheets, white litho, choosing the rough side for it's tooth, the way it welcomes and supports the black ink. Soon red, blue and green follow and the pattern, transported, dances across the joined edges.*





I see where my hypothesis is met with resistance, where it is taken up, where it is challenged or simply ignored, left to languish in a brief silence, a refusal to engage, a disinterest. I see from loops and backtracks where I am manoeuvred to a direction of someone's choosing and take up my questioning from that perspective, or where I insist and return again and again in different ways to repute my queries. (Thinking here about something that is almost like trying to approach someone and being fenced off - fenced, that is, in the sense of formal fencing with it's dance like choreography and protected sword tips; it's about two different ways of touching).

the distance, the space between self and interlocuter, is not an irritating reminder of the limitations to knowledge imposed by the enigma of intersubjectivity, but the indispensable ground of two way communication. But for the existence of the other, there would be nothing to do or say, no event, no song and dance (Carter, 1992, 176).

Drusilla Modjeska speaks on the radio one day of her recent work, exploring the song and dance from the perspective of the female "I", which is also a problem of the eye, "a problem of sight and language for women as writers and artists". She thrills me with images of eyes on skewers, eyes on a plate, and three wild women, saints who have plucked out their own eyes, a passionate gendered slant on Carter. The saints, rejecting not sight, nor desire, itself, Modjeska suggests, but "the desire to be object to another", each have their sight restored, although not perfectly in the case of Odilia, "a dumpy saint with the figure of a middle-aged woman". When God returns her eyes they are huge and she must bear them in her arms, at her bosom; frog-like eyes, cradled like a child.

*What kind of spectacle is this that holds me so powerfully at the point of the grotesque? Is that my mother's voice, as Russo<sup>1</sup> recalls, tut-tutting disapproval, of excess and unshaved armpits, invisible boundaries crossed. "Who do you think you are?" Yet I cannot help think also of her own 'excessive' breasts, heavy, pendulous. Though sometimes contained in a garment of no pleasure that rubs raw at times, that needs my help to "do up", they come to mind now as my mother lies in a warm bath. She lies, floats. She is very still, except to re arrange, with some pleasurable whimsy, it seems, a warm square of washcloth, draped first on her belly, then on a breast.*

It is, in fact, a very real material threat to her own eyesight, and a profound fear of blindness, that forms the occasion for Modjeska's reflection on both a specular economy and an economy of movement. Being alone with her fear and illness in a space of

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Russo begins an exploration of the discourse of carnival and the category of the grotesque body associated with it, by recalling the "harsh matronizing phrase" - "She is making a spectacle of herself". Her account of how this discourse operates resonates strongly with my own experience.

complete stillness, (movement was dangerous), feeling the extent of her withdrawal, Modjeska realises both "the exhaustive, exhausting monitoring that is made of us wherever we go" and that her fear is as much about solitude and ways of being as it is of physical blindness.

I came to see that what is required of us at such times is not performance - that endless dance of display - but the simple task of being. In a world in which movement is equated with achievement, and pain with failure, in which established creeds have emptied out into stale rhetorics, the question that was put to me was how to live with any bigness of spirit when the soil from which it must flourish had shrunk to a small handful of loam (Modjeska, 1994, 119).

For Modjeska this experience "remained dark brown down there in the tunnel, and damp"

At best it was as if, with my body rather than with my eyes, I could sense its shape, lift my arms safely towards the leaves, push my fingers into the loamy soil to find they weren't immediately snapped off.

I began to find ways of existing there, that's all, each day made up of small repeated gestures, memories and sensations to which I became attuned as I was to the symptoms I read with the precision I once gave to books (Modjeska, 1994, 118).

*I wonder if those are Modjeska's fingers in the soil, or mine, or my mother's? This is not the first time Modjeska has returned me, "far away and long ago", to my childhood, to rhododendrons and damp earth; fed me morsels of memory - gardens and artists and orchards, and a mother undeniably present yet not somehow visible.*

*We are sitting, my mother and I, on small, rush seated stools, either side of the bushes, bent low, picking blackcurrants, redcurrants. I can feel the rush twine through thin fabric, discomfort and satisfaction mingled, shared. The weighing and washing, calculating, comparisons with last year, - mounds of glistening ruby-red and black, evidence of our joint labour. Yet I cannot bring her into focus. Is this another displacement by the paternal, I ask Margaret, because what struggles all the time is that it's my father's garden. I've always thought of it as his - what's made least visible is my mother's part.*

*I call my sister, my seven years younger sister, on the other side of Australia, to talk of gardens. Rhododendrons, she said, right away, and picking blackcurrants on those little stools - one had a red seat, the other brown. Mum used to put on Beethoven's Pastoral and leave the dining room window open while we picked. "You'll wear that record out",*

*Dad said. And we walk round the garden, my sister and I, naming as we go - lavender, (and alyssum, don't you just have to have that too, though it's not so easy here), buddleia, lilac, aquilegia, hollyhocks, red hot pokers and foxgloves down the drive (I was never, ever, to touch them, they're poisonous, you know); and the nests, keeping a tally, on the eggs, the nestlings, the fledglings; marigolds and daffodils (but never in the house? Oh, yes, don't you remember putting pansies in that special pansy vase, the horseshoe? Kate Llewellyn had one just the same, in "The Waterlily").*

*Some knowledge, beyond words, must be buried very deep. Goosebumps all over when, looking for the china dish in Llewellyn, and not finding it, I catch a reference to the Pool of Siloam. My mother's favourite hymn, I chose it for her funeral. I never knew the story, that the pool got its name from the place where the blind man was sent after Christ daubed his eyes with spit and clay. He was told to wash in that pool and as he did, sight returned. There's a fleeting, painful doubt, a momentary but quite distinct ripple through a long held notion of my mother's martyrdom and her figure blurs uneasily with both Modjeska and her blinded saints.*

*Peas, my sister says, shelling peas, buckets of them. There we are, shelling peas, and we cannot see our mother, in the kitchen, at the stove, only the food arrives - cauliflower cheese, we chorus. And raspberries. Raspberries, raspberry jam. This is different. I had forgotten the taste, stirring the pot, the clear taut cellophane covers, and the berries themselves, now there before me in absolute, disturbing, clarity. I am afraid to describe them, they are so delicate, so perfect, naked on a plate, their outside dimples a velvet bloom beyond any pink or red, the cupped inside a darker, deeper juice. A sprinkle of sugar circles the edge of the plate, to coax the worms out.*

*It was a beautiful summer evening, the night before she died, my sister tells me. "I was playing on the front lawn, while they both weeded that long bed beside the drive. They were both there, bending and weeding. It was a lovely night". And strangely I begin to see her too.*



Mothers' Gardens



Not only does Modjeska give me a body, and a specifically female body, but one which clearly demonstrates the possibility of being and doing, being and speaking. In an exquisite example of Drew Leder's ecstatic/recessive body<sup>2</sup> Modjeska elaborates the phenomena of the painful, ill or diseased body "emerging from disappearance to become a thematic object", exerting "a power that reverberates throughout the phenomenological field, shifting our relations both to the world and to ourselves (Leder, 1990, 79).

My own body becomes the object not just of perception and interpretation  
but of action.

Instead of just acting *from* the body, I act *toward* it (Leder, 1990, 79).

Leder's project is committed to explicating the historically oppositional and negative nature of that action, where "Insofar as the body seizes our awareness, it can come to appear "Other" and opposed to the self" (Leder, 1990, 70), and while Modjeska never underestimates the threat of "*dissolution, the borderline between being and not being*" (Modjeska, 1994, 122), the relationship she unfolds between body and self, and ultimately "Other", is far from oppositional, generative rather than disabling or destructive.

Elsbeth Probyn has talked about the complex work that needs to be done on "care of the self", a self "already there", in order to balance the Western epistemological emphasis on "Knowing thyself" such that both the epistemological and the ontological can be articulated together (Probyn, 1993). It is just such a shift that Modjeska effects for me in her writing, taking me beyond the "figure of interdiction", the one who asks "who do you think you are", to a much earlier and unexpressed maternal figure, to a space, a relationship, practices which allow embodied selves to come into being and "being to be thought".

At a recent women's spirituality conference Chi-Kwang also made the body powerfully present. She had spoken earlier, in a formal address, about her fifteen years experience as a Korean nun, and of a recent year long solitary retreat, but later her words flowed in response to a question of the relationship between spirituality and aspects of daily being as material and bodily as menstruation.

*When I had started to settle down very much more in myself and my life,  
accepting all my difficulties and accepting myself as a nun, this much fuller  
feeling as a woman, I started to feel much more wholesome about myself and I*

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<sup>2</sup>In "The Absent Body", Drew Leder argues that "certain modes of disappearance are essential to the body's functioning". In the case of the surface, ecstatic body, opening and projecting onto the world via the senses entails both a necessary backgrounding of other bodily capacities and an inaccessibility to the site from which one projects. Similarly many vital processes of the interior body are unavailable to consciousness and control, and must remain largely hidden away, in depth, to protect their functioning.

*started to take much more responsibility about my life in many very simple ways.*

*In Korea we don't use meds or pads, we use cloths. And the cloths are very natural, and the blood washes very easily from them, so you become very close to your own menstruation blood, because you wash, you smell it, you feel it, it's right there with you. Getting to know the smell, you know, whether my body had enough iron, or didn't have enough nutrition in it, just from my menstruation. And it doesn't only go through this body, it goes into the motion I am putting into the land around my hermitage, into my life, even into how I am making a fire. The water is very important because my hermitage has very little water, and I have to make fires every day, so the fire is very important for me. I had to take much more of an interest in the basic elements and this started to become a part of myself, you know there wasn't so much of a duality, me and the earth, or me and the air or me and the fire, we were all starting to become friends and become one.*

A retreat of another kind, the annual family holiday, is brought vividly to mind, and Chi Kwang's words flow over and beyond the difficulty, the unspoken tension that filled up the space of supposed rest and play along with my mother's incessant bleeding and diarrhoea. Her words echo, embody, Gagnon's daily deaths and bodily flows.

That's why we can only speak in a loosened tongue, why we are unable to utter anything besides what flows out, and is dissolved, and knows that what obliterates it from all power at the same time conserves it in men's memories (Gagnon, 1981, 180).

And Thea Gaia, hearing Chi -Kwang, speaks also, of the Goddess as "She who bleeds yet does not die".

Both Modjeska and Chi Kwang re/mark a tension between self and other that is bound up with the materiality of the body and yet defies conventional notions of separation and connection, or linear economies. Each in different ways affirms a body knowledge and their specific materiality and equally the paradoxical importance of other(s) with whom one can be.

*Frogs croaking after the rain, after a long drought. Me running round the garden to check the beans and seeds, to see how amazingly revitalised everything is, even plants I had judiciously, carefully watered with our diminishing supply. Little blades of green pushing up noticeably and the tomato plants must have grown about a foot in these last few days of gentle rain and overcast skies. But most magic, I*

*discover on a late evening walk in the paddock a flush of mushrooms - pushing up at the base of dusty dry tussocks and amongst the horse manure crumbled like mown grass. Here and there in the barest patches they stand bright white and proud, but most of the ones I pick at first come with a tangle of fibre and clinging particles. Those in the open are easier of course, but I can be obsessive, on my knees, seeking out the brown white knobs in the fading light, realising so many, many, large and small are almost invisible in the grass. It is nearly nightfall and I realise just how many there are. A desire to pick and pick as if there might never be another; as if I could not bear the waste, as if I am a little mad, and in this madness I am pleasing my mother - trying to win her approval, she who counted the daffodils each spring and gave sixpence for the first swallow.*

my mOther calls me  
through the dusk,<<youuu-whoou-Betsy-youuu-whoou...>>

how do I (w)right you  
you I have protected myself from  
for so long

you were my mOther  
so foreign mater-: <<matter>>  
though the world said the opposite  
in every book & greeting card  
Moder/Mother

As in the case of Father, the substitution of the *th* for the earlier *d* dates from the beginning of the sixteenth c.>>

and what was lost with the d?

D:<<Corresponding letters- Sanskrit dwr, Celtic duir, Hebrewdaleth,- meant the Door of birth, death, or sexual paradise... in India it was the Yoni Yantre, or yantra of the vulva.>>

<<d>>  
sensation of  
coming up through the earth

self-possession

<<th>>  
sensation of fragility  
energy going out from the mouth hanging in air

waiting for someone to take it  
(Warland, 1990)

*It takes me nearly an hour to clean only some of the mushrooms. I lay three towels on the floor and carefully spread out the remainder, stems up, until I have time to deal with them. They look wonderful, if daunting, a sea of frilled gills, delicate pinks and soft browns and some gone almost black, all sizes. Some are bound to disintegrate before I get to them, a gentle collapse of too much moisture or a host of threadlike honeycombing grubs. I make soup, wonderful soup, sorry that tonight there is no-one else home to share it.*

### **Mushroom Soup**

A delicious and easy-to-make soup. Use a strong, well flavoured stock.

Serves six.

3oz (90g) butter

4 shallots, finely chopped

1lb (½ kg) button mushrooms, thinly sliced

Juice of ½ small lemon

2 tablespoons flour

1½ pints (750ml) chicken or vegetable stock

6 tablespoons dry sherry

½ pint (250ml) single cream

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley, to garnish

Paprika or cayenne pepper.

Heat the butter in a fairly large saucepan. Add the shallots and fry, until they are golden but not brown. Stir in the mushrooms. Squeeze the lemon juice over them (this helps to preserve the colour of the mushrooms) and cook over moderate heat for 2 to 3 minutes until the mushrooms have softened slightly.

Sprinkle the flour over the mushrooms and blend it into the butter. Stir for 1 minute longer over low heat. Stir in the stock and bring it to the boil. Reduce the heat and simmer the soup for 15 minutes. Stir in the sherry and the cream. Season to taste with salt and pepper and bring the soup to just below boiling point.

Stir in the parsley. Sprinkle each portion with a dash of cayenne or paprika before serving.

Last night I asked Lou to dinner. She has come to the country again to do some more drawing and we have evolved a very comfortable way of meeting, either over her art or my food, and usually both.

The first of summer's meals outside, it is jewfish cutlets, a crisp bright salad straight from the garden and little patties of spinach and potato. I am consciously pleased how quick, easy and pleasurable it is to prepare. We need candles by the time we get to the fruit, mango and honey dew, pawpaw and orange, sour cream. The cats are hovering hopefully like the moths and mosquitoes but we talk and talk and talk on.

I was telling Lou how useful I had found Winnicott's and Stern's developmental theory, and feminist accounts of it, to ways of being with the other, my problems of writing, and my ongoing conversation with (and about) my mother. Lou wants to make changes to her self and her ability to relate to others, especially passionately, with desire, and says she does not do the work to be with others, the work that mothers do as part of bringing a sense of selves to their babies, (and often their partners too), the work Winnicott describes.

In elaborating my understanding of the theories I say that how the mother child relationship goes is critical. If the mother is there in a variety of ways not only **for** the child but **with** the child - development of a sense of self takes place unproblematically. The mother is with the child not only in a holding/nurturing protective but also playful way. She is there to play with the child in complimentary activities that require the other to complete an action that, for example, brings about an affective state both share - joyful exuberance, laughter, satisfaction, pleasure, fun. The mother can be there to change the state of the other, not straightforward libidinal drives, though these may be at the very root, but lulling to sleep, bringing to laughter, and so on. All these need to take place in a space of play. The mother can be with the child in a way that allows the child to be alone in the presence of the mother, to develop its sense of self, neither in separateness nor connectedness but in a state that undoes the binary opposition itself, a space that touches and includes both, a space of paradox.

By entering the space of play one enters the paradox. One does not have to choose between child and mother, one can be both. One can mother oneself in that space of play to mend, rework, re-allow aspects which may not have gone well at first.

The difficulty is perhaps in entering that space. Lou and I talk of this, but, I say, we are NOT totally dysfunctional, far from it, there are aspects of our selves we feel really good and confident about. Perhaps these are areas where things went really well, or at least well enough, the particularities of our mothers' preferences and interests, their own areas of well being, will show through here<sup>3</sup>. And if we have a sense of being whole enough in these areas perhaps we should treat them as a safe place, a place from which to take further risks, a place in which to set up another space of play.

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<sup>3</sup>Winnicott's concept of the 'good enough' Mother, dealing with the provision of an "average expectable environment" of intimate nurturing and play, also includes and requires a capacity of the mother to gradually disillusion the child, to reveal her own autonomy and the child's lack of omnipotence.

I tell Lou about the mushrooms, about the mother of the pressed flowers and the first daffodil and the prize for the biggest mushroom and the most blackberries, the counting of nestlings each year. We talk again of my appalling need for her approval. Was that dreadful memory of being told I was so bad, so wicked, being so humiliated and damaged, was that incident the first time I demonstrated independence, my own desire, Lou asks.

Laughing we decide I should ceremoniously throw all the mushrooms in the compost. Margaret tells me later, as we talk of my excesses, of the Navaho people growing, claiming, excess "for the Gods" and I remember teaching my weaving students a Navaho belief that every weaving should have a flaw, a perfect piece would only offend the Gods. I wonder about such a culture which offers so gentle a community caring for the individual and her idiosyncrasies. Margaret asks if I can retrieve the origins of the "good" food stuff, but good memories are much harder to come by. What seems to stick in memory, or comes to surface, are matters one needs to attend to in some way, the unfinished or corrosive bits.

*Memory*, goes back to the Indo-European root *smer-*, which the word *mourn* is also derived from (Warland, 1990, 47).

*12th October*

*It is difficult to start work today, I feel so disoriented somehow. Some fairly mechanical work helped but as I was copying text a thought from somewhere else arrived. I am perhaps a fairly embodied being. I feel pleased with this thought. How did I come to be like this? Could I write to my father and connect with him? Of course not, what a stupid question. And suddenly there it was, a huge gaping grief filled hole, my mother dead for twenty years I want my mother where are you why can't I reach you talk to you touch you.*

*I want to make a mother coat and get back inside her and start over again.*

I remember my excitement at this image, the energy it provided just as I was about to start the conversations with the women, and the thought, apparently incidental, that I might also ask the women what moved them and how they responded to such energies. Fragments of the coat in progress, blueprinted images of my mother, became unplanned starts to conversations as our talk of smell and touch triggered memories and multiple possibilities for representation.

Some experiences are inchoate, in that we simply do not understand what we are experiencing, either because the experiences are not storyable, or because we lack the performative and narrative resources, or because the vocabulary is lacking (Bruner, 1986, 6).

But it was only a few weeks after we began our discussions that one of the women, Neen, gave me the following note in which she reflected on our conversations.

No matter what the subject, ultimately we come back to talking about our children! It's as if its some kind of life-raft that keeps us afloat. The only place where we can feel important to ourselves - of being unique. We seem to feel more comfortable with this subject, less threatened by it, than personal thoughts about our bodies and our minds. Somewhere in the process of marriage and bearing children we have lost contact with the most important thing in our lives - Ourselves.

Where are we, as women, located in a space between our mothers and our children?

### **The First Conversation**

The classical association of femininity with materiality can be traced to a set of etymologies which link matter with *mater* and *matrix* (or the womb) and, hence, with a problematic of reproduction (Butler, 1993, 31).

### **Reproduction**

Childbirth and labour stories had emerged as a charged topic in our preliminary discussions and I had heard the talk of not being believed, listened to, not 'mattering', as women being made absent from the scene of their own labour. The sense of grievance, long held and now made evident resonated with me as both resistance to disempowering (medical) discourse and as unresolved personal pain. As such it was very powerful, both appealing and yet disturbing. Perhaps this is enough to account for both the considerable ideological fervour *and* a certain academic/theoretical distance with which I broached the subject and the first conversation, and which I felt the need to justify when I first tried coming to terms with the data. With motherhood and fertility the closest we have come to an image of feminine activity (Benjamin, 1986, 83), I took "reproduction" to be a mutually safe starting point for an attempt to speak the body differently.

The assumption of any mutuality however was premature to say the least, and the process of negotiating our common ground proved to be more challenging, complex, at times demoralising and ultimately more exciting than I had ever imagined. I am enormously grateful for the insistent speaking of many of the women, for helping to

teach me, in a spirit of self love, to be amazed at just what we are all able to say. It is strange to acknowledge the extent of the pleasure in now being able to speak both of my expectations and resistances to them when in the actual first talk they were experienced as such difficulties.

I began by suggesting that there was perhaps little scope for expressing women's agency or creativity in the language commonly used around reproduction. Talk about what meanings were attached to the term 'reproduction' itself was lively at first, but as soon as I tried to relate that talk to "actually having a baby" it was made clear to me that the theoretical start had already alienated some.

*Shirley:* I couldn't go into in depth like you do. I mean its a bit over my head the way you talk, but

I mean those things would never enter my mind. I mean, I don't know, you're just a female and I always thought, well I hope I fall in love with somebody and, er, have some beautiful children and that's exactly how it went. And, um, for me in my mind, that's, that's it!

*Laura:* yeah

*Shirley:* I'm happy with my lot

A subsequent shift to much more embodied and positive pregnancy talk still brought a challenging combination of responses. I had thought we could recall some specific body memories, suggesting the unthreatening subject of taste and smell, but the responses were polarised into either the "fantastically well" or the "horribly sick". I believed that the pregnant body could be a critical site for making visible the way women live their bodies as both objects *and* subjects. My comment on the profound, overwhelming need for sleep and rest in the very early days of a pregnancy twenty years ago was met with the following response.

*Sandi:* you should slow down.

*Mavis:* It's Nature's way of telling you what to do. *You* should listen to Nature.

*Laura:* and listen to your body

*Mavis:* Well that's Nature, one and the same thing.

It is impossible to duplicate the irritated, reprimanding tone in which this was spoken, but the difficulty that was present, the distance between various selves, was confirmed shortly afterwards when a latecomer arrived and was brought up to date.

*Rita:* Hi Neen

*Laura:* We had just started off talking about mothers and whether reproduction was the right kind of word to describe actually producing a

baby; whether there is something kind of a little bit questionable about the term reproduction?

*Neen:* yeah, mm you could think of a lot of words, couldn't you!

*multiple voices*

*Mavis:* Now this is a serious place!

*Neen:* waste of time !

*multiple voices*

*Laura:* a waste of time ooh!

*multiple voices*

*Laura:* its all right you can be as funny as you like

*multiple voices*

*Mavis:* Yes, well, we've established that it's hormonal change in your body that, - altered metabolism. That its Nature's way of telling you to slow down and, um, to nurture the foetus. Well, where do you go, where do you want to go from that, then?

These aspects of the first conversation initially so overshadowed other intriguing comments that in order to do justice to what now seems a very complex piece of talk some unravelling is required. I had felt reprimanded for putting forward the notions I did; had felt there was an attempt to contain me, and others who transgressed limits, and bring us back into correct thinking, and I was experiencing the strong presence of discourses of romantic love and Mother Nature as personal failures even before we had hardly begun, and whether my talk was abstract or specific. How can I understand this?

Were those resistances a response to my clumsy ideological privileging of the maternal?

Although feminist philosophers have traditionally sought to show how the body is figured as feminine, or how women have been associated with materiality (whether inert - always already dead - or fecund - ever living and procreative) where men have been associated with the principle of rational mastery, Irigaray wants to argue that in fact the feminine is precisely what is excluded in and by such a binary opposition. In this sense when and where women are represented within this economy is precisely the site of their erasure (Butler, 1993, 37).

On several levels my early talk seems to make exclusions. The work "to produce a female image or symbol that would counterbalance the monopoly of the phallus in representing desire" fails again, if I appear to take the female imaginary to mean "the prerogative of the maternal over the female" (Irigaray, 1981, 104). My rather abstract and theoretical beginning alienates some of the women and my effort to undo the word reproduction takes us farther than ever from a body of creativity and desire.

Moving, and being moved, to a more embodied way of talking was a first step in our negotiations, a step towards a more productive relationship. But if I at least had some choice of discourse, did these women?

I ask Lizzie, who has worked locally as a "family counsellor", what she thought it was like for a woman living in Coonabarabran. Even the name of my job said so much, she recounts, in any other place the job would clearly have been that of a sexual assault counsellor. In a small community where violence is played out quite openly it is not only those directly participating who normalise it. The other part of the community doesn't really believe violence is happening, doesn't want to know, and even when confronted with it, forced eventually to deal with it, they still will not, or cannot, name it. Country "independence" is so deceptive too, she says - the way women dress, move about and work. It seems they can do many of the things men do, and I see them in their shirts and blue jeans, but it doesn't mean what I first thought. Underneath, the dependency is still there.

In this context I have to consider not only what stories are available to the women, but the strength with which they are spoken, the extent to which they must function as perhaps their only negotiating tool. Emily Martin's excellent cultural analysis of reproduction (1989) documents many of the metaphors of absence and alienation in medical science and while she too looks for potential sites of resistance, not only in the pregnant body, but in menstruation and menopause, the work of reading against the grain is obviously complex. The specificities of race, class and occupation form the trace lines for her work in comparing "cultural grammar" with ordinary women's accounts of their body processes, but the pervasiveness of "lack" and fragmentation in women's self and body images also brings us to aspects of the lived body which reinforce or lend themselves to dualistic philosophies. Martin refers to Paul Schilder's Gestalt psychology. Schilder had commented

One would like to say that we lose the unity of the body only under special pathological conditions, but we also have to remember how much the feeling of our body varies under normal conditions.

We build the picture of our body again and again (Martin, 1989, 75).

Drew Leder's work, in *The Absent Body*, is focussed on understanding the several ways in which the body is both normally and necessarily "absent" from conscious experience *and*, in certain situations, both pathological and normal, clearly experienced as absent, or *apart from* "the self".

When my embodiment radically diverges from the habitual, dys appearance is likely to result. When sick, the body changes, exhibiting novel sensations and altered capacities. In the face of such transformation I can no longer take the body for granted. This dysappearance by virtue of

temporal discontinuity can also characterize normal phases of life (Leder, 1990, 89).

The assumption of a novel body renders problematic what was previously tacit (90).

Leder is deeply concerned with the way these phenomena of disappearance ("the body forgotten in it's seamless functioning") and dysappearance ("brought to thematic awareness at times of breakdown or problematic operation") can together "lend seeming support" to "onto-valuational" Cartesian style oppositions of mind and body. The very notion of immaterial reason, and it's reification, is made possible by the structure of bodily disappearance, he argues, and is supported by the sense of body as threat, readily suggested by the experiences of dys-appearance which range from normal changes to pain and sickness, to the ultimate mode of dysappearance, death.

It is from the very immediacy of the life-world that this dualism is first brought forth and by which it is continually sanctioned (Leder, 1990, 147).

Our cultural belief in the disassociation of mind from body leads to an increase of disassociative practices; we are encouraged to abandon sensorimotor awareness for abstracted mathematical or linguistic forms. This in turn intensifies the day-to-day experience of mind as disembodied, confirming the initial cultural premise (152).

Could we negotiate across our various differences *and* across these absences of the body? How are we, as women, to find ourselves, speak ourselves, when we are absented from our own discourses?

### **Pregnancy**

There was talk of putting on weight, "blooming" and feeling "on top of the world" and then talk of being sick and incapacitated. It was this 'sick' talk, however, that gave Sandi a context to move to labour and delivery, saying she must have been mad to have had another baby after her first experience.

*Sandi:* Yes, I must have been mad.

*Norma:* Every time you say that, but I had four - and I didn't really have to have any of them I suppose.

*Barbara:* Well I had two normal births and three caesareans, and a lot of people feel that they're cheated by a caesarean, but I never felt cheated. I was awake for the last one, and it was fantastic, 'cos my mind was really clear, and I felt part of the whole thing

*Sandi:* Oooh.. I don't think that would turn me on, being awake during a caesarean.

*Barbara:* I wanted a mirror on the ceiling. They wouldn't let me have one!  
*laughter.*

Caught between Mavis's strong statements these powerful glimpses of desiring subjects were almost lost to me at the time. In the doubled images of mirror one sees oneself in the act of production, re-enveloping the self. Perhaps I was responding to the sexual connotations, being turned on, when I turned to the pleasure of pregnancy on Mavis's challenge - "where do you want to go from there, then?", and Norma's casual comment from above obviously became an important cue for others to speak.

Still within a context of sickness and recalling the drama of events, there is no mistaking the positivity with which these women speak, even a sort of competitiveness?

*Neen:* I loved being pregnant

*Barbara:* So did I

*Neen:* I could have been eternally pregnant. I absolutely loved it.

?: me too

*Barbara:* me too

*Neen:* totally, totally fulfilled

?: Yep, me too

*Norma:* That's what my mother said, and I had the worst experience, as far as, for nine months

*multiple voices*

*Neen:* I was in bed with the second one and with a three year old, you know.

*multiple voices*

*Norma:* You weren't sick, though.

*Neen:* Oh yes. I was. Morning noon and night sickness it's called.

?: And I was in bed with two prem babies

*Neen:* absolutely adored it, loved it. I had nine pregnancies to get three children.

Is it pleasure too? I believe I am not the only one asking this question, as there seems to be some reflection on what it is that drives or fuels this fierce commitment.

*Neen:* I was still clucky until after I had a hysterectomy. Even after that I was going to foster a child and I thought - I'm out of my brain.

*Sandi:* Yes I think you are out of your brain!

*laughter*

*Neen:* a 12 year old, I almost fostered a 12 year old

*Mavis:* you love children.

*Barbara:* I do. I did occasional fostering.

*Sandi:* I don't mind other people's children, but I don't particularly like my own.

*Barbara:* And I don't feel, I don't feel any emotional love for them. But to me that's not just—love's not just a feeling anyway, love's an action.

*Neen:* It's not, it's not having a baby that makes you a mother, it's nurturing a child.

*Norma:* I agree wholeheartedly

*Neen;* whether, if you adopt a baby it's not yours biologically, but it's rearing a child that makes you a mother.

*Norma:* When they first put this little baby into my arms, you get so flat sort of thing. You don't feel any love for it for probably weeks really, until you, it's, it's up all night and

*laughter*

*Barbara:* and then you definitely love it!

*Mavis:* That's what makes you love it. I think nurturing it makes you love it

*Neen:* But the brain blocks it out.

Touching critically on material practices, practices of nurturing, love as an action, this extraordinary piece of talk resonates with Iris Young's work. I return to her essay "Breasted Experience" (1990), where developing her phenomenology of the pregnant body even further, she makes the practice of breast feeding and the breasts themselves the site of visibility for a mother-woman sexuality. Kelly Oliver succinctly summarises

According to Young, a woman's breasted pleasure is irreducibly her own. If the mother takes pleasure in the caresses and fluids exchanged with her child while nursing, then man cannot possess women's sexuality. Young's account of a mother's sexual pleasure opens up the possibility of women articulating other pleasures, pleasures forbidden within patriarchal conception of motherhood and female sexuality (Oliver, 1991, 220-221).

What Young develops, Oliver says, is an erotics of care, where women are not forced to choose between pursuing selfish pleasures and giving ourselves and our pleasures to others, nurturer *or* sexual being. "Crashing the border" in Young's terms means affirming women "can have it all".

While this talk by no means crashes the border, nor does it seem to conform to a maternal that is simply phallic in nature, a role that Irigaray says was assigned to woman long ago by mythology, a role in which "she is allowed a certain social power as long as she is reduced, with her own complicity, to sexual impotence" (Irigaray, 1981, 104). For the moment, as a group, we make use of the discourses available to us in the most positive way we can - to form links between individuals, to extract whatever pleasure *and* power they offer a subject, and to mark out a space that will function as mutual ground for further departures.

Neen seems to summarise our pregnancy talk by decisively turning around the constraints of social expectations and speaking herself as desiring subject.

*Neen:* But I *wanted* children. I suppose that's, it happened, because it was expected, socially

*Barb:* No that's right

*Mavis:* Well I had a child because of love. I mean I wanted, I wanted a baby.

*Norma:* Sometimes you just *want* a baby

*Neen:* It's the *woman* who *really* wants the child

*Mavis:* Yes that's it

*Neen:* because she ultimately has it. Doesn't matter whether her husband says lets, its the woman who has the child.

*Norma:* I don't suppose there would have been any children only for me

And in this reshaping of discourses old body memories are brought vividly into the present.

*Shirley:* when my children were all born I just thought it was a miracle each time that

*Sandy:* Yes it is

*Norma:* Yes, I enjoyed the birth, I just didn't like the nine months before!

*Shirley:* I'd look at them and think - did I do that? -It's perfect! Fancy me! Did I do that? And you think you're the only one in the whole world and then you've really got to talk to yourself and think of course you're not the only one in the whole world, you know, there's millions do it, but at the moment

*Laura:* But it doesn't stop you feeling that way, though, does it?

*X?:* It's a miracle

*Norma:* You really feel that you're the only person who's ever done it.

*X?:* the only one, yes

*Norma:* It's probably the most wonderful time in your life

*X?:* It is, it is. It's true too

*Neen:* It would have to be the closest to heavenly grace I've ever been.

I don't need to intellectualise or search for connection, for every detail, seen and felt, of a concentrated moment from the past, is instantly recognisable in their talk. I am simply standing at a bus stop, taking my new born child alone into town, out into the world for the first time. I can remember the moment exactly, of looking around and knowing I was anybody's equal.

*Laura:* I've just had a baby! And I just felt that nothing, nobody, could do anything to me because I was really powerful and, you know, clever!

Yes!

*Laura:* Clever! really really clever..

*Mavis:* And that's how you should be.

The women's talk here could hardly be described as "poetic" in the traditional sense - and yet their talk reverberated for me in much the same way as Bachelard describes the poetic image.

The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche. It is not an echo of the past. On the contrary, through the brilliance of an image, the

distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away.

The poetic image has an entity and a dynamism of its own; it is referable to a direct *ontology* (Bachelard, 1964, xii).

Perhaps it is this ontology rather than any poetics per se that is so recognisable to me; an intensity of experience that is unmistakable yet so extraordinarily hard to speak outside the dominant categories. The "flare-up of being in the imagination", the sudden image, that Bachelard calls the poetic act is uncannily like the impulse to creativity and production that I had hoped to ask questions of with the women.

Now, another way of reading makes me think more and more about high drama, about performance, the ways women inhabit available discourses as well as their bodies. As we move from childbirth to discuss premenstrual experiences I can understand that, performed with idiosyncratic style, the discourse of the neurotic premenstrual woman can unsettle its own economy, bending back its excesses to ask questions, highlight, elsewhere. Reading differently, I can see clearer ways of organising the data, allowing an agency and a pleasure in temporary pattern making that also changes the meaning possible.

### **Premenstrual**

Whilst the women are looking over the comments I have handed out, Mavis begins to reflect on the status quo.

*Mavis:* And of course it's only lately they, doctors and the male gender, recognise menstrual stress

*Laura:* Yes

*Mavis:* Before that, it was just whims and neurotic

*Laura:* yes, neurotic women! Yes.

And Neen demonstrates the double edged effect of a dominant medical and cultural model of pre menstrual "stress", which while validifying a certain experience also contains it in the negative, reinscribing old tactics of constituting woman and her body in need of protection or special treatment.

*Neen:* I remember my son asking me, he was a teenager, what was wrong with his sister next to him, who was always an angel, and I mentioned that she'd started menstruation and she was inclined to be very bitchy at this time. She was! We all are! And a couple of weeks later another sister started and he turned round and said, why can't you all get together in one week?  
*laughter*

We hear of a discourse which universalises (we all are!) and essentialises, equating women with bodies that are rendered imperfect, unreliable and vulnerable in ways that men's bodies are not. There is no mention of hormone effects on teenage boys, and here the son appears as spectator outside the constraints of such a discourse.

And what questions about what "bodies" could otherwise be and mean are covered over with the view that Neen adds— that synchronisation, the phenomenon of women coming to menstruate at the same time, is probably "to get us all over our bitchiness in one time"?

*Neen:* And then the opposite end of the scale is amenorrhoea, lack of it, like in concentration camps, women didn't menstruate at all. Or if you go through stress, any particular amount of stress, because I've done that, and you just don't have it at all!

The load of negative cultural meaning this particular aspect of female bodies has to carry reflects the double bind that is posited for women in patriarchal discourse in general. Present or absent, her menstruation is a critical cultural marker. Madonna or whore (or angel to bitch, as Neen describes) amount to the same fear.

*Neen:* It was just always such a horror stretch - those ten days before you went into the horror of it. On top of it, as I said, I found that I could have a drink of alcohol and not be affected by it prior to menstruation, and then go quite out of my tree, with a glass of wine during it.

Neen's capacity to perform this account so vividly and clearly is so valuable when I think of the other possible trajectories that medical/scientific discourse constructs. While the definition of a general premenstrual syndrome is still being contested, the long association with madness, a logical extension to bodily frailty in patriarchal thinking, continues to be clearly expressed. "True" sufferers, as opposed to neurotics, malingerers and those deemed not be insufficiently incapacitated to need drug intervention, will actually have Late luteal Dysphoric Disorder, chosen to emphasise that the essential symptoms are unpleasant (dysphoric) mood states. This definition moved into the *Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1987.

Hearing myself insist, (I would like to talk about these cyclical experiences in a positive way, because my own experience was really positive, such a strong sense of being creative at that time, even if it was expressed in a sort of verbal diarrhoea), I become more appreciative of the way others seem to scan through their experiences for possible positive connections. There is a move towards me in humorous deprecation, an acknowledgment of sorts, and a new kind of space seems to open up.

*Barbara:* But I also got real - would really spring clean, get in and clean and clean and clean

?: Right before a birth you do that

*Barbara:* It's like nesting, yeah

*Norma:* you do that before, I do that before I have a baby. So just before I have the babies I get this real working, you know, burst of energy and I clean everything up.

*Neen:* everyone does that

*Barbara:* clean cupboards out

Hearing this burst of energy I look for extensions, reflections - any other contexts, and although there seem to be few words for this story at first,

*Mavis:* I don't know. I think your mind just tells you you'd like to do it

*Laura:* uh huh

?: needs to relax

*Norma:* Could be a mood, a certain mood I'd imagine

explanations are tendered, and it seems not so much that these urges to produce, to create, do not arise but that they are so successfully dismissed.

*Neen:* But I haven't really pinned it down to a time. Usually because when you really feel artistic or you want to do something there's always so much else to be done

*Norma:* It's gone!

*Neen:* Yes! It's gone. If you could just sort of drop everything that you *had* to, learned to do, and do what I want to do .

*Laura:* Why do you think we don't?

*Mavis:* Because we're convention bound. Because that's what's expected of us—to do the things that we *must* do not the things we want to do.

*Laura:* right, right

*Norma:* we feel guilty, if we spend too much

*Mavis:* yes

*Norma:* time

*Barbara:* I don't!

*Norma:* on ourselves

*multiple voices*

This resonates with my own familiar procrastinations, the difficulties of shrugging off patterns of behaviour, ways of being that persist despite my understanding too about guilt and convention. When Yvonne speaks specifically of writing, she too echoes my own problems of production.

*Yvonne:* when I'm supposed to do some writing, write a piece, I go and do the cupboard!

*Laura:* Ahh! real sort of diversionary tactics!

*Yvonne:* in the mood for the writing

*Laura:* You don't want to do it? or? what?

*Yvonne:* don't want to start

*Laura:* you don't want to start? Why is that?

*Yvonne:* terrified of course.

*Laura:* of? of?

*Yvonne:* of whether I can do it or not.

*Norma:* Not doing it well

*Yvonne:* mm

*Norma:* And what do you do? Go home and clean cupboards?

*multiple voices*

There are contradictions and paradoxes in women's production. The Angel in the House that Woolf did battle with, "whose shadow falls across the page as we write, warning us of the dangers of causing too great an offence, of putting oneself forward, of airs and graces; of inevitable humiliation, failure, poverty, neglect" (Modjeska, 1994,144), is familiar to many women. Neen asks why women should excuse everybody else but set such high standards for themselves and clearly states "mother" as the problem.

*Neen:* Why? Because we're the mother, the focal point in the home.

Everything. We carry the lot. I know we're very strong, much stronger emotionally than men.

*Norma:* Probably because more and more is expected of us. So we, we are expecting too much of ourselves. I know I expect too much of myself.

I go to Margaret's work, her chapter on Houses and the performance of home, where she talks of the difficulties of women constituted as home, as hearth, as well as limit and envelope. What other ways in are there, she asks, for women exiled not only from language but also from home.

As the corporeal horizon of existence, the mother cannot be seen as occupying a place of her own. She is space, place or "home" and consequently has none herself.

The maternal feminine remains the place separated from her place, deprived of his place. She is or becomes the place of the other who can't separate himself from her. Threatening therefore - without knowing it or wanting it to be so - with what she lacks: a place of 'her own'... It would be necessary for her to re-envelope herself with herself, and at least twice: as she who is woman and as she who is mother, which implies modifying the whole space - time economy (Irigaray in Grosz, 1989, 174).

Margaret discusses acts of unsettlement, displacement and the daily acts of inhabiting which remake home from the inside out, allowing women to speak their relation to home otherwise, rather than "stranded mute, identified with the house itself, just as Irigaray describes woman entombed at the centre of philosophy" (Somerville, 1995,158). With

this in mind I try to listen to the ambivalences the women speak in their material relations to house and practices of the home.

Housework, aside from those momentary urges, is taken to mean repetitive cleaning, drudgery, and the women all declare they loathe it. Cooking is accorded very mixed status, several claim they only do it because they have to. What is taken on very positively is the production of feeling, of emotion. When I draw attention to an account of premenstrual urges to make bread ("I can hardly wait to get home and start mixing it - smelling the yeast. It's almost sensual and very satisfying"), initially ambivalent food talk turns to all sorts of underlying tensions, who cooks for whom, what strains and stresses, what meaning this food has to carry for them. Food can function as a vehicle of reward, of love, someone suggests, and several do mention the difference to their cooking when they are in the right "mood" for it, but what gets largely spoken is the way the framework of necessity, of being the provider, overrides and displaces any pleasure. There is talk of anger and while the women claim their emotions very positively, and their ability to express as a powerful healthy feature (slam the doors, kick the cat, break a glass deliberately in the sink, cry), Barbara links it to problems of "clear speaking". When Neen tells of throwing a plateful of porridge at her husband in the early days of their marriage, Barbara comments..

Well, you see you got in early. I think that's where a lot of people make their mistake, they don't say. You didn't wait sixteen or twenty years. It's a bit like a man after twenty years says to you - "*oh you know I don't like whatever it is*" - but he's been eating it for twenty years! Why didn't he say that in the first couple of weeks so that you knew where you stood? And it's the same thing, if you don't cook as good as Mum well, go home to mum then!

Neen strongly articulates the sense that while traditional 'mother' and productive 'woman' are diametrically opposed, simply "adding on" isn't the answer.

*Neen*: My grandmother said to me years ago that modern woman has more to do, today, than she ever did in her time, and she had no washing machine, she had a fuel stove, you know, nine kids, the Depression.

*Norma*: well you never went out, you

*Neen*: Monday you washed, Tuesday you ironed. You had those set days, you didn't clean the house every day, most of it was dirt floor.

We are our own worst enemies. We're trying to carry two sides, the conventional things and still at the same time become a woman and do the things we want to do.

Rita clearly implies that production lies outside the home,

*Rita:* well I think a lot of women they don't go out to art and they don't go to fabric printing classes and they don't go to classes on this or that, so really all they know how to do, is clean the house well.

—re-opening many questions. In what circumstances, I wonder, can such practices function as a necessary displacement, as process in "becoming women" and when do they simply "add on" to the existing status quo? In what space and fashion can women claim themselves as both site and agent of production?

Determined to exhaust any possibilities around the cyclical body I mentioned how my sense of smell was "charged" in both migrainal and premenstrual states, asking if anyone else had those odd experiences. I wonder if Neen is thinking of "reading one's body" when she says "I suppose that's similar to bingeing or, you know, when you're really craving for some sort of food", but it is Yvonne who takes us to "other, more mysterious images, realms, and sources of knowledge (Modjeska, 1994, 131).

*Yvonne:* Goes with a nightmare for me

*Laura:* Does it?

*Yvonne:* Special smell, yeah. And it's a revolting smell

*Laura:* You dream the smell?

*Yvonne:* I dream and I also can smell in the dream  
the dream's always a nightmare

*Rita:* I dream a lot of weird things but I don't think I've ever smelled things in them.

*Norma:* I have. I've smelled things in dreams.

*Laura:* What sort of smells?

*Norma:* Oh I can't remember now, but I know that I've dreamt

*Barbara?:* That's the worst of dreams

*Yvonne:* burning paper, mine was

The talk turns to dreams in general and the way they can construct meaning.

*Norma:* When I was having my last child, every night I used to hate going to sleep because I always dreamt I was losing my kiddies in real muddy water. You know what this is, this is depression.

*Neen:* They don't always mean what

*Barb:* ..the literal. But often a dream, like if I dream and I think about it, it's always tied in with something that we've spoken about or that's happened to me. I can piece them together, usually piece them together - not a lot, you know, not always, but usually.

That slippery elusiveness is familiar to Barbara too

*Barb:* And if you say you don't remember... If on waking you do remember them, but then later in the day you suddenly realise you can't remember as

clearly—so if you write it down, you know, it's worth it, it's there. I've done that a lot in the morning - I've dreamt something that's been vivid and I think, oh I must tell Deb or whoever, and then when I see them and I say Oh I had this funny dream, I'm blowed if I can remember the details of it. So I should write it down.

*Laura:* I feel a bit like that when I get an idea of doing something. Like it might be something I want to write. Maybe it's just an idea. You know I have this urge to make images and I don't always do them but sometimes I do. Sometimes I might try and draw them or print an image and when it's all happening I don't even know where it's all coming from but it's a bit like a dream, and waking from a dream? I can be reading a book and it's about something completely different and my mind kind of slides off the page and my eyes are there and I'm looking but something else is happening in my head and it's usually about an image and something I want to do and I never know whether to kind of stop and write it down and whether that's valuable or whether I should be going on doing work? And I think you know, maybe I have to try and make myself think more that it's alright to kind of get hold of those ideas and it's alright to imagine and make images and produce something and not kind of shove them out of the way and get on with the "work" stuff. Just like you say, you know, we want to do something and we find the housework that needs to be done first. The same with ideas— I have to kind of stop and try and grab them and write them down.

Bachelard says "The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depth" (1964, 6). They are, for him, values of "inhabited space" critically linked to the "primary function of inhabiting" and to the maternal nature of our first environment. Reverie carries us back not only to the house we were born in, but to the notion that "Being is already a value. Life begins well". Even though we may have been dispossessed we can still daydream. Is this a way back in?

*Barb:* Well I know what Laura was saying. It's the same as when you think of a picture or something that you'd like to paint and you can see it as vividly as anything but when you actually put it down it comes out nothing like.

*Mavis:* You can see it in here but it can't—something very powerful

*Barb:* And I was trying to explain something the other day and if you could use movie special effects, you know these special effects they use in movies.. I could see it as plain as anything while I was trying to explain but I couldn't put the picture into words.

*Yvonne:* can't put it into words

*Barb:* If I had all the special effects that movie makers have I could have.