

Chapter four

Homefront: doing community

Introduction

All the activities that constitute 'Homefront' were inspired and directly informed by a feminist approach to refuge work which intertwines theory and practice and the personal and political, as a practice of social change. In this chapter I look at the processes and issues of this feminist practice of doing community in the Homefront context. This includes detail on Homefront's practice of a participatory methodology - producing our own knowledge - collective management and decision making, and independent resourcing which I discuss in the context of 'becoming Homefront'. I also look at working collectively across different social locations and positions, and demonstrate the distinction between working with a static categorical understanding of community and taking it up as a flexible dynamic activity. I start the chapter with an overview of my approach to researching and writing Homefront.

Researching and writing Homefront

... no permanent telling of a story can be given (Denzin, 1994: 506)

My approach to researching and writing Homefront is informed, as Homefront itself has been, by the political intention of working 'against the relations of dominance' (Lather, 1991: 12). This means looking at Homefront processes and issues with a view to understanding how a radical community practice can work effectively, and drawing on this participatory, inclusive practice in my research and writing. Implicitly it means challenging research paradigms based on a 'neutral' relationship between researcher and research material, and the idea that research 'discovers' the subject (Lather, 1992: 89-90) which may then be 'explained' or

‘captured’ in writing.¹

As an alternative to this colonising, centralising approach, what are variously called postmodern, poststructural and discourse theories of knowledge (Lather, 1991: 4), provide a framework for research that does not seek to fit human experience to a single, universally applicable truth. Its premise is that knowledge is socially-historically produced, necessarily ‘partial’ and ‘local’, and that we, as individual ‘knowers’ are similarly ‘situated’ (Richardson, 1994: 518). It understands that language constitutes rather than reflects this knowledge (518).

In this theoretical framework there is no definitive understanding of Homefront. But, as Richardson points out, this does not override the value of understanding (518). In a sense, unmasking its ‘situational limitations’ (518) widens its possibilities for serving particular interests and purposes. What I offer here is not an objective or final version of Homefront, but rather a ‘knowing’ (516) which I hope may contribute to ‘conversation’ (Rorty, 1979 in Ellis and Flaherty, 1992: 5) across radical fields of thinking and practical endeavour.

As contributors to Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994) qualitative research handbook show, taking this approach opens up a number of research and writing opportunities, and responsibilities. Following Richardson (1994), I see my research text as a deliberate, reflexive creation rather than ‘just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project’ (516). In particular I want to create an open rather than closed text which shows Homefront as a collaborative construction made and remade through the intertwining experiencing and knowing of participants, including myself (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994: 416-418). Textually, the use of ‘evocative’ (Richardson, 1994: 521-523) as well as expository forms, and the inclusion of voices other than my own, as well as my own in different registers, support such an approach.

There is a developing tradition of working with evocative and experimental forms

¹ Laurel Richardson discusses metaphors used in traditional social science research in ‘Writing: A method of inquiry’ (1994: 518-519).

in writing about lived experience, as Richardson shows (521-522). Ellis and Flaherty (1992) suggest that investigating subjectivity requires research and writing forms that admit its 'complex, paradoxical and mysterious qualities' (5). Similarly, Kate Altork (1995), writes of working 'from the mind and the heart' (111), against the mind-body split that characterises Western science and the way it attempts to master through compartmentalisation (112). Such approaches to writing about individual/social life bring experience as 'being' right into the epistemological project of 'knowing' (Probyn, 1993: 4), challenging where one stops and the other begins, inviting us to read both at once.

In working with the perspectives of other Homefront participants, my intention is that their voices should speak in my text as independent subjects, rather than as objects of my inquiry, and in a way that they are comfortable with. On this basis names have been used as they appear in Homefront publications, and not attached to unpublished material without agreement from the author.

Adopting an 'inscriptive' (Lather in Denzin, 1994: 505) approach to research writing also invites an explicit reflexive engagement with research material. In working with the voices of other Homefront participants, I need also to 'care' for my own, in Foucault's sense (Gore, 1993: 128), taking its effects in relation to others into account. Accordingly I see my positions as writing workshop leader, researcher, and participant in continuing Homefront meetings, in Sandra Harding's terms, as a methodological 'resource' (Olsen and Hirsh, 1995: 18). But while I am aware that working with the difference between self and other is a critical part of this approach to analysing power relations, I am also interested in 'working the hyphens' (Fine, 1994: 70), as a bridge between 'us'. In textual terms this means, as Altork (1995) suggests, using 'lyrical description, subjectivity, and the personal voice' (130), to create an effect through which 'the boundary between self and other might slowly blur' (132). As she says, the intention is not to erase difference, but to enable us 'to feel - from the innermost part of ourselves - the power of similarity' (132).

Richardson (1994) suggests thinking of the sort of multi-faceted, inclusive and

reflexive, situated research text that I am proposing, as crystalline (522). Creating a research text in the image of a crystal liberates it from forms that work in terms of the rigidity of certainty, the abstraction of ‘objectivity’ and the monotony of exposition. The crystal challenges simple ideas of validity and a single truth and ‘provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic’ (522).

... the crystal ... combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous.

Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose (522).

Becoming Homefront

In the end it is a matter of storytelling and the stories we tell each other (Denzin, 1994: 512).

My life was shit. I was stumbling from shock to shock. At the end of this spiraled nightmare I was spat into a women’s refuge - me and my kids - for better or worse.

(Paris, 1993)

Letter writing workshops, October 1988 - December 1988

Belles’ Letters workshops, November 1989 - February 1990

Hells Belles’ Letters workshops, June 1990 - November 1990

Homefront Belles Australia women’s writing and publishing group, November 1990 -

Research workshops, March 1991 - June 1991

Margaret, Paris and Mary, 1992 -

Journal of meetings with Margaret and Paris, 1997

Letter writing workshops

Starting next week - we were told - would be two community development workers.

They will be working with residents of the refuge and ex-residents - helping women adjust to their new lives.

Good I thought

Two new faces

I was getting bored with the now well-known faces of the well meaning refuge workers.

The morning came when the new ones started

We heard a car pull up

Without falling over each other we got to a window so we could have a little sticky beak

We were witness to a most amazing sight as these creatures alighted from the bidgy bomb car

They were magnificent

Walking talking pieces of Art

The hair cuts were sculptures - different shapes on the slightest turn

A brilliant usage of peroxide in full display

The clothes were so deadly

Surely they were fresh off the stage of a women's rock concert?

Big hangly-dangly earrings of silver and shiny coloured glass

One had on a black leather jacket of style

The other a beautiful fluffy hot pink coat

We elbowed each other in excitement

These girls are going to be a rage!

Paris (Homefront Records)

The letter writing workshops were attended regularly by ten - twelve women. All of the participants had reached a point of making considerable changes in their lives and were keen to explore writing and visual artwork, as part of taking up new

ideas and directions.

Within the wider program of community development activities, these initial writing workshops established a strong model for creating a space in which representing ourselves could develop as an inclusive and participatory activity. Importantly, the community development workers, Cascade and Lyn, identified ‘having fun’ together as an egalitarian approach to developing self esteem and confident mutual relationships. They set the groundwork for this, as Paris (1993) makes clear in her assignment on adult learning, by making the workshops accessible, both economically and emotionally, by providing transport, safe child care, food and plenty of cups of tea (2).

Thank you, the unity and similarity are there. We Klick! Another cup of tea? Let’s party!

(Homefront Records, 1989)

The letter writing workshops also set up a collaborative planning process which became a hallmark of Homefront activities. Cascade, Lyn and I prepared the workshops together, taking into account feedback from participants. We conducted the workshops together and established clear ways of ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ them, so that people were invited into the activities and given time to respond to their experience of them. A written report of each workshop was produced so that anyone who had missed out could connect with what was going on. The report also operated as a talking point for feedback and discussion, which increasingly suggested an interest in taking further steps in representing ourselves.

... It makes me feel good to know that we can say it in our own way - just like a crack in the door, we can make that door open wide

(Homefront Records, 1989)

A group scrapbook documented the writing from the workshops and was circulated amongst participants so that they could read it outside the workshop structure and add anything they wished. Through this process it became a

prototype book, as well as a precious, group-owned document. At the last letter writing workshop it was ceremoniously named - by drawing from a hat one of many suggested titles - 'The Power of Paste and Women's Voice'.

Belles' Letters workshops

... Were you sitting under the Hawthorn tree or on a wall? Were you sitting holding one knee (rather like an aerobic exercise) or just sitting? You were interested. I am certain of that detail. Your face said you were interested, that you were anticipating what was going to happen, and wondering who was going to turn up. I have the perception that the Hawthorn tree was in leaf. To me, this memory is like an unfinished painting in which the background has been left incomplete. Your face, with its expression of waiting interest, is the most precise and vivid image, and the most important. If the memory is a painting, then somehow the palette has painted sunshine and shade around your figure and the tree, and left your face quite pale but very alive with your hair cut very short and close to the shape of your head. And that's where this episode and everything it has contained - imagination, thought, creative energy, ideas, theses, publications - started.

Margaret (Homefront Records, 1997)

The second series of workshops which produced the publication, *Belles' Letters*, was a more distinct writing and publishing activity, with its own designated funding. This was a direct result of the self determining shaping of 'us' through doing it ourselves and experimenting with representing ourselves, in the letter writing workshops.

During our explorations we made a few demands. We wanted the workshops/process to continue and we wanted to extend the scrapbook into the form of a publication, so that it could reach other women. We wanted to speak out about domestic violence and sexual abuse in a

publication for other women.
(Paris, 1993)

The workshop program became more my responsibility than it had been previously and I worked primarily with eX de Medici who took up the position of visual arts workshop leader and graphic designer, in planning it. The role that Cascade and Lyn had played was taken up by Lyn, who also administered the funds on behalf of the Incest Centre. 'Handle the \$\$\$ + be accountable for report on process and completion of the project ... Organise participants ... ensure support for transport, child care etc ... Emotional support' (Homefront Records, 1990).

The workshop group included some participants from the letter writing workshops and others joining for the first time. Thirteen people contributed to *Belles' Letters*, and ten regularly attended six three hour workshops and additional meetings to finalise visual and written material for the book. We floundered around a bit at the beginning, getting to know each other, finding out what would work.

Not being sure, being a bit worried but pretty amazed about how the photocopies came out. At one stage I didn't want to come at all. I was starting to put myself down because I couldn't get anything out ... it got better slowly.
(Homefront Records, 1990)

The focus of the workshops was group writing activities in which individual voices could be clearly heard. These encouraged individual writing which in turn encouraged and inspired others.

Do you like it????
Your 'face'?? wot does it say???
YUK ... YES!!! ... breathe .. PHEW
(Homefront Records, 1990)

It was an inclusive process that required individuals to take charge of what they

wanted to say, and become involved in bringing their distinct interests and contributions together.

The workshops have helped me find an outlet for the voice in my head. The endless, droning monologue that's been going on for so, so many years. I've had to listen carefully to what this voice is actually saying. The group interaction has taught it to say different things, join in dialogue and to just shut up at times. What a relief!

(Homefront Records, 1990)

It was a practice of sisterly² relations offering a vital alternative to the experience of systematic and violent abuse and the discourses that support it, through the process of speaking out, in our own voices, in our own book.

Hells Belles' Letters workshops

Today the sun shone
 And we were
 Just four women.
 Mary holds the
 Threads
 Together.
 She is such a
 Gentle woman.
 Paris,
 I get closer to
 Every time.
 I love her laugh -
 It's as raucous

² 'What then are the possibilities of moving beyond category politics, with an inclusive political project, a project that is feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonialist? Central to this project is how to treat difference in theory and practice and how to talk and work across the category boundaries ... It means recognising unequal power and conflicting interests while not giving up on community or solidarity or sisterhood' (Pettman, 1992: 158).

as mine.
 Janine represents
 The Incest Centre
 And herself.
 What I like about
 Her
 And the other ladies
 Here
 Is that they are
 Not up themselves.
 I feel warm
 In their company,
 Trusting them
 With my vulnerable
 Ego.
 Robin (Homefront Belles' Australia, 1990: 122)

Having travelled so far in representing ourselves, many participants were keen to take the experience of writing and publishing further in the *Hells Belles'* workshops.

This time we wanted to be in control from the start to the finish. Talked about how we wanted it to look, layout, structure, spine. The favourite decision was the scrapbook feel.
 Paris (Homefront Records, 1991)

Practical sessions with our layout designer, Stella Wilkie, enabled all participants to take charge of the design of their own pages and those who were interested had access to Stella's word processor so they could actually execute their design. The visual arts component was also extended to include different techniques appropriate to publication - lino cut and pin hole photography. A further extension into developing skills in promotion and distribution was also made possible by the support of the ACT Women's Employment Strategy Small Grants Program.

In going on to make another publication, we hoped to draw in a larger number of participants from a wider range of women's services. In the event, five *Belles' Letters* participants continued and a further eight women joined the group, most through the Incest Centre. Janine became the new co-ordinator.

... I remember thinking: This is too good to be true! I would be doing two things I value very highly - working with survivors of Incest and Domestic Violence and WRITING ...

The second workshop I went back to work in tears. Who did I think I was, anyhow? Group leader extraordinaire? Feminist Fatale? What a wank. I became so critical of myself and my shortcomings I seriously considered throwing it in. Handing it over to a more capable worker. I couldn't even bloody write anything, so God knows what I thought I was doing there ...

It all changed the third week. I went feeling low about a few events in my personal life and received so much support I was overwhelmed ...

I had so much fun in the next few weeks. I learnt that when women bond together with a common purpose we are a force to be reckoned with. I learnt that the stories of our lives are more powerful, more poetic and more touching than anything shoved under my nose at school. I learnt that despite everything I was ever told, I'm OK ...

Janine (Homefront, 1990: 123)

Eleven women altogether contributed to the book. The real extension was not in opening the process out, but in consolidating it through a longer and more varied workshop program, and becoming more knowledgeable and skilled in the process of writing and making a publication. This development in turn engendered the confidence and interest in continuing as an independent community writing and publishing group.

Although in hindsight it seems obvious that consolidation is a different process

from broadening out participation, the desire to extend the experience to a significant number of newcomers played a strong part in the design of the workshop program. I was particularly concerned about meeting the needs of more and less confident people. I wanted to encourage working together as a whole group, but I didn't want to create a group too large for comfort. In the end, after discussions with continuing participants and Lyn and Janine, I drew up a twelve week program which included two sets of workshops; a weekly morning workshop for new members and a full day weekend workshop for continuing members, with both groups coming together at several weekend sessions for introductory, visual arts and publication workshops.

I couldn't have provided a better example of the difference between the model that operates as an institution-determined course of instruction, in which only the teacher has past experience, and doing it ourselves, if I'd tried. Fortunately the framework of 'Homefront process' was strong enough to steer us away from the divisions of the instructional form and show that an egalitarian inclusive approach offers an enormous capacity to take account of different needs.

It became obvious, in practice, that most continuing participants were more concerned about working together as a group than going over old ground. Several chose to come to both the weekday and weekend workshops. It also became apparent that working consistently as a whole group offered a valuable point of continuity and the opportunity for long term participants to pass on their experience of the earlier workshops. It would have been great to have built this deliberately into our process.

I've used the pronoun 'we' in discussing the *Hells Belles'* workshop program because 'we' did come to decisions together about its design. But, as Jennifer Gore (1993) argues, despite emancipatory intentions, the wider discursive context within which a given activity is situated may promote authority as domination as much as, or rather than, authority for democracy and freedom (122, 123-126). 'Community' is not guaranteed by a common social purpose or the intention of mutuality but 'has to be struggled for' (Razack, 1993: 95). Part of this struggle

involves a commitment 'to probing beneath the surface of what we know' (100) as a way of understanding the effect of 'me' in particular situations.

The situation of the *Hells Belles*' program may be read as a conjunction of my sense of individual responsibility for the ongoing development of Homefront activities, and the 'proper' dominant instructional form. However, the community discourse of doing it ourselves was so firmly established that the potentially dominating effect of 'me' was ameliorated by the egalitarian intention of 'us'.

Homefront Belles Australia

The group, now called Homefront, was a force unto itself ... Besides reclaiming our own voices and using them we were also becoming: authors, editors, publishers, distributors, public speakers, poets, function co-ordinators, artists, thinkers, readers.

(Paris, 1993)

Homefront's successful application to the ACT Health Promotion Fund, supported this new phase of Homefront activities. Paris and Jena shared the very part-time job of co-ordinating everything from book distribution to workshops and readings.

In 1991 Paris and Robin were invited to give a writing workshop at the Wodonga Community Education centre as part of Feminist Book Fortnight.

Washing the first silence of womanhood away

Whiter than white cleaner than clean

(Homefront Records, 1991)

The Health Promotion funds also stretched to another series of workshops which we called 'research' workshops. These contributed enormously to my own research on the writing methods I'd used with Homefront, but also supported Homefront participants' interest in continuing to write together and documenting the workshop process.

The process was a powerful and healing one for all the participants, one which left everyone who contributed or took part with a strong feeling of achievement. It was a way of taking control of the experiences in our lives. If we could write this down and send it out into the community it could become a resource and an inspiration for other women and other community writing groups, or anyone else who wanted to make use of the process.

(Homefront Records, 1991)

An important part of Paris and Jena's work was encouraging correspondence with women as the basis for a further publication. *Letter to Friends: Lines from the Homefront* (Homefront, 1991) was a collection of this writing compiled for contributors only and sent to them as a 'letter', drawing on ideas of letter writing that had been part of Homefront workshops from the beginning. Margaret put *Letter to Friends* together as a simple photocopied collation of different typefaces and handwriting.

What everyone seemed to want when you wrote back to us was a point of connection - somewhere you could get access to other women and start to tell your stories ... Our own process - that is, Homefront's own way of working - of getting together in workshops, using writing exercises, discussing the results, putting them together has worked so well for us, and allowed us to produce our books, that we want to pass this information to other women. We want to say you can do this too. You can banish the ghosts out of your life. Or you can at least say what you feel and think ...
(3).

The last entry in the book is one of Paris's cartoons - a kitchen full of women, children and pets, with the phone and door bell ringing, and the kettle being filled. One woman is appealing to the heavens for help, 'Oh great goddess, give me a sign'. The woman filling the kettle replies, 'The only sign you're going to get is off us. Keep talking'.



Oh... Great Goddess... send me a sign.....

Things to be Done !?!?
Wash
Wash
Wash
Other

Welcome

The only sign your going to get... is off US! Keep talking-.....

PARIS

Margaret, Paris and Mary

Since 1992 the three of us have been meeting at the Calypso (to my mind the coffee has improved) to discuss what Paris calls ‘Homefront business’.

The first time we’ve got together in the New Year. Paris tells her Christmas story ... [It has prompted her to] re-read *Belles* and *Hells Belles’ Letters*, get out the archives. ‘Six years ago I was writing this stuff!’ ...
Mary (Homefront Records, 1997)

Homefront business expresses our ongoing use of Homefront as a touchstone in our varied explorations of violence, writing, voice, social change ... ‘what’s happening here is like Homefront ...’, ‘that’s what we learned from Homefront ...’.

Margaret has sent off her novel ... She’s feeling anxious. Paris says, in a way that names the anxiety perfectly, ‘Don’t worry, we have your child in custody’ ... Whenever Margaret reads her work to us I feel her characters, their world. They’re not stick figures who represent the issues of violence, but whole complex people whose lives have been underwritten by violence.
Mary (Homefront Records, 1997)

I was certain that in my file marked ‘Homefront 1992’ there would be evidence of our long term engagement, of the excitement and pleasure that’s been part of it, of the changes in our lives and how Homefront business has woven through them. But apart from one or two leaflets about related activities, and some notes that suggest renewed enthusiasm for documenting Homefront’s activities in book form, there’s nothing. For thesis purposes I decided to keep a journal of our meetings.

With some nervousness I read my journal notes from our previous meeting. I can feel Margaret and Paris with me as I read, a listening so active, that it seems to be writing the words.
Mary (Homefront Records, 1997)

We discussed ways of representing our distinct voices in the journal. The pattern that developed was that I took notes, often using a verbatim scribing technique, turned them into journal form and then read them back at the next meeting, where Paris and Margaret made corrections and added comments.

This is me trying to rush a journal entry. I've been reading Mary's 21 Feb 97 - very cool Mary ... 'weaving a rope' wasn't doing it for me, and 'differently textured and coloured strands' wasn't doing it for me, so I added my two bobs' worth.

Paris (Homefront Records, 1997)

The struggle for community - working with commonalities and differences

What kind of conversation do we imagine will ensue? (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994: 425)

Difference in our positions may produce conflict but it may also vitally enable change in personal and political practice. This is precisely the importance of 'ourselves' in 'doing it ourselves' - it offers the opportunity for a collaborative making of both me and us.

In a discussion about my position as a woman untouched by violent abuse, in relation to other Homefront women, Margaret said, 'we needed your whole body to make the connection' (Homefront Records, 1997). She and Paris saw my distinct position as a 'practitioner', not as a threat, but as a 'bridge'.

Paris: (A122): I remember you saying in one workshop, not exactly these words, I'm not here because my story is the same as yours.

Margaret: Yeah.

Paris: You know? And that's sort of like was a link out of the rubbing each other's misery thing, which could go on you know, but didn't.

Mary: Oh, that's interesting.

Margaret: Yeah ... This gets back to what you were doing which is something that is unconnected to this idea 'we're here for therapy', something quite different, we're here to learn a technique girls, this is what we're here for, and it's irrelevant whether this is my background or not. I'm here as a practitioner.

Paris: I'm here to help you reclaim the art of communication.

Margaret: (A143) ... That's it you see, that's the really important thing, getting that bridge between, you see if you bring, if you come in here with a technique, and you say, 'I'm here to help you reclaim the lost art of communication and we're going to do it by turning language inside out and today we're going to start with ... You brought it up into the world, into the light of day by using a technology ... [which] transformed this thing out of the world of 'this is a woman who is overreacting for sure' into a genuine experience ...

(Homefront Records, 1995)

Many of the Homefront women felt that their experiences had been ruled out as the proper content of writing and were determined to find a way of making their voices heard. When I began work with them, I had been speaking myself long and loudly into the world for some time, with enough recognition from the voice judges to be occasionally paid for it and to call myself a writer. In this sense I embodied what they had been excluded from. But I also speak, at least in part through an understanding of my own voice as out of order, too loud, of the horror of 'saying the wrong thing', of the longing to be really heard, of the determination, in hooks' (1989) words, and those of my father, to 'talk back'. It was at this point of transgression that the Homefront women and I were deeply connected.

Mary: ... That was something that I learned from you. It was a really important part of my experience to be able to say what I felt was different

about my experience from yours, without feeling that it then became some issue - because you know that idea of people who have the same experience coming together ... to be able to see where those bridges could come between us as women and to work across difference was very important.

(Homefront Records, 1995)

Our meeting through a counter-hegemonic interest in voice, or representing ourselves, suggests hooks' (1990) image of meeting in the margins (152). But Margaret's use of the bridge metaphor also suggests a new, overlapping space that is not peripheral but central; a collaborative space of crossing and connecting which changes 'my' position and the shape of 'our' relationship. It is this experience of doing it ourselves and my ongoing community with Margaret and Paris, which provides both the impetus and support to my present reflexive analysis.

The reflection offered in the following discussion was developed as a mutual process with Margaret and Paris, beginning with their response to my own written remembering. It concerns ideas about some of the power relations Homefront's collective activities engaged. Here I am working from the understanding that power is not 'an institution, a structure or a certain force with which certain people are endowed' (Foucault, 1977 in Westwood, 1991: 82), but a complex engagement producing a range of effects. I am interested in drawing out individual positions in the particular situations I examine, and what is involved in making alliances across these differences.

1. Choosing the title - making community between different positions

At a Homefront meeting during the course of writing this chapter, Margaret says, 'Belles' Letters - everyone hated that title'. Although I might describe my memories of arriving at that title as uneasy, I am shocked by this statement. I cannot imagine that I didn't pick up such depth of feeling at the time, nor that in the long discussions when we agonised over and threw out the alternative title

‘Scratching the Polish’, that no one voiced similar objections to ‘Belles Letters’. Perhaps they did. Perhaps I didn’t hear them in the same way.

Conflicting discourses may be dramatised as a struggle between individuals, but reflexive re-membering of how positions work in particular situations shows that the conflict is located in discourse rather than essential individual characteristics. Furthermore, the examples I’ve worked with so far show that rather than embodying any one discourse my ‘self’ was a site of competition between discourses on the authority of the writing workshop leader.

Gore (1993) points out how powerful dominant teaching discourses are when she asks us to ‘Consider ... why it is that, despite our most emancipatory intentions, many of us, as teachers, have found ourselves repeating the very expressions and practices that typified the kinds of teachers we vowed we never would be’ (155). They are so available, so pervasive, so ‘there’, that taking up alternatives is always a matter of work and support.

When it came to finding a title for the publication that became Belles’ Letters I wrote down a lot of possible titles on a sheet of paper - a personal brainstorm to get the workshop going. One of these titles was ‘Belles Lettres’ (the ‘Australianisation’ came later), which came to mind through association and which I saw could be read as a subversion of Literature with a capital L - a challenge to what it is ‘proper’ to say and write. It was not a title that I thought would find favour with the group but I didn’t cross it out as I wanted people to keep working with association and see that anything can be tried out. I remember sitting in the sun on the verandah in the main courtyard at Gorman House with eX and showing her the titles before offering them to the workshop. She didn’t seem very impressed with any of them except ‘Belles Lettres’.

Margaret doesn’t remember the list of titles at all. She says, ‘I’d love to see that list’ (Homefront Records, 1997). Paris remembers cutting up titles and rearranging them as part of the brainstorm. ‘I remember eX explaining how ‘Belles’ Letters’ would work’ (Homefront Records, 1997).

My earlier discussion of the *Hells Belles*' workshop program, suggests that reflexive analysis may highlight the strengths and risks for 'community' in a specific context. In the Homefront context the relative strength of doing it ourselves was vital. I would also argue that points of connection across different positions, such as our common interest in speaking out, provided a critical basis for the success of doing community in Homefront. However it does not follow that these strengths worked so clearly in every engagement across our different social locations and positions. If some engagements produced spaces for freedom and change, some did not, and some produced murky spaces whose factors and effects are hard to read.

My notes for the last Belles' Letters workshop have 'publication name and brainstorm' highlighted in a square. This must have been the day I sat on the verandah with eX. Subsequent pages in my busy book feature two different titles and subtitles. 'Scratching the Polish - writing and drawing by women from homes of violence' and 'Belles' Letters: voices of women from homes of violence'.

Prompted by Margaret's initial memory of Homefront feeling about the title 'Belles' Letters' I began a personal remembering of the situation which I took to Margaret and Paris for response. This evolved as a fascinating process in 'sharing authority' (Frisch, 1990 in Stuart, 1993: 80) and using writing as a 'method of inquiry' (Richardson, 1994: 516).

Mary Stuart (1993) discusses Frisch's notion of 'shared authority' (81) in an oral history interview as an encounter between identities rather than an examination of one. In this encounter the interviewer participates in creating the story of the interview, and as much as she may have an impact on the interviewee's telling, so that telling has an impact on her. As the interviewee recomposes her own story in the particular encounter, the interviewer also revisits her self (82).

On one of the last pages in my 'Belles Letters busy book there's the sort of writing that I do when I'm trying to be really clear to myself as a basis for laying it out for others. It's all about how the title 'Belles' Letters' can work. I have no

memory of writing this but it has all the symptoms of persuasion. I start to get glimmers of the first brainstorming session after showing eX my list, which to date I haven't been able to recall at all, and have the suspicion that 'Belles' Letters' was highlighted as a preference from the very beginning.

Revisiting my self reflexively through initial discussion with Margaret and Paris about their understanding of what had happened in the process of choosing the title, brought out the components of my uneasy memories. It became clear to me that, in the position of writing workshop leader, I had shown eX, visual arts workshop leader and book designer, my brainstorm list before showing it to everyone else. Despite my reservations about 'Belles' Letters', eX and I agreed on its strength as a title, arriving at this through shared understandings about working artistically against the grain.

My identification with eX rather than the workshop group had the effect of upholding a powerful demarcation between leader and group which reinforced the dominating effect of the position of workshop leader. This line of thinking shows how it was that the discussion seemed to come so quickly down to two titles - one concerning the 'below the surface' theme which had already been part of the *Belles' Letters* workshops, and was evident in the choice of kitchen lino for the cover - and the other 'Belles' Letters' which had first impressed eX if not anyone else.

As for the title: What do I remember? Sitting in the booth at Tilley's uncertain of the currents of emotion, and political allegiances, who was imposing what on the group. Feeling, truly, that I should not give my true opinion because I was uncertain what that was. What did I think? I think I liked *Belles' Letters* for its pun. Worried about it for the same reasons, that it was a literary joke and the work was about the toughness of people's lives. No bad thing, I think in retrospect, but at the time I believe I thought there was an incongruity because of the process by which the book was created. I think that was the main point - there was a sense of the incongruity of a clever pun in the context of workshops which got to the

strength of emotive language, and were concerned with turning the use of language inside out. eX had more distance than we did. That did not make her judgement wrong at the time. In retrospect, the title does turn the idea of 'belles lettres' inside out ...

Margaret (Homefront Records, 1997)

My long term lack of awareness of the depth of feeling about 'Belles' Letters' also suggests how uncritically I was working with the intention of radical pedagogy. I saw my position as 'working with' the group, unaware of the mask this assumption applies to the effects of power. Perhaps the reason that Homefront at that time accepted not just a title which didn't ring true for them but my domination of the decision making process, was that they felt, or felt that they ought to feel, that they had been part of an egalitarian group decision-making process. Given that we were all working under the assumption that intention is enough, none of us had the tools to understand the holes in the practice we were engaged in; to name them or mend them.

Mary (Homefront Records, 1997)

We didn't assume the process, we were claiming a process and when we were choosing a title for *Belles' Letters*, it was a new group dynamic. I remember jumping up and down at one session because I didn't know everyone's story, so how could we work together. But I knew one experience we all came from and then I realised that getting to know and trust people is a long process. Holes - when you're pioneering you just have them. I remember the frustration of finding a name but it was still a good forum for people to have their two bob's worth. And we'd never done this before. In my head we were pioneering and Mary was our sheepdog. We didn't know but we kept trying to chuck cards on the table - raw and crude at times but we did it. See if you were looking at all this through the lens of feminist group practice then you'd have one point of view, but there was real excitement about what we were doing. While you're so nervous there's something else going on for everyone else.

People weren't happy with the title but they weren't really disturbed by it.
Paris (Homefront Records, 1997)

Our joint re-membering of choosing the title as it developed seemed quite powerful and dramatic to me. We were producing our own really useful knowledge about democratic group processes. I could feel my perception of how things work changing. My sense of what happened in that situation on a reflexive basis, shifted, became more open and useful.

When Paris recalls the booth at Tilley's where we sat for what we all agree was the final decision meeting on the title, I see it all a bit more closely. I'm looking more like a sheepdog and less like a monster and I think I can even see Glenda shrugging her shoulders and saying quite easily, 'Oh well I don't like it, but I'll go along with it if that's the best thing to do'. I still want to say that it was really only when Glenda said that we should call the next book 'Hells Belles' Letters' that the first title made sense. Now, remembering with Margaret and Paris, I want to say that getting through to *Hells Belles* was an extraordinary achievement of hanging together and moving on and that 'Hells Belles' sounds a note of triumph as much as subversion - an acknowledgement of the journey through.
Mary (Homefront Records, 1997)

2. Red/Black - recognising individuality in community

The issue

Red is
hot
blood
pain
anger
splitting open
fire

Black

Black
 is
 circles
 long
 flowing
 sinister
 bad
 nothingness
 hiding
 everywhere

Beware, black is dangerous. Stay away, I'm too scared for you to come near. Stay away, black is dangerous. Black is the colour of my soul. The essence of my past and the colour of my future. The blackness drags me back to my past and to my abusers, tearing me apart. Black is the colour of the moon and the time of my death.

(Homefront, 1990: 101-102)

As soon as I think about the sort of paralysing situation that Sherene Razack (1993) describes in calling for a stronger 'care of the self' (Foucault, 1983 in Gore, 1993: 128), I think of Homefront's 'Red/Black' episode. Razack describes a situation in a social change workshop in Canada which focused around a 'standoff between Mohawks and the Quebec provincial police' and the federal government's decision to 'send in the army' to end it (92). Positions around the idea of taking action against armed intervention included those of two non-Mohawk Native participants 'who assumed a leadership position' (92) and advocated that action be taken. Anglophone participants tended to argue against action on the basis that the Assembly of First Nations who represented Native groups had taken the position that the army was marginally preferable to the Quebec Police. Some Francophone participants 'felt that sympathy for the Mohawks came easily for Anglophones

whose daily lives were not touched by the crisis as were the lives of Francophone Quebecers' (93).

The linked pieces 'Red' and 'Black' were two of several written by the same author for *Hells Belles' Letters*. They were strongly imagistic and referred to colours associated with the writer's experience of a ritual form of abuse. I did not know this at the time, but understood them as evocative images of horror and fear, somehow associated with how the writer saw what had happened to her. The identification of ritual abuse was a contentious issue at the time. She did not speak or write the words. When the books were ready, an Indian refuge worker read 'Black' as a racial insult, a position that was taken up by the Incest Centre and other women's services in Canberra.

Margaret: I remember when we had that get together at Acton Peninsula, instead of the launch, and Glenda said, 'Hells Belles' Letters', and wasn't it hell girls?'

Paris: This whole period was so ugly, but at the same time it was one of the best educative experiences that I've had. There was a different group process for meetings which we weren't expecting. It had been all glowy glowy but now it was really close to the bone - people's lives, people's politics. The glowing had been our warmth, now it was the whole world. It was a mixed experience for me. We'd done the two books and there was the possibility for something else, really rock solid, and then all this.
(Homefront Records, 1997)

Readings

Paris: I first saw it in the coffee shop - Glenda, me, Nike, Jena. The book wasn't bound, it was the sheets. The sheet [on which 'Red' and 'Black' were written] was in my hand and what was in my head, fresh, was women's services and racism - I thought, 'this is horrible!'. 'Black' stood out like a racist poster. I didn't see the 'Red' bit at all.

Margaret: I didn't see it till the book was finished. I didn't read it till after the shit hit the fan. And then I thought, 'how dare they!'. The writer had got this down on paper and they were treating her like shit. It had cost her so much to put it down. After that I felt, 'get your hands off our work!'. The important thing about what we were doing was that people's own words had integrity - finding your own and doing it - and that was what I had been looking for, so it struck at the very heart of the process.

Paris: I read the racist meaning. Others didn't. So I let it go. I thought, 'Well this is our process'.

Margaret: Paris read it like 'Cop it Sweet'.³ I read it like they were getting at the particular writer and the whole process. Like a take over of the process, 'Who are they telling us?'. It was a successful process and maybe people wanted to undercut it.

(Homefront Records, 1997)

Discourses

Reflexive examination of my position in the matter of 'Red/Black' suggests that perhaps if I had formally encouraged group members to read each other's pages before we went into the layout process, the issue of 'black' might have surfaced earlier. However the discursive 'community' issues here were not at the level of Homefront process so much as in relation to the dominant feminist discourse at play in the Homefront environment. This was an essentialist discourse which at heart understands community methodology in terms of fixed social locations rather than making community across difference.

An important consequence of such a discourse is that it does not have the capacity to work with the fine balance of individuality and community that doing community suggests and requires. Working with commonalities and differences in

³ A documentary film about police violence against Aboriginal people.

the matter of 'Red/Black' may be expressed as working for individuality in the context of community.

Differences between women on the basis of class, race, sexuality and other social locations, have long been on the agenda of twentieth century feminism, and found various forms of expression within it. Homefront activities took place in the frame of what Liz Bondi (1993) calls hyphenated identity politics (93). As she explains '[t]he experiences generalised and validated within consciousness raising groups tended to be those of white, Western, middle class, heterosexual women' (92). In response to criticism about the exclusions which this single identity approach engaged, hyphenated identity politics takes up the idea that women's identity is informed by more than one social location, but understands these in essentialist terms. The 'Red/Black' issue provides a particular example of this kind of politics at work.

The 'recognition and development of **multiple** feminist identities through a process of hyphenation' (93, emphasis in original), is based on the idea of many 'essences' rather than one and seeks feminist community through 'mutual identification' (93). In effect, this produces a situation in which individual subjects line up the key conditions of their experience to identify their political locations and on a kind of grid basis sort out where they stand in relation to other individuals. As each of these locations signifies the experience of oppression in essential terms, it is not surprising that, in this scheme of things, absolute divisions between women emerge. Bondi quotes Haraway's (1990) concern for the:

Painful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention among women) along every possible fault line ... [and the] response to this kind of crisis by endless splitting and searches for a new essential unity (in Bondi, 1993: 93).

Fragmentation

Margaret: I remember being frightened that I would get bricks through my window.

Mary: L... lost her job at Beryl [refuge].

Paris: I'm getting images of complaint letters - there were only two in the end. Part of it seems to be connected with the politics of women's services at the time. This time they thought they'd got the racism thing right. They were going to be the movers and the shakers.

Margaret: It was a vehicle for women's services politics - using us to make an impact.

Paris: It was like they were replacing the idea of refuges being there for all women with some new found thing about racism.

Margaret: We had a situation where we had a genuine issue, but it got blown up into an incredible power struggle.

Paris: Another important ingredient was the power struggles around dealing with ritual abuse, as a previously not understood aspect of incest. (Homefront Records, 1997)

Bondi (1993) also notes the tendency to encourage 'an equation of oppression with authentic knowledge and even virtue, and of privilege with taintedness ... [which] inevitably accentuated fragmentation and detracted from the emancipatory goals of feminism' (94).

Despite the commonality of the experience of abuse between women involved in Homefront and the wider ACT women's refuge 'system', an essentialist approach to difference meant that different readings of the 'Red/Black' poem could only be dealt with competitively. In this case the writing by an abused woman was 'tainted' by her position as a white woman. This in contrast to the necessarily authentic reading that might be assumed to be associated with women also oppressed by their position as 'black'. In these circumstances, the denial of the writer's voice was seen not only as justified but necessary.

I was so astounded when suddenly this women's services place wanted to shut us up
 You know what I wanted to do?
 I wanted to get the *Hells Belles*' book
 And rip out all the pages that were so-called offensive to Aboriginal people
 And then rip out all the pages that were offensive to church groups
 And then rip out all the pages that were offensive to men ...
 We would have had a book with nothing in it
 Robin (Homefront Records, 1997)

Robin's response shows that such a denial is based on the privileging of a particular reading amongst many possible readings. The relative power of the hyphenated identity politics discourse in the feminist women's refuge community in Canberra at the time, brought a reading of the use of 'black' as racist into predominant focus.

Individuality and community

Paris: I can remember myself, Robin, Margaret, Lyn at the meeting at the Arts Council. I was aggro with Mary and you [Margaret]. It's the only time I've ever felt an aggressive thing from you [Mary].

Margaret: I remember saying, 'people suffer just as much whether they're Aboriginal or not'. You [Paris] just shook your head. The thing that got to me was that it was a particular person's work. I expected you to understand that, but you were saying, 'it's not that easy, it's not that straightforward'.

Paris: We eventually made a decision that we weren't changing it and wrote a letter [to the Incest Centre].

Margaret: We didn't toe the line. It was our work.

Paris: We went into support of the writer - the different readings became less important.

Mary: The bottom line of the meeting was that we couldn't change it without the writer's permission.

Paris: When I went to Sydney with the books, I put in a slip saying 'this was written by a woman who understands the ugliness of ritual abuse'.
(Homefront Records, 1997)

A non-essentialist approach offers a way of understanding both the writing and some readings of it, in terms of discourse and its constitution of subject positions, rather than individual voice. On this basis, the reading of the words 'beware, black is dangerous', as drawn from oppressive racist discourse, as well as an imaginative representation of a particular experience of abuse, may be admitted. Such openness to different positions does not necessarily mean denying ethical and political considerations. In some ways it may sharpen an approach to dealing with them.

Elisabeth Porter (1997), for instance, takes a non-essentialist position in examining what is necessary to create 'political community' (Mouffe, 1993 in Porter, 1997: 94) in Northern Ireland. She argues that it dissolves the absolute quality of social location and so provides the basis for renegotiating positions on the basis of commonalities rather than difference (95). Her interest is in dialogue towards 'mutual understanding' (95) as an alternative to 'bullying, competitive point scoring and too little listening' (95). Here the focus is working **against** the relations of domination rather than **for** a particular position.

Similarly it is with a view to working against 'power over' that Gore (1993) and Razack (1995) speak for examining the effects of our positions on each other in given situations. In fact such reflexivity may be a critical basis for conversation which is directed towards finding a position of agreement rather than a position of dominance.

In the 'Red/Black' situation there seemed to me to be strong potential for not only understanding the situation in terms of discourse, but also resolving it at that level by clarifying the subject position from which it was written, rather than apologising for the individual voice, which the Incest Centre initially asked us to do. I hoped that in keeping with Homefront intentions, the writer would be able to claim the subject position she had tentatively taken up in writing her sense of her experience. Just as we had written 'Hells' in red text on the cover to make the title, I suggested that she could make a similar intervention in relation to her own piece, which would clarify what she was talking about. However while this might have been possible for her to contemplate within the frame of the 'warmth' of the development process, at this point it asked her to claim an increasingly fragile position in a hostile environment.

10 October 1997: We talk more about 'Red/Black'. We look at the book this time. Paris points out which bit of the poem 'did it for her'. The piece that is in the blackest type, that looks most like prose, and speaks to someone out of fear. Then Paris notes the tape over the writer's name on this particular copy. We had all forgotten.

Paris: She asked us to white-out her name. It [the storm over 'Red/Black'] fed right into her paranoia. I didn't remember until I saw it. She was coming from a background where everyone owned your own thoughts.

Mary: I had been wanting to find a balance, which sounds very middle of the road, but I wanted to allow the different readings, like yours [Paris] and Margaret's. I also wanted to keep the writer in charge of her writing. I didn't want us to decide on what should happen because that was like doing the victim thing on her. I wanted to bring it back to her for her action, offer her a powerful position. Perhaps that was unfair given her fragility.

Margaret: She couldn't take up that offer because, I suspect, that

someone writing this sort of stuff is already too fundamentally undermined.

Mary: The action she took was to ask us to white-out her name.

(Homefront Records, 1997)

Writing this now, the loss of authority writes itself large. The very thing the workshops were all about. How much this writer of all people struggled to be present, struggled not to disappear and then could only disappear from her writing. It seems such a violence that was enacted upon her, a repeat of the mind controlling games that had been so much part of her abuse. The great thing was that she came back for the research workshops.

Paris: It [the whole experience] was one of the reasons we did the research workshops.

Mary: As an affirmation of Homefront's activities?

Paris: Yeah.

Mary: The ground must have been really strong.

Margaret: We had a very clear idea of what we were doing. We were committed to something real and fundamental. That was from you [Mary] because you were committed to community writing - the voices of people on the ground becoming something - texture. Women's services might have seen the workshops as a political action - ideology.

Paris: For us it was something more powerful - our lives and where we were going. [Women's services saw Homefront] as a support group - we attacked that, like the term, 'survivor'.

(Homefront Records, 1997)

vi'ctim: Little person cowering in a corner. Stuck.

survi'vor: Gaunt, ragged clothes, crawling up the beach. Only just making it. Miraculously escaped a natural disaster, plane crash etc.

dome'stic vi'olence: Jugs and toasters throwing themselves at you, stabbing the eggs

fa'mily vi'olence: Three year olds attacking you, throwing dummies.

male vi'olence: Wife bashing: Beating: Bruises.

(Homefront, 1990: 3)

As we are talking about the workshop process and how it all exploded with 'Red/Black' but how we managed to keep going, Paris opens *Hells Belles*' and points to individual writing, saying, 'this is personal'. She closes the book and holds it, 'this is group process'.

Making the joins⁴

Paris's image of the book - the individual pages joining at the spine - is an apt one for 'doing community' and the intention to hold together in this process both individuality and an inclusive relationality (Phelan, 1992: 140). Phelan suggests that the basis for doing this is in understanding the individual as a specific embodiment of all the 'jostling, shifting elements' (134) that constitute our identities at any one time. In relation to others, individuals embody both differences and commonalities, offering possibilities for connection and alliance as well as conflict.

The issue of choosing the title shows the process of working across difference through our commonalities. These commonalities produced 'Homefront process' and 'safe in process', as Paris would say, there was room to value, negotiate, change and accept our different positions. If not always comfortable, it was a productive collaboration in which our differences were critical to learning and change.

⁴ Homi Bhabha (1994) uses the image of 'the join' to express the 'desire for social solidarity' (18).

On the other hand, the issue of the poem 'Red/Black' highlights the risk that essentialist understandings of individuality, and static, asphyxiating notions of community, pose for this delicate/strong balance. Again, the non-essentialist thinking employed by Phelan offers the possibility of recognising and valuing difference as well as 'what we share' (140), by suggesting the possibility of connection through our individual embodiment of multiple social locations. The community 'we' who 'do it ourselves' is a process which takes place through joining at points of common purpose.

Each Homefront book is an image of the way we made and thought about 'joining at the time. Each is a different configuration of individual and group voices, connected but distinct. Through our years of conversation, Margaret and Paris and I have threaded many of our present interests through those earlier makings of Homefront. My thesis research and writing is very much a continuation of this process of creating and recreating 'us', as well as our individual selves, through a discourse of mutuality which honours rather than dissolves our distinct inquiries and contributions.

Chapter five

Changing the story lines

Introduction

In this chapter I develop my argument that representing ourselves in cultural activist terms involves work with both the 'politics' and 'poetics' (Hall 1997: 6) of representation. As I suggested in chapter three, these two dimensions of representation are closely and dynamically interwoven. As Bakhtin (Morris, 1994) has argued, the formal conventions of a text are themselves 'sociological' and cannot be separated from what is communicated (161-2).

What I want to suggest here is that at the heart of this two-dimensional approach is a **re-presentation** or re-writing of the stories individual subjects make of their lives. This project connects with the broader cultural narratives or discourses which constitute individual subjects, but to take effect it requires intervention in the way meaning is made in individual stories. I think of this approach as one which may change the 'story lines' (Davies, 1992: 57) which shape us individually and collectively.

The first part of my discussion addresses the discursive shaping of self by connecting Homefront feminist interests and issues with a non-essentialist, broadly poststructuralist understanding of the individual subject. On the basis that language is a critical site for personal and political change it offers a theoretical framework for re-writing self in terms of embodied and agentic subject positions.

The second part of my discussion takes up the discursive importance of forms of cultural representation and looks at re-writing self in the context of the politics and poetics of textual production. It suggests that the conventions and strategies of what may be described as 'imaginative' writing provide the tools for changing the story lines.

Feminism and poststructuralism - the Homefront context

The political agenda of 'second-wave' feminism, which provides the political context for the Homefront workshops, has been articulated in various terms. 'Liberal' feminism, initiated by 'first wave' feminists, calls for women's equal access to the social order as it exists (Weedon, 1987: 4). Socialist feminism is also concerned with equal access to the social order but understands gender oppression as 'integrally tied in with class and racial oppressions' and requires the 'full transformation of the social system' to achieve women's equality (4). Radical feminism focuses on gender rather than other forms of oppression, and suggests that a social order which values women's distinct qualities will be more equitable and just (4).

Broadly speaking liberal feminism offers no critique of the social order to which it demands that women have equal access. The premise is, much as Wollstonecraft (1792) articulated it in 1792, that women have the same capacity for rational thought as men, and that it is education and opportunity rather than the innate qualities of gender that enables people to participate in social life. In this framework equal access is clearly mediated by other inequalities of the existing social order. In the context of feminist theory and politics, class has probably been the most longstanding and debated of these but other political movements concerning race, ethnicity, indigeneity, ability and sexual preference, which came to be heard much more clearly in the 1970s, have all placed major demands on the liberal feminist position.

Socialist feminism offers an alternative to liberal feminism through its critique of the social order in terms of class inequalities. It has revealed liberal feminism's implicit class bias and effected enormous changes in women's position in the labour movement. Perhaps most importantly it has brought to the women's movement the understanding, from Marxist thought, that gender, as much as class, is 'socially produced and historically changing' (Weedon, 1987: 4).

The idea that the individual is made by circumstances, rather than born with a set identity has informed much modern thought. It is central to Marxist theory that individual subjects are socially constructed through the objective circumstances of their lives, namely their place in the division of labour and, for Marxist feminists, this includes the sexual division of labour. In this scenario individuals' understandings of themselves may change in response to the changing conditions of their lives. In Marxist terms the most critical of these changes produces the realisation of 'class (or gender) consciousness'. This happens when individuals 'feel an identity of interests as between themselves and as against their rulers and employers' (Thompson, 1977: 12) and it is this realisation which galvanises mass action for social change.

'Consciousness raising' towards women's awareness of their common interests, in the context of second wave feminism, as Bondi (1993) points out, 'enabled women to rewrite their own stories, to insist that "the personal is political" and to develop a feminist identity through which to challenge the subordination of women' (91). One of the discourses of feminist identity which developed through this activity was radical feminism.

Radical feminism asserts women's identity as distinct from that of men and unlike either liberal or socialist feminism offers a gender critique of the social order (Moi, 1985: 12), which it sees as inherently masculine. Patriarchy, rather than capitalism, as in the case of socialist feminism, is the crucial factor, and politically the issue is not to achieve equal access to the social order but to establish an alternative, woman-centred society. A separatist approach to women's activities is a key aspect of this agenda (Weedon, 1987: 4).

While it is possible to identify liberal, socialist and radical feminism as contesting feminist positions, the arguments and insights of each of them may also be read as variously integrated in second wave feminist activism. For instance, British feminist educator, Jane Thompson in her 1983 claim for women's education, calls for:

an education system in which women's experience is accepted as equally valuable and valid as that of men, in which half the knowledge that is available is generated by women and about women, in which women are half the government of education, and in which women's ideas about education are seen as equally viable and are equally implemented as those of men (31).

While Thompson's position is concerned with equal access, she is also clearly working from an understanding of women's particular experience, knowledge and approaches to learning. The impact of other contemporary 'identity' movements on feminism is also visible in Thompson's position. She makes it clear that 'women's education' includes working class women, black women and lesbian women and that these groups have distinct concerns and issues which may not be reduced to or universalised under the umbrella 'woman' (128-147).

The Homefront workshops suggest a similar integration of feminist approaches. As I've shown through my previous discussion, they were initiated in a women's refuge system that was established through liberal feminism and a grass roots socialist feminism which has remained evident in collective management structures. By the late 1980s staff and collective members often brought a radical feminist perspective to their analysis of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and their approach to working with women who sought refuge. As I've also shown Homefront drew on the consciousness raising approach of early second wave feminism by looking at women's experiences historically and relating them to our own. In addition, we assumed women's oppression by both a patriarchal and capitalist 'system' and celebrated women's shared characteristics as women. The contention over the poem, 'Red/Black' (chapter four), shows the impact of Indigenous and ethnic identity movements on feminist women's refuges and something of the uneasy relationship between these and the emphasis on gender oppression in radical feminism.

Alongside liberal, socialist and radical strands of feminism, my own work at the time brought to the Homefront workshops an interest in what Chris Weedon

(1987) has characterised as ‘poststructuralist feminism’ (20). What distinguishes this position is its understanding of the individual. Liberal, socialist and radical feminism are located in a humanist understanding of each individual as a whole subject, essentially fixed as ‘oneself’ (80-81). Poststructural theory however, suggests that subjectivity is a ‘process’ (87) not so much made by experience, but by the discourses we use to give meaning to experience (85). In this schema the subject is neither unified or fixed, speaking (or writing) self in multiple and even contradictory ways, through the subject positions of the discourses available to her (86, 111-112).

It is this ‘concept of positioning’ which, as Bronwyn Davies (1992) explains, is ‘central to an understanding of the way in which people are constituted through and in the terms of existing discourses’ (54).

When I talk about the experience of being ‘a woman’, I refer to the experience of being assigned to the category female, of being discursively, interactively, and structurally *positioned* as such, and as taking up as one’s own those discourses through which one is constituted as female (54, emphasis in original).

From a poststructuralist perspective, we are not so much ‘made’ as always in the making and the vital ingredient of the making is language rather than experience because it is language that gives meaning to experience (Weedon, 1987: 85). Nor can we see the language we use to give meaning to our experience as unique. We do not invent the collections of words we use. They already exist, often in very powerful established arrangements, and it is they which often dominate our sense of self.

It is not difficult to see how poststructuralism’s refusal of essential identity and objective experience offers a strong challenge to a political movement in large part fuelled by its validation of women’s experience as women, and on this basis, its sense of women’s distinct and common identity as women. However, as Bondi (1993) notes, ‘the emancipatory potential of critiques of liberal humanism’ (95) has

drawn feminists to take them up ‘without succumbing to the apolitical relativism of postmodernism’ (95). A hallmark of feminist refiguring of identity in non-essentialist terms, is the determination to maintain the political commitment of feminism to not only ‘**understanding** but also **changing** the position of women (Nicholson, 1989: 202, emphasis in original).

In this spirit, my representation of Homefront’s collaborative writing and publishing activities as ‘changing the story lines’, combines a broadly non-essentialist and discursive understanding of subjectivity with feminism. In particular it draws on feminist work with agency and embodiment.

Agency

In feminist terms, the personal - the way I live as a woman - is political - based on my position in the relations of social power. In working towards change in women’s social position, feminism challenges and resists a social order that produces and supports women’s subordination. It also pursues political change at a personal level by encouraging individual women to see themselves as self-determining agents, rather than determined by their subordinate position.

Poststructuralism suggests that in terms of the feminist project, language is a key site of personal and political change. It links the personal and political by locating language and its discursive organisation as the ‘centrepiece’ of a schema that ‘links language, subjectivity, social organisation and power’ (Richardson, 1994: 518). In this framework the political is enacted through the personal. Individual subjects, constituted through discourses that define and contest social meaning (518), are inextricably part of the ‘wider social play for power’ (Weedon, 1987: 113).

Hall (1997) shows that the process of becoming a subject through discourse takes place in two ways. One involves the production of a subject – eg, woman - as defined by the particular discourse. The other involves the location of the subject in a position established by the knowledge that discourse produces (56). In this way individuals are ‘subjects’ of particular discourses and represent themselves

according to the 'rules' (56) of that discourse and the subject position it offers them. On the other hand, as Weedon (1987) argues, a discourse 'cannot have any social and political effectivity except in and through the actions of the individuals who become its bearers ...' (34).

Weedon's argument for a level of agency on the part of the individual subject is that discursive constitution of the subject 'occurs through the identification by the individual with particular subject positions within discourses' (112). It is where identification doesn't occur that resistance is produced (112-113).

Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available (125).

The feminist project in this framework involves working against powerful discursive constructions of femininity which subordinate women, and offering alternative understandings of, for instance, men's violent treatment of women in their families. Speaking out about domestic violence and sexual abuse may be seen as making a resistant discourse, in which women have the right to leave violent and abusive domestic situations and the agentic capacity to determine their lives otherwise, more widely available.

Davies (1990) suggests that poststructuralism actually opens up the possibility of agency for those positioned by oppressive discourses as 'non-agents' (344), precisely because it understands the subject as discursively 'becoming' (Phelan, 1993: 774) rather than fixed. That is, it is possible to 'take oneself up' (Davies, 1992: 57) in various and different ways. Given the availability of appropriate discourses, 'and the means to mobilise them' (Davies, 1990: 344), the subject

‘woman’ may be independent and self determining, resisting dependency and subordination (344).

For Davies (1992), the awareness of discursive practices that Weedon (1987) advocates ‘to develop strategies to contest hegemonic assumptions and the social practices which they guarantee’ (126), includes an awareness of how ‘I’ constitute myself (Davies, 1992: 69). For her the feminist project involves understanding and intervening in the way we render our own experience discursively as stories of ‘me’. Using her own story of falling in love she writes:

In poststructuralist terms, to get out of the romantic narrative, to escape its confines, I don’t need to catch myself mistakenly reading someone as prince when he is not. Instead I need to understand the story itself, how it draws me in and how others position me within its terms. I need as well to imagine new story lines in which the problems inherent in the existing narrative are eliminated and in which the positionings available to me are not destructive in the way that the romantic narrative is (69).

This understanding of the possibility of re-writing my story from a self-determining position is a vital aspect of Homefront’s writing practice. It suggests that the radical point of representing ourselves is in re-presenting ourselves.

Embodiment

I’ve already worked with the idea of embodiment as a basis for discussing doing community across difference, by drawing on Phelan’s (1992) concept of the individual subject’s distinct embodiment of multiple social locations. As she writes, thinking in terms of the material, but not essentialist, specificity of bodies not only makes it impossible ‘to imagine that we are “really all the same”’ (133), but also enables us ‘to value what we share’ (140).

In purist terms ‘specificity’ has its own essentialism. Indeed Diana Fuss (1989) suggests that even ‘anti-essentialism’ rests on essentialism, insofar as ‘positionality’

or 'subject-position', is a form of 'essence' (Fuss in Bondi, 1993: 98). In effect, the development of the relationship between feminism and poststructuralism has involved a feminist refiguring of essentialism as much as a refiguring of identity.

An increasingly important strand of this theorising for both feminist and postmodern critiques, addresses the 'mind/body dualism' that is so entrenched in western thinking (Cranny-Francis, 1995: 1). In the long term this work has resulted in a shift from understanding the individual in terms of 'consciousness', to the concept of 'embodied subjectivity' (1-2). This concept, particularly as elaborated by Liz Grosz (1994), allows the subject to be both materially distinct from other subjects (xi), as well as 'in process', as I've described the discursive construction of the subject, above.

In terms of feminist thinking, the reappraisal or 'rethinking' of essentialism, 'through the body' (Kirby, 1991: 14), as Kirby puts it, drawing on Jane Gallop (1988), was highlighted in a special issue of *Hypatia* on Feminism and the Body in 1991. In her introduction to that volume Grosz points to feminist interest in questioning the essential and dualistic 'terms in which the body has been previously theorized', as well as in examining 'feminist rejections of notions of women's lived bodily specificities' (2).

Grosz's work on refiguring identity and essentialism through the body has been particularly influential. The body, she argues, is a 'sociocultural artifact', not a 'natural, fixed, ahistorical given', but an effect of culture which has 'ontological status' (1991: 2). It is produced by culture but is also a 'pliable, variable **condition** of both women's identities and their differences' (2, my emphasis). If subjects are discursively/culturally constituted they are also specific 'corporeal being[s]' (1994: ix).

Grosz's (1994) understanding of 'experience' similarly interlaces mind/matter, suggesting, as Probyn (1993) does, that experience is both ontological and epistemological (5); both a matter of being and a matter of cultural making. Experience is not an 'unproblematic given' (Grosz, 1994: 94), nor is it simply

metaphysical or ideological. 'Experience can only be understood between mind and body - or across them - in their lived conjunction' (95). If we think of experience as constituted through varying social/historical discourses, it is also lived bodily, 'located in and as the subject's incarnation' (95).

Subjectivity, in this non-dualistic mind-body framework, has a material dimension. Bodies, on the same basis, are discursively constituted or 'inscribed' (x). In this sense subjectivity is 'written on the body' (Cranny-Francis, 1995: 1), not as a prescription but as a specific embodiment produced 'within a network of material and discursive practices' (17).

Sam's Body Map (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990) shows the stories literally written on her body: 'scars/I did them to get my dad back/to hurt him/because I hated him' (32). In marking her skin, she writes herself as a particular embodied subject. 'Sometimes/the scars make me feel better/I still make them/but I try not to' (32).

Changing the story lines

If Sam's 'Body Map' dramatises the concept of 'writing on the body', it is also a poignant demonstration of the implicit agency involved in taking up a discursive subject position, and of the possibility of re-writing 'me'. Using the language of 'story', my argument is that such re-writing involves 'changing the story lines' of dominant discourses, including those of established literature.

As Davies (1992) suggests, the particular characters and plots of our own stories unfold on the basis of the 'story lines, concepts and images' (57) associated with the position the larger cultural narrative offers 'me'. For instance, many women take up the position 'woman' in a discourse which situates women as subordinate to men and understands domestic violence against women in terms of men's predominant position in the marriage relationship. On this basis they may understand themselves in various ways - they are 'unlucky', it's their lot in life, they don't try hard enough, it's their own fault. Their stories of their experience unfold in terms of characters like victim, bad wife, or perhaps martyr. On the other

hand, feminist discourse situates women as equal to men and understands the beating of a woman by her husband as violent assault. Abused women are survivors rather than victims. Clearly the action open to the subject 'woman', the possible 'plot' of her story, is more limited and as Davies says more personally 'destructive' (69), in one of these discourses than the other.

The relationship between discourse and 'my' story is graphically demonstrated by Elaine Gaber-Katz (1996) in her discussion of the writing of *My Name is Rose*,¹ by Rose Doiron (1987).

Speaking from the context of a community-based literacy program, Gaber-Katz (1996) argues that literacy programs which 'work with the language of literacy learners through the stories of their lives, are working with the fundamental questions of who people are, how they have been formed, and who they are to become' (52). Writing life stories in a discursive context which supports telling stories that have been silenced or told only from one perspective, offers the possibility for learners to see themselves in 'new ways', and 'as an actor' (53) in their own lives. In *My Name is Rose*, Doiron (1987) is able to 'project another image of herself, the image of someone who was not to blame, of someone who matters, of the expert, of the one who knows' (Gaber Katz, 1996: 54).

In the process of telling her story, Rose does more than verbally resist negative messages. She rescues her history from her nightmares, she re-lives and re-enacts her experience and envisions a different world. 'If more people read my story, maybe they will talk more about what it is like to get beat up', says Rose. 'Maybe someday it will stop' (Doiron, 1987). Rose begins to see, perhaps for the first time, the injustice she suffered as a child and the role of language in the injustice ... (54)

¹ Homefront participants met one of the teachers involved in the publication of this book, Jenny Horsman, when she visited Australia. Books and ideas were exchanged. *My Name is Rose* is a treasured item in the files. The connection continues now as I draw on Gaber-Katz to discuss Homefront.

In her manifesto for African-American women 'coming to voice', hooks (1988) provides another example of bringing the feminist intention to 'speak out' together with a constitutive understanding of language. 'Coming to voice' (46) is not 'merely speaking' (49). It requires women of colour to re-present themselves in active resistance to their position as 'other' in white supremacist discourse (48). In hooks' words coming to voice is 'a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject' (46).

Only as subjects can we speak, as objects we remain voiceless - our being defined and interpreted by others (46).

Taking the poststructural understanding of 'becoming a subject' through discourse into account, the idea of becoming the subject rather than the object or 'other' of my story, provides an appropriate writerly image for taking up an agentic position.

Margaret: (AO87): ... You see before I could never write because I kept thinking, how will people read this? Will they hate it? ... But once you shift from that position of defining yourself from an outside position or perspective to writing because you've got something to come out, rather than describe something external, then you get a fundamental change of sensitivities. Or subject matter.

Mary: ... Isn't that ... that you ... are seizing a position that says 'I am doing this'?

Margaret: And not only that, we have the authority.
(Homefront Records, 1995)

Westwood (1991) points out, in the context of a research project with a black mental health group in Leicester, that realising this authority through publication is a critical part of political change. The private documentation of 'a very painful and compelling story' (84) is not enough.

Margaret: (B209): It's like bringing it out into the light ... Because you simply make it another - not just another story.

Mary: But part of the world of stories?

Margaret: Part of the world of stories.
(Homefront Records, 1995)

The publication of *My Name is Rose* (Doiron, 1987), moves it beyond its importance as an act of self-transformation, marking the authority of the writing subject, Doiron, as well as the subject 'Rose'. By publicly resisting the language that affirms 'her father and those in power' (54) and defines her in their terms, Doiron 'becomes an authority - on her life and on literacy' (55).

And as a text in the world, it asks the reader to make sense of images of Rose that are contrary to the taken-for-granted notions of how exploited and oppressed people live. For example, Rose, a welfare recipient, reveals herself through her story as a person with tremendous integrity and dignity, a person who has never been a willing victim of abuse. This may challenge the reader to reflect upon the role that people and systems (some of which are thought to be sacred, such as the church and the family) play in the oppression of certain groups of people in society - people like Rose (56).

Part of the discursive struggle for 'power/knowledge' (Westwood, 1991: 82) involved in the production of texts which claim the particular knowledge of 'other' subjects, is the challenge they offer 'what is considered to be literature' (Gaber-Katz and Horsman. 1988 in Gaber-Katz, 1996: 56).

In a broad sense, literature may be seen as offering representations of cultural life in the form of stories which, through our reading of them, suggest ways of understanding our world (56). On this basis the 'story lines, concepts and images' (Davies, 1992: 57) of dominant discourses strongly inform textual representations of who we are, and who we may become, individually and collectively. Dominant

discourses of textual production in turn perpetuate and underline the stories and voices that play the most powerful role in representing life (Gaber-Katz, 1996: 56). That is, the oppressions and exclusions of subjects in dominant discourses are repeated at the site of 'orthodox' (Gilbert, 1988: 29) or established constructions of literature.

Here I want to suggest that Homefront's community writing and publishing practice, offers a 'site-specific' approach to changing the story lines of oppressive discourses. As such it necessarily involves a challenge to the way those story lines define the site, in this case in terms of the dominant forms and processes of textual production. In the following discussion I suggest that the production of texts which write the subordinate 'other' subject as embodied and agentic, is a critical aspect of that challenge. Importantly, as I argue later in the chapter, this involves the use of imaginative writing strategies in counter-hegemonic contexts.

'Disestablishing literature'²- embodiment and agency

In established terms, 'literature' is exclusively defined as 'fiction' rather than 'fact' (Threadgold, 1992: 77) and, in recent times has 'narrow[ed] to equate with the three distinctive genres of poetry, fiction and drama' (Hooton, 1990: 5). Autobiographies, diaries, letters and other writing located in the lived experience and immediate voices of its writers, have been disregarded as literature since the nineteenth century (5).

This development may be seen as part of the modern western philosophical distinction between mind and body. '*Belles lettres*', 'fine arts' suggest a move to greater and greater refinement, away from 'the body experiencing' (Shapiro, 1994: 62). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) describe the shaping of western culture through the eighteenth century as 'the fabrication of an idealised space of consciousness which is being systematically **scoured**' (93, emphasis in original).

² See chapter three for a discussion of Morley and Worpole's (1982) proposal for 'disestablishing literature' (pp. 18-44).

Eagleton's (1990) *Ideology of the Aesthetic* shows this idealisation of the sensual as taking place in and through the process that saw the 'emergent middle class ... defining itself as a universal subject' (25). The disembodiment of this subject, which is also male and white, supports its claims to universality and the hegemonic power of its production and interpretation of social life. Dominant forms of cultural representation, like modern literature, similarly universalise the white male middle class subject, through disembodiment, and the privileging of 'mind' over 'matter'. Even dance, as Sherry Shapiro (1994) shows, in its traditional 'masculinised and commodified' (69-70) form, is not about the particular dancing body.

In the implicit hierarchy of the 'universal' bourgeois social order (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 200-201), which may be seen as operating in terms of the mind-body opposition and parallel dualisms - male/female, culture/nature etc. - 'high' culture rejects specific embodiments as 'low' culture. As Stallybrass and White write, the identity of 'superior' and 'ideal' bourgeois culture is mirrored back through 'the scene of its low Other' (202).

In the late twentieth century context of post colonialism, Razack (1993) identifies this efficient hegemony as a kind of cultural tourism, 'feeding off the tears of stories from the Third World' (97). When the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women calls for immigrant women's stories 'with a view to publication' (84), she 'suspects that it is the sentimental, personal and the individual that is being sought after' (84), rather than the transformative possibility of 'refut[ing] patriarchal and racist constructs' (83).

Trinh Minh-ha (1989) also suggests that the interest in 'other' stories masks and re-inforces the dominant-subordinate relationship. In fact it is the interest in them which reveals their use in this regard (86-88). Like an 'endangered species' (88), they provide a particular sort of entertainment, a diversion 'from the monotony of sameness' that 'will not go so far as to question the foundation of [the] beings and makings' (88) of their audience.

Paris: (B250): Oh those poor creatures,

Margaret: Oh those poor, poor

Paris: broken women.

(Homefront Records, 1995)

As well as pointing out how the mainstream publishing industry supports the 'other' as 'commodity spectacle' (hooks, 1988: 47, see chapter six), hooks shows how 'other' writing may itself perpetuate a 'culture of domination' (49).

... it is easy for the marginal voice striving for a hearing to allow what is said to be determined by the needs of that majority group that appears to be listening. It becomes easy to speak about what that group wants to hear, to describe and define experience in a language compatible with existing images and ways of knowing, constructed within social frameworks that reinforce domination (48).

For instance, as hooks (1991) writes elsewhere, 'Literature ... that is only a chronicle of pain can easily act to keep in place the existing structures of domination' (59).

My reading of hooks' (1988) argument for coming to voice (45-49) as 'a way of speaking that is no longer determined by one's status as object or oppressed being' (48) is that it involves embodiment and agency. The 'assertion of a decolonised subjectivity' (hooks, 1991: 59) does not mean using the form of the universal disembodied voice, but means speaking agentially in a distinct, embodied way which 'articulat[es] cultural practices that are part of the reality of marginalised groups' (59).

As a dance teacher, Shapiro (1994) argues for the specific embodiment of the dancer as a 'practice of freedom' (Freire, 1985: 54). She likens the experience of dancing in a traditional context to the experience of Freire's 'banking' education.

'... most dancers never know what they are dancing about, but only regurgitate the steps given to them by the choreographer' (Shapiro, 1994: 76).

In this way the dancer is a cipher for a story of the dominant subject/social order, in which her particular body is an instrument, rather than instrumental. In contrast, Shapiro is interested in a dancing practice which opens the way for the dancer's own authority over her movements. For her the point of dance is for the dancer to be 'speaking and dancing her own voice as this has been mediated through her body experience in the world' (77).

In the context of the written form, Gaber-Katz (1996) also emphasises how important it is to the transgressive authority of *My Name is Rose* (Doiron, 1987) that it is specifically embodied by the syntax and idiom of Doiron's own voice, her own words (Gaber-Katz, 1996: 56). In this it unmistakably claims space in the world of stories for particular and different knowledges and experiences, and highlights the exclusiveness of the apparently neutral voices that generally interpret and comment on cultural life.

Such embodiment is not a move to reinstate the essential author or the text as a transparent translation of experience. Just as the idea of the embodied subject opens up space for the materiality of cultural difference, it is through the specific voicing of subject positions that difference may be read. Similarly, distinctly placed text, embodied by specific, material detail of location, supports the particularity of subject positions. In the same spirit as the embodied subject, distinctly voiced and grounded text does not infer authenticity. Rather it suggests particular, situated authorities (Richardson, 1994: 518). In this sense, coming to voice is coming to awareness of the voices through which I may speak (hooks, 1988: 46).

For writing ... is an ongoing practice that may be said to be concerned, not with inserting a 'me' into language, but with creating an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go (Trinh, 1989: 35).

In becoming the subject of the story 'I' take up the authority, not of singular 'authentic' authorship, which fixes the 'other' in a performance of subordination, nor of the 'castrating objectivism of the "universal" writer' (Trinh, 1989: 29), but of the particular subject. It is the 'notion of subject-positions' which 'reintroduces the author ... without reactivating the intentional fallacy' (Fuss, 1989 in Robinson, 1991: 12). 'I' am not a fixed single identity. 'I' write through the languages of many positions.

For hooks (1988), writing agentially also requires an understanding of what shapes voice in terms of distinct 'style' and the effect it may have in various contexts (46). Vitally it places the 'other' at the 'centre of our discourse' (48) through the rhythms and constructions of language. In her paper on 'critical fictions' (1991: 53-61), she draws on examples of writing in *patois*, to show how embodied voicing of the 'other' works as an agentic move. What she brings out particularly is how this move asks readers to 'shift locations' (56).

Styles of language pointedly identify specific audiences both as subjects of the text and as that audience one addresses more intimately ... Yet to address more intimately is not to exclude; rather, it alters the terms of inclusion (56).

The particularity of a specifically voiced text cuts across dominant readings in which the subordinate 'other' supports the identity of the dominant according to the 'normal' story lines. Readers cannot assume that 'they already possess a language of access' to the work, 'or that the text will mirror realities they already know and understand' (57). Such embodiment offers a challenge not only to writing practice but to 'dominant reading practices', compelling 'the uncritical reader to put aside set notions of what literature should be or do and enthusiastically grasp new and different approaches' (57).

Another example of repositioning the reader through an embodied text, is offered by the ‘borderland’ writing of Chicana women like Maria Lugones (1989) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). Working across and with different languages it both embodies a particular cultural position and undoes its subordination.

... En que voz *with which voice*, anclada en que lugar *anchored in which place*, para que y porque *why and to what purpose*, do I trust myself to you ... (Lugones, 1989 in Razack, 1993: 96).

As readers of this work, we may discover ourselves at the ‘centre’ of the discourse, or recognise ourselves not as the ‘ideal’ or neutral subject against which difference is defined, but in terms of our own specificities; the distinguishing marks of our own bodies, including the particular ‘tongues’ with which ‘I’ speak. Such embodiment demands attention to positions and their relationship. It offers a way of re-presenting the low and marginal, on our own terms, rather than as the ‘low other’ (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 202).

Margaret talks about the Homefront process of becoming the embodied subject of the story as ‘re-writing the damaged body’. This is not about making the wounds invisible, nor is it about displaying them for public entertainment. It’s about speaking the damage in ways that resist it. It’s about locating women from homes of violence as diverse individuals and making insubordinate understandings of the experience of abuse visible in the world of stories.

What becomes clear from this discussion is that forms and styles of writing affect the positioning of the subject. The poetics of writing is undeniably political and may support or change the story lines of powerful, exclusive discourses as they are represented in mainstream literature. On the basis of my argument for a situated authority in terms of embodiment and agency as a way of re-presenting the subject in written form, I now want to look more closely at the ‘poetic’ creation of embodied and self determining subjects.

The politics and poetics of imaginative writing

The promise of imaginative writing in revolutionary terms, is in the world it creates.

Writing ... is malleable. It is a plastic art. In writing we not only can create worlds, we can change them at will ... A child writes 'the dog died' and is astounded at what has been accomplished. The child has put a dog into the world that did not exist before - created a world that would not otherwise have existed - and then has killed the dog ... And if the child is contrite, a stroke of the pen is all that is required ...
(Smith, 1985: 207).

As much as it suggests 'fiction' rather than 'fact', (Threadgold, 1992: 77) 'narrative', rather than 'exposition' (82-83), imaginative writing suggests the capacity to reposition the subject, to change the story lines, to unsettle and disestablish. Its conventions and concerns, such as point of view, voice, specificity, motive, action, are methods of creating a world of embodied and distinctly grounded subjects, and investigating their positions and the consequences of these. It also employs writing strategies designed to engage readers in the world it creates. In hooks' (1991) terms this provides a basis for repositioning the reader. 'Imagination', or the empathy generated by imaginative writing, 'can enable us to understand fictive realities that in no way resemble where we are coming from' (57-8). Use of figurative language plays a vital part in this engagement. Homi Bhabha (1991) suggests that metaphors offer alternative and plural visions or versions of the way we see things. 'Metaphors produce hybrid realities by yoking together unlikely traditions of thought' (63). If we may be 'moved' into an alternative position in reading imaginative work, the process of writing ourselves imaginatively, may also open up new worlds and positions.

Richardson (1994) speaks for the embodying and transformative qualities of imaginative writing in the context of advocating its use as both a method of inquiry and a way of presenting social science research. Her discussion suggests that the

formal demands of imaginative writing work against the objectification of research subjects and the neutrality of the researcher in traditional social science writing. '[E]xperimentation with point of view, tone, texture, sequencing, metaphor (523) enables a research text to represent distinct subject positions. Various ways of working with voice (520, 523, 525-526) produce research subjects and researcher as distinctly voiced characters. Working with imaginative writing strategies makes it possible for research writers to 'learn about the topic and about themselves what is unknowable, unimaginable, using prescribed writing formats' (521). Writing with an eye to specificity, to metaphor, to character, to rhythm, to juxtaposition, with a view to evoke rather than explain, engages the writer in the transformative process of 'self-creation' (521).

Frank Smith's (1985) article, which I have quoted from at the beginning of this section, led to doing 'the crossing out exercise' with Homefront. This was a group-writing-in-process, in which the developments were visible to everyone, which at first changed the actions of the subject in each successive line and then changed the character of the subject. The first section started 'the girl smiled', the second 'I am the girl'.

The girl smiled/said fuck this I'm not going to smile for no
 bastard/screamed/refused to come back/stepped out/purred/spread her
 wings and flew away/swung shut/I am the girl/amazon that dances on the
 backs of turtles ...

(Homefront Records, 1991)

In this section I argue that the 'poetics' of imaginative writing provides tools and strategies for decolonising – as hooks (1991) might say, or re-writing the subordinate subject as embodied and agentic. In doing so I outline the politics of the orthodox discourse on literature as one which maintains broader discourses of exclusion and subordination by claiming imaginative or 'creative' writing as the defining and exclusive quality of literature (Brophy, 1998: 25-34) which itself is confined to a 'narrow band' (33) of forms. As I also show, postmodern understandings of language and subjectivity provide the basis for undoing this

relationship and appropriating or democratising imaginative writing as a radical and inclusive, rather than conservative and exclusive, writing practice.

In documenting a collective project to record and analyse their personal memories in an investigation of 'female sexualisation', Haug (1987) shows the difference between self-representation in imaginative writing and more generally accessible forms of language. She points out that 'everyday' (62) language, in contrast to imaginative forms is severely limited as a means of representing or interpreting self. The abstract generalisation of everyday language, exemplified by the cliché, denies 'thought and understanding' (62) by 'suppress[ing] the concreteness of feelings, thoughts and experiences, speaking of them only from a distance' (64). For instance a group member writes about a new haircut, 'I realised how fashionable my hair had become; long and curly, it attracted everyone's attention' (63). As Haug reports, this renders her experience as an instance of 'degradation to slavish femininity' (63). In contrast, novelist, Doris Lessing (1975), writes of a character leaving the hairdresser 'with a very dark red haircut so that it felt like a weight of heavy silk dangling against her cheeks as she turned her head' (Lessing in Haug, 1987: 63).

Here, the words that present themselves so readily to us as adequate expressions of experience in fact direct us away from sensual pleasure and bodily feeling. The path to 'liberating' action they mark out leads only to defiant attempts to make ourselves independent of fashion, or of the opinions of others - attempts limited to gestures of refusal, whereas Lessing's use of language enables us to opt for the sensual pleasure (63).

Haug understands the discursive distinction between imaginative and more readily available and usual constructions as a 'division of labour between literature as creative writing, and everyday language as a means of communication' (38). In this view, access to the means of representing ourselves is politically critical. Without 'control over the language at our disposal' (62), we are subjected to it, spoken by others, rather than speaking ourselves. '[L]anguage can serve either as a prison house, or as the material of liberation' (63).

I started working with Homefront with the intention of encouraging writing that works with the complexity of meaning, creates a sense of experience and character, speaks distinctly. In contrast to this I was aware of the sort of writing I did not want to come out of the Homefront workshops - self disclosing, confessional writing, a suggestive, even prurient catalogue of victimisation. The workshops were designed to rule out those 'ready-made assemblages of words' of the most powerful and available discourses, through which 'the writer condemns herself anew to subordination' (63).

*Not long after the publication of *Elles' Letters and Hells Belles' Letters*, a colleague and I were briefly involved with a community writing and publishing project which offered me something like a 'control group' for this approach.*

The situation was that the relationship between a group of women who most definitely had something to say about a common experience, and a writer employed to work with them on a publication, had broken down on the basis of the writer's criticism of the participants' work. The participants were writing about painful, often deeply buried experiences for the first time, at some cost to themselves. The employed writer felt that their writing was sentimental and unconvincing. In this criticism the group members felt their experience, long kept secret or ignored by others, doubly denied; their words neither speakable nor hearable.

What was happening was that the discourses on writing, and painful, unjust experiences most available to the participants, were shaping their writing in a way that mirrored their lack of power and identified them, in orthodox literary discourse, as 'poor writers'. In this way they were doubly subjected, and most cruelly through their intention to change the discourse which had silenced their stories.

Haug shows that the imaginative use of language opens up alternative ways of being and knowing 'me'. '[A]rtistry in language' is a linguistic competence which

produces greater 'self consciousness in our actions' (62), and on that basis the possibility of taking up agentic subject positions - 'practical political action' (63).

The 'orthodox' discourse on literature as an elite 'creative' form (Gilbert, 1988: 29), however, is at pains to maintain the 'division of labour' between imaginative writing and all other writing, including the theoretical and 'everyday'. Kevin Brophy (1998) shows how this works in the pedagogical practice of creative writing, where courses may advertise '... all genres (prose, poetry and playwrighting [sic])' (33). Similarly, those subscribing to 'the modernist literary canon' (34), may defend their elite position as producers of novels, poems and plays (32-34).

The understanding that underlies this approach and critically informs the orthodox discourse is that 'creativity' is located in the author as the originator of texts (25-37). This is an essentialist construction of the author which suggests a transparent relationship between individual and text. 'Literature' is the 'natural, creative and unified expression ... [of] a gifted individual' (Gilbert, 1988: 30).

An important effect of this understanding is that it implicitly privileges 'creative vision' over technique (29), and ensures that 'good writing', as Trinh (1989: 17) describes it and 'good writers' are inseparable. Technique, in this context, is offered as a complex and sophisticated definition of 'good writing' which is nevertheless unattainable by those who are not 'good writers'.

Good writing is ... differentiated from bad writing through a building up of skill and vocabulary and a perfecting of techniques. Since genius cannot be acquired, sophisticated means, skills and knowledge are dangled before one's eyes as *the* steps to take, *the* ladder to climb if one wishes to come any closer to the top of this monument known as Literature ... The Well Written (17, emphasis in original).

Alternatively, pedagogical discourse may suggest that student writing may be as 'authentic' and 'original' (Gilbert, 1988: 31) as Literature, through the idea of self

expression. Although this seems to democratise the possibility of ‘talent’, it similarly reproduces the division of labour by ‘obscur[ing] the process of production of the text’ (30). In this way, writing as personal, individual ‘expression’ may come to equate with ‘poor writing’.

Bill Green (1990) suggests that the pedagogical concern of the orthodox discourse is not with linguistic skills at all but with ‘**cultural** competence’ (144, emphasis in original). English teaching in schools, for instance, functions as ‘a means for the production of a particular kind of “cultured” subjectivity’ (144). ‘Good writing’ is the ‘gift’ of the ‘cultured’ subject. In effect then, the orthodox and essentialist understanding of the poetics of imaginative writing is a divisive ‘cultural politics’ (135) which intersects with the wider field of dominant discourses and their emphasis on and denial of certain stories and voices. On this basis the only resources that may be available to ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘uncultured’ subjects may be those ready made clichés which inscribe self in the straitjacket of dominant discourses and reproduce the exclusive literary canon.

Postmodern theorising about the constitution of subjectivity through language has produced shifts in essentialist author-based understandings of textual production. ‘What is an author?’ (Foucault, 1979 in Brophy, 1998: 25) when individual subjects are not fixed or unified; when they do not ‘express’ themselves originally in language. Broadly, such ideas free imaginative writing from the ‘cultured subject/creative individual’ (Green, 1990: 144) and enable it to be seen as a practice rather than an innate talent ‘expressed’ through a particular literary form (Brophy, 1998: 34-42).

I didn't want Homefront's intention to re-present ourselves by speaking out about domestic violence and sexual abuse' to be lost in the idea of expressing 'some immanent kernel of identity' (Robinson, 1991: 11).

I wanted to start without the baggage of 'literature' and 'creativity' and explore the way language constitutes subjectivity - the fluid changing varied shapes of language making me making language.

*here is a woman who is however she wants or needs to be
 here's a woman whose behaviour can be lazy, loving,
 stubborn, generous, twitchy, kind, mean, expansive, laid-back
 here's a woman who's living her life, reacting to her
 surroundings, initiating things
 I can be right here, off my tree and out of my body hey, but I
 decide
 hey, and if I say that I'm built like a wharfie
 you'd better believe that's the size I'm feeling today ...
 Lisa (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990: 17)*

As well as separating imaginative writing from 'imaginative or creative individuals' (Brophy, 1998: 41), a constitutive approach to language highlights the discursive construction of all texts and questions established genre boundaries. In the context of her interest in breaking down the 'factual' identity of qualitative research, Richardson (1994) shows that the conventions of textual production are themselves historical constructions; drawn together, separated, debated in the long-term demarcation and realignment of genres (518-519). The association of imaginative interpretive work with 'made-up' literature, rather than 'true' science is part of this process.

Postmodern thought suggesting that knowledge is discursively produced and situated highlights the interpretative, imaginative aspects of theoretical writing (Richardson, 1994), as well as the creative aspects of biography and autobiography (Brophy, 1998: 30). Hybrid forms like the 'autobiographical novel' signify new inclusions, or reinclusions in 'literature'. Threadgold's (1992) paper, 'Legislators and Interpreters', uses the example of 'paraliterature, a hybrid of literature and criticism, art and science' (76), to point to the new overlaps between 'fiction and objectivity in interpretation' (77).

Such blurring of the boundaries between categories of texts is part of changing dominant discourses concerning textual production. Challenging the established contexts and processes of imaginative writing, as well as its forms, is another.

Brophy (1998) suggests the radical potential of practising creative writing in varied 'contexts and locations' (41). He cites as an example the 'collaborative, relatively public, educational, shared activities' (42) which often take place in Australia under the rubric of 'community writing'. He sees the practice of imaginative writing across genres, contexts and locations, as creating a space for what Deleuze and Guattari (1986) characterise as a 'minor literature' (in Brophy, 1998: 43); a heterogeneous space for diverse and resistant voices re-presenting themselves.

... in an Australian context this could mean Aboriginal writers using an English mixed with traditional Aboriginal speech; or, in a global context, youth using slang against literary English; the limited but intense language of the street or of family life transported into poetry; migrants and post-colonial literatures bring their words and concepts into English literary forms or producing bilingual texts; or small regional groups simply supporting each other to keep working on creative projects (43).

The deaths of the science writer as 'disembodied omniscient narrator ... claiming universal, atemporal general knowledge' (Richardson, 1994: 518), and the literary writer as 'genius' (Trinh, 1989: 17), make way for the writing subject. They create space for the particular authorities of writers like Doiron, like members of Homefront; for their re-writing and re-presentations of themselves and the world.

Chapter six

Coming to voice: Homefront community writing and publishing practice

Introduction

How not to write the experience of domestic violence and sexual abuse as an object of pity or spectacle? How to speak damage in forms that make it visible but don't sentimentalise it? How to speak as an embodied, agentic, decolonised subject?

Drawing on the example of Homefront, this chapter demonstrates an approach to re-presenting ourselves which brings imaginative writing together with unorthodox writing contexts, processes and intentions. It suggests that, as well as appropriating imaginative writing strategies, the practicalities of coming to voice as a counter-hegemonic move include working collaboratively rather than individually, and taking an independent, co-operative approach to publishing.

A large part of my discussion concerns ways or technologies of re-writing explored by Homefront. These had various effects, were taken up by participants in different ways, sometimes worked in the way I imagined - sometimes not. As Hall (1997) shows, the poetics of representation is constantly engaged in the political struggle over meaning (277). For me, the process and the writing it produced, suggest more explorations as much as they highlight the dynamic relationship between the politics and poetics of representation.

The chapter also provides discussion on coming to voice as a collaborative writing activity, and on the movement involved in the individual process of coming to voice. It shows how important independent publishing is in the project of 'self-authorisation' (Lanser, 1992: 7), and concludes by bringing the politics and poetics

of re-writing self together in a version of what has been called ‘the politics of pleasure’ (Regan, 1992).

‘Putting myself in the picture’¹ - technologies of re-writing the subject

Margaret: It comes down to a tool ... not teaching people but giving them access to the tools.

(Homefront Records, 1995)

Neither self-expression and ‘voice’ nor the practice of forms constitutes on its own the basis for an adequate pedagogy. Those with ‘something to say’ need information about **how** things may be said (Medway, 1988: 93, emphasis in original).

In the Homefront context, I saw working with how writing makes meaning as a way of approaching the nexus between the construction of text and the construction of subject position. The workshop activities I developed on this basis were designed to resist certain conventional constructions and open up as well as claim others.

There was no ‘tell your story about sexual abuse’
 In fact it wasn’t even mentioned
 I thought I was there to be told to write my story
 When I found out that wasn’t the case I was stoked
 I couldn’t wait to get there every week
 Robin (Homefront Records, 1997)

In writing about representation of ‘the Aboriginal community’ in Australia, filmmaker, Frances Peters (1999), argues that it is vital to use stylistic strategies to change the established story lines about Aboriginality. This involves considering how information is conveyed and by whom in what setting. For instance

¹ *Putting myself in the Picture* is the title of Jo Spence’s (1989) documentation of her photographic work. It is an apt image for my discussion.

conventions such as a white reporter speaking to camera against a background of Aboriginal people in a local environment, fix Aboriginal people as a peripheral group who may be interpreted without differentiation, by someone from the centre. Bringing Aboriginal people to the centre of the discourse as multiple and diverse individuals interpreting themselves rather than featuring as an illustration of somebody else's interpretation of them, requires very different filmic conventions (2-3). In his discussion of the politics and poetics of racial stereotyping Hall (1997: 223-279), characterises such stylistic moves to resist negative images as 'transcoding' (277); interrupting and rearranging the conventional and stereotypical relationship between signs which produce discursive meaning.

With the intention of changing the story lines of dominant discourses on domestic violence and sexual abuse by writing the subject 'woman' as agentic and distinctly embodied, the Homefront workshops focused on the shape and shaping of language. We investigated the meanings produced through different juxtapositions and emphases. We drew on familiar and accessible forms not associated with current literary genres. We worked across forms, mixing intentions and applications. We interrupted clichéd and prosaic written constructions and often focused on the most simple elements of the relationship between form and meaning, through the sound of a word, combination of certain words, the arrangement of words on a page.

We were working very much in the 'how' as Medway (1988: 93) says, of producing textual meaning, but in our approach to the 'ideologically charged' (Lanser, 1992: 7) technology of writing we took a 'disrespectful attitude' (Haug 1987: 63) to the conventions of textual production. As Green (1988) suggests, we used 'playfulness' (58) as an antidote to the 'silence and seriousness' (58) of the elite enterprise. Such a playful and disrespectful approach links re-presenting the subject with breaking down the subordinating idea that writing can only be done in certain (limited) 'proper' ways. It's directed towards a double decolonisation of the subject and writing subject.

One approach we took was to use forms of writing associated with particular identifiable purposes as enabling devices, but for intentions that were quite different from their conventional use.

A fit it with yourself kit
 One set of shoulders to hold up your world
 One length of guts to get you through the day
 One tongue and voice box to speak up for yourself
 One set of feet and legs to stand up for yourself
 One set of fists to fight for yourself
 One length of backbone to put to the wall
 One set of hands to hold out for help
 One nose to snub at the world
 One dab of gumption to hold the kit together
 feral (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990: 27)

What is formulaic in one sense, may also offer structure for saying something embodied and agentic which might otherwise be lost in lack of structure and consequent generalisation.

The framework of the letter has an immediate and direct audience, named at the top. This clarifies the writer's location and provides a firm basis for decisions about tone, style and content. This definite shape can also be used for a number of purposes and be written in varied subject voices. In the 'pass-round' letter game, everyone wrote a line and passed it on to someone else to write the next line. In a situation where the previous line could not be read and all contributions were anonymous, participants felt free to try out voices.

Focus on familiar forms - writing I already do - lists, notes, letters, scrapbooks, recipe books, photo albums - make a list of them! Focus on forms that connect - letters, scrapbooks. Ease people into writing by drawing on these forms and working on them together – eg, group

shopping lists (wish lists, hit lists). Encourage extravagance ...
Mary (Homefront Records, 1997)

What was known as the 'labeling' exercise was a rewriting of subordinating 'labels' which began in the form of a list. It wasn't on my agenda as writing workshop leader, but emerged from participants' interest in addressing ways in which they had been defined.

You're a slut
You don't have a mind of your own
You're my wife
You can't do anything properly
You don't know
You're pregnant
Why aren't you pregnant?
(Homefront Records, 1990)

If I hadn't quite understood the potential at first, as soon as the list started emerging I saw how it could work in imaginative re-presenting ourselves terms.

Jo Spence's (1989) photographic work, documented in *Putting Myself in the Picture*, is a powerful demonstration of re-presenting the subject through interrupting and rearranging discursive signs. In her exhibition, 'Beyond the Family Album' (1979), she offers a re-reading and re-doing of herself through collaging and annotating family album snapshots of herself. Her interest here is in 'identify[ing] the process by which I had been put together' (1989: 83), as the subject 'woman'. Contemporary photographs in the same exhibition which deliberately explore and play with representations of herself show her moving from passive to active subject of the camera. In this she puts herself in the picture, not as a fixed or unitary subject but one that is multiple and various and may be made and remade.

Allowing myself to concentrate on the playing out of various images for the camera gave me an immense amount of information about myself. Apart from the fun we had from this I began to conceive of myself as a set of signals or signs, all of which “meant” something to the viewer (including myself) which I could begin to control more by emphasising or de-emphasising as I wished (95).

In the labelling exercise, making a list of accusing and determining phrases unhinged them from the associations which gave them their initial discursive meaning. In their new context they provoked much hilarity as it became clear that the lines were manipulable and those who had been the objects of their abusive meaning, found ways of working with them agentically. We used repetition, re-ordering and insertion of new lines as initial strategies for developing the list and a number of individual pieces of re-writing developed from it.

Shut up, the neighbours’ll hear
(I don’t want them to know I bash you)

You’re dumb, bad, lazy, dirty, ugly, a slut, fat, weak, cold, my wife
(I’m not educated enough to think past four letter words)

You’re unreasonable
(I like being a spoilt child and you won’t play the game)

You’re easily led
(I knew that if I gave you a few broken bones and threatened the children that you’d see it my way)

You f... bitch
(I’m throwing a tantrum, I want to own you, I’ll get you for this, if I knew where to find you)

Nike (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990: 16)

In *Belles' Letters* the whole of the original list appears in a pyramid shape - a mountain which moves in the individual pieces that follow it.

For Sidonie Smith (1993) such re-presentation of self critically concerns the subject as a particular embodiment. She is interested in women's autobiographical practices on the basis that autobiography operates at the intersection of 'the history of the body' (23) and 'the deployment of subjectivity' (23). How have those 'excluded' (20) from dominant discourse, or perhaps drawn into it as the 'low Other' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 202) reclaimed their bodies?

Voiceless simmering close to boil

Burning Red Flushes

Down deep inside I push.

It's a deathly Hush

all is so

raw

Proud Flesh

Acid tears, beginning to warm

Tiny little Thing I'm looking for

looking for

looking for

MY CORE

...

I NEED AND WANT MY OWN SWEET NECTAR

NO MORE HAND FED SACCHARINE

Come and be with me now, I want to feel.²

Paris (Homefront, 1990: 85)

Smith (1993) cites Spence's (1989) work as investigating, disrupting and re-inventing the making of the female body (152-153). It also addresses the personal and bodily distress located in the ways we are put together. Perhaps the most

² This is a small excerpt from a longer piece using a number of graphic variations. Although I have not reproduced all of these, I think the varying emphases, breaks and joins are conveyed.

powerful and moving 'talking back' (Smith, 1993: 20) Spence (1989) offers is her photographic charting of the treatment of her body after she was diagnosed with cancer. Here she makes visible the medical construction of the sick female body and resists its discourses - its making of her body. At the same time she claims and re-pictures herself in the process of alternative treatments, alternative ways of taking up herself/her body (150-171).

Me

Learning to breathe. That is how I have learnt to be;
to breathe; it's okay if I breathe.

Learning how to move. Take a step. I can move. If I move
I won't walk into razor blades. I won't make a connection
with a fist one fist several times.

I am making a connection. I don't have a body like a frozen
chicken anymore where the skin is loose on the top and the
flesh is dead underneath. It's warm. I am part of it/she/
she is me.

Me.

Body warmth and thought. I/we connect. The connection is
real. My flesh never looked so solid before. It has been
there before, an extraordinary substitute for something
else. I'm back at the place where I started but now I know
what I look like.

Me & me: I start here.

Margaret (Homefront, 1990: 36)

Putting myself in the picture/writing myself into the world of stories, from positions of silence and subjection, is a subversive act of self-representation. It involves resisting the powerful and most accessible discourses that speak of us as objects, and reaching for a language through which 'I' can speak, differently and agentically. Working with the poetics of writing, the forms and conventions which produce meaning and locate the subject, in the way that Spence (1989) and Peters (1998) suggest in relation to photography and film, is a vital part of this process.

Working from talk to text was another Homefront strategy for re-writing the subject. Deborah Tannen (1985) identifies the similarity between ‘casual’ or ‘spontaneous conversation’ (137-8) and imaginative writing, citing ‘interpersonal involvement’ (139) as a feature common to both. This suggests a connected, lively, embodied relationship between writer and reader. It suggests writing with the sort of voice that speaks in uninhibited conversation; creating images, manipulating language confidently and distinctly.

... imaginative literature has more in common with spontaneous conversation than with the typical written genre, expository prose ... The features thought of as quintessentially literary are, moreover, basic to spontaneous conversation ... A few such features are repetition of sounds (alliteration and assonance), repetition of words, recurrent metaphors and other figures of speech, parallel syntactic constructions and compelling rhythm (137-138).

In the Homefront workshops, we started with what people said, as the examples of lists that I’ve already cited. show. This meant that the writers immediately had raw material to work with, and it was in the broken elliptical form of speech, rather than the carefully (too) filled-out form of writing.

left the past behind
 starting with one bag of clothes and two dollars
 You can get through things and survive
 (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990: 3)

It may start off in an everyday discourse, but the local idiom, personal quirks and capacities, the ‘interpersonal’ quality of speech, offers a springboard for what Haug (1987) calls ‘artistry’ (62). In particular it claims and works from non-standard construction.

In chapter five I suggested in my discussion of coming to voice that voice is both a metaphor for the agentic subject and in a more literal way may embody the subject

as decolonised. As Gaber-Katz (1996) indicates in relation to *My Name is Rose* (Doiron, 1987), the point here is to speak the difference that non-standard construction may imply, in agentic terms (Gaber-Katz, 1996: 56). It's an act of self-authorisation that the UK community writing and publishing movement (see chapter three) has taken up as a radical political practice. A number of publications by members of the FWWCP feature writing in the mother-tongues and dialects of people living in Britain.

Claiming non-standard forms also offers the possibility of working with the metaphorical layers that are part of subjectivity, which in colonised, standardised forms, may be rendered invisible or merely clichéd. I've already mentioned examples of writing in *patois* and other hybrid and multilingual forms. In *The History of the Voice*, Edward Kamau Braithwaite (1984) shows how in losing language people lose place as well as self - 'The snow was falling on the canefields' (9).

He locates the 'business of emergent language in the Caribbean' in the taking up of an agentic Caribbean subject position located in the language and metaphors of place as well as in 'the very software' (9), 'the actual rhythm and the syllables' of Caribbean English (9). 'The hurricane does not roar in pentameters' (10).

nagging/bitching/raving on/backstabbing/hysterical gaggle/loose
talk/mindless
chatter/gabbling/gabbing/gasbagging/magging/chinwagging/slagging
off/yakking/nattering/twittering/wittering/women never stop talking
Research workshops (Hutchison, 1991: 31)

Stories fracturing dominant narratives

Sally Robinson (1991) writes '... it is through narrative that women most often become Woman' - i.e. inscribe themselves in terms of dominant narratives about gender - 'but that process can be fractured through women's self-representation' (10). The intention of Homefront's imaginative work with forms of textual

construction was to open up the possibilities for taking up narratives of self in an embodied and agentic way. As I've already suggested, taking up a more powerful subject position opens up wider possibilities for the plot of 'my' story; in Fiona Place's (1990) words, 'a choice of ends' (46). As Homefront members' work with the list of labels shows so graphically, oppressive narratives may be fractured when an individual takes up an agentic subject position and from that vantage point deconstructs and replots her story.

YOU didn't you do anything today did you make dinner did you
 what about dinner I've had a hard day

wouldn't dare leave you leave I'll come after you I'll kill
you if you go if I can't have you no one else will
stay here fuck you STAY HERE
the bed the kitchen the house is empty
why is it empty the space is empty

YOU'VE gone
 why have you gone you're mine aren't you I own you
 there's nothing there my hand closes on nothing
 my fist on nothing

I
I've escaped
you won't find me
you won't find me ever again
violence ends here
permanently
ends

Margaret (Doris/Incest Centre, 1990: 16)

In Place's (1989) novel, *Cardboard*, Lucinda writes herself out of *anorexia nervosa*:

... Lucinda reconstructs her subjectivity in her own words and in doing so re-maps her past and creates new possibilities for her future. In her case, this means her past narratives of patient, sick girl and failure are discarded and incorporated into her new narratives of writer and woman' (Place, 1990: 47).

A choice of ends offers itself as an imaginative writing strategy for use and development in the re-writing process. But as Place also makes clear, developing her own words is a vital ingredient of this re-telling. In *Cardboard*, Lucinda starts to use language in a poetic rather than expository form. She literally slices through sentences and the meaning they make, using line breaks and images to disrupt that meaning:

And once I could tell my own story. Choose how I wanted to tell it.
Choose how I wanted to continue it, in this way or that, I had less and less
need for the rigid black and white, thin/fat tale of eating ...

she shapes
the language
of her Self

is aware
of how others'
words wrap her
(Place, 1992: 8)

Generally I preferred to work in a 'slicing through' way with *Homefront*, rather than engage with the construction of narrative. I wanted to keep the positions from which *Homefront* writers might talk back, as open and flexible as possible. However when I, rather cautiously, offered the fairy tale as a genre to play with, in the spirit of working with and against conventional forms, there was the opportunity to directly tackle a pervasive dominant narrative.

for years I have tried to get out of this mess of words this narrative crawl through spaces between letters out into something real but this is as real as it gets & i always trip on commas fall down deep into the text I was born with my bloody inheritance of satin & pearls (Bolster, 1990: 48).

Kathy's pages in *Hells Belles' Letters* (Homefront, 1990) contain a set of pieces which includes one inspired by family photos - 'painful smiles pushed onto people's faces like stamps on an envelope' (Homefront, 1990: 52) - and two that trace a move out from the pain of childhood but suggest hovering on the cusp between drowning and breathing. On the fourth page of six, indicating the theme of the set, is a deliberately naïve drawing of a house, flowers and birds, and written across it is 'lived happily ever after' (54).

Those 'three bloody words', as Bolster (1990: 48-55) says, characterise the fairy tale. They're so powerful that it seems impossible to make any reference to it, whether deconstructive or not, without them. I was concerned that taking them on in a deliberate way could lead to closure through 'refusal' (Haug, 1987: 63) of its discursive intentions rather than development of re-writing. Kathy's pieces show how useless the fairy tale is to her as anything but a stinging reflection on its failure. feral takes to the form with more optimism.

A fairy tale for me

Once upon a life time there was a distressed beautiful maiden. Oh god was she distressed. Where had all the White (white being the symbol for good, of course) Knights gone? Villains she had plenty of, but you couldn't find a hero for lust or money. (She could find a yuppie or two but didn't have a gold American Express card.)

Bugger the bloody feminists - getting all those wonderful saviours and turning them all into touchy feely lefty new age wankers who were too involved with finding themselves to have time for her and her plight (no matter how awful).

So who would rescue her? There was no one, Oh sob sob whimper what's
a poor helpless girl to do

But wait - what was that? A flash of clothes in the shadows. Her saviour?
Maybe ...

Turn on the lights. Let's have a look at him -
Oh my God it's a bloody woman. What use is she?

Hang on tho' - she does look strong and capable: strong firm hands, strong
lines on her face show experience and thought -

Why couldn't a woman be her saviour? Yes it's time to get liberated.

And so saying, the distressed beautiful maiden, me, I go to speak to her - to
ask her to save me - take me away, show me a new life - to wrap me in her
cloak of strength. I open my mouth. She opens her mouth at the same
time, she's saying what I'm saying. Great Goddess I'm talking to a mirror
and I'm my own saviour.

And if this story has a happy ending it's 'cause I'll make it so.
feral, (Homefront, 1990: 116)

Stephanie Bolster (1990) talks back through existing fairy tales, refiguring the
characters and their desires. feral locates herself in the frame of the form's desire
and challenges its construction of dependent femininity. Here, 'happily ever after'
is produced by the agentic subject, embodied in idiomatic language. It is the voice
of the writing subject/narrator which more than anything takes this deconstruction
beyond the formal codes of the discourse and makes a difference.

Coming to a collaborative voice

An inclusive, participatory approach to the re-shaping of me/us is almost the definition of re-presenting ourselves. It is apparent in and underlies all of Homefront's writing activities. In this section I think about it more deliberately as a writing strategy - a collaborative poetics.

... The warm feeling when voices small and uncertain at first start to add to the fabric of the web that is the group - the workshop ... We see our own words on the wall belonging with everyone else's - they belong together now - they are the beginning.

feral (Homefront, 1990: 113)

I have argued that freeing the text from the special individual author, frees the subordinate subject to write and interpret herself. Collaborative writing practices, as Brophy (1998: 41-42) suggests, offer a further challenge to the essentialist hegemonic author. Here the poetics are directed to knitting and negotiating the relationship between individuality and collectivity.

One of the technologies of Homefront re-writing practice was an ongoing developmental movement between the individual and the group. Group pieces worked to generate and sustain individual work, individual voices came together in group pieces. They showed that writing is a construction that does not rely on the hegemonic mantle of author, nor on individual creativity.

For instance the letter writing workshops started with group letters which drew out and encouraged individual voices. They finished with the concertina postcard - a group postcard composed of individual cards which imagined 'me' on holiday - performed by different voices. During the research workshops, Homefront members described our work with letters and voices as taking up the threads of different selves and working them into patterns of relationship (Hutchison, 1991: 30-31, 35-38).

Homefront's publications are images of the collaborative relationship which encourages and values distinct voices and their particular stories. Each gathers the different voices of Homefront together, between their covers. Joined at the spine, fanning out, unfolding, the pages touch, converse. The 'voice' of *Belles* and *Hells Belles' Letters* may be heard as a whole and also as the individually distinct 'voices' of Margaret, Paris, Robin. Sue, Nike etc.

In each workshop process we developed ways of representing something of the complexity of this relationship in the design and arrangement of the books. The use of drafting paper in *Belles' Letters* for group pieces interleaving individual work, the sets of individual pages between sets of blank ones in *Hells Belles' Letters*, the decision to use spiral binding in *Hells Belles* and write 'Hells' in red text across the linoleum image that is the cover - all speak to this.

Lanser's (1992) work suggests that Homefront 'herself' may be understood as a subject - a transgressive communal subject and writing subject. She makes a clear distinction between a female community like the one presented in Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69), where the characters do not speak themselves, and what DuPlessis (1985) describes as 'collective' protagonists (in Lanser, 1992: 255). Collective protagonists speak from 'a sense of purpose and identity' (255). They grow through 'mutual collaboration' (255). '[She] is represented through formal strategies that allow the plurality itself to speak' (Lanser, 1992: 256).

In the Homefront context, formal strategies of this voice as a radical community voice may be seen as the group piece, its imaginative juxtaposition with individual pieces (*Belles' Letters*) and its framing of sets of individual pieces (*Hells Belles' Letters*). It is embodied by the joining and connecting rhythms of women's talk. As 'another language' (Hutchison, 1991: 35) women's conversation is free in form and varied (35), navigates breaks and gaps with ease (35), is held together over interruptions (30), makes space for other voices to come in (30). In *Hells Belles' Letters* the blank pages extend the identity of the collective protagonist to those

beyond Homefront, inviting others into the web of writing and re-writing me/us.

The book the body the self the text the book the body of women.

The process of coming to voice

So far my discussion has focused on examples of Homefront's work with imaginative writing strategies. I now look at coming to voice more from the angle of a developmental process.

Fiona Place's (1990) elaboration of her work with imaginative writing in psychiatric settings highlights the way writing enables you to read yourself, literally your story, as separate from the immediate experience of self (45). Writing self onto the page, in whatever shape, is an initial step in reshaping self in the form of stories from alternative positions. In Richardson's sense it is a research process, an 'inquiry' (1994).

Paris: That hours and hours of standing in front of a mirror looking at yourself ... I remember I used to do that, and I've seen other young girls do it too ... and they're sort of like trying to know themselves. But that's not the only way that girls do it. I reckon that you [Margaret] writing ... was getting to find what's in there, because you're looking at the words as they come out, same thing except for it's not a mirror and your body. It's your mind and the words, eh?

(Homefront Records, 1995)

'Writing it out' is the beginning of a writing process which may move the writing/subject into quite different intentions and positions. Paris indicates the shift that's required in a comment she made about a letter someone had written to her, 'Still writing it down', she said (Hutchison, 1991: 25).

Moving on from this 'writing on the spot' to come to voice is a multidimensional process. Homefront writing practice developed it through demystifying writing

and taking up imaginative writing strategies in a collaborative and counter-hegemonic context.

Within this frame, we made the sort of explorations with forms and conventions that I've already discussed, as a basis for opening out the subject's voice, or voices, in an embodied and agentic way. In her thinking about this process, Place (1990) uses the expression 'saying what is me' (45) and emphasises writing strategies which show rather than tell, and open up different angles of vision and narrative trajectories. She suggests that writing from the points of view of distinct characters is a way of practising taking up an agentic subject position (49-55). In this way 'I' experience myself in different locations as a basis for making agentic choices which may themselves be played out through story.

Place also suggests the power of showing rather than telling, in providing a basis for becoming a 'voiced subject' (45). Telling is generalised, abstract. It leaves the subject in what Paris has called 'that nowhere land thing' (Homefront Records, 1995). Showing demands an embodied and specific representation of the subject in the world and in relation to others. It requires attention to specific, concrete detail and involves the development of tangible images from this detail.

the bud smiles as she unfolds
unmarked, unscarred, unblemished

But no
this is a fantasy a dream
the seeds of yesterday, today - probably tomorrow
are raped -
and wilted
or
Dead -

but some
 regrow
 and grow thorns
 grasping together
 to endure
 Sheila Rose (Homefront, 1990: 42)

During the Homefront research workshops, I came to see that the lack of specificity of the images in Red/Black may have contributed to the reading of it as racist.

The Red and Black pieces would have been less controversial and more useful to [the writer] if I had been confident enough to move her towards specific elaboration of her initial colour images ... the words she used in association with black, simply connected with 'black' - that was their only place. They did have a [concrete] shape on the page, which in itself was an image, but that was the extent of their embodiment... [the] image was blurred - floating. (Hutchison, 1991: 68).

An associated issue in Red/Black is a problem with point of view. The 'I' of this text is overwhelmed by Red/Black, to such an extent that she does not speak how they overwhelm her. Clarifying point of view in a text, means locating the subject in an embodied and specific way. For instance, if the writer and I had been able to work with her experience of herself as 'black', the meaning of black would have been held to a particular context, and her 'nowhere land' might also have gained some perspective for her as well as her readers. The establishment of one location might also have enabled her to move from it in an agentic way. This understanding of Red/Black suggests that the subordination of the writing subject that came with the racist reading was in a sense already located in the writing. Its lack of embodied agency was its vulnerability.

The experience of Homefront suggests that coming to voice is an ongoing process involving a three-part overlapping movement of writing it out,

embodying/specifying and re-writing. Reading yourself back is a critical part of this movement and keeps it open.

An important factor in moving from writing it out to re-writing, and which is perhaps part of making the distinction between ontological self and story of self, is reading yourself back in relation to others. Margaret described her writing before Homefront as ‘just vacuum stuff. Writing in the middle of the bell jar’ (Homefront Records, 1995). It was this discussion that prompted Paris to think of mirrors, which she described as a very personal thing in contrast to the Homefront process where writing ‘took on another whole feel’ (Homefront Records, 1995) – the feel of a readership, an affirmative context and an intention to reach a wider audience.

If seeing one’s own writing in a wider social context is an enabling factor in coming to voice,³ reading yourself in the stories of others is another way of reading yourself back which may open up the possibility of an agentic re-writing process. For participants in the letter writing workshops, it was the reading of other women’s letters, as well as writing their own, which provided them with a wider reflection of their own stories than that offered by the frame of the ‘mirror’.

Paris: ... you reading out old letters from women, back, it sort of like removed the personal side of it which is ‘I fucked up, I’ve had a terrible life, they’ve done bad things to me’, you know like that nowhere land thing’.

(Homefront Records, 1995)

Margaret and Paris described a shift from mirror writing, which as much as it involves separating and objectifying self, cannot move self beyond the object of another’s gaze - ‘I kept thinking, how will people read this? Will they hate it?’ (Margaret, Homefront Records, 1995) - to a sense of having something to say as the agentic subject of the story. They described it as ‘crossing a bridge’ (Homefront Records, 1995). But this is not a finite or simple passage to self-

³ Gaber-Katz (1996) also notes the importance of an affirmative context in her discussion of *My Name is Rose* (p. 54).

authorisation. Writing the self in an open-ended imaginative way is an ongoing movement between and across on several different but interrelated planes; into the world of stories; into embodiments and agency; into a sense of the multiple voices and positions at our disposal.

In one of the research workshops I conducted with Homefront I asked the group to think about their use of the pronoun 'I' as a sign of self. Someone made a connection between 'I' and 'eye', itself richly suggestive, but in the same vein of the crossing out exercise (see chapter five), my focus here was on the moves that could be made on the part of the subject. As a collaborative thinking, the piece of writing that resulted shows something of the process of working in a group - the rippling connection between 'I's that galvanises the imaginative process, leaving something that then exists like a print of the web made in that moment.

I/Eye

see

write

am one/I/alone - terrified

am free - speaking/writing for myself

I/Eye freaks me out

is hard because of aloneness, isolation

I/Eye is

confronting

fear

image of I/one

I/Eye become more comfortable with myself/one

avoid myself

I/Eye

leap towards me

am a bright light on the page

own that

wrote that

wrote it and I meant it

wear it

deal with it

ignore it

can't be ignored

Research workshop (Hutchison, 1991: 23)

What is produced on the page is not me but a representation of me, more or less suitable, reshapeable with the tools at hand. Like the photographs in Jo Spence's (1979) exhibition 'Beyond the Family Album', different ways of writing generate different "'fictions" of me' - 'different ways of "seeing" myself' (Spence, 1989: 93) which interact and develop dynamically in the reading back/re-writing process.

Self-authorisation

'I'm an authority on this ... I know this story'.

Margaret (Homefront Records, 1995)

Lanser (1992) works with the idea of self-authorisation to describe the politics and poetics of coming to voice. A critical ingredient for her in this process is writing with an intent to publish. She sees this act of authorship as 'implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence' (7). She echoes Gaber-Katz's (1996) analysis of *My Name is Rose* (Doiron, 1987) in her interest in 'narrative voices that seek to write themselves into Literature without leaving Literature the same' (Lanser, 1992: 8).

For Lanser, narrative voice - the position of the teller, the explicit or implicit 'I' of the text - links 'social identity and narrative form' (6). It's the point where the discursive meaning of dominant forms of literary practice and dominant discourses concerning social identity come together. On this basis, 'One major constituent of narrative authority ... is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to this dominant social power' (6). However, the production of discursive meaning through form means that 'narrative authority is also constituted through (historically changing) textual strategies that even socially unauthorised writers can

appropriate' (6-7). In this light, the Homefront projects were a move by 'non-hegemonic writers' (7) to produce their own texts by taking up the intentions and techniques of imaginative writing, **and** pursuing an independent community approach to publication and distribution.

As I've made clear, the Homefront projects that followed the letter writing workshops were conceived with a view to publication. The desire to publish for other women in a similar position, not a hegemonic readership, was part of Homefront's transgressive coming to voice. Robin, like Margaret, suggested that this intention, as well as the support of other Homefront members, was an important part of changing her writing, and implicitly developing her authority as the writing subject.

I never wanted anyone to see it

It's like exposing yourself

I think the poetry I'd been writing was what I was using to try and get my sexual abuse, which had been silent for so long, out

Homefront gave it a focus

Robin (Homefront Records, 1997)

Homefront's writing and publishing focus was clearly located in changing the story lines of women's experience of domestic violence and sexual abuse. hooks (1988) points out, however, that where production and distribution of texts is regulated by powerful 'ruling groups' (48) who support dominant discourses and perpetuate subordination, the intention to speak out may easily be taken over, and recreated in hegemonic terms as 'commodity spectacle' (47). As she suggests, an important aspect of this commodification, - 'black women writers are **in** right now' (47, emphasis in original) - is that it appears to be working for the marginal voice.

At the time that Homefront was working on *Belles' Letters* a series of articles under the banner 'A lifetime of terror' (Frith, 16/12/1989 - 23/12/1989) appeared in *The Canberra Times*. They detailed the story of a young woman who had finally succeeded in bringing a case of violent sexual abuse against her father, to court.

There is no doubt that the intention of the articles was a liberating one; to break the silence surrounding sexual abuse:

‘I’ve got lots of secrets. Bad secrets.’

... saved her tears for the dead of night when the house of evil was finally asleep.

... the pledge not to tell and together two growing girls weathered the storm ... the secret was safe.

... she’d tried to tell ... but the words stuck in her throat.

... she’d tried talking out and that had only brought more disappointment.

She was on the verge of telling. Really telling.

‘I knew it was bad,’ he said, ‘but I had no idea ... no idea.’

She said it. She took his bad secrets and spat them out.

Her privacy was gone. Her ‘bad secrets’ were out of her control. Her body and her psyche wouldn’t let her keep them anymore.

It was over, the long, long fight for the right to tell was over.

(Frith, *The Canberra Times*, 16/12/1989 - 23/12/1989)

The successful commodification of this story rests on its extraordinary quality. In effect this requires a personalisation and sentimentalisation (Razack, 1993: 83-84) of the ‘other’ experience for public consumption which holds the subject in her different marginal position as the object or spectacle - in this case the tragic spectacle of the young violated body. This fixes the subject ever more firmly in the story of abuse, **as** the story of abuse.

An important convention in the commodified story of abuse, is the narrative tension generated by the 'secret'. The issue of telling/not telling forms the basis for the plot in *The Canberra Times*' story, which is developed through the articles as a series of episodes. Each episode has its own title: 'A lifetime of terror', 'Smashing down the walls of loneliness', 'An enormous hurdle was crossed', 'Thirty six hours with voices of the dark', 'Judgement day and time to face the final test', 'A crime that knows no happy endings'. Some episodes include a tag for the next one 'Tomorrow: dark cloud of the impending trial'. There is no doubt that silence and secrecy, the shame attached to domestic violence and sexual abuse, and the plain fear by which it controls, are key factors in its experience. However in the spectacular, mainstreamed form of the story they sustain a gripping plot in which confession - harrowing yet cleansing - is the climax whose aftershocks are felt into the denouement. It is indeed a story that will never end.

In contrast to the 'dark cloud' of this discourse, independent and community publications have generally worked against the 'secrets' plot and the confessional voice. As well as Homefront's work, publications such as *Painting Myself In* (Mariette, 1997), from Spinifex, a small feminist publishing house; *Homesick* (Heiner and Crocker, 1996), from Ginninderra Press, a local independent publisher; and *My name is Rose* (Doiron, 1987), from East End Literacy, show that stories of domestic violence and sexual abuse have many voices. Working away from the extraordinary saleable story they are not telling the secret, or even telling my story, in any way that suggests that 'I' am one story only, nor that it is only mine. What they offer is a reading of experience which connects it to its material and social conditions and is, in real terms, moving.

As I've argued in chapters two and three, independence is vital to the transformative intention of doing it ourselves and representing ourselves. Here it is a critical aspect of appropriating narrative authority as both the agentic subject of the story and the published writer of the story. It is perhaps the only way the agentic 'other' perspective may reach 'circulation' (Weedon, 1987 in Gaber-Katz, 1996: 56). Independent publishing provides the opportunity to challenge and

change what is understood as literature, as well as to add alternative and resistant stories to the available store in the world.

However, I would argue that it is the co-operative model of publication and distribution offered by members of the FWWCP that makes the difference to such independent activity. In following this model Homefront writers were involved in and responsible for a range of decisions and practical activities concerning the process of reaching their audience. What size should the book be? What sort of binding? What is the best method of distribution? How will we reach women further afield?

It's a model that draws on the varied resources and skills of group members, for an outcome that rewards both individuals and the group. It enables writers to follow their writing intentions through to the look and feel of a publication, and setting up a distribution process that will reach their audience. Its enfranchisement of non-hegemonic writers and their narrative authority, is also an enfranchisement of non-hegemonic readers. It opens up new audiences and purposes for literature. Income is managed for further publishing and collective developmental activities, rather than payment for individual contributions.

In the *Belles' Letters* workshops, participants decided to use a photograph of cracked lino⁴ as the cover image, and for *Hells Belles' Letters* used it as the entire cover. This image was deeply embedded in shared understandings and particular memories and aptly held the book together. More than that it was the way Homefront members wanted to collectively and publicly write themselves as agentic subjects of stories 'from homes of violence'.

... Margaret says ... 'That was my idea, from the lino on the floor of the house that I lived in, in New Zealand. It had those images that you're supposed to find on a carpet but it was all cracked and worn.' Together then Paris and Margaret gather up the meaning of cracked lino and the

⁴ 'lino' is a colloquial term for linoleum, a vinyl floor covering.

fading pretty-rose pattern. It is domesticity - the homefront, home as the crime scene, the battle zone. Paris says for her it's the lino you were always looking down on as a kid, head down, looking at your feet, and later it's what you're always trying to keep clean, keep the cracks and spills from showing. Then you get to kiss it she says, either cleaning, or when you land there.

Mary (Homefront Records, 1997)

Violence, like cracked lino, is an ordinary story, in anybody's house.

Political value and pleasure

In this chapter I have suggested that without the constraints of literary discourse, imaginative experimentation with various forms and constructions is a critical investigation of the possibilities of text/self. In conclusion I want to bring the politics and poetics of this process of agentic re-presentation together in terms of the idea of pleasure.

This is a poem for one of my cats.

For my large luxuriating, golden-eyed cat.

At a philosophical level such a move may suggest a refusal of the separation of mind-body and the attendant difficulties that radical thought has with the beautiful, sensual, female. What I am particularly interested in is the practical liberating qualities of pleasure - as Homefront has understood it, having fun - and how pleasurable the experience of re-writing self may be.

He

is an epicurean -

he sniffs, tastes, samples and then sleeps,

When he sleeps his meows are like chirrups.

His whiskers and paws twitch.

(He is dreaming of birds and cream.)

Waking or sleeping, life
is wholly edible, and delicious.

Following Isobel Armstrong (1993), I use the idea of play to bring these two terms - politics and pleasure - together and open out their relationship in the context of Homefront writing practice.

I really wanted to write about my spouse;
who has some of the same qualities;
who also finds life delicious;
who I find delicious.
But I couldn't so here we are instead -
still in the sun but with Pinkerton my cat.
Margaret (Homefront, 1990: 35)

Homefront workshops played with language. We experimented with the shape and sound of words. We worked with 'found text', cutting up and collaging words and phrases from magazines. Such an approach makes those 'ready made assemblages of words' (Haug, 1987: 63) apparent, and begs their rearrangement.

all these words someone has said, but no longer attached or belonging
words in the way we find them are not satisfying - you have to reshape
them, the sentences and meanings
picking up where others have left off - the next generation
within the language there are other languages
all sorts of stories jumping
Research workshop (Hutchison, 1991: 38, 42)

Such play is an active 'doing', as engaging and absorbing as, in Homefront members' words, 'reforming the pop-it beads', 'looking through mother's sewing box' (38). It's also an activity that is widely encouraged as an imaginative writing technique.

'How to' books on imaginative writing encourage various kinds of play with the arrangement of writing from disordering the grammatical arrangement of nouns, verbs and adjectives to cutting and pasting (eg, Sellers, 1991, Grenville, 1990). The intention is to break conventional patterns of expression, open up new associations, suggest alternative directions.

Both Spence (1989) and Place (1990) also suggest that imaginative re-presentation of the subject is a process of play. 'She plays with images and language. Chooses and rejects words' (Place, 1990: 43). Trying out new ways of writing turns up new meanings. When Lucinda starts to speak her experience agentically, through showing her experience in the moment, rather than telling or explaining her illness, she literally writes herself in a different form; breaking out of sentences and paragraphs into images and phrases shaped by line breaks.

In the same spirit, using the shape and sound of words in a material way offers an alternative to generalised descriptions of feelings in formally constructed sentences.

Today I want to say
 Gurgle Gurgle
 Splat Splat
 Take that
 Stuff it in your hat
 Wear it flat
 And remember what it was
 That I said
 Gurgle Gurgle
 Splat Splat
 Paris (Homefront, 1990: 2)

It is this 'doing', as Place (1990) and Spence (1989) suggest, and as I've described in the Homefront context, which Winnicott (1971) indicates is a critical definition of play as an activity which connects the subject and culture (41). Play is not

purely psychical - concerned with thinking or wishing. It is located in a space between internal and external reality.

... the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality ... In playing, the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling (51).

What play is doing in this inside/outside space concerns the negotiation of personal/cultural meanings of the subject's experience. As Isobel Armstrong (1993) interprets it, the site of play is 'an intra-subjective space in which meanings are renegotiated ... play is and creates a shared cultural reality' (183).

Understanding imaginative representational strategies as play in Winnicott's (1993) terms and as Armstrong (1993) suggests drawing on both Winnicott (1971) and Vygotsky (1978), brings new light to the poetics in the politics of representation. As Armstrong (1993) puts it:

... [such] play is **play**, not simply subversive linguistic play, but the transformation of categories which constitutes a change in the structure of thought itself: it is not only an aspect of knowledge but the prerequisite of political change (184, emphasis in original).

I also want to suggest that the imaginative construction of text 'plays' across mind-body. I am not talking here about the 'imaginary' and the 'material' (183) in psychoanalytic terms, but the cultural and the material as Grosz (1994) brings them together. We feel/understand imaginative writing bodily and culturally. It evokes, touches, resonates.

I'd like to lick the skin off your back
and chew the raw red flesh underneath my tongue
would travel up your backbone flicking
between vertebrae my hands

would caress your lungs warm soft breasts
 moving under your ribs my legs
 would slip into yours the skin
 taut like snugfitting boots our hips
 would clink i
 could look out of your eyes and
 speak your tongue
 Lisa (Homefront, 1990: 66)

Like Grosz's (1994) Möbius strip (xii), imaginative writing twists specific material into the epistemological and the epistemological into material specificity.

The artistry of imaginative writing is the artistry of play, 'Interactive, sensuous, epistemologically charged' (Armstrong, 1993: 181), and capable of making and remaking 'me' as a particular, embodied subject, in open-ended and multiple ways.

Today I am naked. The sun burns my neck and my body feels heavy. I cycle down Wattle Street, turning sharply onto the cycle path. Here the exposing light of the sun is dappled by trees. Zoef, zoef around the bumps that are their roots. Big, black birds crawl their complaints as I come whizzing past. My favourite spot comes into view. I lean back sensually on the saddle, leaving one finger to steer me in the right direction. Bliss, as the smell engulfs me. Chamonix, Mont Blanc, Annecy, mountains, rocky paths, cliffsides, pine forests. Too soon I'm through and crossing Masson Street. The heat is making me heady. I want to spread my legs, rub my clit on the saddle and freewheel into Civic. Instead I stand on the pedals, up and over the road-under-construction. No workmen there today. Barry Drive, lots of traffic, people walking. My cyclesprite takes over, guiding me between cars. Today I'm checking out the scene.
 Lisa (Homefront, 1990: 64)

In the political terms of re-presenting ourselves, the material, embodied touch of the particular works against the generalisation of sentiment which reduces

everyone's experience to a broad banality typical of exclusive, centralising discourses. In this there is the possibility of a 'politics of pleasure' (Regan, 1992) which brings 'political value' and 'pleasure' together (Connor, 1992: 219). This synthesis is demonstrated in the pleasure everyone in Homefront took in reading back their own voice as part of group pieces. It was a tangible example of the process of reading and re-writing self; the shape of 'us' opening new possibilities for shaping 'me'.

In the research workshops participants identified the negotiated flowing patterning of women's conversation as embodying political value and pleasure. The way they described it suggested a feminine poetics of community. 'Handing information and stories on' (Hutchison, 1991: 31), through the connecting rhythms of women's talk, is both 'business and pleasure' (35).

keeping in touch

histories of people

network

web

and ... and

passing on

Research workshop (36)