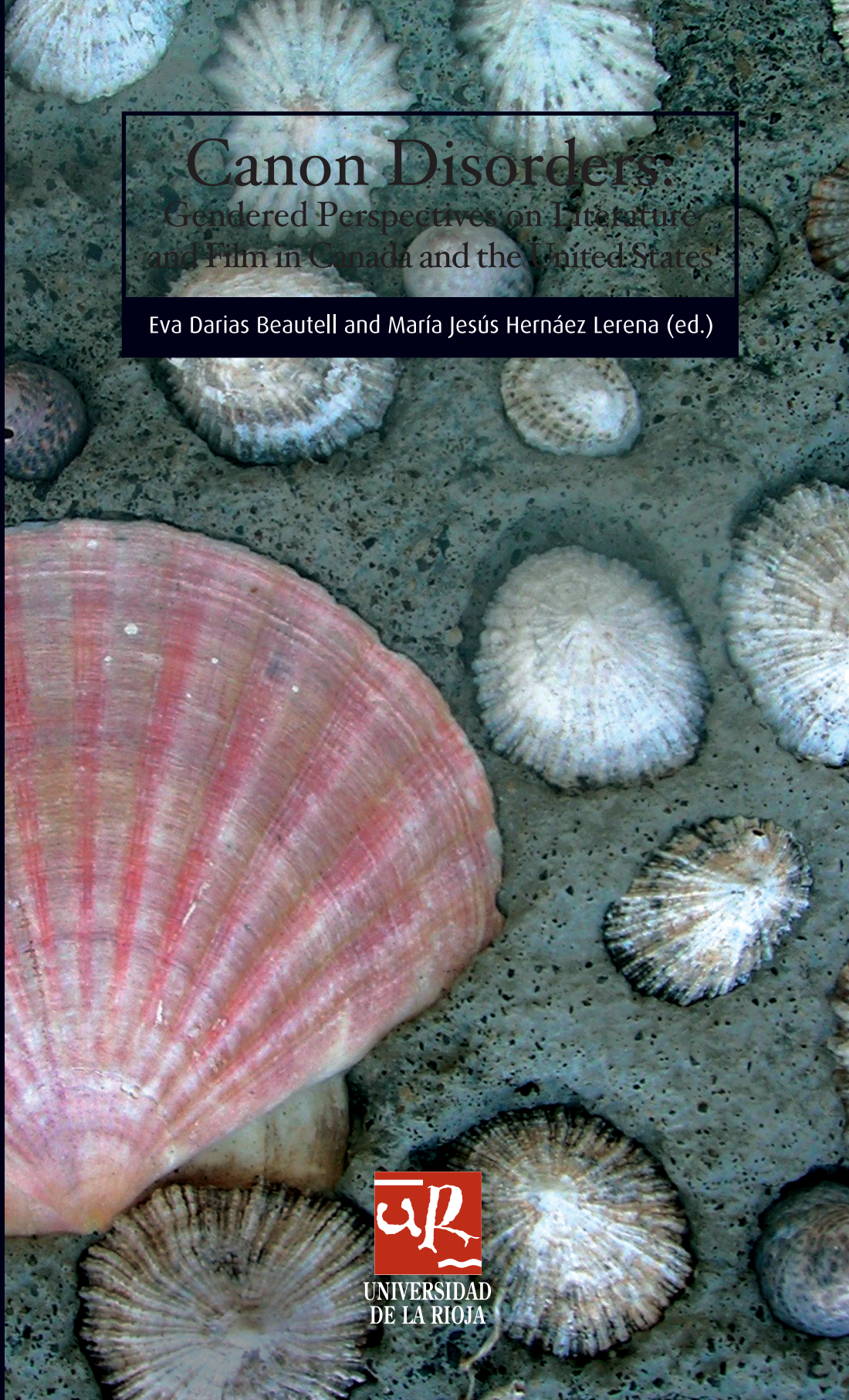
Canon Disorders:

Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States

Eva Darias Beautell and María Jesús Hernáez Lerena (ed.)



UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA

CANON DISORDERS

Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States

BIBLIOTECA DE INVESTIGACIÓN

nº 48

EVA DARIAS BEAUTELL AND MARÍA JESÚS HERNÁEZ LERENA
(EDITORS)

CANON DISORDERS

Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States

UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA
UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA
2022

publicaciones.unirioja.es

E-mail: publicaciones@unirioja.es

Diseño de cubierta: Universidad de La Rioja. Servicio de Comunicación

Fotografía de cubierta propiedad de Brian McMorrow

ISBN: 978-84-09-36682-8

in the stillness of morning, we set out seven glass bowls
with tea-light in the middle - water, water & flowers,
incense, flame, perfume, food, music. pour water
through inner turbulence. watch it brim luminous in
each transparent dish. watch in through our muddied
implicatedness.

Daphne Marlatt, *Seven Glass Bowls*.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Few critics would disagree today with the assertion that the last decades of the 20th century witnessed a significant transformation of Western culture, bringing a radical change that affected our notion of literature, and therefore, of the canon. Postmodern thought and related theoretical movements, such as post-structuralism and post-colonialism, had a tremendous impact on the humanities, on the ways we had so far conceived the world and its various representations. Within that general reorientation of epistemology, gender studies, and very specially, feminist production, began to play a central role in all fields of knowledge, moving from previously precarious positions on the fringe to the mainstream of academic research. A telling illustration of such movement from margin to mainstream, more than 80% of the contributions to the *PMLA* Special Millennium Issue (2000) to evaluate the state of literary studies in the past century dealt specifically with gender issues: "In these thirty years," Florence Howe ("Looking Backward" 2000: 2007) writes in this context, "we have taken giant steps to reclaim some of what women lost to patriarchy over the past several millennia. Only with continuing energy, optimism, and intelligence and by resisting backlash as well as despair and amnesia will the women of the twenty-first century complete the task begun".

That seems to be specially the case of Canada and the United States, where feminist scholarship has insistently brought to the foreground the complex relationship between canon and power, uncovering the patriarchal ideology of our literary and cultural traditions and pushing the current questioning of the Cartesian subject in directions never explored before. Extending to the gender arena the poststructuralist approach to reality, culture, and identity as always already constructed in and by language, North American feminists have consistently challenged our grounds of thought, unveiling canon formation as an ideological operation and arguing thus for its revision. A focus on the relationship

between canon and power becomes thus paradigmatic of the larger changes mentioned since it has also opened the field to an ever-expanding interdisciplinarity, based, in turn, on our awareness of the constructedness of the subject through multiple and interacting constituencies such as class, race, gender, and so forth.

In their analysis of the factors determining this shift of feminist theory and criticism from the marginal position occupied in the 1970s to the prominent place enjoyed two decades later, Kaplan and Rose (1990: 127) mention a notable increase in the number of women both in the profession (entering the academia) and in the MLA, where they have been very active since, taking institutional responsibilities and participating in the decision-making organs. The alliance of different forms of feminism with political activities that generated wide support in the social spheres outside the academia, as well as the important body of research and scholarship produced in those decades across various disciplines, also notably contributed to the consolidation of the field. Still, Kaplan and Rose commented in the early 1990s, it remains unclear whether the evident move from the fringe to the center of literary studies can be taken as empowering (that is, as an expansion of the field) or as a cooptation (by a field still dominated by white male critics anxious about maintaining their power). In the latter case, the dimensions of the shift, they argue, would be only relative:

> We are compelled by the terms of our own argument, no less than by the force of the evidence we have examined in these chapters, to refuse to make any predictions. If, as our survey of literary history indicates, the process of canon formation and reformation is an organic and ongoing process, then even if—as we have also argued—there is something novel about the current confluence of political interests of groups previously excluded from the academic/cultural hegemony and theoretical challenges to humanism and positivism, what we are now going through feels unprecedented only because we are so involved in our moment in history that we have not yet put it into perspective. (Kaplan and Rose 1990:158)

Written more than fifteen years later, the essays in this collection contribute to that desire to put changes into perspective. In their diverse topics and approach, they address a range of key issues around the relationship between gender and canon in the North American literary and filmic production of the last twenty five years. The case of Canada constitutes an exception to the rule here, for the prominence of women writers and artists in the Canadian canon is unquestionable even in the earliest stages of its young history (see Gerson 1997). Contemporary artistic production in Canada and the United States constantly addresses that relationship, stressing the necessity to find critical alternatives which account for the multiplication of references, for the proliferation of positions, and for the new forms of thought. Invariably based on close readings

of the texts/films in question, these essays implicitly define gender in the most encompassing sense, which would include traditional (white and middleclass) feminist analyses, queer theory as well as studies of masculinities. They thus reflect and embrace the opinion that, by the end of the 1980s, the emergence of gender studies as a promising new area of research and critical inquiry, one in which both men and women had a space, expanded the feminist agenda from the study of the female subject to the analyses of the various social constructions of gender, including masculinities, studies of sexuality and sexual orientation. If the rise of feminist studies in the 1960s produced an important degree of animosity on the part of the white heterosexual male critic, this new shift generated even more resistance from the traditional sectors, who feared the disempowering of their own identitary position, and perceived the further critical turn as ultimately castrating and depriving them of a safe position from which to speak: "How does a straight man react responsibly to articles on the creative, existential, and hermeneutic experience of women and homosexual?" exclaims Sandy Petrey in the early 1990s. "Straight male engagement," he further complains, "is often not a concern for criticism consciously and confidently directed elsewhere" (Petrey and Kahn 1993: 219).

Additionally, the essays that follow evaluate and articulate from a variety of angles the influence of gender studies on the current process of canon renewal, drawing connections across disciplines as well as between gender theories and other contemporary discourses such as post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and globalization studies. We believe it is the strength of much feminist work of the last decade to have traced a firm alliance with racial and cultural minorities. Together, they have gained both relative power and a sense of solidarity in their common claim that the canon should open up to include the works of the previously excluded. It is thanks to their joined effort that most of us are now able to agree that "a canon constructs value as much as it reflects value; that the canon is contingent not universal; that the canon is a fiction about aesthetic and intellectual supremacy" (Stimpson 1992: 266); or, to put it simply, replicating Paul Lauter's famous assertion (1991: 261), that "*literary* canons do not fall from the sky". Thanks to the firm alliance between feminists, scholars of race and ethnicity and postcolonial theoreticians, we are now able to imagine new configurations of the literary and the cultural: "It is now time to devise more coherent theories of literary value, maps of the good that are neither cut in stone nor scuffed in sand" (Stimpson 1992: 267).

Twenty five years later, the task, however, is far from complete, and the continuation of intense debates on the nature and ideology of canons reveals the great complexity of the question (see Harris 1991). In his seminal study of Western canonical structures of thought, Paul Lauter argues for the value of comparative approaches as more democratic methodologies to study the

contemporary reformation of the canon. These would involve the critical scrutiny of Western literary studies, the notions of mainstream and minority, as well as imply comparative strategies of learning. A comparative approach, Lauter (1992: 269) writes, "offers, in fact, not the false tranquility of settled traditions, but the ferment and passion of a struggle over what shall be honored by calling it 'culture' or 'literature' or 'history'; what shall be esteemed by describing it as canonical; what shall be dignified by including it in college curricula, reading lists, and cultural catalogues". A most graphic instance that canons are indeed *constructed,* a group of American universities worked during the 1990s in the "curriculum integration" or "curriculum transformation" projects to change the content and methods of the regular courses taught, to include new approaches and new authors (special attention being given to the author's race, gender, and/or class). An attempt to produce the change of mentality necessary for the transformation to successfully take place, these projects involved a good number of scholars, who were generously funded to read new material being published and discuss their opinions in "faculty development" seminars.

Needless to say, the category of gender played an essential role in the transformation of scholarship intended by those projects. That gender intersects with other constituencies of identity, like race, culture, class, age, or even, region became soon evident in the work of feminist critics of different social, racial, and cultural backgrounds, who, already in the 1980s, insisted on the idea that feminist theory had been mainly white and middleclass. In the United States, it was African American critics and activists, and very specially Alice Walker's *womanism,* that produced the most effective feminist counter-discourse against the ethnocentric bias of their Anglo-American sisters. They were soon followed by Chicana writers and critics who felt excluded from the ongoing rise of a powerful Chicano movement with a continuing (and unquestioned) patriarchal basis. The strong social orientation and constant activism of these forms of feminisms have always prevailed over the various theoretical impasses we have experienced in recent years (see Aldama 2005). A decade later, in Canada, the critic and writer Arun Mukherjee would altogether reject feminist theory on account of its colonizing ethos, for "[i]ts project of 'recovering' and interpreting women's writing has often rubbed [her] and many other women of colour the wrong way" (1994: viii). The canonical texts of white feminism would then be complicit with the imperialist discourses: "Even though feminism and feminist literary theory are seen as radical discourses," Mukherjee continues, "I, as a non-white woman am forced to retain an oppositional stance to them as well" (1994: x).

Equally radical in her critique of Western liberal feminism as a classist and racist movement, Marlene Nourbese Philip (1997: 12) does not dismiss, however, the potentiality of the movement "to bridge some of those gaps –race and class for instance–isolating communities and audiences". Feminism, she argues, "could, in

some instances, promote that 'common base' through which experiences might be shared". The more encompassing and inclusive the feminist works, the closer we will be to the establishment of a "true feminist culture", whose goal, Philip (Phillip 1997: 13) maintains, would be to bridge racial and class differences:

> We are a long way from a true feminist community, and even further away from a true feminist culture–one that would not, as it has tended to do, emphasize one aspect (the white and middle class) of that culture, but a culture in which the word feminist is enlarged to include those groups which have, to date, been excluded. When that is accomplished –the establishment of a true feminist culture– we shall be a long way towards having audiences who are able to complete, in more authentic ways, the works of artists *whatever* their background.

Critiques like these ones have had a crucial effect in the production of the past few years, triggering a self-critical attitude within the various feminist movements and producing a number of studies that revise and question the privilege of the white middleclass female subject from the very critics that had upheld such a position in the recent past. Such is the case, for instance, of Sara Mills's latest work (2005), a study of gender and colonial space in which the aboriginal approach to spatiality, the classed nature of colonial societies, and the colonial woman's complicity with Western conceptions of the landscape are given special attention. "Because 'class' is almost invisible to the constituents of a particular classed society," argues Cranny-Francis (1995: 66) in a different context, "it is therefore one of the most difficult markers to deal with". Consequently, a considerable body of research is being done in areas in which gender intersects with class, race and culture and in issues, such as domestic violence, where not one single constituency can be considered in isolation (see, for instance Sokoloff and Pratt 2005).

Elsewhere, a focus on region (as opposed to nation) may also produce important challenges to the dominant (white male) canon both in Canada and the States, where the "continued defining of the canon in terms of enclosure implicitly rejects works with different formal structures, whether or not they were written by white males" (Bredahl 1989: 5). Similarly, recent theories of globalization are now taking into account the gender and ethnocultural bias of much of the previous work being done. Drawing on women's traditional connection to the domestic, the local, and the small details of everyday life, a feminist perspective on global issues would necessarily draw attention to the local context, where actual, effective action can take place. And, in fact, as Paul Jay (2001: 40-42), has commented, the most challenging work being done in these areas is coming from feminist scholars, who question the supposedly liberating effect of popular male-dominated theories of globalization, view local cultures as sites of potential resistance, and propose the empowering of

communities to confront the replication of a colonial experience under the guise of the newly labeled and much-invoked globalization.

Where will we go from here? The possibilities are many and can take us in very different, even, opposing, directions. The essays in this collection mark the persistence of old sites of struggle within gender studies and point to the existence of new ones. From there, the road opens in front of our eyes.

* * * * *

The authors that contribute to this volume set out to show how certain cultural determinations may diminish our capacity to interpret our experience, and, in so doing, they also underline the dangers of imposing a role in the name of a standard. The question of who –or what– gets to be representative is a worthy one, pointing directly to our archaeologies of meaning. It unearths zones of awareness –dominant stories to tell and to reproduce– and also zones of "unawareness", experiential material which has been neglected or underaddressed because it might not be easily accommodated into our patterns of knowledge.

In "Hanging out The Laundry: Heroines in the Midst of Dirt and Cleanliness", Aritha van Herk makes us see more profoundly through the power of a metaphor which brings together the realms of hygiene and of canon construction. She proposes to examine more closely the actual chores involved in the abstract term "domesticity" so that we become aware of the impositions of our civilization and its canons: she demonstrates the importance of laundry and its potential to signify in connection to our literary and cultural standards. This article figures hygienic practices –the removal of dirt– as conceptually close to the sanitization processes of canon-making, which favor only a few representative images and plots. Once filth and the agents in charge of its erasure are brought to the foreground, we are able to realize what kinds of effacements have been committed in the history of the literary canon and of feminist theory.

Van Herk warns us against the dangers of an acquiescent feminization of the canon, where the only heroine admitted for entrance has been one that undertakes the "universal story" of the psychological journey towards wisdom. The heroines allowed this redemptive pattern are tied by the demands of the conservative narrative of suffering followed by redemption –or wrongness followed by reformation–, a dignified emotional trajectory mainly available for the middle class condition and therefore exclusive of other kind of women which had to permanently deal with the excrescence of society. Thus, soiled linen and other unacknowledged items of domesticity previously "beneath" consideration resurface now to show us who has made the dirt of the privileged invisible. They are maids, servants, criminals, outcasts, immigrants who, by virtue of their gender, but also because of necessity and of punishment, have

been devoted to washing away the bodily fluids which stain the clothing of respectable members of the community.

"Hanging out The Laundry" deals with a variety of narrative genres and nationalities which document the eradication of dirt: the films *Quills* (2000) (American) and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2003) (British/Irish), the novels *Alias Grace* (1996) (Canadian) and *Joan Makes History* (1988) (Australian), the short story collection *China Dog* (1997) (Chinese Canadian) and the memoir *The Woman Warrior* (1975) (Chinese American). Van Herk disengages these narratives from the inertia of ready-made symbolic interpretations on domesticity in order to unearth the real mechanics of gendered labor. In doing so, she teaches us to be watchful over the stories and the female characters we accept as worthy and to be more attentive to the kind of knowledge emitted by marginalized figures. These figures, necessary but unwanted, provide us with unsuspected perspectives to learn about life and its demands and they most significantly disclose our complicity in creating elitist cultural patterns.

The question of representativity also permeates the essay "Blood Road Leads to Promise: A Gendered Approach to Canada's Past in Gail Anderson-Dargartz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning*". Through a thorough reading of Anderson-Dargartz's novel, Eva Darias Beautell shows that Canadian foundational myths of the wilderness are made to mean differently when engendered, her proposal being to pay attention to those contemporary authors whose renderings of Canadian nature expand our understanding of the wilderness beyond the parameters set by Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, and also beyond other contemporary fictions which unquestioningly celebrate a return to an idealized nature. The essay collects the traditional meanings associated with nature and strips them off their universality, demonstrating the oxymoron implied in traditional associations of women and nature on the one hand, and women and civilization on the other, as well as the danger attached to analogies that have historically served to justify ecocide and patriarchal domination. Additionally, a close examination of the contradictory symbology which springs from a feminized nature (both as nurturing and as evil) unveils women's complicity with a pattern of thought aimed at their very submission.

And so it happens in *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996), a novel which Eva Darias uses to claim that the remnant of aggressiveness and exploitation deriving from our models of interaction with nature can only be deconstructed through a recognition that they are gendered; only then can we become aware of unsuited and damaging views both for humanity and for nature. Men's violence against nature and animals and women's compliance with this order are seen as the result of an inability to question the foundations of available cultural discourses. In the essay, these discourses are located within the Canadian literary tradition and its views on wilderness and pioneer life to show how Anderson-

Dargartz contests the conventions of women pioneer writing and homesteading plots by means of combining alternative gendered and Aboriginal perspectives. In the process, Eva Darias probes the relevance of the novel's rearticulation of Canadian myths and of environmental symbolism in order to appraise its contribution to the Canadian contemporary literary panorama.

Similarly concerned with Canada's foundational discourses, the essay "Surviving the Metaphorical Condition in *Elle*: Douglas Glover's Impersonation of the First French Female in Canada", by María Jesús Hernáez Lerena, studies Glover's text, a story set against the failures of early colonization of Canada, in order to show how the current rhetorical environment interacts with the writing and the reception of contemporary literature. Given the fact that nowadays the production of literature has to co-exist with tremendous amounts of theory and criticism, with this essay, María Jesús Hernáez proposes not so much to extricate the uncomprehending cultural and gender models which literature exposes as wrong but to observe how the specific questions which assail feminism and post-colonial criticism –how the weight of ideology– shape the creation and understanding of narrative nowadays. In *Elle* (2003) the reader finds the case of a Renaissance French noblewoman, Marguerite de Roberval, empowered with today's vision but restricted to her sixteenth-century role as an exile into an empty piece of land not yet turned into nation. Her fated destiny is made more acutely painful because this woman is aware that she has been turned (and will be turned) into an over-symbolized semiotic field, the perfect icon for a feminist or post-colonial approach.

María Jesús Hernáez holds up this novel as an example of how contemporary novels absorb the style of thought and vocabulary of another genre, the ideological and cultural critique, and how criticism itself is integrated into the plot and becomes of primordial narrative interest. The essay poses the question of whether fiction runs the risk of evaporating when the narrative openly undertakes the discussion of feminist and post-colonial issues, and this perspective brings about a discussion on the modes of addressing the past favored by recent fiction. Marguerite's situation –trapped in her condition of historical artifact– and her analytical superpowers are made to function as a parody of current academic clichés, but are also lyrically fused with the perceptions of her ordeal in such a way that the novel manages to create a dialogue between two overlapping kinds of discourse, that of a mainstream cultural reading and that of an unmediated first-person account of deprivation. The description of the nature of this dialogue as informative of the kind of readers we are nowadays is the main purpose of the essay.

Vicente Rosselló Hernández contributes to this volume by introducing masculinity studies and also a filmic genre, the documentary, often neglected as source of information for gender identity theory and analysis. His essay offers a

comprehensive view of the male studies project in North America and a detailed examination of its connections with the documentary through a three-layered approach which includes: an assessment of the state of the discipline at the moment, an analysis of the epistemological tenets of the documentary, and a commentary on three examples of documentary film –American and Canadian– which revolve around the topic of hyperbolic masculinity. The conclusions ultimately reached in the final textual commentary will precisely inform us on the degree of incisiveness and sophistication of masculine studies nowadays and on the ideological obstacles which may eventually make the deconstruction of masculinity ineffectual.

After tracing the beginnings of male studies and locating the problems which have hampered the development of the discipline (both deriving from the impact of feminist theory and from other kinds of internal resistance), Vicente Rosselló discovers the theoretical possibilities of a corpus which, being traditionally associated with objectivity, has recently come to realize the need to make a move towards less essentialized claims to knowledge. The new "marking" of positions which previously went unmarked –such as gender and nation formation– make the three films under examination particularly fitful to observe to what extent the recent documentary industry gets involved with the representation of gender. The three films are the mockumentary film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) by Rob Reiner, the Canadian documentary *Project Grizzly* (1996) by Peter Lynch, and the Oscar-Nominated *Murderball* (2005) by Henry A. Rubin and Dana A. Shapiro.

After this study on the codes of masculine representation, two essays on what could be considered the most feminist of all subjects, the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship, follow, which focus on the difficulties involved in the fabrication of identities within the constrains of gender. In order to show the importance (both epistemological and emotional) of the daughter's relationship with the mother, Dulce Rodríguez González and María Henríquez Betancor gather the examples of eminent American women writers whose artistic production has revolved around a different plot from that of the romance, officially sanctioned for centuries as the main source of human drama.

"The great theme is not Romeo and Juliet", Anne Sexton claimed, and in "The Dismantling of the Oedipal Dyad in Two American Women Poets: The Dynamics of Maternal Desire", Dulce Rodríguez registers the implications of this shift of focus from the traditional couple to the mother-daughter dyad through a close reading of two poems by two American writers: Anne Sexton's "The Double Image" and Alicia Ostriker's "Listen". The article points to a blank in Freud's work which leaves many aspects of femininity unstudied and directs the reader's attention towards Lacan's recontextualization of Freud's theories within a linguistic ground. It then proposes subsequent feminist reworkings of these theories as offering a more complete perspective from which the critic can

understand the complexities of symbiosis and identification. The essay draws our attention to an often overlooked source of oppression for women: an archaic and rigid conception of the bond between mother and daughter that needs to be reconceptualized.

Upholding the life of Chicana writer and critic Gloria Anzaldúa as an example of endurance and survival over multidirectional patriarchal attacks, María Henríquez focuses on how Anzaldúa's difficult relationship with her mother was further complicated by issues of poverty, race, and sexual orientation. With a clear emphasis on Anzaldúa's ability to confront the destructive power of that unrevised emotional bondage, the essay "*Too Bad Mihijita Was Morena:* Anzaldúa's Autobiographical Encounters with Her Mother" discusses the contribution of Chicana writers to the genre of autobiography at the end of the twentieth century in a context of ethnic and class marginalization. Anzaldúa's rebellion, both against restrictive upbringing patterns of gender and cultural behaviour and against white mainstream definitions of identity, shows the continuing relevance of the construction of the female subject as a legitimate and representative plot of our contemporaneity.

This book closes with a challenging essay which invites readers to try to comprehend gendered identities beyond the limiting possibilities of language and story. In choosing Robert Kroetsch's poetic text *The Hornbooks of Rita K.* (2001), Mladen Kurajica puts gender construction in a different context, a mental space where energy has not yet solidified into formulation or concept. Through a critique of the cultural schemas of western logics and a revision of the constraints involved in the Derridean notion of *differance*, this essay finds philosophical support to argue that it is possible to escape polarizations and to think of the different forms of existence not as structures or categories but as flows.

In order to escape story, inevitably fossilized after so many centuries of cultural assertion, Kroetsch's heroine disengages herself from any organizational principle, proposes simultaneity over direction and silence over codified thinking, and thus claims that silence, randomness, and latency are generators of vital possibilities outside established cultural discourse. Mladen Kurajica traces the implications of this proposal which shakes up previous gender-based notions of affirmation and foresees a path free from teleology, a road to silence as an expression of freedom. By making the effort to think of reality without the tools we have always used, this essay adds a fresh final touch to the collection because it names the coordinates within which we have been made to understand reality, it shows the dangers of our ideological allies, and it suggests new ways of thinking about the self, the gendering of the self, society, and history.

Every essay that follows works under the assumption that literature and film reach beyond and across aesthetic pleasure and make us see through the conventions by which we have been trained to think. Literary and cultural

conventions are in themselves complicitous carriers of dangerous metaphors and plots which can keep us blind to the event of otherness and to our own possibilities.

Eva Darias Beautell and
María Jesús Hernáez Lerena

Works cited

Aldama, Frederick Luis. 2005. *Chicano/a Representations of Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity.* Austin: U. of Texas P.

Bredahl, A. Carl, Jr. 1989. *New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon.* Chapel Hill: The U. of Carolina P.

Cranny-Francis, Anne. 1995. *The Body in the Text.* Melbourne: Melbourne UP.

Gerson, Carole. 1997. "Anthologies and the Canon of Early Canadian Women Writers". *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism.* Ed. Ajay Heble, Donna Palmateer Pennee, and J. R. (Tim) Struthers. Peterborough (On.): Broadview. 146-167.

Harris, Wendell V. 1991. "Canonicity". *PMLA* 106.1: 110-121.

Jay, Paul. 2001. "Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English." *PMLA* 116.1: 32-47.

Kaplan, Carey and Ellen Cronan Rose. 1990. *The Canon and the Reader*. Knoxville: The U. of Tennessee P.

Lauter, Paul. 1991. *Canons and Contexts.* New York: Oxford UP.

"Looking Backward, Looking Forward: MLA Members Speak". 2000. *PMLA* 115.7 (Special Millennium Issue): 1986-2024.

Mills, Sara. 2005. *Gender and Colonial Space.* Manchester: Manchester UP.

Mukherjee, Arun. 1994. *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Place*. Toronto: Tsar.

Petrey, Sandy and Coppelia Kahn. 1993. "Figuring Gender: Two Views". *PMLA* 108.2: 219-223.

Philip, Marlene Nourbese. 1997. "Who's Listening? Artists, Audiences, and Language". *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. Ed. Ajay Heble, Donna Palmateer Pennee, and J. R. (Tim) Struthers. Peterborough (On.): Broadview. 1-16.

Sokoloff, Natalie J. and Christina Pratt. 2005. *Domestic Violence at the Margins: Readings on Race, Class, Gender, and Culture.* New Brunswick (N.J.): Rutgers UP.

Stimpson, Catharine R. 1992. "Feminist Criticism". *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies.* Ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA. 251-270.

Turner, Margaret E. 1995. *Imagining Culture: New World Narrative and the Writing of Canada.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP.

Hanging out the laundry: heroines in the midst of dirt and cleanliness

Aritha van Herk
University of Calgary

The tremendous valorization of women's experience by feminist criticism produced a tsunami in the previously androcentric field of canon formation. The careful re-visitation and re-visioning of women's experience as represented in literature challenged not only the elevation of male experience and expression but also the accepted values of a patriarchal hegemony. The appropriate critiquing of phallocentric ideology, the fascinating debates about the effect of sexual dichotomies, and the analysis of *écriture féminine* served to revise the accepted canon in terms of women's presence as both subjects and creators. But in the exhilarating rush to get women out of both madhouse and attic, footnote and funhouse, another more elusive slippage occurred. In attacking and revising the established canon, feminist theory and literary representation performed a particular flexion in writing by and about women. The result of this gynocritical attention, appropriate as it is and was, inadvertently effected the canonization of the middle-class heroine. These women were heroines of relative means and education, experience and expertise. They were "worthy" of canonical attention in the eloquence and force of their writing back to and against their own marginalization, both as authors and subjects. Their respectable standing, education, and class meant that they could not be ignored, but had to be accommodated in the ever-changing sand city of canonical castles.

The ensuing ferment quickly recognized that race and class amplified these gender issues. Women's newly strong voice, and gender's torsion in terms of identity politics in Canadian and American writing then opened the door to other

considerations, less mainstream and more quotidian in their preoccupations. Increasingly, distinctions of power and class came under scrutiny and provided a scrutiny of their own. Racial marginalization drew particular attention; and women's work (its enactment and contingent necessity) became the subject of subversive narratives, with an increasing focus on the dirt under the fingernails of previously pristine heroines.

Evident then, in various narratives after 1975, were women engaged with "dirty work," women who got their hands dirty and whose dubious professions did not preclude their availability as narrative subjects. Alternative explorations of the *picara* began to appear, as did other texts examining women's relationship to work and its attendant revisions. The extent to which women's narratives struggled to grapple with the ongoing rub of necessity versus choice in terms of work, resulted in major revisions to women's explorations of self, and spearheaded a departure from the fetishized focus on the psychological journeys of largely privileged women. Within this rubric, texts concerned with besmirchment and *nettoyage* take on a particular resonance, for they gesture implicitly toward the requirement that woman (both author and subject) must be "clean," must meet a certain measure of textual respectability in order to enjoy the anointment of canonicity. This respectability can be cloaked in poverty or lack of experience, which will be rectified by the heroine's appropriate acquisition of wisdom; nevertheless, it identifies the gap between the heroine worthy of canonization and the heroine who remains beyond the pale. Even the now-accepted erosion of the distinctions between high and low culture and the suggestion that the bourgeois individualist subject has died does not quite attenuate the repeated inscription of the redeemable and to a large extent respectable woman, the heroine who "comes to terms" with her challenges and who undergoes a transformation that enables her metamorphosis. The retrofit of a gender-friendly canon was subtly employed to underscore the paradigm of a heroine guarded rather than garrulous, restrained rather than intemperate. What agitation filtered into the still-architecturally selective canon had done so despite the foreign body of woman. Intrusions, inundations, and injuries to a relatively standard and authoritative totality could thus be accommodated by absorption, and by such osmosis rendered relatively anodyne.

Much has been said about consensus and canonicity, critical reception and pre-disposition. Any canonical revision must reconcile multiple aspirations and contingencies. As Dominick LaCapra (1989: 5) astutely observes, literary works themselves recite "complex, internally divided relations to their contexts of creation and use". There is, then, an argument for the internal context of a work to unpack a problem of canonicity, one that gestures toward the tools within the narrative rather than the actual plot content or aesthetic achievement of the text. This focus on quotidian action can falter by virtue of its domestic marginality. For example, is it important to know and to observe what characters eat, or is it more

important that they do eat, starvation and satiety markers of societal rank? Is it important to witness the washerwoman scrubbing a character's clothing, or is it more important to understand the metaphorical import of clean clothing for a reformed sinner? The weight attached to such rites of passage as represented within literature is undeniable; but behind those rites resides a material labor that subverts the ascendancy of the ritual as embodying high literary aspiration and, by extension, canonical marker. For while the concept of liminality readily carries the burden of transition (coming of age, acceptance into a community, completion of a pilgrimage, naming, or recognition), its abstraction does not accommodate the concrete enactment or impetus of the symbolic transformation. Here is a space where gender trouble and canon disorder can fruitfully intersect. And here is where we can locate domestic labor of the ilk that has always been relegated to instrument rather than focal point.

What follows will undertake to explore the citation and location of laundry work and refreshed linen as a narrative trope that denounces the framings of canon, using the lens of how narrative representations of laundry take on the perplexingly encumbered space allotted to female subjects. Besmirchment as a convenient marker related to class and race is relevant; so too is the sensationalisation of dirt and the regularization of cleanliness and order as representative of a "civilized" society. This discussion locates whiteness (both human and textile) as a marker of moral superiority, but also looks closely at the temptations and revelations of soil and sin as a powerful adjunct to these discussions. The films *Quills* and *The Magdalene Sisters* specifically utilize laundry (the place where linen is refreshed) as the location where the canonical story of incarceration and rehabilitation is both enforced and usurped. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's historical novel, *Alias Grace,* permits Grace Marks to launder (to tell from her own perspective, as an incarcerated prisoner) the story of her involvement in a murder, a murder back-dropped by Grace's own skill as a maidservant and laundress. Kate Grenville's Australian novel, *Joan Makes History,* employs the washerwoman as an historian or chronicler of human foibles; she divines from the laundry that she washes the events that will transpire and that will ultimately be reformed as "official" history. By contrast, the Canadian Chinese laundries depicted in Judy Fong Bates' collection of short stories, *China Dog,* make the laundry a site of separation, outside of the town's history in terms of the treatment that the Chinese laundrymen are accorded. Nevertheless, those same laundrymen re-name the men who control the story, take back the power of identification. Ultimately, their presence in the Canadian story will transform the canon of naming, laundry as the page on which a new story is written. Finally, Maxine Hong Kingston's account of growing up in a Chinese laundry in San Francisco speaks the unspeakable by crossing the fine line between silence and speech. Her memoir, *The Woman Warrior,* transplants Chinese women from their original mythology and history to the uncertain life of Chinese immigrants

in the United States. The literal and figurative depiction of the laundry work that feeds them gestures toward the terrible exclusions of a canon where the eradication of a culture's dirt is accompanied by a muting or mutilation of those who accomplish this important task.

Why laundry rather than a more codified or creative domestic activity? To a considerable extent, women's value as mothers and wives is now celebrated within canonical fiction, but those inscriptions again push heroines toward the realm of acceptability and accommodation, the realm of fulfillment rather than filth. In a culture of convenient plasticity, the re-inscription of the canonical woman as accepting (pliant), understanding (self-effacing) and composed (confined) is a contraindication to the disintegrative and fragmenting forces of postmodern life. The epiphanies presented as resolutions for heroines of canonically-inclined texts are reflective of the extent to which the canon itself enforces conformity, all within the rubric already inscribed by master narratives still valiantly upholding rites of passage and well-rounded conclusions. Interruptions to this continuing tapestry are unusual; from this perspective, the depiction of a gendered, marginalized, and repulsive activity becomes useful for what it can tell us about the process of canonization and the very contingencies of such work and its import within novels that set out to interrogate their own distance from canonicity.

The over-arching metaphor that bedrocks this discussion pivots around nettoyage or cleaning, the erasure of soil, dirt, and experience, literally or in writing. In the 2000 film *Quills,* about the Marquis de Sade and his determination to write despite being denied paper, quills, and ink, linen carries the weight of medium for the imprisoned (and scandalously scandalizing) writer. First, his manuscript pages are smuggled out between the soiled linen that the laundry maid collects, but when that ruse is discovered and the writer is denied paper, he manages to use his bed linen as stationery. Finally, when ink and quills are denied him, he inscribes his words with the only writing tools remaining to him, his finger and his feces.

While the film makes no attempt to adhere to historical fact, the explicit connection between the act of writing as subversive activity and the soiling of linen as human expression –to a scatological extreme– recites a useful space from which to explore this intervention in canon construction. In *Quills,* the writer is male, although his subjects are frequently women, heroines both independent and oppressed. What is even more interesting, however, is the *letter de cachet* used against the historical writer –the Marquis de Sade. *Lettres de cachet* (or letters sealed) referred to orders issued under the old régime in France; persons deemed dangerous could be imprisoned or punished without trial. In the 18th century, these letters were often issued as blank warrants: the name of the marked subject could be filled in as convenient. Needless to say, *lettres de cachet* were frequently

the instrument used to confine or disable less than desirable members of society, prostitutes, lunatics, or inconvenient relatives. In direct contravention to *habeas corpus* then, *lettres de cachet* impose a fierce codification, rather like canonical guidelines, unstated but rigid in their requirements. The body and its evidentiary markings on linen or clothing –the line of dirt around a collar, grease spots down a lapel, stains under the armpits of a shirt– recites a refusal to obey a pre-scripted commandment. Such Rabelaisian frankness does not readily obey canonical guidelines, or more accurately, manners. The linen becomes holographic instrument in *Quills,* requiring the words to be transcribed to paper and then onwards in order to be disseminated. But by acting as page, the soiled sheets take on a resonance beyond their function.

To digress further, the laundry work of the incarcerated and horribly mistreated girls in the 2002 film *The Magdalene Sisters* (directed by Peter Mullan) is less a literal act of writing than a metaphorically produced text inspired by Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Deemed wild or unmanageable, the girls who are sent to the Magdalene Laundry are set to cleansing the besmirched linen of the community, most particularly the vestments of the priests. Required through their labor to purify the impure, they are condemned to this grotesque existence by virtue of their own purported impurity –they have broken the rules, behaved badly, or gotten themselves pregnant, all indices of a refusal to adhere to acceptable or restrictive mores or behaviors. The foul steam and heat, the mess and filth that they toil to purge, is meant to accomplish their own purgation and purification, but of course, the miasma of such a heap of befoulment purifies nothing, but punishes most severely. What is written here is the figure of the girl/woman refusing to obey expectation, and then being subsequently chastised by the requirement that she slave to meet expectation. Laundry is not an occasion in aid of writing in this latter case, but a metaphor for erasure, the dirt of the body effaced from cloth, the dirt of the rebellious expunged from their desires, actions, even memories.

What possible relation does the conundrum proposed by the work of laundry in its transformation from dirty to clean have to the ongoing project of canonicity? While this connection might seem capricious, the costumes that humans wear, their particular details, reflect standards, values, and traditions, the same elements that inflect canon-formation. Although the care of those same outward manifestations is usually visible only in the moment of wearing or employment, cleanliness and decorum ephemeral and time-specific, the ongoing ritual of laundering and its metaphorical weight gesture toward the larger enterprise of human value, presentation and hygiene. Canon-formation, inclusion in an inherently exclusive declaration of history and culture, is ultimately an act of ordering, measuring, and valuing, but the process toward such a regularized body must of necessity be disorderly. In its exquisitely

knowing contact with both contamination and spotlessness, laundry presents a powerful trope for more abstract considerations of our constructed literary tradition, the tradition that reads our reading, as we read its body.

Laundry as both task and domestic verity has occupied an evasive and evaded position in the material world of necessary tasks. Its representation in literature and art underscores that sidelining. From the first reference to laundry in Homer's *The Odyssey* (Odysseus' meeting with Nausikaa and her handmaidens washing their clothes by the seashore –their ablutions the goddess Athene's pretext to provide the shipwrecked Odysseus with a way into what would otherwise be a closed city to him), to contemporary depictions of laundry in the films cited above, laundry (both the action and the clothing) serves as a vehicle of intervention. Inevitably the work of laundry is presented as instrument assisting a goal more significant than the sanitations at hand. The readerly capacities of the laundress are disregarded and the textual interventions of those pages she deciphers as part of her labor are dismissed as mere domestic trace. Abstract critical declensions tend to overlook common effluent or soil.

Yet here is presented a brilliant opportunity to disorder the accepted canon of progress and knowledge. An overtly telling example occurs within the historical *tour de force, Joan Makes History,* a novel by Australian writer Kate Grenville. Grenville is not North American, but a proud descendent of those who were transported with the First Fleet to Australia in 1788. Her rendering of history, however, echoes the colonial history of both Canada and the United States, and is evocative as a literary signpost. The settler story occupies an uneasy space within the North American canonical mythology of arrival, "discovery," colonization, and occupation. Grenville's fictional exegesis of the role that women performed within that nation-building trajectory is worth examining for its parody of social order and canonical reward. *Joan Makes History* (and the "making" is a pun of no small magnitude) rummages past the "official" story to argue for a history inflected by women, a history of different priorities and magnitudes. And key to this alternative saga is an unseating of hierarchies and valorizations. Heroic deeds are subsumed by small gestures, strutting ceremony is undercut by private delight, a proliferation of positions. History is rendered domestic, dignified occasions reduced to sweat and mildew and laughter. The "Joan" of the book's title refers to a series of characters, all named Joan, who parallel the development of a canonical Australia over the two hundred years between 1788 and 1988. All of these Joans are rebels of a sort, who "wished not to marry history but to make it" (Grenville 1988: 49). These Joans scorn the limited repertoire of those satisfied with being handmaidens to history, who merely wanted to "marry a prospect, to be the colorless wife of an ambition, to wash the socks and underpants of a destiny" (1988: 48). These Joans labor and toil to clear a small spot within the master narrative, but inevitably relegated to a gendered declension, make little headway against the formal framings of culture and power.

Yet the opportunity for canonical unseating is present in the mistress narrative of daily life, and one of these Joans enacts an astonishingly subversive reading of the plodding calendric of time itself.

> I was nothing but the laundry woman: I was a down-at-heel person who came humbly to the back entrances of all the grand houses on the hill, and spent my days scrubbing things on a ridged board, my hands growing puffy from the big bar of yellow soap. I scrubbed at soiled collars, cuffs full of gravy, socks full of holes: I poked at bed linen tangling in the copper, and heaved and grunted afterwards, hoisting the dripping sheets up into the sun on the clothes-prop. (Grenville 1988: 96-97)

She is "nothing," humble, working class, even grotesque, her puffy hands manifesting her occupation. The hard work of the washer woman signals her marginal standing; a servant, she must use "the back entrances of all the grand houses on the hill". In canonical terms, she is, like all washerwomen, an uncanonized figure, diminished and yet, in readerly terms, in charge of the story by virtue of being in a position to read what no one else sees. Mistress of the subtext, she provides a declension for a larger standard, the postulator of domestic verity. Joan accomplishes this postulation by reciting for us her week, day by day.

> Of a Monday I was to be found scrubbing for Mrs Cassell and her household, and of a Tuesday it was the Bigelows' endless pinafores and embroidered bibs, and the lawn nightdresses, full of the smell of mother's milk that could not wait for a babe's suck. Poor Mrs Bigelow seemed fertile to a fault, and I had traced the progress of her fallings (the sudden way there were no rags to wash), her confinements (the bloodied sheets and towels), and the growth of her many infants on her good rich milk. (Grenville 1988: 97)

Joan's litany of the homes where she scrubs begins by listing the names of the families, but she barely reaches Tuesday before she begins to interrupt the week's strict order with her own commentary on what the laundry has told her about Mrs Bigelow's many pregnancies and children. Joan is intimately familiar with bodily tracings that are generally concealed or private: menstruation, pregnancy, confinement, and nursing. And her reading skills proceed from strict observation to critique and evaluation, a miniature unpacking of societal opinion and pretense: "Of a Wednesday there were the gigantic pantaloons of Mrs Cotterill, who was a widow and liked a fresh tablecloth every other day and clean sheets twice a week, so my Wednesdays were busy, her lines all full of those vast pantaloons that filled with the wind and tugged gaily at the rope while the tablecloths snapped and flapped around them" (Grenville 1988: 97).

The identification of Mrs Cotterill as a widow who enjoys the luxury of clean linen, possibly because her domestic world is not encumbered by male demands, shifts the reading of the laundry away from the model wife and mother embodied by the fertile Mrs Bigelow. And the widow is mere prelude to women who fall even further beyond the pale and certainly outside of marital respectability.

> Thursday was my day at Mrs Ridge's establishment, where no lady had ever set foot, but many females of light laughs and loose lips, and most of the gentlemen of this town, and here there were copperfuls of sheets until I was sick to death of their weight through the wringer, and endless slippery piles of underthings: chemises, slips, petticoats, nightdresses, pantaloons as provocative and unlike poor Mrs Cotterill's as possible: endless piles of slithering tantalizing garments, and not much else, just a few collars if Mrs Ridge's gentleman Norman had favored her with his presence that week. (Grenville 1988: 97)

The excess of the "slithering tantalizing garments" is in contradiction to the "weight" of the many sheets that are used in Mrs. Ridge's brothel, residence of the transgressing women who provide relief to the canonically privileged "gentlemen of this town".

Cleverly, laundress Joan covers the gamut of the disreputable to the sanctified, where the elevated interpreter of holy texts must be guarded by a maiden sister who polices the "fun" of the washing with chilly disapproval.

> Fridays were sombre days at the rectory, where cups of tea for the washerwoman were not very forthcoming, and Miss Skinner the reverend's sister inspected every tedious bit of starched surplice and bib and bit of fine clergyman's lace, and counted the wine-stained double damask napkins used at Communion. I did not feel inclined to sing over my scrubbing or enjoy a bit of a joke with Bridget in the kitchen at dinnertime, because Miss Skinner had a habit of gliding up behind people on her silent feet and giving a laughing person a nasty fright. (Grenville 1988: 97-98)

Jouissance is dampened, creativity (at least what creativity Joan can muster in her trodden life) is here subjected to canonical disapproval. Respect the damask that accompanies worship of the authoritative text as interpreted by the authoritative male or she will be denied access to that sanctified story. Miss Skinner as new critic is here indubitably implicated in the trappings of canonicity, religion's determination as a set and measured story that cannot be interrupted or disrupted.

But Joan does not conclude with religion and its ritual. She finishes her litany of work by returning to her own humble dwelling where she "takes in" washing for those not yet wealthy enough to pay her come to them. She becomes

receptacle, the "taking in" denoting her role as one who gathers the story and its principles together, even though her version is never accorded canonical authority.

> My Saturday was not my own, but it was at least in my own home, for Saturday was the day I took in the washing of the Purvises, the McElroys, and the Russells, and that Knightley: all optimistic folk, but either not prosperous enough just yet to have my services in their own establishments, or in Knightley's case, being bachelor gentlemen requiring little washing done. (Grenville 1988: 98)

Joan's story then is her ability to parse others through her intimate inspection of the clothing that she launders. The owners can hide no secrets from her, and she unpacks a veritable history of civilization in her observations, the same civilization that decrees what is and what is not worthy. Thorough, assiduous, and almost clairvoyant in her reading of grass stains and bloodied handkerchiefs, Joan deciphers the mysteries of human process, but in a decidedly uncanonical way. Knowing her own marginality, Joan nevertheless persists in exercising an imagination, an imagination that she applies to those items of linen and clothing that she is weekly on such intimate terms with. Illiterate and othered, she nevertheless critiques the exclusion of such women as she is from the canonical project: "although I seemed no one and could not as much as spell my own name, I was someone, though someone whose name would quickly be forgotten for never having been written down" (Grenville 1988: 100). Her role is to impose cleanliness on the dirtied, order on disorder. Magically refreshing the laundry she washes in her once-a-week ritual, she nevertheless recites that one element that the literate and privileged always forget: a disorderly, unstructured or unexpected interpretation and evaluation works behind the glossy construction of what is deemed acceptable; its inventive misrule may enact an alterity that contravenes static citations of value.

Otherness and rebellion then collude with the silent apparatus of secrecy and invisibility, laundry's cultural aesthetic requiring erasure rather than declaration. Stains and soil must be effaced, and only decorative markings, those that are "intentional," announce their presence with impunity. Lustrations and expurgations are thus inevitably relegated to a surface pathology, one deemed beneath lofty considerations of the soul or the human spirit or aesthetic transcendence. Such willful division is troubling and implicitly valorizes the abstract as compared to the doggedly concrete. Work itself, while treated as part of the discourse on class, becomes mere abstraction, an expressive device that cannot escape its own horizon of expectation. This re-inscribes then the comfort of a value-laden and oppressively narrow measurement, leaving outside the canon the pragmatism of necessity. Indigence and illiteracy, misrule and misdirection then are barred from canonical anointment, or are included within

such company primarily as a measure of relief or entertainment. Witness the rather coy inclusion of Rabelais and the carnivalesque as escape routes, relief from the ur-philosophical. Matters of digestion or desire are thus kept firmly in their place, and officially sanctioned rules and texts can afford to wink at insignificant sin.

It is unsurprising then that laundry is often depicted within an institutional framework. As is evident in the previously cited film, *The Magdalene Sisters,* the work of laundry can serve to discipline and punish, can keep a willfully imaginative mind at bay because the hands are so thoroughly occupied. By virtue of its association with jails, hospitals or hotels, all bastions of regulation, laundry then evokes a criminal halitosis, perspiring underclass. In early novels depicting laundry work (Zola's *L'Assommoir,* for example*),* the laundress, who is supposed to embody physical and moral cleanliness, instead suffers the corrupting influence of the *blanchisserie* and takes on the tinge of the dirty linen she cleans, an osmosis making her resemble her occupation. "The vulgarity of the *blanchisseuse,* her preoccupation with sensuality, appear as a natural consequence not only of the knowledge gained through the laundering of personal garments, but also of the sexual *disponibilité* and indolence engendered by inhaling the body's odors emitted by the soiled clothing" (Donaldson-Evans 1992: 159). A moral profile of laundresses is implicit in readings of this nature. And even more fascinating is a repeated connection between the abattoir and the laundry, the deliberate connection between animal smells, the stench of death, and of soiled linen. In this context, "the moralizing discourse of hygiene" (Donaldson-Evans 1992: 155), its bourgeois imperative, dominates depictions of laundry workers. A hygienist discourse would hold that the corrupt are in charge of the cardinal virtue of cleanliness; the laundry is the "meeting point between filth and cleanliness" (Donaldson-Evans 1992: 159). Intimate but functional act, this declension connects women to the management of dirt, requiring that they keep moral slime, degeneracy, and contamination at bay. If they do not, they will be punished, excluded from canonical space and imprisoned within a construct, virtual or real.

It is perhaps Margaret Atwood's obviously canonized position as a writer that frees her to explore this conundrum in her novel about the "celebrated murderess" (Atwood 1996: 22), Grace Marks. *Alias Grace* introduces a gender contamination that questions the construction of a heroine, using that historical "celebrated murderess" to serve this end. Atwood's novel undertakes to examine the incarcerated Grace Marks (and the crime she was accused of) from the perspective of various authorities, most particularly Dr. Simon Jordan, who seeks to make his mark in the field of mental illness. As Atwood's "Afterword" summarizes, "Grace Marks was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s, having been convicted of murder at the age of sixteen" (1996: 463). It is not only Grace's marginal position (as maid and murderess) that makes this novel a challenge to canonicity, but the extent to which her story serves as a lens

for the textual depositions of women like Grace. Poor, part of the serving class, girls without protection who had to make their way in a world often capricious in its treatment of servants, they occupied a contingent position both in terms of actuality and art. Atwood asserts that the murder and trial garnered attention because "the combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes was most attractive to the journalists of the day" (1996: 463). The scattered traces of the story as contained within penitentiary records, the popular press of the time, and as recounted by Susanna Moodie in her 1853 book, *Life in the Clearings,* together propose Grace Marks as a discursive site from which to examine the elements that determine whether a story is authoritative or apocryphal. Ultimately, even Atwood's intricately disturbing fictional depiction resorts to a provocative mesmerism.

Unsurprisingly, although she is described as a "serving maid" (Atwood 1996: 11), before the murder and her arrest, Grace Marks worked as a laundress, laundry very much a part of service work. In the present time of the novel, Grace is again performing as a maid, but now in the home of the Governor of the Penitentiary, assisting in the kitchen, the scullery, or the laundry. She is content with these tasks; "I always liked doing the laundry, it is hard work and roughens the hands, but I like the clean smell afterwards" (1996: 64). Her performance is not simply a matter of doing household chores; she contributes to the caché that the Governor's wife enjoys by virtue of parading this "celebrated murderess" in front of her friends. "She must make the most of her social position and accomplishments, and although an object of fear, like a spider, and of charity as well, I am also one of the accomplishments" (1996: 22). The enigmatic text of Grace Marks, then, is given considerable scrutiny, as if it might provide an answer to the inscrutable source of her criminality.

The implicit interrogation behind Atwood's own fictional revision to the many versions of Grace Marks is where she (as character and historical figure) fits into the larger story of nineteenth-century Canada: the canonical depiction of immigration, work, and the social and cultural milieu of this period. As convicted criminal, Grace becomes a version of *tabula rasa* on which both the scandalized and titillated can inscribe their own voyeuristic fears and fetishes. The difficulty provoked by her intervention in the structured narrative of master and servant, powerful and powerless, rich and poor, clean and dirty is exactly that, a tear or fissure in the accepted and heavily stratified social fabric, a soiling of its clean linen. As such an uncontainable and unpredictable actor, Grace Marks first forces her audience to mistrust the usual outcome of the historical drama of hard work and redemption. Second, Atwood's fictionalization of her story forces revisionist readers to question the canonical inscription of 19th century women. The doubleness of Grace's actions is then mirrored and complicated by the doubleness of these readings, and even further refracted by

the *dédoublement* or "disassociation of personality" (Atwood 1996: 466) that Atwood's Grace experiences.

The ordinary work that Grace does signals her story as unexceptional, purely part of the economy of the time. She herself treats her employment with a matter-of-fact detail that does not quite hide her own pride in her skill.

> I help the regular laundress, old Clarrie, who is part coloured and used to be a slave once, before they did away with it here. She is not afraid of me, she doesn't mind me or care what I may have done, even if I killed a gentleman; she only nods, as if to say, So that's one less of them. She says I am a steady worker and pull my share and don't waste the soap, and I know the treatment of fine linen, I have the way of it, and also how to get out the stains, even from the blonde lace, which is not easy to come by; and a good clear starcher too, and can be trusted not to burn the things in ironing, and that is enough for her. (Atwood 1996: 64-65)

The treatment of fine linen is then a gift or a talent, even though Grace's treatment of the gentleman she worked for (the murder effectively destroys "fine linen") was less than trustworthy. The washerwoman's zone of knowledge is lightly drawn here, but Grace comes to this skill by virtue of her early apprenticeship under her friend, Mary Whitney, who taught her "what [she] needed to know" (1996: 157). In those happier times, when Grace has just begun to work for Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, in "one of the finest houses in Toronto" (1996: 147), she is set "to assist Mary with the rinsing and the wringing out, and the hanging up and the folding and the mangling and mending" (1996: 157). The study of this skill is augmented by Mary's advising Grace in the politics of subservience and survival with relation to the rich.

> She said that the trick of it was to have the work done without it ever being seen to be done; and if any of them was to surprise you at a task, you should simply remove yourself at once. In the end, she said, we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a good deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all. (Atwood 1996: 158)

Within a household narrative where servants are meant to function invisibly, absolutely outside of any canonical consideration, Grace is advised to "remove" herself if encountered. The additional suggestion that with the refreshment of linen comes a privileged knowledge that empowers these servants, even though they are invisible, contributes to the potential for a narrative where that knowledge is both empowering and dangerous, leading to an inversion of the expectation that a servant must efface herself. Such rude shocks to canonical order can form the basis of a new subversion.

There are early suggestions that the laundry holds more secrets than its mere utility. Although Grace loves "the smell of a laundry dried outside" (Atwood 1996: 159), she is frightened of the same linens and shirts and nightgowns when they are hung inside: "in the grey twilight of the drying room, they looked different, like pale ghosts of themselves hovering and shimmering there in the gloom; and the look of them, so silent and bodiless, made me afraid" (1996: 159). Mary, who will later be identified as the *double* inhabiting Grace, is quick to recognize Grace's fear. She "would hide behind the sheets, and press up against them so there was the outline of her face, and give out a moaning sound; or she would get behind the nightshirts and make their arms move" (1996: 159-160). Linen then becomes the ghost text that tracks the knowledge that the servants possess; it carries the impress of all sins; and even predicts the ghosts that will haunt the story. Mary, who dies from a botched abortion, actually dies because as a laundry maid she is beneath the social standing of Mr. George Alderman Parkinson, who has gotten her pregnant. That the servants are mere meat is emphasized by the smell of wet straw and blood from the mattress where Mary expires. It is the smell, says Grace, of "a butcher's shop" (1996: 177), with Mary compared to "a carcass hung up at the butcher's" (1996: 178). And their mistress, Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, declares that the story of Mary's death will be censored. "Out of respect to the dead we will not say what Mary died of. We will say it was a low fever. That will be best for all" (Atwood 1996: 177-78). Mary is thus excluded from the "official" story of her own death, as effectively effaced as the blood that Grace must scrub away.

> I bundled the sheet and the nightdress together and took them down to the laundry, and pumped a tub full of cold water, because it's the cold water you need to get out the blood, as the hot will set it... And I scrubbed and much of the blood came out, making the water all red; and I ran that down the drain and pumped another tubful, and left the things to soak, with some vinegar poured in to help with the smell. (Atwood 1996: 179)

Whatever the servants know does not help them to gain a place in the authoritative story. Their knowledge can be applied pragmatically, or can be dismissed as being beneath consideration, a lesser and less refined information than that possessed by the rich and educated. But all knowledge is dangerous, and when it does enter narrative, can provoke an unexpected backlash.

As listener and audience to Grace Marks' story, Dr. Jordan is charmed by her account of her domestic life, thinking that her philosophical ruminations on quilts as flags and on beds (where birth, death, and sex occur) are fanciful. His cavalier misreading of her tale reflects his own sense of entitlement by virtue of his superior position, underscored for us by Grace's watching him write. "I [. . .] watch his hand moving over the paper, and think it must be pleasant to have the knack of writing so quickly, which can only be done by practice, like playing the

piano" (Atwood 1996: 161). That he does not recognize the extent to which Grace controls her own narrative is evident in his susceptibility to her story, even though Grace suggests: "Surely you do not want to hear about such ordinary things, and daily life" (1996: 162). In fact, he follows her tale with "personal pleasure" (1996: 185), the indulgence of the well-off listener for whom domestic detail is romantic, until her account of the death of Mary Whitney, which sickens him; "he feels as if he has just come from an abattoir" (1996: 185). His complicity in the deaths of all the Mary Whitneys (young maids who are taken advantage of) who remain outside of the canonical fold does not occur to him; instead, he remembers his own first kiss, which he extracted, of course, from a maidservant. Later, he dreams that "he's in a fenced yard where laundry flaps on a line. No one else is there, which gives him a sensation of clandestine pleasure. The sheets and linens move in the wind, as if worn by invisible swelling hips, as if alive" (1996: 194). To Dr. Jordan, the dream signals laundry as erotic encounter, the cloth standing in for the hair of "an unseen woman," but that same disembodiment declares the extent to which such work and its outcome is disembodied, and those who accomplish it are excluded from canonical consideration.

Grace is uniquely connected to this form of nettoyage. She smells like "smoke, and laundry soap" (Atwood 1996: 90), markers of her class. When Dr. Jordan assures her that she can be frank with him, she reminds him that her character is already delineated by her crime, and so her speaking cannot alter her circumstances: "'I was never a lady, Sir, and I've already lost whatever reputation I ever had. I can say anything I like; or if I don't wish to, I needn't say anything at all'" (1996: 90). Her frank disclosure that she is long past participating in the elaborate rituals of refinement and respectability is the key to her "confession"; the doctor, however, does not recognize this essential distinction and continues to wait for the salacious details of what happened, her participation in the crime. He tries to "open her up like an oyster" (1996: 133), as if she could be so pried apart. His own embarrassment is to Grace's advantage; she knows more about the restrictions that confine him than he does and the narrative confirms that relative discrimination. For example, when he rents rooms from his landlady, he is unable to inquire if laundry services are included. "So fastidious and stern was she when he was arranging for the rooms, that he'd found it embarrassing to ask whether washing was included. Her manner had implied that she was not in the habit of discussing the state of men's personal items with them, such painful matters being best left to the servants" (1996: 75). And he declares to Miss Lydia that he believes that "'Women should not attend such grisly spectacles [executions]'" because "'they pose a danger to their refined natures'" (1996: 87). More trapped by canonical renderings of the female sex as genteel or delicate than he knows, Grace is able to play to this credulousness. Indeed, Grace's "refinement" or lack thereof is a matter of some speculation on the parts of all who encounter her, except perhaps Clarrie, the laundress, who cares only that she do her job well.

Work is the site where Grace demonstrates her own value as a subject; she is interested in doing her job well, and in the respect her labor should garner. This gap between her duties as a serving maid and the less than clear expectations that she encounters when she accepts employment with Thomas Kinnear leads Grace toward her crime. At first she is pleased with the situation she has taken.

> In the courtyard between the two kitchens there were three lines strung up for the washing. There was no separate laundry room, but the things for the washing, the coppers and the washtub and scrubbing board, were at present in the summer kitchen beside the stove, all good quality; and I was pleased to see they did not make their own soap but used bought soap, which is far easier on the hands." (Atwood 1996: 212)

Grace prefers simply to do her work within the parameters expected of her, but the blurring of the lines between servant and mistress disorder her perspective. Still, she proceeds with her duties.

> The next day was a fine fair day with a breeze, and so I did the wash, and high time too as clean things were running short. It was hot work, as I had to keep the fire in the summer kitchen stove going at a brisk rate; and I'd had no chance to sort and soak the things the night before; but I could not risk waiting, as at that time of year there could be a quick change in the weather. So I scrubbed and rubbed, and got it all hung up nicely at last, with the napkins and the white pocket-handkerchiefs neatly spread out on the grass to bleach. There were snuff stains, and ink stains, and grass stains on a petticoat of Nancy's–I wondered how she had got them, but she had most likely slipped and fallen down. (Atwood 1996: 224)

Simply by doing the wash, her proximity to stains, Grace acquires more knowledge than she wants, and that knowledge contributes to her confusion about her role in the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. Invested in order and in the banishment of dirt, Grace becomes entangled by the metaphorical weight of the contradictory bargains struck between cleanliness and dirt, appearance and admission, the private and the public.

Cleanliness is a display, a declaration; as Grace muses, "they do say that cleanliness is next to Godliness" (Atwood 1996: 225). But Grace's investment in purity is undermined by the unconventional situation at Kinnear's, where the symbolic upsetting of convention mangles both her dreams and her waking hours. On the day of the murders, she dreams that she sees headless angels sitting in judgment on Kinnear's house; when she wakes, she goes outside to find that the laundry she had done the day before has blown into the trees. She observes, "the nightdresses and shirts which were stuck in the trees did indeed

look like angels without heads; and it was as if our own clothing was sitting in judgment upon us" (1996: 281). The elaborate cosmologies of pollution symbols (Douglas 1966) thus serve notice of impending disorder. This mirror-moment of Grace's earlier recognition that Nancy Montgomery is pregnant, and thus at risk (as Mary Whitney was), leads to the conclusive "She was in trouble" (Atwood 1996: 276), ambiguously referring to both Nancy and Grace in terms of their impending contact with death.

Canonically, women are expected to enforce morality, to hold and restrain it at the same time. When the bed linen is a shambles, they are expected to wash out the stains; when the narrative is disrupted, they are expected to serve the roles required by their gender. It is not surprising that Nancy Montgomery's body is found under the washtub, or even more indelicately stated, "her dead legs sticking out from under the washtub" (Atwood 1996: 22). If washing is configured as a vanishing act (making dirt invisible), then the vanishing act of murder is close to laundry in its impetus; it is an attempt to erase some pollution. After the murder, when Grace at last is able to sleep, she imagines the soothing effects of water, and her very footsteps "being erased". "On the edge of sleep I thought: It's as if I never existed, because no trace of me remains, I have left no marks. And that way I cannot be followed" (1996: 342). Grace has been, in that dream, laundered to purity and innocence, a return to a cosmology where she is canonically undisruptive because she has been quite simply erased.

Uncomfortable as such disruptions to canonical expectation are, the effect is multiplied by the additional disturbance of race. If the project of canon-formation is valuation, then the weight of white male proscribement is particularly difficult to shift when laundry, race and gender together stir the aesthetic *mélange*. In Judy Fong Bates' 1997 collection of short fiction, *China Dog and Other Stories,* the presence of the Chinese laundry discomfits the smug setting of the Canadian small town as cohesive entity within the Canadian literary canon. In these almost tangentially framed stories, the town's hegemonic whiteness and uniformity is interrupted by the necessary but othered members of the community who are Chinese. The narrator of "The Gold Mountain Coat" relates this situation almost limpidly. "The small town that was my home was typical of many small towns in Ontario" (Bates 2005: 25). She goes on to enumerate its canonical sameness: it has schools and churches, a funeral home and post office.

> The main street of our small town had a dime store that sold everything from *Evening in Paris* perfume to stationery and hammers. It also had a clothing store, a jewellery shop, a hardware store, a drugstore, a barber shop, and a restaurant that served Canadian food. And, typical of all small towns, it also had a Chinese restaurant and a Chinese hand laundry. (Bates 2005: 25-26)

The almost seamless predictability of this small town is presented as being so "typical," that it is virtually a stage set for the execution of a predetermined *lebenswelt.* The two Chinese businesses interrupt this unruffled surface by virtue of their difference, a difference that the narrator remarks. "My father operated the hand laundry and the other Chinese family managed the Chinese restaurant. I was the only Chinese child in the town" (Bates 2005: 26). Such isolation makes it difficult, indeed almost impossible to accomplish any intervention in the standard weave of community.

The work that the Chinese hand laundry performs for the small town is inescapable and inevitable: the laundry must purify the town's pollution even as the Chinese family who run the laundry are considered polluting to the norm's impenetrable whiteness. In the story "Eat Bitter," when Hua Fan arrives in Canada to assist his "uncle" in his laundry, he immediately remarks the line between the town and his uncle's business.

> Just inside the door was the handmade wooden counter that would separate Hua Fan and Elder Uncle from the customers when the business was open. On the other side of the counter was a wall lined with wooden shelves on which there were neatly stacked packages of finished laundry wrapped in brown paper. Along another wall were two "ironing beds," each a roughly made wooden table covered with old blankets, topped with an old sheet–all tightly tucked under the wooden surface and secured with nails. Elder Uncle walked past the brown-papered bundles and pushed aside a heavy green and red flowered curtain that divided the customer area from the washing section. In the middle of the floor was a monstrous looking washing machine. It was a massive grey metal barrel. Nestling inside was a similar-shaped wooden container punctured with holes the size of quarters. Carved into one side of both barrels were hinged doors where laundry was stuffed and removed. Hua Fan looked at the contraption, thinking that it resembled a giant insect with four metal legs standing inside a large metal pan with a drainage hole. To one side were three wooden laundry basins used for rinsing the clothes. A hand-cranked wringer was attached to the last basin and a tall stack of brown bamboo laundry hampers stood in the corner. Along another wall was a coal-burning stove for cooking and heating. Beside it stood the boiler. Hua Fan noticed a small bedroom off to one side. Inside were two narrow cots made of metal. (Bates 2005: 49-50)

The men are separated from their white customers by the counter; and their workspace is separated from customer service space. They themselves sleep right next to their work, identifying them with their labor more than any private or personal identity. Outsiders, they are relegated to doing domestic work, their difference feminized. And the clothing they must refresh is repulsive, rank with

unfamiliar sweat. "Hua Fan handled the socks gingerly. He picked them up with his thumb and index fingers. He was barely able to put his hand inside the first sock to turn it inside out. The acrid odour assaulted his nostrils and left him gasping for air" (Bates 2005: 52). The stench, the heat and humidity and the unrelenting pattern of the days, days where they sometimes work until two in the morning, inscribe their drudgery on Hua Fan and his uncle. The foul exhalations of the town's filth all concentrate in the laundry, banished only by the sweat equity of these barely tolerated workers who struggle to make a living in this unfriendly milieu. The miasmic exhalations bred in that cleansing site are released in a cloud of steam when the door to the back room is opened.

Despite the indispensable service that they provide to the community, the Chinese characters in these stories are emphatically isolated within this "typical" town, suffering manifold indignities, taunting, stoning, racist slurs and other humiliations. Meanwhile, the trappings of gentility and culture, white shirts and handkerchiefs, once dirtied, accumulate in the laundry to be refreshed, made spotless again. But the process of this repeated cleansing is brutal, requiring soaking, agitation, and rinsing. "Handkerchiefs were boiled to loosen the dried snot that floated to the top of the pot like a film of pale green algae" (Bates 2005: 53). The most despised of the community are thus in charge of expunging the filth of those who despise them. Instead of gratitude for this task, the community conveys to those same laundry workers gestures suggesting they would like to expunge them. Although the Chinese perform a surface ingratiation (the doubleness of a monstrous and feminized position), they comfort themselves with small acts of ironic revenge, not physical but textual and linguistic. When a customer drops off a bundle of dirty clothing, Elder Uncle carefully writes inside the collars of the shirts: "'I don't know what their names are'" Elder Uncle explains to Hua Fan. "'They don't know mine either. But I give them names. That one's Big Nose. There's Crooked Mouth Uncle, Doctor Uncle, Banker Uncle. They're no trouble. But some are terrible, like Drunk Uncle. But the worst is Shitty Pants Uncle. Never mind, though, as long as they pay'" (Bates 2005: 51). The gap between canonical text and revised canon is emphasized by the fact that the dominant characters cannot name their servants, while the marginalized characters name their masters by how they look, what they do, and how they act. Elevated philosophical characteristics, and even the authority of naming is then completely undercut, and the ambiguous but deliberately identifying black ink marks debunk the "superiority" of the town's leading citizens. The explicit intervention here is that the non-canonical and silenced will nevertheless insert themselves into a space and place, despite not being "typical". The contaminated thus mirror the filth that they regulate.

The regularization of the "body" within the canon is acutely present and yet most assiduously ignored. And while the body can perform its breathing and its movement, the bodies that work with the garments of other bodies are made

vulnerable by contact with their emanations. In Maxine Hong Kingston's ground breaking 1975 memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, the laundry sanitizes dirty clothing but does not cauterize memory or secrets. And while the title's eponymous ghosts refer to *lo fans* or whites, they are also the marginalized children of the Chinese families who will have to transcend the laundry where their journey begins. It is unsurprising that Maxine Hong Kingston feels choked by her story, and although her mother tells her she cut Maxine's frenum, cut her tongue loose to ensure that she "would not be tongue-tied" (Kingston 1989: 164), she suffers from a terrible silence. "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness–a shame–still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say 'hello' casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver" (1989: 165). The silence at first is a refuge, an enjoyable space that requires no explanation or intervention. Hong Kingston does not feel that she must escape it.

> It was when I found out that I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak. I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks comes out of my throat. "Louder," said the teacher, who scared the voice away again. The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl. (Kingston 1989: 166)

The voice excluded from the canon can barely whisper, cannot make enough sound to enter a textual space. Even as an adult, asking for the most straightforward information within a codified societal communication (the check-out counter, directions), Kingston is struck dumb, her voice stifled. Before starting junior high, and after an episode where she torments her silent Chinese twin (another little girl who will not or cannot speak), Kingston suffers a mysterious illness that permits her to stay away from school, and to enjoy a kind of Victorian vacation, watching the seasons change from a rented hospital bed in her family's living room. That eighteen month hiatus from the hard work of trying to intersect with a language and a culture that excludes her somehow gives her the strength to continue. Although she has "to figure out again how to talk" (Kingston 1989: 182), she begins to understand that she is choked by her family's secrets, immigration elisions that cannot be aired, all an extension of the consanguine dirt that her family erases and must disguise.

Maxine Hong Kingston's terrifying and indomitable mother tries to force her children to hold to Chinese tradition despite their American upbringing, their slow assimilation into the American melting pot. In that process of that inevitable acculturation the laundry serves as a liminal space, and the family who rely on the laundry business for their livelihood embody its role as a transformative site. The

laundry describes an ascending ladder of difference, from Kingston's own difference within her Chinese community to that community's difference from the American narrative that has ingested them. Work becomes the mantra of survival for Kingston's mother, the logos that she insistently embraces. Yet a laundry in San Francisco is no cleaner than a laundry in small town Ontario. "'I put you babies in the clean places at the laundry, as far away from the germs that fumed out of the ghosts' clothing as I could. Aa, their socks and handkerchiefs choked me. I cough now because of those seventeen years of breathing dust. Tubercular handkerchiefs. Lepers' socks'" (Kingston 1989: 104-105). But the exquisite contamination of shared bodily vapors is not sufficiently "universal" for those same bodies to be offered space within a national canon.

Still, when she visits her mother years later, Kingston remembers the laundry almost nostalgically. While lying in bed, her mother sitting beside the bed, they revisit that work place.

> In the midnight unsteadiness we were back at the laundry and my mother was sitting on an orange crate sorting dirty clothes into mountains–a sheet mountain, a white shirt mountain, a dark shirt mountain, a work-pants mountain, a long underwear mountain, a short underwear mountain, a little hill of socks pinned together in pairs, a little hill of handkerchiefs pinned to tags. Surrounding her were candles she burned in daylight, clean yellow diamonds, footlights that ringed her, mysterious masked mother, nose and mouth veiled with a cowboy handkerchief. (Kingston 1989: 105)

The astonishing appropriation of canonical "cowboy" imagery for these new Americans, the translation of the promise of "Gold Mountain" into the mountains of different articles of clothing, is here made mythic by the diamond light of the candles that Hong Kingston's mother burns to sear away the potential germs exuded by the dirty laundry, the ghost germs of the dominant American story.

This work and the complex construction of its accomplishment, as well as its metaphorical association with the erasure of filth, signals that laundry is not tangential to these texts, but pivotal to an entire re-thinking of this domestic paradigm as discursive intervention in what often resembles an impregnable canon-fortress. There are nudges toward a necessary revaluation of domestic space and the female subject. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak refers to "global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item" (Spivak 1988: 308), but does not pursue the question of the "laundry list" itself as a useful but marginalized tool, one that glances at but refuses to scrutinize the extent to which the privileges of class, leisure, and cleanliness have served the canonical project. This submerged drama of the extraordinary ordinary argues for a

strenuous overhaul of an orthodox narrative oblivious to the quotidian elements –clean clothes, fresh linen– that drive survival and human dignity. While such domestic fragments ultimately illuminate corporeal rather than transcendental subjectivity, laundry suggests a material metaphor that embodies "historically instantiated power, knowledge, and subjectivity" (Cook 1992: 150). Foucault claims that the primary phenomena are not discursive but social, political, economic, and technical; his argument for the power of "the writing of things" (Foucault 1980) provides a theoretical flourish for laundry's credibility as a fragrant disordering of any constructed canon. What is wonderful about this physical intervention is its profound celebration of what is concrete and inescapable. Ultimately, human frailty and filth together argue for a renovated literary canon, one aware that it cannot escape being plunged into boiling water.

Works cited

Atwood, Margaret. 1996. *Alias Grace.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Bates, Judy Fong. 2005 (1997). *China Dog.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Cook, Deborah. 1992. "Umbrellas, Laundry Bills, and Resistance: The Place of Foucault's Interviews in His Corpus". *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History* 21 (2): 145-55.

Donaldson-Evans, Mary. 1992. "The Morbidity of *milieu: L'Assommoir* and the Discourse of Hygiene". *Literary Generations.* Ed. Alain Toumayan. Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum. 150-162.

Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* New York: Frederick A. Praeger.

Foucault. Michel. 1995 (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York : Vintage Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings.* Trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon.

Grenville, Kate. 1988. *Joan Makes History.* New York: British American Publishing.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. 1989 (1975). *The Woman Warrior.* New York: Random House.

LaCapra, Dominick. 1989. *Soundings in Critical Theory.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

The Magdalene Sisters. 2003. Dir. Peter Mullan. Perf. Geraldine McEwan, Dorothy Duffy, Annie-Marie Duff, Eileen Walsh, Nora-Jane Noone. Miramax.

Moodie, Susannah. 1966 (1853). *Life in the Clearings.* Toronto: Macmillan.

Quills. 2000. Dir. Philip Kaufman. Perf. Geoffrey Rush, Kate Winslet, Joaquin Pheonix, Michael Caine. 20th Century Fox.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P. 271-313.
Zola, Emile. 1969 (1877). *L'Assommoir.* Paris: Garnier-Flammarion.

BLOOD ROAD LEADS TO PROMISE: A GENDERED APPROACH TO CANADA'S PAST IN GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ'S *THE CURE FOR DEATH BY LIGHTNING*[1]

Eva Darias Beautell
Universidad de La Laguna

Invariably praised for its lyricism as well as for its unusual rendering of the Western Canadian farmland life, Anderson-Dargatz's first novel, *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996), immediately enjoyed both unquestionable critical approval and great popularity. Critics compared her writing to Faulkner's in its unfailing depiction of rural life as a fundamentally Gothic experience: "Like Faulkner", one critic writes, "the author blends lyricism with symbolic revelation to portray a time and a place peopled by a group of eccentric characters whose uneasy cohabitation animates the narrative" (Charney 1997: 4). In Faulknerian fashion indeed, the novel's most sordid passages appear often counterbalanced by beautiful descriptions of the natural landscape: "The presence of ghosts, strange deformities, bizarre occurrences, and frequent brutality creates a stern Canadian gothic landscape, alleviated by tender, lyric evocations of nature's graces" (Charney 1997: 4). Many commentators also identified Michael Ondaatje's influence in Anderson-Dargatz's poetic style, or Gabriel García Márquez's in her taste for magical realism (*Quill and Quire* 1996: 29-30). In that

1. This essay is the result of work conducted as part of the research project "Revisiones del canon en Canadá y Estados Unidos: literatura, cultura y género (1975-2000)", funded by Consejería de Educación del Gobierno de Canarias between 2003 and 2006 (PI2002/045). I am also grateful to Iona Douglas who, among other things, introduced me to Anderson-Dargatz's novel over coffee in her beautiful front garden during the summer of 2005.

context (and although not immediately perceived by most), Jack Hodgins's combination of the real and the magic (1986) would be a clear literary antecedent in British Columbia and a most probable influence. Additionally, the novel represents a rich contribution to a tradition of women's writings in Canada that engage with gendered perspectives on rural or small-town life (Alice Munro), regional identities (Sandra Birdsell, Margaret Laurence), the Canadian Gothic in its multiple variations (Margaret Atwood), and the metaphoric dimensions of the Canadian wilderness (Marian Engel, Aritha van Herk).

The Cure contains all those elements and influences and reads at the same time like no other novel before. It seems both firmly grounded in the Canadian tradition, yet it revises that tradition, questioning it, exploring its possibilities, and pushing it in directions where it had rarely gone before. "My name is Beth Weeks", the opening pages read. "My story takes place in the midst of the Second World War, the year I turned fifteen, the year the world fell apart and began to come together again" (Anderson-Dargatz 1997: 2). And so does the story we are about to read, Beth's story, seem to fall apart and begin to come together again, after having replayed gender conflicts, cultural confrontations and regional idiosyncrasies in a remote Canadian farm. This essay offers an analysis of the modes in which Anderson-Dargatz's novel engages with some of Canada's most significant national myths, those related to the wilderness and the land, modifying them to make room for alternative pictures and leading them in directions never taken before. It attempts to articulate the process by which the text introduces gendered inflections in those foundational myths, making them interact at three different levels that eventually overlap: the writing of the pioneer narrative, the analysis of the metaphoric meaning of the Canadian wilderness vis-à-vis the Western Canadian homesteading, and the recuperation of the erased presence of the Aboriginal cultures in the country's myths of origins.

The novel seduces the reader from the start with an intriguing title and a catchy beginning:

> The cure for death by lightning was handwritten in thick, messy blue ink in my mother's scrapbook, under the recipe for my father's favourite oatcakes:
>
> *Dunk the dead by lightning in a cold water bath for two hours and if still dead, add vinegar and soak for an hour more.*
>
> Beside this, some time later, my mother had written Ha! Ha! in black ink. (1)

At a superficial level, what follows is the coming-of-age story of a white girl, Beth Weeks, growing up in a small rural community of the interior of British Columbia during World War II. But *The Cure* is much more than that. To begin with, the text replicates the plot and structure of pioneer women's narratives: the

recipes, both ordinary and the most unlikely, survival tips, botanical information, description of seasonal change, and farm life instructions which are found pasted in the scrapbook of the protagonist's mother seem to also govern the plotline, which is in turn carefully woven around its contents. Endowed by a certain magical quality, the mother's scrapbook acts as a parallel narrative or supplement to the narrator's narrative, a silent commentary to the events related. Everything is recorded in the scrapbook, from the famous recipes and home remedies to death notices, pieces of news about children gone missing, bear and coyote attacks, as well as the mother's occasional cryptic thoughts about any of these:

> My mother didn't keep the book as a diary. [….] But she wrote brief thoughts along the margins or at the bottom of a page, as footnotes to the recipes and remedies, the cartoons and clippings–footnotes to the events of the day. She was always adding a new page, and it didn't matter how many times I stole the scrapbook from her chair and pilfered my few minutes with it, there was always some new entry or something I'd missed. (2)

In a deconstructive gesture, then, the centrality of this mesmerizing scrapbook in the narrative we are about to enter comes to the foreground by its own supplementary function. First, as unfailing source of fully detailed recipes, the scrapbook marks, as Tanya Lewis has put forward (2003: 87), "the historically specific region that produces and consumes that food". Furthermore, the novel is "so liberally strewn with recipes and descriptions of meals that food becomes a narrative motif and acts as a powerful indicator of place (on the farm in the Shuswap) as well as of time (during the Second World War, when rationing affects local foodways)" (Lewis 2003: 86). Secondly, at the level of narrative structure, the scrapbook breaks the monotony of everyday life in the farm, and of Beth's own narration, in that every page is different, some made from backs of letters, some from scraps of wallpaper or brown wrapping, most stained with fingerprints and colours, burgundy and blue from the wings of a pressed butterfly, black from the soot in the mother's fingers, greasy yellow from the stain of melted butter: "The book was swollen with years of entries. Pages were dusted with flour, stained with spots of tea, and warped from moisture. Each page had its own scent: almond extract or vanilla, butter or flour, the petals of rose it was made from, or my mother's perfume, Lily of the Valley" (2). Thirdly, from a feminist perspective, through the scrapbook, the text will direct the reader's attention to the novel's emphasis on gender relations and, specifically, on the relationships between the farm women. It is made clear from the start that the scrapbook is the mother's territory, her whole life being recorded there. The narrator's own story then follows and conforms the novel we read, her narrative focus still on her mother, the reserve women, their daughters and their grandmothers. The two books become connected through a *mise-en-abyme*, for the mother's scrapbook will often

contain the key to the interpretation of the daughter's, a magic companion to the narrated events. Revealingly, at the end of the novel, Beth will make her own scrapbook by following the last one of the recipes in her mother's, the recipe for paper, which she will reinterpret and adapt to her own supplies and needs:

> I tore the paper into strips and soaked them in water, and then mashed the paper back into the pulp it had started out as, with a potato masher. When my mother used plant matter—like the dry stalks of potato plants—she boiled it first, until it was soft, and then mashed it. I placed the pulp mess into the washtub in which we took baths, which was half filled with water. I dipped the screen down into the bath and brought it up from the water, flat, so that the paper pulp caught on the wire mesh and the water drained through it. This pulp became paper (287-288).

Finally, the scrapbook anticipates the juxtaposition of elements such as the magic and the real or the wild and the domestic that is going to characterize Beth's account. And that is artistically done by way of the collocation of items on one page, their order or the particular combination displayed: a traditional recipe for pancakes, for instance, is revealed against "coyote scent", a pioneer recipe to trap coyotes learned from the nearby Native Shuswap people (196-197); a newspaper clipping of Ginger Rogers's improbable one-night visit to the town of Promise is found on the page along with a sentence the mother has scrawled: "Box of geraniums at open window keeps flies down" (66); the cure for death by lighting itself appears, as we have seen, side by side with a traditional recipe for oatcakes and a butterfly pressed flat, caught by the mother because of its having a torn wing: "'Wonderful', she told me. 'That it could still fly. It's a reminder to keep going'" (1). Combining the mother's focus on food and the daughter's on language, the book's initial description swiftly sets the reader into a complex narrative of pleasure, love, fear, violence and, ultimately, survival.[2]

As I have suggested, the novel clearly belongs to a long tradition in Canadian writing that has revised the metaphoric meaning of the wilderness from the point of view of gender through both pioneer and exploration narratives. In that context, and despite Margaret Atwood's much-quoted claim (1992: 19) that "[f]orest is *passé*" and her proposal to turn from the wilderness to the exploration of urban Canada, I would argue that the exploration of Canadian nature as a trope different from the one articulated by Northrop Frye and Atwood herself still needs to be done, and is in fact being done by contemporary novels, especially outside

2. For a thorough analysis of the relationship between food and language, see Eagleton (1998). Language as well as food, Eagleton writes, have strong material and metaphorical significances, and are therefore essential ingredients in the making of a cultural identity.

Ontario.[3] In the case of *The Cure*, the introduction of a gender-marked view of the human interaction with the landscape in the nation's past provides us with a step forward not only in the study of the relationship between gender and the environment, but also in the search for alternative ways of relating to it for the present and the future. That is so, because,

> [l]iving in the twenty-first century involves living in that uncomfortable zone known as the 'environmental crisis.' If this crisis has come about because of a nexus of historical, economic, and political forces, then it seems vital that we try to find new ways of thinking about human relationships with the natural world. Part of this process involves identifying the gendered reality of many activities, histories, and cultural engagements with the Canadian land. (Hessing, Raglon and Sandilands 2005: xviii)

Anderson-Dargatz's own contribution to that process is to appropriate the pioneer narrative, traditionally white and male, and inflect it with inter-gender issues and intercultural considerations. The result is an alternative portrait of the Canadian pioneer period, based on the dismantling of its patriarchal and ethnocentric pillars and enriched by an analysis of the function of the previously erased women and Aboriginal cultures in those backwoods societies. As Coral Ann Howells (2003: 167) asserts,

> Writing in the late twentieth century, Beth not only rewrites her mother's version of a Canadian country-woman's life during World War II but also and most crucially she revises the white wilderness narrative through her postcolonial awareness of the significant presence of Aboriginal people and indigenous culture, marginalized but always there on the edges of the farming community around the small town called Promise.

The inclusion of the Aboriginal presence in *The Cure* is important not only in itself but, most effectively, in my opinion, in its alliance with a gendered perspective on wilderness life. Together, these layers of meaning constantly interact producing a complex narrative with a sweet and sour ending. Although, as we will later see, the novel seems to advocate a life in contact with nature and in communion with the environment, it is definitely not an uncritical celebration of life in the backwoods. Neither does it promote an idealised view of *feminine*

3. That shift is already seen in Atwood's own writing of the last decade and is also true to a certain extent of an important part of the fiction and poetry written in Canada today, which has become fundamentally urban. Yet, as I argue here, this is in no way representative of contemporary Canadian literature at large, much of which is written out of a (conscious or unconscious) desire to undo pan-Canadian national images by adopting pluralizing perspectives. For a different, feminist, account of the relationship between Canadian literature and nature, see Relke (1999).

and/or *Native* identification with nature. There is no recovery narrative here of the kind we may find, for instance, in Sharon Butala's *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994), a text that strongly proposes an ideal, spiritually infused, return to a capitalized Nature as the answer to (in this case) the Canadian Prairies identity question. As Smaro Kamboureli (2001: 55) has shown, in her critique of Butala's text, "a return to the land, let alone to Nature, that is not accompanied by a radical questioning of the 'foundation of our nation' will only further solidify what is wrong with this nation's foundation in the first place".[4] Similarly, I would argue, a return to the land that does not question the gendered implications of those foundations will only repeat a history of ecocide and misogyny.

Anderson-Dargatz's text does question those foundations from three different overlapping angles: it probes, in the first place, the very notion of the wilderness as Canada's most important national image, and it does so by counterbalancing its various meanings against the related notions of dwelling and homesteading. It analyses the processes by which farmland comes to be perceived as wilderness domesticated, its success, the proof of *man*'s victory against the wild. *The Cure* then goes on to apply two alternative viewpoints to the traditional picture: a gendered perspective on Canadian nature and pioneer life, which shifts the emphasis from the natural to the social bases of that type of life; and a First Nations' perspective on the environment which counteracts the foresaid rhetoric of subjugation and exploitation of the land. The two latter constituencies, gender and culture, contribute to the text's content and theme at much deeper levels than mere topic, influence or folklore. They are determining factors of plot structure, of narrative pace and teleology as well as of the novel's resolution. In what follows, I will articulate the intricacies of this two-fold revising strategy.

In looking at the notion of wilderness in Western tradition, it is impossible to avoid the overriding equation between nature and women, embedded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition "since the beginning of times", with the story of Adam and Eve, and repeatedly readapted and reworked at different periods of our era to suit the various scientific advances: "Mechanical theories of the world developed in the seventeenth century", writes Gillian Rose (1993: 69) in this regard, "represented Nature as passive and female: she was seen as a set of discrete functioning mechanisms that could be controlled and also exploited, and that exploitation was legitimized through the images of conquest, violation and penetration which constituted scientists' claims to know Nature". The power of

4. Butala's autobiographical text, extremely successful and the recipient of multiple literary prizes in Canada, was soon followed by *The Garden of Eden* (1998), a sequel to *The Perfection*, and *Wild Stone Heart* (2000). See Kamboureli (2001) for a shrewd analysis of the elements leading to Butala's popularity.

the association is such that, even after the publication in the last forty years of numerous studies that effectively dismantle its patriarchal logics and denounce its underlying violence (against both women and nature), unconscious connections between women and nature still pervade much of our thought today.[5] In the process of disfurnishing these connections, the main difficulty for critics has often resided in the complexity of their meanings, usually subject to a range of highly contradictory connotations; for "[t]he femininity of Nature", Rose (1993: 69) asserts, "invoked both the passive and nurturing Mother Nature of organic theories of the self and cosmos, as well as the tempestuous and uncontrollable wild Nature of storms, pestilence and wilderness; both Woman's fecundity and her evil lust placed her closer to Nature than men, and both characterized Nature itself".

Very much caught in the contradictions implied by the above approach, the traditional Canadian relationship to the wilderness has typically confronted Nature as source versus Nature as evil. Judaeo-Christian ideology together with the circumstances surrounding the first European contacts and experiences with Canadian land promoted a notion of the wilderness as the enemy, the other, the unknown and, therefore, the site of potential risks and dangers. With time, his vision was inflected by various nuances, becoming increasingly sophisticated by the late 1960s, a decade in which the rising nationalism found in that victimized construction of the relationship of the Canadian subject to the overwhelming landscape an appropriate image to refer to, and almost justify, what was then perceived as a low-profile national identity. Canadian nature was constructed as a threat, a Gothic wilderness that was soon assimilated and promoted by the incipient national literature. In this scheme, settling the land, homesteading, was conceived as a fight for survival against the elements, a triumph of order and reason over chaos and the irrational; it was the triumph of Science and Culture over Nature. Paradoxically, because of its chaotic and lawless nature, the wilderness represented, at the same time, freedom, liberation, redemption and purity, the space of possibilities and new beginnings.

The Cure deals with the thin line between those two notions of wilderness, as well as with the frontier between wilderness and farmland, the narrator's own house literally placed on the edge between the two. It incorporates both the Gothic notion of wilderness–as in the potentially hostile territory of the bush behind the house–, and its Edenic representation, a safe space, a source of good

5. It is well known that a branch of feminist thought, including some forms of ecofeminism, have adopted these connections, turning them around and exalting nature's supposed attachment to the irrational and the emotional over the scientific (see, for instance, Daly 1979, or Griffin 1978). Yet the validity of these strategies is far from clear and, more often than not, they have unwillingly reproduced the very hierarchical oppositions they were intended to overthrow (see Biehl 1991).

and a provider–as in the narrator's hiding places in the bush or the juicy cherries falling off the trees with the wind. Initially, the world of the farm is presented as a battle field between those two versions of nature: Nature as paradise and provider is always under constant threat from Nature as chaos and evil, and the occasionally rewarding and peaceful moments of farm life are often interrupted by storms spoiling the crops, coyotes entering the chicken coop, or bears attacking the camps. Beth's perception of the landscape around her switches accordingly, the strong emotional load of her responses revealed in the spectrum of such contradictory images, tending at times to the Gothic, as, for instance, in the many scenes in which she feels followed by an unknown presence in the bush:

> Then I heard it, as if my fears had conjured it, the swooshing behind me, the sound of grass opening a path to the wind. But it wasn't the wind. Something followed me in the grass. There was a second path through the long grass behind me, coming at me. I walked faster and then ran. The path through the grass chased me. I jumped over the fence behind the pile of rocks, the homesteader's graves, and leaned against the back of the barn out of breath, my heart pumping fear into me. (96)

Or, conversely, inclined to a representation of nature as the Edenic myth:

> When you eat a ripe cherry straight from the tree on a sunny day, its juice is so hot, thick, and red that it has the feel of blood running down your chin, staining your lips, and filling your mouth. Once you've sucked all you can from it, you spit out the pit and go for another warm cherry off the tree, and another and another, because the cherry will seduce you every time [….] Cherry. It's all juice and warmth, an *O* in your mouth, a soft marble for your tongue to play with, a sweet soft thing with a core cloaked in flesh. (158)

The two versions of nature juxtapose in the text to the point of blurring. The novel, one could argue, is about the blurring of the boundary between the two, between good and evil, between the domestic and the wild, between culture and nature, unveiling in the process not only the contradictions implied in the association between women and nature, but also the real and discursive violence that these oppositions imply.

To begin with, in the pioneer world of the novel, it is men and not women that seem unconsciously connected to the wild. Women, and especially wives, on the other hand, are strongly aligned with the domestic and the civilized, with reason and culture, and would represent therefore the opposite of nature, for it is well known that in pioneer society women were "understood to *embody and transport* necessary 'civilization' to colonial landscapes. On top of their sustaining (and largely unrecognized) contributions to frontier economies, these women

were thought to bring domestic stability and social conservatism to the 'wild'" (Hessing, Raglon and Sandilands 2005: ix). The character of Beth's mother is here a case in point: for all her unusualness as given away in the style of her scrapbook, in her unapproved friendship with the Native Bertha Moses, and in her habit of talking to her dead mother, she fails to support her daughter in key moments in which the girl is being sexually harassed, seemingly more worried about keeping social appearance and domestic stability than about the truth: "'Nothing happened!'" she cries, after Beth tries to tell her that the school boy Parker has molested her. "'Nothing happened at all. You just don't want to go to school. Don't lie to me'" (151).

But Mrs. Bell, who regularly visits the Weeks' farm, is probably the character who best epitomizes the conservatism of the pioneer woman: "Mrs Bell said all dirt was evil, and it was a Christian woman's duty to scrub away evil and never turn her back on it. Evil was what made you sick. Evil was what crept into your night dreams and made a sinner of you. A dirty house was an evil house, and a woman must guard against the evil men brought into the house on their boots" (16). Unconsciously following Mrs. Bell's weird instructions, when Beth is molested by Parker in the bush, her mother prepares a bath and vigorously *scrubs evil away* from Beth's skin (155). She gives Beth a bottle of vinegar and hot water instructing her to douche: "If a boy got inside of you, or ever gets inside of you, you take care of it. Understand?" (155). Later, after the father's rape, his figure *creeping into her night dreams* "as a black faceless thing, with only the form of a man" (184), the protagonist walks to the outhouse and *takes care of herself*, the vinegar solution, an ironic reminder of the impossible cure for death of the title.

The attitude of Beth's mother reveals the extent to which these women interiorized their roles as house-keepers against an unknown set of threats. A wilderness woman must guard the frontier between outside and inside, between the wild, seen as dangerous, and the domestic, perceived as safe space. As Randall Roorda (2005: 37) has put forward, the very pioneer women writers of that early period respond to that notion, their texts invariably reproducing "a conventional domesticity, versions of the belief in women as foes to wilderness, as bearers of civilized virtue among wild men and wilder beasts". In that context, *The Cure* may be said to be really about the failure of the pioneer women to fulfil the demands of their role, or to keep the house safe. A horrendous evidence of such failure, the rape of the narrator by her own father is associated with his having been mysteriously attacked by a crazed bear, a confusing event related early in the narration with deliberate imprecision, but after which the father nonetheless seems to turn wild, as if possessed by the spirit of the wild creature: "Something got him in the bush'" Bertha enigmatically warns Beth's mother early in the narration. "'You be careful. You and the girl'" (15). The father's increasingly violent

behaviour is repeatedly put down to this mysterious experience in the bush, and thus, implicitly to his crossing the boundary between civilization and wilderness: "'A man stays out in the bush long enough, and the bush changes his shape'", says Bertha (72). And, accordingly, John is often portrayed as a crazed animal –as, for instance, when he walks in Beth's room after the fight with the Swede: "His breath and clothes stank of booze. Blood was smeared on his face, his cracked lips bleeding, and a splotch of red was growing where his cheek had met with a blow. He scared me so that I could barely breathe or answer him" (152). Literal and metaphorical meanings converge in this image: the wild beast has entered the domestic space of the house.

Still, if keeping order in the domestic realm is largely, as we can see, a failed enterprise, attempts are nonetheless constantly made at denying, ignoring or covering any evidence of such failure. It is the appearance of order, thus, rather than order itself, that must be achieved, this installing at the basis of social interactions a logic of concealment that goes beyond the purely material (the clean house, the hidden underwear) and verges upon the very constitution of the female subject. Any unnecessary celebration of femininity, for instance, is frowned upon, thought to bring trouble to the domestic space and considered therefore a provocation; a belief that is ironically subverted in the text through the fetishization of clothes and objects often adding opposite shades of meaning to the scene. In this way, Beth hides a perfume bottle and a lipstick from her father inside a hollow stump in the bush, which also, significantly, serves as her hiding place: the stump is the first place where we find the protagonist, in her act of self-erasure, her knees up to her nose, cobwebs stretching over her face, insects crawling up and down her still body, becoming one with the bush. Elsewhere, refusing to take notice of the danger that has already infiltrated the space of the house, Beth's mother hangs the female underwear inside pillowcases on the wash line "so that they would neither entice nor offend a man who might come into our yard" (19). Ironically, the rape of Beth by her own father becomes public by his failure to *conceal* the silk nylons he shamelessly buys for her as a token price. The kitchen scene, the only one in which a description of preparation and consumption of food is drastically interrupted, is worth quoting in full, for it marks the collapse not only of the social codes of appearance, but also, most importantly here, of the family structure as has been described so far:

> "You like the nylons okay?" Dennis asked my mother.
>
> "Nylons?" said my mother.
>
> I turned to see my father shake his head at Dennis. Dennis looked into his plate. "I guess I spoiled the surprise," he said. "John got me to pick up some nylons for you today."
>
> My father played with his food. "They weren't for Maud," he said quietly.

Billy's swearing swirled up into a little flurry and died down again.

"Well, who are they for?" said my mother.

My father glanced once, involuntarily, in my direction and said nothing. I was at once delighted and mortified. Nylons!

"You bought them for Beth?" she said. "She's not old enough for nylons. I don't have nylons. You said we couldn't afford nylons."

My father went on chewing his food. My mother eyes watered up and her chin quivered. "You bought them for Beth?"

Dad ignored her. He cut his meat and ate, methodically, intently. He stared past Billy's shoulder at the gun rack on the wall. My mother pushed her plate angrily across the table so that it clinked against my father's and stood up. She muttered to her dead mother and threw dishes into the washbasin, filling the room with the noise of her anger. My father winced but didn't get angry, not immediately. He clenched his teeth in between mouthfuls and, when her clanking reached high notes, he closed his eyes briefly.

[....]

Dennis sat again. I piled the pancakes no one would eat onto a plate as my mother banged dishes in the washbowl next to me. My father turned in his chair and yelled at my mother. "What's the matter with you?"

My mother didn't answer or look at him. But now that she had a reaction from him, she took up the scrapbook and dropped into her chair by the stove and rocked and rocked, clutching the scrapbook to her chest, staring and muttering at someone only she could see. The words she said sometimes rose up so that I could almost catch them, then slipped down again.

[....]

"Mum?" I said. "Do you want some tea or something?"

She glanced up and, pouty as a small child, went on rocking. I reached out to touch her cheek, but she pulled her head away. (198-200)

This scene also marks a turning point in the narration. If *The Cure* has played with the contradictions attached to the inherited notions of the Canadian wilderness, portraying the bush as both dangerous and safe, by also looking at those contradictions from the perspective of gender violence, a particular reversal of meaning takes place, for the father's violent fits and incestuous behaviour have the effect of turning the wild into safe space, and the domestic, into dangerous territory. Accordingly, and despite a constant unspeakable threat that permeates the narrative from beginning to end, Beth finds refuge in the bush; and the only time in which the natural environment becomes in fact a real threat tellingly happens in connection with yet another instance of gender violence: when Beth walks by herself into the bush to escape the social pressure of the Dominion Day

picnic, she is victim of a rape attempt by the school mate Parker (145). The Gothic wilderness is thus implicitly associated to patriarchal thought, its metaphorical power cancelled out by the *actual* violence of physical assaults against the female protagonist.

But, if the wild, as we can see, is connected with evil, violence and uncleanliness, so are the Native people who live on the nearby reserve considered to be wild, with which the tale acquires a further complexity. "'She's a breed. They're filth. They carry lice. Do you understand?'" The father shouts to Beth when he discovers she has become friends with a reserve girl, Nora. "'It's for your own good. I'm only trying to protect you'", he ironically contends (152). *The Cure* provides us with an uncompromising portrait of a divided community: on the one side, the narrator's side, there is the world of white settlers around the town of Promise, still attached to the British Empire and trying hard to emulate what they believe to be the manners of proper society beyond their reduced environment; on the other side, there is the world of the Shuswap Native Reserve, outside of Promise and, therefore, of the Law, placed literally and metaphorically *in the bush* and invariably represented in the novel as a locus of disease and alcoholism, of maimed children and battered women: "You heard things then, about the reserve; how white women were raped, how children were beaten" (46). Interestingly, racial confrontation is often figured through food metaphors: in the things each community eats –raspberry buns against porcupine; or in the eating socials: the two farmhands from the reserve, Dennis and Billy usually eat in the Weeks' kitchen, together with the other members of the family except when they have guests (69); Bertha is also usually welcome to the house, but when she turns up in the middle of Mrs. Bell's visit, Beth's mother dismisses her and asks her "to come by later" (70; see Lewis 2003: 88). Racial prejudice against the Native community is so ingrained in the white settler's mind that even Beth cleans the house compulsively after the first visit of Bertha's family of women (16-17).

In those circumstances, the appearance in the novel of Coyote, the legendary trickster shared by many North American Native cultures, could be expected to strengthen the Manichean representation of the colonial mind, bringing evil and chaos to the white community. And, to a certain extent, that is so:

> "The thing is, Coyote keeps getting born, over and over," said Bertha Moses. "He rides on the spirit of a newborn into this world. It don't have to be a human newborn, it can be an animal, but once he's born into this world, he slips off and goes walking until he finds somebody to have some fun with, eh? He takes that somebody over, see? Possesses him, like them demons in the Bible. Coyote has an awful thirst. Can't satisfy him nohow, that's what makes him so bad. You got to stay away from Coyote." Bertha smiled, a little too sweetly. "Ain't that right, John?" (72)

Still, Coyote's contribution to the story seems more intricate than what we may expect from Bertha's unambiguous statement. Shapeshifter, potentially female and male, animal and human, Coyote's typical trespassing activities would reinforce the crossing of the threshold between the wild and the domestic that I have been discussing so far. He is implicitly linked to both the Gothic and the natural, to incest and to protection from it, to being both at home and homeless in the wilderness. As Sophie Levy (2003: 869) asserts in this context:

> In Gothic literature, incest –its overriding theme– stands as a marker of the boundary between nature and civilization. In Byron's play *Cain*, Lucifer argues that it is the incest taboo that marks the passage to civilization and the end of 'natural' familial love. Anderson-Dargatz plays a double game in her novel: the father's incest compulsion appears to arise, after he has been attacked by a bear, out of his possession by the natural/savage Coyote, yet the 'natural' world is also Beth's salvation from the 'civilized' Robert Parker in the form of Coyote's host, Billy. Coyote initially seems to symbolize the breakdown in 'white' civilization enacted in the Canadian wilderness but comes to symbolize not the primitivization of Europeans, but their uncomprehending and damaging incursions into Native territory. Coyote exists between worlds, representing all that is homeless in the natural world, forever seeking human hosts, moving restlessly from (male) body to body, invading and possessing.

As can be inferred from Levy's analysis, the introduction of Coyote in the novel is related to the text's juxtaposition of issues of gender and culture, and its meaning is indeed as complex as it is ambiguous. On the one hand, and despite his well-known abilities to cross gender categories, in this novel, the enigmatic source of evil (attributed by Bertha to Coyote) is unmistakably identified as male: it appears right from the beginning in Beth's childhood mind as a "huge hairy thing" living down the hole in the outhouse (36), and it is girls, not boys, that are repeatedly warned against wandering in the bush by themselves. Later, when Sarah Kemp is found dead, supposedly killed by a bear, rumours circulate that point to a sexual attack: "'They said she was pulled apart from the crotch up,' said my brother. 'And the top of her legs were just gone. Nothing. That's what would've happened to you, if that bear got you last spring. They say her breasts were eaten off'" (24). Evil in the novel may be real or imagined, then, it may refer to coyotes, bears or to the mythical Coyote wandering about, or it may even be, in an allusion to the distant war, the unlikely German thought to be hiding under the floorboards of Mrs. Roddy's house (56). Yet it is invariably marked as male and it produces immense violence against women. "'Of course the old men here wouldn't agree with that,' said Bertha. 'To them, Coyote gave us good things, like salmon. But he's a clown, a scary little clown, like that Hitler, always getting into trouble. Always beating his women. Stealing women. Killing women'" (170).

Subject to frequent abuse and rape, the native women of the reserve carry in their bodies, their webbed fingers, their two-coloured eyes, the stamp of such violence: "'Granny says they are Coyote's daughters'", says Bertha's granddaughter and Beth's lover, Nora. "'If Coyote is inside some man when he's with a woman, you know, then the child that woman has by him is like that'" (189). And, thereupon, Beth is not allowed to go to the reserve because of the rumours of that nature. However, the fact that, as we have seen, she is repeatedly harassed by white men, including a class mate and her own father, undermines any exclusive attribution of violence to the Indian male that the reader may be entertaining at this point. Scene after scene, the novel unfailingly documents a history of violence against the whole female species, explicitly attaching the ubiquitous brutality to a masculine principle: cows being operated to extract their ovaries; ewes whose genitals and belly are eaten by coyotes while alive; turtles being crushed by the passing wheel carts, as they cross the road to lay their eggs by the river on the other side, their blood giving the name to the road. In those circumstances, Bertha distances herself both from her own cultural background as well as from the white settlers', tracing a gender alliance across cultures which seems strong enough to overcome mutual racial prejudice: "'Coyote's like a god, eh? But the things Coyote does, well, he does us women no good'" (241).

On the other hand, and as if undercutting potential celebrations of a "feminine" principle intrinsically associated with the natural and the non-violent, *The Cure* is also careful, as we have just seen, to identify women's discursive complicity in the patriarchal violence perpetrated against themselves. This complicity is made particularly evident when seen against the historical background of World War II, a distant narrative affecting nonetheless, and in a ghostlike manner, the everyday life of the inhabitants of Promise:

> The women were hungry for [men]. You could see it in them, in the way they leaned towards my brother, Dan, in the way they fawned over Dennis and even Billy, bringing them sweating glasses of lemonade or slices of cherry pie, and in the way they lingered, as the boys accepted these gifts, smiling grins as big and foolish as that of the Swede's begging dog.
>
> You could see it, too, in the way the women both ignored and snatched glances at my mother. My mother had her son still at home, and a handsome buck named Dennis working for her. Though they pitied my mother because they now feared my father, she had the power these women lacked: she had men to care for. (140)

The text, in other words, seems to constantly erode any essentialist approach to gender difference that the reader may be alternately holding to. If, as I have just mentioned, the bodies of the reserve women are often marked by abuse, so are the town characters marked by some kind of physical and/or psychological

malady. Beth's father, John, for instance, lodges in his head a piece of shrapnel from World War I, a fact that is often linked to his violent behaviour. Beth herself has been hit by lightning and, as a result, has lost control of one arm's movements. In fact, in the Faulknerian fashion that many reviewers have remarked, most characters, female and male, are crippled by patriarchal dictates, social norm, cultural prejudice, and the war. Violence, *The Cure* suggests, is ubiquitous, and the text's emphasis on breaking oppositions and dichotomous representations works in all directions.

Additionally, if the figure of Coyote poses important questions about the fundamental oppositions between genders the novel seems at times to put forward, so does *The Cure* undermine the seemingly Manichean, certainly simplistic, representation of white and native cultures in the well-known pairs: colonizing/colonized, crippling/crippled, masculine/feminine or feminized. That is done, in the first place, by introducing a deliberate indecisiveness in the portrait of the trickster, which is made evident, for instance, in his racial definition: Bertha says that white people are Coyote's children, and, as we have seen, the father himself is supposed to have committed his crimes under Coyote's influence. Later, however, Bertha associates Coyote's evil doings with drunk Indian men (170), with which a sense of confusion is installed in the legendary figure, who, as violence itself (and unlike the novel's characters), can in fact move across races and cultures.

Secondly, the Coyote plot, with its evil associations, is suspended by the text's misdirection of the reader's attention, mistaking the source of violence and thus missing the point where the actual danger lies. In that context, two are the male characters believed to be literally "the house" of Coyote at the moment when the story takes place: Coyote Jack, a man who after spending too much time in the wilderness has become *bushed*; and Billy, the half-breed farm hand at the Weeks' farm. There is a deliberate ambiguity, however, as to whether either of these two characters poses any real threat. Billy himself, the most inoffensive of all characters and Beth's eventual lover, thinks he is the house of Coyote and puts the Tourette's syndrome and the epilepsy he suffers down to his being host to the trickster, although the text gives no firm sign that this is so. Similarly, despite the fact that Coyote Jack is ostensibly possessed, the neat, domestic environment of his own cabin in the bush, visited furtively by Beth and Nora, points rather in the opposite direction: "Everything was swept clean. A little bucket of geraniums grew on a stump by the door" (166). Like the mythical character after whom he is nicknamed, Coyote Jack is believed to be able to change skin, and Beth relates a scene in which a transfiguration of the man into a coyote takes place in front of her eyes (272). She therefore seems convinced of the evil power of the bushed man and, in a highly confusing episode, she follows Jack to his cabin and confronts him with a gun (275). Yet, by that point

in the narration, it has become clear that the real threat for Beth is not in the wild, but in the domestic setting, a dangerous crossing symbolized by the coyote skins hang out to dry on her bedroom wall, "their inside-out skins shining in the moonlight, their dark eyeholes watching [her]" (263). From that perspective, I would argue that the protagonist's aggressive attitude towards Coyote Jack may be the result of her failure or even her resistance to come to terms with the reality of incest, and hence to interpret the message of her own dreams:

> The coyotes entered my dream; they growled at me. Their weight made the floorboards groan. A darkness crossed the window and fell on my chest. When I cried out, the coyotes put their claws over my mouth. They lifted my nightgown. They rubbed their wet tails between my legs and over my belly. They told me to keep quiet. I hid my dream self in the darkest corner of my room and watched the shadows of the coyotes suck the breath from my body. When they had their fill, the shadows sighed deeply, came together, and took the form of my father. He lifted his weight from my body and left the room. (264)

Seen in the context of this dream, Beth's own misguidance of the reader, through her first-person narrative, towards the figures of Coyote Jack and Billy could be interpreted as a pathological response to the experience of rape, an unconscious deviation of her own fears (see Levy 2002). The narrator's confrontation with Coyote Jack near the novel's end may symbolize in this sense the encounter with her own misdirected fears, projected onto the figure of the bushed man. Interestingly, the end of the story seems to draw a magic connection between the two male characters, since Coyote Jack's suicide is followed by Billy's miraculously recovery of his tongue, the relationship between the two events only tacitly suggested in the novel's resolution. Besides, in the context of Bertha's statement, earlier on in the narration, that in order to win over Coyote, one must take his own life when Coyote is inside (172-173), Jack's suicide would read as a kind of sacrifice, a means of saving Beth from further evil actions. The solution, nevertheless, would only be temporary, for Coyote will sooner or later succeed in getting born again, Bertha asserts, undercutting thus once more any expectations for a happy ending.

So far I have analysed the women's sanctioned alliance with civilization and the domestic against the intrinsically male wilderness and their failure to guard the safe boundary between the two. *The Cure* also plays out the other, indeed classical trope by which women, mostly because of the biological functions of the female body, would be essentially linked to nature. This view is indeed the opposite of what we have just seen and the fact that the two contradicting discourses have run smoothly parallel to each other for centuries indicates the traps as well as the complexity of patriarchal thought. As many feminist and postcolonial theoreticians have successfully shown, the analogy between women and nature is at the basis

of both the patriarchal system and the colonial enterprise, arguing for the biological superiority of the white male over *female territory* and thus justifying the domination of both. In the pioneer society in which the novel is set, the trope played an important role, for it perfectly fit into the rhetorics of *the recovery plot*, fully embracing what Carolyn Merchant (1995: 32) has defined in the following three-fold approach to nature:

> Nature, in the Edenic recovery story, appears in three forms. As original Eve, nature as virgin, pure, and light –land that is pristine or barren, but having the potential for development. As fallen Eve, nature as disorderly and chaotic; a wilderness, wasteland, or desert requiring improvement; dark and witchlike, the victim and mouthpiece of Satan as serpent. As mother Eve, nature is an improved garden; a nurturing earth bearing fruit; a ripened ovary; maturity.

It will be noted that the three versions of nature replicate the intricate construction of the notion of wilderness as discussed earlier. The common argument to the various, and otherwise contradictory, approaches would be that both women and nature *are* "'resources' for male exploitation, overused, undervalued, and denied full subject status in patriarchal thought" (Hessing, Raglon and Sandilands 2005, xiii). The idea is clearly expressed in the text through the character of the father, his view towards his wife, daughter and farm animals. "In patriarchy," Collar and Cotrucci (1988, 1) assert, "Nature, animals and women are objectified, hunted, invaded, colonised, owned, consumed and forced to yield and to produce (or not). This violation of the integrity of wild, spontaneous Being is rape". The father's incestuous behaviour could again be seen, from this perspective, as both a literal and a symbolic rape –the rape of his own daughter, a monstrous simile of his attitude towards the wild Canadian land. By warning her daughter to stay away from bulls and male dogs at the time of menstruation, his animalization of the female body turns against himself and becomes a sign of his own wild uncontrollable impulses. But the most graphic instance that his farming methods are extremely aggressive to both the land and the animals, as well as of his reduction of the female species to the reproductive function, is to be found in the painful episode leading to the death of the cow Gertrude. Since the animal has failed to get pregnant, John decides to operate her in order to have her ovaries removed, to then make her gain weight fast and be able to sell her as meat. In shameful contrast with his visible excitement, the operation is slow, bloody and tortuous for both Beth, who is forced to help, and the cow:

> My father began swearing. The ovaries were not where he had imagined, and he searched inside her body until his arm was bloody to the shoulder. He rinsed his hands off in the bowl of water again and again. The

> cow's head rested heavily on the stanchion and her eyes rolled in her head; she'd bit her tongue and the blood congealed on her nostril.
>
> […]
>
> "There!" my father said. "There!"
>
> He pulled something from the body of the cow and dropped it in the bloody dish. "Now," he said.
>
> He went to the other side of the cow and made a second incision just in front of the hipbone. The cow struggled for a moment, but she gave up quickly. She didn't bawl this time. My father's search here went more smoothly. He found the second ovary and slopped it into the dish. He stretched his back and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his shirtsleeve. Then he took the two ovaries from the bowl and held them out for me to look at. The ovaries were oblong and purplish red, like the egg plums that grew in my mother's orchard.
>
> "You have these," he said. "This is what makes you female" (84-85).

The protagonist's analogy between the bloody ovaries, now a piece of dead meat, and the plums growing in her mother's backyard seems to smoothly undercut the sordidness of the scene, albeit only in a partial and momentary way. The episode, moreover, illustrates well the environmental implications of misogyny, uncannily foreshadowing the risky manipulations of nature into which the meat industry has entered today.[6] Soon after the operation, the cow dies.

Given the appalling circumstances of Beth's life, the novel could well recoil into some kind of essential female principle, denouncing all forms of (male) violence and searching for a lost (female) harmony with the environment. Yet, as has been already suggested, *The Cure* is too complex a text to lend itself to one-dimensional messages. By initially representing idealized versions of her relationship first to the mother, and then to her lover, Nora, the protagonist implicitly plays with that option, both characters provisionally providing her with love and a place safe from the father. Eventually, however, both characters also fail to meet the reader's expectations: the mother is definitely shown as too enmeshed in the very social traps that Beth wants to break from, and her half-hearted response in the event of the father's incest reveals her patriarchal complicity, despite herself. The first part of the book is indeed rich with sweet domestic scenes between mother and daughter that effectively counteract the threat posed by the father. A scene in which Beth is hiding from the father in

6. A remarkable fictionalized account of such manipulations can be found in Ruth Ozeki's *My Years of Meat* (1999), a must-read for those of us interested in the intersections between ecology, feminism and literature.

the barn, for instance, is immediately followed by the mother's entrance and the subsequent description of an immensely soothing moment between the two, milking the cows "to the rhythm of [their] heartbeats, so close sometimes that the milk squirted into the pails in unison, like an iambic drumbeat". In moments like these, the two women achieve a perfect harmony with themselves as well as with the farm environment: "My mother sang quietly, and we milked with our heads against the warm flanks of our cows. They knew us enough to trust us" (39). Similar domestic duties performed together with the mother fill the narrative with a soothing effect: "My whole body rocked with the effort of it", says Beth as she kneads the dough after a disastrous day marked by unspeakable events, harassment, a storm that has ruined the harvest, and her first contact with Nora: "I pushed the day's events into that dough, brought them up, and beat them back down again. Parker's laughing face, then the girl's hand in mine. My father's anger, then blue petals drifting. Pull forward, push down" (101).

Yet the mother's reaction when she learns about John's abuse of her daughter, cryptically signified in the text by the scene of the nylons discussed above, marks a turning point in the relationship between the two. This is clearly expressed in the following scene in which the milking chore has completely lost the previous harmony:

> My mother and I let in the cows and set up our stumping powder boxes, rattled our pails into position, and settled into the shush-shush rhythm of the milk hitting the pails. I was off from my mother's rhythm, slower because of the weakness in my lightning arm, anxious from my father's hot, dark looks, sick with the image of my brother stepping on my stool to do his dirty business. I couldn't bring myself to lay my head on the cows. Their flanks were too hot, their stomach music disgusted me. The cows, picking up my case of nerves, rocked back and forth on their high-heel hooves, kicked, and slapped me with their filthy tails. The lead cow, the cow with the bell, would not stay still. She pawed my hands with their hooves as I milked, slapped me around the head with her tail, bawled, shook her head, and rang her bell, and that sent a ripple of nerves though the whole herd. They all started prancing and bawling like new mothers separated from their calves. (207)

In the face of the mother's failure to provide protection, Beth turns to the half-breed girl from the reserve, Nora, one of Bertha's grand-daughters. Both girls are being abused by their elders. Both are victims of a repressive and violent atmosphere at home, although in the case of Nora, it is mostly her acculturated mother, a victim herself of the residential school system, who beats her regularly. Together, they replay their ideal notion of home in the winter house, an abandoned underground structure that used to serve as winter lodge for Nora's

Shuswap grandmother.[7] There, the two girls try to live a life in invisibility and in communion with nature; a safe, cocoon-like life anticipated earlier in the narration by Beth's own habit of hiding inside the hollow stump. It is in that wilderness life with Nora that Beth also finds pleasure and love, the description of her first sexual contacts with the reserve girl strikingly opposed to the ubiquitous violence endured elsewhere:

> "Roll on your stomach," she said. I rolled over and lay full length, resting my chin on my hands. The bells smelled tinny. She arranged my hair to one side and smoothed the material of my blouse as if cleaning a blackboard. She began to draw on my back. It felt smooth and ticklish and I relaxed under her hands. After a while, I said, "What are you drawing."
>
> "I'm writing," she said.
>
> "What are you writing?"
>
> "You have to guess," she said.
>
> I followed the circles of her hands on my back. "I don't know," I said.
>
> "Guess!"
>
> Slowly she formed the big looped letters of three words, and repeated them over and over. I understood quickly, but didn't know what to do. I turned over and she continued to write, spelling the words over the sides of my breasts. "You," she said, mouthing the last word, and forming a *u* that cupped my breast. (137-138)

Initially, then, these furtive encounters in the winter house seem to provide a valid alternative to Beth's threat-ridden life in the farm. Appropriately, Bertha compares the winter house to a mother's hug (115), and, once again, a reversal of roles is in place between the wild and the domestic, for it is in the wilderness where the protagonist feels safe from the house. Yet that life will not provide a final answer to Beth's situation, for she starts veering away from Nora as the latter becomes increasingly possessive, and eventually fails to share Nora's desire to escape the repressive atmosphere of Promise and head for the city. It becomes clear at this point in the narration, that, unlike Beth, who, despite immense hardship, refuses to let herself fall into a victimized position, Nora *is* a victim, her habit of cutting herself indicating the degree of her surrender to such a role. Graphically marked in the narration by a trail of blood in the snow, Nora's decision to leave for the city at the end of the novel figures her disappearance from the story as a wounded prey walking into the bush of oblivion and

7. These underground houses provided the most permanent form of dwelling for the migratory Shuswap, who usually moved with the seasons from one place to another. Like the one that appears in the novel, they were usually accessed by a ladder placed in the smoke hole (see Cooper 1998).

probably death. In that context, according to Coral Ann Howells (2003:169), the novel reveals at least three different "female plots in sustained counterpoint":

> On the one hand, there is the neurotic plot of wilderness Gothic where Beth is the beleaguered heroine under constant threat from a mysterious stalker in the bush and also the sexual victim of her mad incestuous father, while on the other there is the realistic plot of domestic fiction with its celebration of women's emotional and moral strengths, which sustain home and community, personified by her own mother and recorded in her scrapbook. There is also a third plot gradually taking shape under the guidance of Bertha, Beth's Aboriginal mentor, which is that of the female hero who repudiates the role of victim.

The novel, I would argue, seems to exhaust the possibilities of the first two plots singled out by Howells. The power of the Gothic, connected to male violence, revealingly diminishes after the father is taken to a mental institution, his return at the end of the novel as a weak and tranquilized character, although disturbing in many ways, posing none of the menace he had previously represented: "'More slowly, talk quietly'", says the mother. "'Don't expect much'" (288). The maternal plot, on the other hand, signalled by the importance of the scrapbook, remains strong throughout the story but becomes questionable in that, as I have mentioned above, the mother ultimately fails to protect Beth from the incestuous father, her initiative to confine him in the asylum offering only a provisional solution. But, what would then be the answer to the protagonist's search? The novel's sweet-sour ending leaves open this question, but Beth's choice, I would argue, is with Bertha, and her own recovery, although partial and tentative, significantly follows the Native woman's advice: "'You don't be scared. Be smart. If someone hurts you, you hurt back until they stop. Go out into the bush until you find your own trail [...]. There is always something out there to get you. Know that, but don't be scared. Go hunt it down, so it don't get you'" (168).

In that context, the story's resolution could be said to rely on the Shuswap tradition taught by Bertha, and according to which a young person must be left alone in the bush in order to receive his or her "power": "An entire new range of communication opened to the child in finding her power. The child would commune with a greater force, summon it as needed, and discover an essence of self to express in many other communication forms" (Cooper 1998, 117). As we have seen, Beth takes to walking alone in the bush more and more often, as a way to escape the claustrophobic world of the family farm. The structure of her plot implicitly follows this belief in the existence of a "guardian spirit" who each person must meet and confront individually in her early years: "'When I was just a young thing, not even sixteen. But that's what you did, you went out alone in the bush, both girls and boys, for a long time, weeks. That's where you met your guardian spirit, your power, something like your Christian people's angels'" (168).

By choosing to follow the Native woman's advice against the repeated warnings by her family not to walk alone in the bush, Beth is tacitly undermining the Gothic approach to the wilderness attached to the nation's foundations and which, significantly, Bertha associates with both white colonization and the triumph of patriarchal discourse over the Aboriginal belief-system:

> "But then I got old and started believing what I was told about going out," she said. "Mostly the men, my brothers and uncles. They said I had to be careful. There was always something out there to get me. Sometimes they said a bear. Sometimes my mother said a man, a bad man, would come after me and get me. I got scared. Then I didn't walk anymore. Now, of course the young girls don't get their power from anywhere. They are afraid to go out searching for it." (168)

The presence of the tombs of the homesteaders' children on which the pioneer farm literally rests would, in this context, symbolically refer to the Gothic origin not of the wilderness in itself, but of the process of occupying the Canadian land and of the violence implicit in those foundations. The repeated mention of the tombs may advance as well the text's move towards a revision of that past. Additionally, in that same line of interpretation, Beth's decision to start a relationship with Billy, a half-breed from the reserve, who serves as farmhand and who is now mysteriously recovered from his Tourette's syndrome, seems to bring to the fore and underline the unacknowledged hybrid nature of the colonial encounter and the need therefore to rewrite the pioneer narratives that inform the nation's foundational myths. Still, for some critics, the protagonist's rejection of Nora and her choice to stay in the farm with Billy would convey a certain conservatism at the novel's closure, meaning Beth's

> accommodation with the transgressive power of masculinity and the wilderness. Home is a habit, posited somewhere between natural, like the blood turtles' annual journey, and an acculturated use of the natural, like the process of making paper from flowers and domestic waste that Beth follows to make a home for her words. The analogy between Beth and the blood turtles, many of whom die crossing the road every year to lay their eggs in the river, is encapsulated in Beth's final words to Nora: "It's home … I don't know anything else" (283). (Levy 2003, 870)

But, although I would agree that the novel's ending seems as uncertain as the fate of the crossing turtles in the final image, there is a way in which the introduction of Billy in Beth's life may add a different meaning to it, resignifying the act of crossing and thus contributing some answers, as I say, to the text's own process of rewriting the pioneer narrative. Billy is not only a hybrid in racial terms; he also embodies the crossing between two seemingly opposite sides with which the text has been playing: the wild (he is supposed to be possessed

by Coyote) and the domestic (as farm hand and as Beth's protector in the house). Moreover, the fact that he becomes the father's interlocutor at the close of the novel turns him into a kind of translator between the masculine and the female powers in the novel, breaking, in so doing, the story's seemingly dichotomous representation of gender. In that context, the redistribution of power to the female characters that takes place at this point, Dennis and Dan gone, the authority of father cancelled by drugs, coincides with Billy's gaining control over *his tongue* as well as the farm. Indeed, the text's ending suggests that he will run the family farm together with Beth and her mother, thus, as Levy points out, "redefining both the domestic home and the definitions of home available to Canadian society at large" (2003: 868).

Finally, Beth's choice to stay home with Billy definitely points to her attachment to the land and the natural environment in which she has grown up. As opposed to Nora's desire to go to the cities of Vancouver or Calgary and find a job in a factory, the protagonist's allegiance is no doubt with the land, opting for a rural life in contact with nature. This choice, I would further comment, is reflected in the textual structure, in the narrative's constant juxtaposition between violent scenes and beautiful, immensely soothing descriptions of the landscape around. Ultimately, it is her love for that landscape and her harmonious relationship to the environment that make her stay, despite much hardship and suffering. That the text is carefully constructed around the seasons of the year would add to the narrator's commitment in that sense, the arrival of each season, a sensual celebration each time: "And when the winter came to Turtle Valley", Beth writes, "it came quickly, without hesitation. I woke the morning of All Saints' Days to a new clean brightness that put a shine to everything in my room and made the whole outside world seem settled and quiet. Snow!" (246). Fittingly as well, the narration moves from one spring to the next, the new season compared at the end of the story to an old body changing skin in reference to Billy's change, but also, implicitly, to Beth's own process of recovery as well as to her passage from girlhood to womanhood (285).

A solemn tribute to endurance, the novel intermingles the uncompromised denounciation of gender violence and of the colonization and acculturation of Aboriginal culture with powerful images of natural beauty. Together, these images not only generate resistance against violence and domination of any kind but also, equally important, bring forward an unrelenting celebration of life, welcoming the cathartic dimension of both nature and words. The description of Blood Road, early in the narration, stays with the reader, entering our interpretation of the novel's events and tracing both unfortunate and miraculous analogies between the turtles and the protagonist, the turtles and the Shuswap people:

> The road followed the valley basin, along the creeks and swamps, and now, in spring, the turtles crossed the road in thousands to lay their eggs,

> so passing down it was a grizzly thing. Many people who lived in the valley didn't stop but whipped their frightened horses over the moving road of painted turtles. The shells were crushed under the hooves of panicking horses and under the wheels of the wagons and the few automobiles. Their smashed bodies were strewn all over Blood Road, wherever the road met the swamp. But death didn't stop the painted turtles. They came and came and came across the road, and by their tenacity and numbers alone succeeded in seeding the next generation. The blood of the turtles seeped into the dirt of the road and hardened, paving the road a brilliant red that turned to rust when the season was done; this is what Bertha Moses told me, and the proof of the story was there, on the road we followed. (46)

The fact that the narrator deliberately chooses to ignore the scientific explanation for the road's odd colour and believe the Shuswap's (above) is symptomatic of the novel's alternative, more imaginative, approach to both Native cultures and the natural environment. In the final image, the characters stand on Blood Road watching the turtles make their deadly journey: the father and mother on one side; Billy and Beth on the other, helping the turtles to cross. This closing description of the two couples standing there looking in opposite directions might well occlude the possibility of reconciliation. Yet I would argue that a new beginning is implied in the young generation's act of saving the turtles, an act that symbolically marks a departure from the past and a different route, perhaps painful, but nonetheless possible and real. Toponyms here have a special resonance: Blood Road leads to Promise.

Works cited

Anderson-Dargatz, Gail. 1997. *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. Toronto: Vintage.

Atwood, Margaret. 1992. *Good Bones*. Toronto: Coach House.

Biehl, J. 1991. *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*. Montreal: Black Rose.

Butala, Sharon. 1994. *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature.* Toronto: HarperCollins.

Charney, Ann. 1997. Review note of *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. *Books in Canada* (June): 4.

Collar, A. and J. Cotrucci. 1988. *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence against Animals and the Earth.* London: Women's Press.

Cooper, Thomas W. 1998. *A Time before Deception: Truth in Communication, Culture and Ethics: Native Worldviews, Traditional Expression, Sacred Ecology*. Santa Fe: Clear Light.

Daly, Mary. 1979. *Gyn/Ecology*. London: Women's Press.

Drenthen, Martin. 2005. "Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration". *Environmental Values* 15: 317-337.

Eagleton, Terry. 1998. "Edible Ecriture". Consuming Passions: food in the Age of Anxiety. Ed. Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace. Manchester: Mandolin. 203-208.

Griffin, S. 1978. *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her.* London: Women's Press.

Groening, Laura Smyth. 2004. *Listening to Old Woman Speak: Natives and alterNatives in Canadian Literature.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP.

Hessing, Melody, Rebecca Raglon and Catriona Sandilands. 2005. "Introduction: Women and the Environment". *The Elusive Land: Women and the Canadian Environment.* Vancouver: UBC Press. vii-xx.

Hodgins, Jack. 1986. *The Invention of the World.* Toronto: Macmillan.

Howells, Coral Ann. 2003. *Refiguring Identities: Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction*. New York: Macmillan.

Kamboureli, Smaro. 2001. "The Culture of Nature and the Logic of Modernity: Sharon Butala's *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*". *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 43: 37-58.

Levy, Sophie. 2002. "'This dark echo calls him home': Writing Father-Daughter Incest Narratives in Canadian Immigrant Fiction". *University of Toronto Quarterly* 71.4: 864-880.

Lewis, Tanya. 2003. "Eating Identity: Food and the Construction of Region in *The Cure for Death by Lightning* and *Fall on Your Knees*". *Essays on Canadian Writing* 78 (Winter): 86-109.

Merchant, Carolyn. 1995. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. New York: Routledge.

Ozeki, Ruth. 1999. *My Year of Meats.* New York: Penguin.

Peryman, Lisa. 1997. "Global Appeal: Quill & Quire Finds Robust Sales of Canadian Boos Abroad". *Quill & Quire* 63.4: 6.

Relke, Diana M.A. 1999. *Greenwor(l)ds: Ecocritical Readings of Canadian Women's Poetry.* Calgary: U. of Calgary P.

Review of *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. 1997. *Quill & Quire* 62.4: 29-30.

Roorda, Randall. 2005. "Wilderness Wives: Domestic Economy and Women's Participation in Nature". *The Elusive Land: Women and the Canadian Environment.* Melody Hessing, Rebecca Raglon and Catriona Sandilands. Vancouver: UBC Press. 35-56.

Rose, Gillian. 1993. *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge.* Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P.

Ross, Stephanie. 2005. "Landscape Perception: Theory-Laden, Emotionally Resonant, Politically Correct". *Environmental Ethics* 27.3: 245-263.

Turbide, Diane. 1996. "Magic in the Mundane". Review of *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. *MacLean's* 109.29 (July 15): 56.

SURVIVING THE METAPHORICAL CONDITION IN *ELLE*: DOUGLAS GLOVER'S IMPERSONATION OF THE FIRST FRENCH FEMALE IN CANADA

María Jesús Hernáez Lerena
Universidad de La Rioja

> (This is the point in history where we are transformed. Before, we had a word and an explanation for everything; henceforth, we shall only discover the necessity of larger and larger explanations, which will always fall short. What we know will become just another anxious symbol, a code for what we do not know.)
>
> (*Elle* 2003: 98)

1. Introduction: "An imperial affliction sent us of the air"[1]

This essay attempts to explore how the current critical atmosphere may affect the writing and reception of contemporary narratives, in particular the novel *Elle* (2003) by Douglas Glover. "I am not immune to the symbolism of events", remarks Marguerite de Roberval in *Elle*, a character who assimilates her own life in terms strikingly similar to those used by feminist and postcolonial theorists in their analyses of the injustices of male hegemony and of European imperialism.

1. Emily Dickinson's "There Is a Certain Slant of Light".

Marguerite's life was documented in her time by the semi-fictional account of Marguerite de Navarre (1558) and the record of André Thevet (1575), it was kept alive through the centuries and, in our time, a number of poems, plays, juvenile fiction, and documentary books have recovered a story which also interests many internet pages. By choosing to produce a novel about a historical figure surrounded by legend and by many versions, Glover has chosen to pause on a site of intense analogy and iconicity in Canadian culture. Marguerite de Roberval, a French woman, is abandoned by her uncle –a general commissioned to spread the Catholic faith in Canada and to build fortified towns– on an island off the north shore of St. Lawrence in 1542. This third expedition to Canada was a failure –even Jacques Cartier returned early against orders–, and caused such general disillusionment (no precious metals were found) that the colonization of Canada was put off for half a century (see Parkman 1983: 145-174 or Dickanson 2001: 93-96).

Marguerite represents thus an extreme geographical and historical isolation because her experience happened before "things started to happen". She is the ideal figure, part true, part legend, to take us back again to the shaky origins of a nation and whose image we can construct as a trope for a foundational moment. She was, after all, the first French settler in Canada.[2]

This situation gives Glover the opportunity to construct a female separated from cultural constraints, at the mercy of a hostile land and of new cultural values, those of the Inuit. But her "strandedness" is only one layer in meaning: every element in this story possesses a high degree of intertextuality in relation to universal literature (abandoned women in classical literature, the descent into hell, and so forth), and particularly within Canadian history, literature, and critical practice. Namely the woman as metaphorical of the Canadian colonial condition (marginalization, invisibility, search for identity), the relationship between women and the wilderness (the female bond with nature as different from a typified male perspective), the importance of the woman's travel tale and the pioneer journal, the failures and cruelties of colonization, the paradoxes of the foundation of the Canadian nation, the heroification of failure, the reluctant immigrant, the rhetoric of the North (as both empty and fulfilling), and the particular hardships of the Labrador coast (see, for example, *Creation* by Katherine Govier).

All these themes have been fictionalized and theorized almost simultaneously in Canada in such a way that fiction is expected to respond to the issues prioritized by criticism by providing stories which partake of its games and concerns. The fact that from the second half of the 20th century onwards all the arts have had to

2. Gudrid, a Viking woman, is considered to be the first European woman in America. See Johnston (1973: 1-20).

exist alongside overwhelming amounts of criticism has caused critics (see Dillard 1988: 98-101 and Slemon 2001:107) to claim that an awareness of criticism encourages a great deal of postmodernist and postcolonial fiction.

In this essay I would like to look at this overlapping phenomenon as a dialogue which informs our interpretation of fictional characters. The intercourse between fiction and theory has created a community of paradigms whose appeal is inextinguishable: motifs are unearthed again and again, sometimes to be parodied, sometimes to extract their lyricism. *Elle* forms part of a prominent tendency in Canadian literature of creative revisions of autobiographical truth; the palimpsestic nature of this slice of Canadian history allows us to observe how the silence of the erased experience is refilled with contemporary words.

I will explore the intersections of this dialogue between two discourses –fiction and criticism– by focusing on Glover's construction of Marguerite's meditations, on the language she uses, and on the nature of her involvement in the events that radically changed her life. I would like to find out whether the weight of current ideology on gender and on the postcolonial stance alters in any way the conditions of the storytelling itself and its basic capacity to engage the reader emotionally. In the process, an additional aim comes to the fore, and that is the description of the relationship between community experience (historic blunders/hardships endured by early female settlers) and intimate experience (the tragedy of an individual).

2. Marguerite de Roberval: History's footnote expanded to life

The story of Marguerite de Roberval closely resembles the sad beginning of humanity (according to the Bible). Due to the first woman's challenging and thoughtless behavior, both man and woman are sent off into a realm of hardships and death. Marguerite de Roberval sinned aboard the ship that was bringing the first French settlers to the New World, and is left on a daunting island of Newfoundland, The Isle of Demons, to perish with her lover in the wilderness. Thus, she reenacts the origins of civilization within a context of Canadianness. The history of European colonization produced in 1542 a chapter analogous to the banishment of Adam and Eve, the first exiles on earth, although Marguerite's story slightly varies from the *Genesis*. Marguerite's lover, a nobleman, is weak and soon dies. Also both Bastienne, Marguerite's aging nurse, and later Marguerite's baby, whom she delivers alone on the island. Marguerite has to survive in a cold, uninhabited, and unknown place of endless winter. Her feat is one of loneliness, she was left to her own devices in a geographical dimension of life where the days become an eternity of nothingness. She was taken to Canada before Canada existed, and left behind when the first French explorers (Jacques Cartier and Sieur de Roberval) were escaping from Canada homebound.

The power of the event makes us instantly visualize a number of exotic images: a woman attacked by demons in the form of beasts, a woman defending two graves with her arquebus, a woman hunting bears, a woman giving birth alone on an island, an aging woman rescued by fishermen. Although there have been many versions of this event throughout history, the fluctuating details have not defocalized the story but instead have contributed to solidify it. Whether the emphasis has been on the theme of love and fidelity in adverse circumstances, the tale of a female Crusoe, the tragedy of a banished court woman in the wilderness, or the cruelty of the tyrannical Sieur de Roberval towards his young female relative, the events have crystallized as the story of a woman stronger than her male partner punished with utmost isolation in a brutal wilderness.

The fascination we feel when encountering the previous situations and topics is paradoxically rooted in the fascination over uncertainty. Arthur Stabler (1972: 63-64), who has tracked down the legend over the centuries, is surprised by the fact that it is a story with a record of tellings when evidence should only allow a footnote.[3] Thus, the story is rooted upon the thrill we feel at just the mere possibility that it might have been true. This possibility makes the story truly real because we are placed in a position of wanting to "rescue" Marguerite from forgetfulness, we are given the chance to restore to reality what has been erased by the flow of history. By means of our sympathy, we can clearly imagine "how it must have been" or "how it must have felt" and almost unquestioningly believe what others have said about how it really was (or even readily contribute our own version).

The first three accounts of Marguerite de Roberval's life were written in the sixteenth century by a queen, Marguerite de Navarre (Francis I's sister), a Royal Cosmographer, André Thevet, and a writer of tragedies, François de Belleforest. Their versions show to what uses this historical event was put. Marguerite de Navarre in *Heptameron* (1558) (published fifteen years after the event) makes it a case of female strength, religious faith, and wifely fidelity, an exempla where a faithful wife decides to abandon Roberval's ship with her banished husband, an artisan who had betrayed Roberval. According to Navarre (1991: 522), Marguerite de Roberval lived like animals in bodily terms, but like angels, in the spiritual sense, and her perseverance was rewarded by her rescue and repatriation to France, where she became a teacher of aristocratic children. According to Stabler (1972: 30), Marguerite de Navarre altered the facts to avoid scandal: Roberval was one of her brother's favorites and the event was too recent to cast Roberval as evil. That is why she used commoners for the main roles, a very unusual literary practice at the time.

3. For archival evidence of Marguerite's existence see Stabler (1972: 25-32).

André Thevet, in his *Cosmographie Universelle* (1575) claimed to have heard the story from Marguerite herself –he also claimed to be a relative of Roberval's–, and he did not need to conceal the true identity of the protagonists because Roberval had already died: Thevet's emphasis was on the sinful nature of the act between two lovers, and on the relationship between Marguerite and the demons, ghosts, and beasts (mainly bears) inhabiting the island. Thevet, sometimes considered not thoroughly credible in his accounts of the new world –"all-believing Thevet", Parkman (1983: 169) calls him–, has been gaining more credibility over the centuries. He is the only historian who, for example, gave the exact date and place of Roberval's death.[4] He was also the only writer who said that Marguerite did not want to leave the island after her exile (1575: 1020). Thevet accused the two others (mainly Belleforest, who managed to publish the story ahead of him) of distorting the facts and of plagiarism.

François de Belleforest, who had also claimed to have heard the story from Marguerite herself, used Marguerite for romance in his *Histoires Tragiques* (1572). Deceived by the singing gentleman who courts her, Marguerite yields to his desires and becomes pregnant aboard the ship, believing herself to be married. Her brother, Roberval, takes revenge and leaves them on the Isle des Demons. Temporarily, and before lover and child die, they manage to live in an idyllic leafy palace of their own making. None of these three versions gave the name of the lover.

Although there have been some plot variations, later stories of Marguerite after the sixteenth century shows two main common characteristics:[5] All authors claim truthfulness in their tale ("I give the tale as I find it", says Parkman 1983: 170), and they all make alterations and introduce embellishments by just making logical implications based on their sources. For example, in a very popular novel of the nineteenth century, *Les Vrais Robinsons* (1863), Ferdinand Denis and Victor Chauvin claimed in chapter one that Marguerite and her admirer were married because they read the world "spouse" in Thevet's *Cosmographie*. Stabler has recorded how the story has been constructed through the centuries again and again, and how its constructiveness precisely derives from the fact that all authors have claimed a sound historical source. Old mistakes continued and new ones were made, things said poetically were repeated by later historians as cold historical fact. We have to take into account that the sources that authors quoted were mainly those of the sixteenth century, where the historical was made to

4. Stabler (1972: 31, 5) confirms that Thevet's account of Roberval's assassination has documentary support.

5. The variations are whether Marguerite was married or not, whether the consummation was aboard the ship or later, also the name of the actors, and the length of time that the child survived.

blend into the literary.[6] The story becomes, thus, a site of interesting pieces of confusion; it becomes, paradoxically, a piece of historical evidence supported by the imagination.

Other authors have taken up the story after Stabler's record stopped: for example Elizabeth Boyer, George Woodcock, Anne Hebert, Shirley Barrie, and Douglas Glover.[7] And the story keeps flowing both ways, at the same time a display of historical eagerness and an account of a woman's ordeal. It is a labyrinthine path that has had Marguerite registered in medieval cosmographies, fashioned by a novel *a-la*-Hollywood –John Clarke Bowman's *Isle of Demons* (1953)–, and eventually appropriated by postmodern practices. A story which was turned into a palimpsest because every author's right to creativity was disguised as sound citation of sources (up to Douglas Glover's account). This continuing effort to imagine the plight of a Renaissance woman at the earliest stage of colonization can be regarded as a rarity, in view of the neglect of the Renaissance in theories on the formation of Canadian identity. According to Warkentin and Podruchny (2001:10), the study of imperialism has been severed from its Renaissance and early modern context:

> Possibly we have not paused often enough to attempt the act of historical imagination invited by such comparisons [between structures of knowledge coming from the classical tradition and first peoples]: envisioning Canada through the eyes of the people of the Renaissance who came here from France, England, Spain, Portugal, […]

We can recognize Douglas Glover's basic structure in Thevet's account; also some other elements that he takes from certain versions, either to give structure to the story or for playful purposes. For example, Glover reverses the situation between Marguerite and her lover aboard the ship as it is described in George Martin's long poem *The Legend of Marguerite* (1887). In Martin's (1995: 32) poem, Marguerite has become a nun after her adventure and tells her story to her congregation. She assures that she and her lover had been praying on the ship. Glover, however, opens the book with a scene in which Marguerite is literally raping her seasick lover in order to forget about her excruciating toothache, and she reaches her climax when recollecting her witnessing the public burning of an apostate nun. From Thomas G. Marquis's *Marguerite de Roberval* (1899) Glover is likely to have taken Roberval's death at the Church of the Innocents. But to trace how Glover reproduces or purposely distorts his sources is not relevant here, since

6. See Hulme and Youngs (2002: 31-32) for a discussion of the problem of credibility in the earliest travel writing.

7. Boyer's (1975 and 1983) are documentary novels. Woodcock's (1977), Hebert's (1990), and Barrie's (1997) are plays.

our interest in the oldest fictional romance of European colonization of the New World is to find out how, or why, it has come alive again and how our contemporary cultural coordinates have interfered in the telling.

The past uses given to Marguerite were as exempla, as history, or as romance. The story was appealing because of its being a curiosity of the first French travels to Newfoundland and also because of its edifying potential. Even Jean Johnston looks at the story as proof that a person could live, or survive, in the New Land. According to Johnston (1972: 2), Champlain used Marguerite's life as a theory that "a colony could live off the land", and so it proves that her life had not been wasted.

What had been left out of the story so far is what engendered Glover's novel. He shows the failures of an incipient empire, he fuses the terrors of the Bible and the terrors of colonization, he includes reminiscences of other abandoned women (both classical and Innuit). He uses the story to show the effects of medieval feuds on a virgin land. The stories so far had had history –conceived of in very abstract terms, as the bare chronological lines of European conquest–, but no context. They had included personal details, but not social details, and they had made reference to other historical or literary sources, but not to how other women have been fabulated in history. Additionally, the religious indictment was a main interpretive line, but it was offered without theological explanation. Elaborations and judgments rested, naturally, on unexplained assumptions because they were shared and unquestioned by the societies that produced them. The story was given in a decontextualized vacuum, its attraction resting mainly on the internal strings of its plot. But Glover's version rests on internal commentary, that of a character-narrator surprised by the incongruity of the rules she has to abide. Doing so Glover provides the reader with historical, social, and religious context. As a consequence, and without significantly altering the events, the story is at points turned into hilarious comedy; its traditional appeal as tragedy somewhat subverted.

Marguerite, although previously held up as a model of female strength, had also always been a heroine of submission, courageous because of her attachment to a man. In Glover's version she is not a heroine of submission: she causes her own downfall because of her libidinous desires, then she experiences life according to the Innuit perspective, and she eventually takes revenge on her uncle. In literally showing Marguerite becoming a bear woman and also in showing her accomplishing retaliation, Glover writes a second and a third part into the story (so far inexistent), and therefore completes it in a feminist and postcolonial sense.

We may wonder whether this overly explicit postmodernist practice is a simple pouring of new models into an old story in order to tune the tale to contemporary epistemology and ethics. Or perhaps we can consider the novel

to be a critique of current parodic methods of recuperating the past in fiction. Since the heroine is endowed with a contemporary critical vocabulary to express her thoughts and feelings, and she shows an intense awareness of ideological issues as they are posed today, we come to realize that Glover is turning the story into an essay, or better, making critical discussion of postcolonial and gender issues the main aspect of the narrative flow. The nature of this hybrid discourse reflects to a very great extent how we extract value from narrative nowadays.

3. Contemporary theory at work

Feminism and postcolonialism –and cultural studies in general– have effected a profound ideological awareness that has changed our reading habits. We tend to use novels now to describe how cultures construct their particular realities, how they devise their systems of evidence; how language, fiction, and social practices impose or create strategies of empowerment and of survival.[8] The individual, the character in a fictional work, has become more context than it ever was because identity is seen in its "situatedness".[9] A large portion of criticism today traces how the realm of the personal and the private is inextricably fused with a reality of immense variety according to the coordinates of gender, class, ethnicity, and historical context. In opposition to critical practices prior to feminism, for example, the human condition is seen now not exclusively in the character of emotion itself or in the turns of psychology, but in how personal experience is implicated in political, social, familial ways of organizing life.

This mode of addressing the past, guided by an awareness of the historical injustices to huge sections of the population, favors the interest in certain kind of plots and in certain theoretical approaches. Nikolas Rose (1997: 224, 238) claimed that the invasion of the language of the psy-sciences (psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, counselling, etc) has shaped the way we think about ourselves and the way we explain other people, that this language "makes only certain ways of being human describable, and in so doing makes only certain ways of being human possible."[10] Certainly, feminist and postcolonialist languages are also shaping the way we understand ourselves and literature, fostering a notion of reality and of literature pregnant with issues of male power and European imperialism, within a

8. See Atkinson (1990:1-4), Warkentin and Podruchny (2001: 8), Debora Doxtator (2001: 44), Quadflieg (2004: 29), Fernández Prieto (1994: 117).

9. See Nicholson (1990: 8-9), Fuss (1989: 20), Spelman (1996: 176), Haraway (1999: 188-193).

10. See also Coward (1985:129,131) for an elaboration of the idea that we understand ourselves in terms of a vocabulary.

more general postmodernist context concerned with the relativism of truth and the textual nature of the past.[11]

Writers clearly respond not only to a predominant style of thought but also to certain vocabularies and their grammars. A mode of fiction invaded by the questions posed by theory is clearly recognizable everywhere and highly visible in Canadian literature. For example, novels responding to the label of historiographic metafiction, also fictional auto/biographies, set out under the premise that history is text, and new realities are sought out of new combinations of facts (a postmodernist orientation) or erased realities are sought in order to be given new life (a feminist orientation).[12] The reader knows that contemporary fiction explicitly serves the purposes of subverting the rigidity of available ideologies. This is not new, the novel has ironically included the theoretical worries of its practitioners since its beginnings, either in the form of overt narrators discussing methods to fictionalize characters or in the form of characters openly illustrating the author's ideas.[13] The difference is that now criticism itself claims narrative status.

Some of the models we bring to a reading of a feminist and/or a postcolonial text are: the stress on the hidden and marginal, the parody of master narratives, the decline of transcendental subjectivity, the exposure of the distortions produced by customary cognitive models, etc.[14] This is a shared discourse which guides readers and critics in looking for value in narratives. Sometimes this search becomes openly described at the outset by the critic: "I employ novels to show how they stage social contradictions and strive to resolve them" (Sharpe 1993: 21-22), or "I derive from each novel an allegory of reading that stages the problem of defining Indian women's agency according to the terms of a rational discourse of subject constitution" (23). Even: "If reversals were possible and causes could be made to follow effects, I might say that Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* to enable my reading of race, gender, and colonialism" (28).

11.."None of us escapes the legacy of a colonial past and its traces in our academic practice." (Sharpe 1993:19).

12. See Curti (1998:9-15) and also Perreault (1995: 133) for a discussion on how feminism and postmodernism overlap but follow different directions.

13. In *Tom Jones*, *A Foundling* (1749) by Henry Fielding, the narrator continually discussed the problem between narrating time and narrated time, for example. Shklovsky remarked that the parodic novel is the most typical novel in world literature. (quot. by Kuester 1992: 12). An example of characters dramatizing an epistemology (in this case naturalism) is found in *Sister Carrie* (1900) by Theodore Dreiser. In this one-way novel characters only do, say, or think that which deliberately illustrates the author's ideas.

14. See Curti (1998: 2) for a list of common theoretical elements that preside criticism today. Also Curti (1988: 4-6) for a meditation on the dangers derived from the fact that marginalization has become central.

We observe in the latter statement the paradoxical effect described by Jonathan Culler in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1983: 169-187): events do not exist prior to the narrative, events are produced by the narrative, they are the products of discourse. Events are brought about by a thematic appropriateness, they are the attempts to make something mean, that is, they are the products of a perspective. If we apply Culler's view to our discussion on the role of mainstream critical approach to fiction, we could say that criticism itself, that is, the demand for assessment, creates the event (it considers what an event should be). Running parallel to this idea is the notion that the past is produced by the present, it is contingent upon the present –one of the basic tenets of contemporary epistemology (see Slotkin 1987 or White 1989).

Thus, writers choose topics, and so create events: we may think that the existence of Marguerite de Roberval enabled Glover to put forward his reading of empire, humanity in the Renaissance –a Renaissance that feels like the Middle Ages–, the role of women, and Canadianness. Marguerite's story becomes a site which makes these conflicts observable. Again, the present has made the past possible. Given the great interest in observing how character is caught up in social strategies of power distribution and marginalization, we may think that Glover has served this familiar structure of meaning to us, and that he has even facilitated our interpretation by making his main character intellectually aware of the scheme that has entrapped her:

> I have sufficient education to be aware of certain fore-shadowings, signs, omens, parallels, prognostications and analogies. Classical literature teems with stories of extreme child-rearing practices: young single girls left on rocks or deserted islands or thrust into dark tunnels as punishments or sacrifices or simply for their nutrient value vis-à-vis whatever slaving monster happens by.
>
> I am particularly reminded of the Greek princess Iphigenia, whose father Agamemnon put her to death on a lonely beach on the shaky theory that this act would ensure decent sailing over to Troy, where he hoped to win back his brother's runaway wife Helen (another woman led astray by her heart in a world of men). It is a male thing, I suppose, not to be persuaded from murder by the threat of revenge, pangs of conscience, pity, justice, the tug of family affection, not to mention the purely unscientific basis of the premise that killing a virgin will cause sunshine and warm, westerly breezes. Surely Agamemnon must have known this would come back to haunt him. (32)

Our familiarity (readers' and critics' familiarity) with a set of critical models and attitudes enables writers to incorporate them, –in this case the parodic strategies– not only as additions which explain the interpretive dynamics of the fictional world, but already as parts of the plot itself, moving

units which do not pause the narrative (they are not digressions), but that contribute to its forward movement. The plotline in *Elle* precisely consists of its heroine cultural reading of two cultures (the French and the Inuit) in the sixteenth century. The narrative marches forward not only by its events in the literal sense (an event is a change) or by the stream of her consciousness (the moods and the psychological turns of her mind), but by her appreciations of the culture that brought her where she is (an evaluative activity). In the early twentieth century the modernist rejection of the artificiality of plotting produced fictions which revolved around almost immobile characters and contributed fragments of their life.[15] But whereas in modernist fiction the character was the "patient", that is, the observed reality (the writer explored the effect of reality on the characters and their state of mind), now the character has become the "doctor" (the critic).

In *Elle*, Marguerite's re-vision has become the plot itself, which is not mobilized by a search for awareness, the main motto in modernism, but which constitutes itself as the advancing stages of a cultural study.[16] It is not narrative as expression of ideology, as DuPlessis (1985: x) has put it, but ideology expressed as narrative. If the mainstream hero of modernism in the twentieth century was the artist, more and more the hero and the heroine of our time is the critic.

The proposition "if you approach a story analytically, it will disappear" (Bonnie Burnard 1999: 10) no longer rings true. Douglas Glover brings that kind of judgmental attention to the story by having a first person narrator with analytical superpowers. Marguerite can uproot the rhetorical strategies of the dominant discourses, of which she is a victim.

We said in section II that, in order to represent Marguerite, only romantic and historical discourses had been used: she was seen as a victim, not as an originator of events, and she had not been connected to the phenomena of colony, gender, or Canadianness. Since the story was fascinating without a need for context, it was not necessary to make it representative of a society. But once Marguerite is taken to the realm of the marginal (in the sense of the powerlessness of her gender and as an exile from her patriarchal society),[17] and to the realm of the historic (she forms part of a foundational moment in the history of the yet non-existent Canada), she becomes an analogy, a symbol of the

15. For a discussion of this narrative strategy, see Mendilow (1952: 46-7, 209), Frank (1968: 59), Mickelsen (1981: 66).

16. See Honeywell (1988) for a study of the kind of metaphysics involved in eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century plots.

17. For the status of white women travelers in the age of imperialism, see Bassnett (2002: 227). For the status of British gentlewomen in the wilderness, see Korte (1996: 147-162).

disadvantages of her sex and of the vacuities of national construction.[18] She is made to live in an allegorical space, a space infinitely spelled out by criticism. And she complains about this repeatedly in the narrative, for example: "I have become a metaphor or a joke, a piece of language sliding from one state into another (like my changing Emmanuel – this sudden fluidity is one effect of entering a New World). It is an ironic position, being neither one thing nor the other." (137). And later on, she adds: "This is the style of the anti-quest: You go on a journey, but instead of returning you find yourself frozen on the periphery, the place between places, in a state of being neither one nor the other. Instead of a conquering hero, you become a clown or fuel for the pyre or the subject of folk tales." (167)."Am I a pun or a simile?" She says on another occasion. "Alas, my legend already grows at the expense of my true story" (181).

Is Marguerite then only available to us as allegory?, is it possible to disengage her from layers of analogies so that we can look at the individual? By making her the representative of the failures of colonialism and by making her think about herself in terms of postmodernist/postcolonial language –"I am infected with otherness" (156-7), she says–, it would seem that Glover is depriving us of an intimate, purely personal contact with her: "I have founded an unofficial colony in an unofficial Canada. Or I have saved Canada from officialdom; unfortunately, no one knows this, which is the nature of unofficial non-histories (and anti-quests)." (148)

This last example is a case of a hysterical use of terminology when attempting to describe postmodernist narratives, which may lead us to conclude that Marguerite is a victim of the language of parody itself, a language which disregards meta-narratives and has a penchant for the prefixes "un", "anti" and "non". She is made to live as allegory and as parody at the same time, that is, she is an analogy with loud metaphorical resonance, a cultural motif, and she has been inscribed in the past ironically (within a non-foundational moment in Canada). Additionally, she has been given command of current academic clichés. We recognize this structure, for example, in George Bowering's *A Short Sad Book*, where the author plays with the clichés that have dominated the study of Canadian literature and history.

Marguerite shows all the marks of a feminist icon. She fully represents what Virginia Woolf (1957: 47) said about Woman: "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance: practically she is insignificant". Although her figure recurs in history, folklore, and literature, in practice Marguerite was under the tyrannical command of an older male relative, she was the one punished for having committed a sin

18. Analogues are certain historical figures or events that embody preoccupations within a culture. They become paradigms, for example, martyrdom, failure, achievement, etc. For the implications of historical analogues, see Kuester (2002: 491-495).

(not her lover), and she was rejected by her own society when she manages to return to France.[19] She also shows all the marks of a colonial icon taken up by postcolonialism. First, she inhabits a contact zone and experiences many of the clashes between two cultures:[20] "[w]hen two civilizations meet, first, they exchange corpses" (177). Second: she is taken aback by the cruelty and ignorance of the European leaders (the kidnapping of natives, their slavery, the agony of Comes Winter, the native girl). Third: She is lead to desperation because of the inability of languages (both hers and others') to enable people to communicate successfully. Throughout the novel she is most obsessed by the native words as she has learned them from Cartier's lexicon. But the words refuse to function when she eventually contacts the natives of the land where she has been deposited. Besides the grotesque misunderstandings her words provoke, her experience is immensely sad:

> I try to speak. I try to recall the savage word for friend. In my confusion, I think I tell him to come to bed. It does not matter. He doesn´t seem to understand. They speak a different language here. Or maybe M. Cartier made up those lexicons out of his imagination. Or maybe the savages purposely misled him. Okay, okay, let's give him aguyase, I have bird shit on my face. Tell him it means friend. And I think how ripe the world of translation is for lying, betrayal, misrepresentation and fraud. It is always thus when one encounters another – child, father, friend, enemy, savage, astral being. A world of confusion, just like love. (78)

Every paragraph of the novel is dense with critical examination conveyed by means of the unprejudiced logics of a bright child who confronts the incongruities of her time. However, she thinks in terms of the criticism we consume in our time. She is surrounded by hordes of analogies: "Have I mentioned the ship-coffin analogy?" (58) Sentences like this one crop up frequently in the novel and often function as a refrain, endowing the narrative with lyricism.

Is Glover parodying the only possible dialogue between our time and the past? We mean this dialogue to be parody and analogy since they are recurrent fictional methods to recreate the past. Perhaps, the author is emphasizing the fact that we

---

19. Glover includes other unwanted women left on rocks to die both in classical literature and in native myths, unwanted females who, however, play a very important role in their culture's systems of belief (see *Elle* 90).

20. See Pratt (1992: 4,6). Contact zones are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other". See (*Elle* 77-82) and (116-119) for a dramatization of Marguerite's surrealistic encounters with the Innu. Examples of other postcolonial recurrent elements are: the deceptiveness of maps (28), the greed of imperialism (26), the domestication of the native inhabitants (32, 190), the harmful effect of universals (35), the failures of imperial plans in Canada (73-74).

cannot see others but through our current conventions.[21] Given the fact that the novel has great potential to constitute itself not only as a statement against our repetitious methods to interpret, but also as a tract on the limiting reality of the European Renaissance, and, additionally, as an entertaining parody of historical figures, does the heroine lose ground as a fictional character? Since all three levels of discourse (the epistemological critique, the historical analysis, and the parody) focus on perspective rather than on plot, is the reader engaged in the fiction itself at all? Is the heroine just a device to produce parody at different levels?

The answer to that question would be that she is not. Her fictionality is never undermined nor do we ever feel detached from her suffering just because she absorbs our approach to the issues of her time. And this is so because in *Elle* we have a character making a case for the reader: this is how Glover has managed to turn criticism into narrative. The character literally suffers the consequences of ideology, and because she is aware of it intellectually, she can express it verbally. The narrative is the commentary itself. The plot becomes the heroine's unrelenting cultural reading, and the narrative advances by contributing more and more factual evidence (Marguerite's experience with the individuals of two very fallible societies). Step by step, she is affected by the incongruity of all kinds of discourses, from the religious to the familial.

But, do we feel Marguerite as a manufactured composite or as "real"? After all, she is seen as a victim of our methods to retrieve and understand the past ("she is not immune to our analogies"), and, simultaneously, she uses this very same intellectual framework to expose social injustice. The complications of her twofold entanglement with theory (as a victim and as an accomplice) could perhaps make her lifestory irrelevant. However, this is not so. Her dimension as an intertext is always permeated by her ordeal as a lost creature in a fearful place, and this juxtaposition creates a hybrid discourse that sends the reader in different directions at the same time, without ever losing track of her agitation. The anti-climactic hilarious details of surrealistic situations are made to co-exist with Marguerite's suffering of hunger, cold, and separation. Each level of discourse (the parody and the personal account) come close together in a textual battle of sentence against sentence, leading the reader towards different kind of responses at high speed in a dazzling way.

4. The disturbing powers of a first-person narrative

The heroine is undergoing a plight that gives her the opportunity to dissect her society and to apply irony to every bit. She is both experiencing subject and

21. For the idea that we can only understand what suits our conceptual needs, and that we cannot see beyond our own culture, see Doxtator (2001: 40-44) and Morantz (2001: 50, 65).

speaking subject, and these two ways of inhabiting the narrative create two distinct kinds of discourse which have to share the same textual space, itemized in almost autonomous paragraphs.

> The sun glows like an armourer's forge. It glints off the water into my eyes, so that everything seems doubly illuminated, flat and insubstantial under that awful light. Does God's sure hand extend this far beyond the stink of civilization and the throw of language? Does he visit Canada? The expedition's three chaplains, along with the symbols, sacraments, rites, holy wine and wafers of religion, are sailing away from me. Now there will be no one to bless my corpse when I am gone. (39)

This paragraph, whose internal structure is similar to many others, shows the following elements: first, a physical description of the place as Marguerite perceives it; second a parody of religion; third, a lamentation of what it will mean to be alone in the island. Most paragraphs in this novel work like this one: the attack on ideologies and the personal experience closely follow each other textually, sometimes it is the personal feeling or perception that acts as a frame, sometimes it is the indictment that opens and closes the paragraph. They are never allowed to monopolize the reader's attention because they succeed each other continually after occupying a small section of the text, sometimes just a sentence. The awareness of colonial issues goes hand in hand with the expression of sorrow on the part of the character "as a person". The effect is that different kinds of responses are demanded from the reader at a hysterical speed; the reader experiences a continual overlapping of modes of addressing the material of the story without finding a point of rest.

Each paragraph is self-contained, establishing its own independent sphere or interest and expectation. Each represents a war between two attitudes: self-assured and anxious. The following example illustrates how paragraphs in the novel build up as a battlefield of opposing voices:

> After a while, a line of black clouds issues from behind the range of purple mountains. Night falls. It begins to rain. These are recognizable events but otherwise disconcerting. The three of us huddle on a bed of damp evergreen needles and moss beneath a rock overhang. Lightning flashes now and again. In the shadows, we spy every kind of animal from bears to chimeras, not to mention the monopods, amazons, mermaids and giant crocodiles that inhabit this region (according to our leading cosmologists who have deduced these facts from Scripture and the words of Aristotle). The night grows chill. I am fairly certain that death would have been preferable to spending time in Canada. (41)

As seen in the previous example, this paragraph also starts with the physical experience (the fear, the discomfort, the cold), it moves towards exposure of ignorance, and it ends in a parody of nationalistic cliché mixed up with a very grim experiential prospect. And the next one starts anew, every chunk of narrative a scene of conflict between two kind of discourses, each one pestering the other in such a way that the character's critique (criticism is the result of mental distance which enables the thinker to express judgments) will always be undermined by the character's constraining situation. And the other way around, the narration of grief will be troubled by the inclusion of humor. Every paragraph focuses on a different event, feeling, object, or idea, but it would be difficult for the reader to remain in only one position for long. This is a disturbing reading experience because it does not allow the reader to conclude which of the two voices (tragic or comic) one has to respond to primarily. It is an unstable position because one kind of language does not invalidate the other completely, it only exposes the reader simultaneously to two different mechanisms of comprehension.[22]

Allusion to national identity disquisitions and the grotesqueness of the European Renaissance rub against the impact of painful reality. Parody is made to clash with real suffering, that of a woman on the brink of desperation at every turn. Glover's achievement is to make the first-person experiencing voice so haunting that, when there is no humor (very rarely, and mainly in the second half of the novel), the narrative becomes unbearably distressing. Occasionally, Glover manages to blend these two discourses: sometimes the vocabulary of criticism and of personal testimony merge poetically when Marguerite thinks about the people who died because of colonization:

> He takes me to see Donnacona's grave, with its diminutive stone cross, in a secluded churchyard. And I am reminded of the little graveyard on the Isle of Demons where Richard, Bastienne and Emmanuel rest forever (though their graves have no marker). I think also of the graves at Trois Pistoles, which Dado Duminil told me of, and the colonial cemeteries left behind by M. Cartier and the General. The idea of all these univisited graves on the peripheries of other worlds haunts me. (180)

Although, in general, Glover never lets lyricism or parody dominate the narrative or become an independent force; each sentence always unsettles the mood of the previous statement:

> In idle moments I recall a savage girl living on M. Cartier's farm at Limoilou. Her parents had offered her to the captain as a gift for the return

22. According to Kuester (1992: 8, 43, 122) parody is not a genre, it is a mechanism, a rhetorical strategy.

> voyage his last time in Canada. (Evidently native child-rearing practices are as thoughtless and irresponsible as those of the French. Dare we ask if her name means Iphigenia in the tongue of the Hochelagans?) […] I saw her only once, in shadow, at the back of a large room lit by a fire, bent so close to her needlework that she must have been almost blind. […] Dull, pocked skin, lank, thin hair, eyes blank from terror and loneliness–no less marooned in France than I in Canada. (66)

In this paragraph, sharp commentary is enmeshed in the tale of suffering, and it seems that neither discourse is contaminated by the other. Parody cannot muffle the voice of the immediate approach to existence. Righteousness of thought gives confidence and comfort (and a kind of intellectual superiority), but the sight of torment gives a tug at the heart, which somehow throws the humorous tone off-balance. Thus, the fact that Marguerite envisages her experience in terms of critical terminology –"I am infected with otherness" (156-7)– does not really diminish the impact of the experience she is undergoing. Perhaps it makes it more real because we recognize the experience in the way contemporary criticism has codified it and made it familiar.

Although it is almost impossible for Marguerite not to be a symbol, Glover has been able to weave her attacks on western civilization with her factual and perceptual conditions of existence. The cultural tract does not alleviate the affliction, it does not de-emphasize the shock: on the contrary, it shows that "the knowledge, the explanation, does not quite fit the sight" (Berger 1972: 7). That is, the critical statement, however humorous, falls short in the face of reality, and it does not heal. When Itslk, Marguerite's Innu lover abandons her, she says "my knowledge of his reasons does nothing to soften the blow of his absence." (96)

Ultimately, the novel seems to be a meditation on the inability of words and discourse to convey experience. The real story of Marguerite is that she lacks the words for what she has lived. She considers discourse as entrenched in the logics of its own arguments, creating awful teleologies that do not bear any relationship with humans:

> And all the optimistic descriptions of the hereafter, with its hierarchies of angels and the risen dead, with God as king, are unwarranted applications of Aristotle's argument by analogy. The throw of language is seductive. Sentences march like fanatical soldiers over cliffs. (107-108)

Especially in the second half of the narrative, Marguerite's mind is continually assaulted by the idea that language has no capacity to express what life is: "there don't seem to be words in any language to explain what has befallen me" (164). "It occurs to me that if I have learned anything it is that the universe gives no clear

word as to its state, that our lives are bracketed in fog". (194). "[T]he nature of life, in my experience, being that of astonishing the participant" (116).[23]

Although in command of the explanation and of the wit of parody, she realizes that reality is not tamed even when we get enough perspective. Her terror is "unspeakable" when she is about to give birth alone (100). When the child dies, a few hours later, she says: "What I feel –words fail. Burn these pages." (104). This is how Glover makes her "real" (personlike, like traditional characters): in Marguerite's heartfelt rejection of language, Glover is creating a space for her apart from postmodernistic language-based games. We can even say that the author has contributed to the feminist project against the limiting available categories of identity; in an exemplary way, he has expanded a woman's potentiality as hero.[24]

5. Conclusion

Marguerite lives in two dimensions all the time: "Were this narrative an allegory, which it is not" (116) she says, pointing at the very conventions that make her exist imaginatively in our mind, as a semiotic field which gathers several symbols. However, she is not only "elle", a cultural artifact, but Marguerite, a woman caught in extreme circumstances. Glover has made it possible for this second dimension to surface by capturing her desperation and enabling the reader to look at her as an eye-witness. But especially by giving her extraordinary powers of insight, because *Elle*, the novel, precisely rests on the sophisticated analysis that a particular woman can make of her environment.

By rendering in detail the effects of male cruelty on a woman, Glover has momentarily liberated his heroine from a symbolic habitat and has served her to us in flesh and bone, and he has done that without renouncing to include parody, which is constructed both as an exposure of a male-oriented culture which destroys women and nations, and as a spur for the reader to meditate on the stereotyped ways we dialogue with the past. This novel is an example of our current stance, it shows that criticism permeates narrative vocabulary and structure without alienating us from the characters.

---

23. Typically, Glover does not let these serious meditations go untouched by irony. Here is the list that Marguerite's doctor gives her to read: "Hippocrates, *On Dreams*, Plotinus, *Inexpressible Things*, Artemidorus, *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, Dinarious, *Unknowable Things*, and Hipponax *Things Better Left Unsaid* (*Peri anecphoneton*)." (187)

24. See Heller's (1990:120-123) acknowledgement of a common feminist project of creating novels which expand women's psychic possibilities and potential as heroes.

Works cited

Atkinson, Paul. 1990. *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Constructions of Reality*. London: Routledge.

Barrie, Shirley. *I am Marguerite*. First produced, 1997. Published 1998. Toronto: Playwrights Co-Op.

Bassnett, Susan. 2002. "Travel Writing and Gender". *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 225-241.

Belleforest, François. 1572 . *Histoires Traguiques*. Paris, Hulpeau.

Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Viking Press.

Bowman, John Clark. 1953. *Isle of Demons*. New York: Popular Library.

Bowering, George. 1977. *A Short Sad Book*. Vancouver: Talon Books.

Boyer, Elizabeth. 1975. *Marguerite de la Roque: A Story of Survival. Novelty*, Ohio: Veritie Press.

Boyer, Elizabeth. 1983. *A Colony of One*. Novelty, Ohio: Veritie Press.

Burnard, Bonnie. 1999. "It Almost Always Starts This Way". *Dominant Impressions. Essays on the Canadian Short Story*. Eds. Gerald Lynch and Angela Arnold Robbeson Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press. 9-15

Coward, Rosalind. 1885. *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought and Packaged*. New York: Grove Press.

Culler, Jonathan. 1983 (1981). *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Curti, Lidia. 1998. *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity, and Representation.* London: MacMillan.

Denis, Ferdinand and Victor Chauvin. 1863. *Les Vrais Robinsons: Naufrages, Solitude, Voyages.* Paris.

Dickanson, Olive Patricia. 2001. "The Sixteenth-Century French Vision of Empire: The Other Side of Self-Determination. *Decentring the Renaissance: Canada and Europe in Multidisciplinary Perspective 1500-1700*. Eds. Germaine Warkentin and Carolyn Podruchny. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 87-109.

Dickinson, Emily. 1987. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. London and Boston: Faber and Faber

Dillard, Annie. 1988 (1982). *Living by Fiction*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Doxtator, Debora. 2001. "Inclusive and Exclusive Perceptions of Difference: Native and Euro-Based Concepts of Time, History, and Change". Eds. Warkentin and Podruchny. 33-47.

Dreiser, Theodore. 1981 (1900). *Sister Carrie*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 1985. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Fernández Prieto, Celia. 1994. "La verdad de la autobiografía". *Revista de Occidente*. Marzo, 154: 116-130.

Fielding, Henry. 1998 (1749). *Tom Jones, A Foundling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frank, Joseph. 1968 (1963). *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Fuss, Diana. 1989. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York and London: Routledge.

Glover, Douglas, 2003. *Elle, a Novel*. Fredericton: Goose Lane.

Govier, Katherine. 2002. *Creation.* Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press.

Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hebert, Anne. 1990. *La Cage suivi de "L'île de la Demoiselle*. Montreal : Boréal.

Heller, Dana A. 1990. *The Feminization of the Quest-Romance: Radical Departures*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Honeywell, J. Arthur. 1988. "Plot in the Modern Novel". *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. Eds. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 238-250.

Johnston, Jean. 1973. *Wilderness Women: Canada's Forgotten History.* Toronto: Peter Martin.

Korte, Barbara. 1996. "Gentle-Women in the Wilderness: Self-Images of British-Canadian Pioneering Women". *Difference and Community: Canadian and European Cultural Perspectives.* Eds. Peter Easingwood, Konrad Gross, and Lynette Hunter. Amsterdan: Rodopi. 147-162.

Kuester, Martin. 1992. *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Kuester, Martin. 2002. "Historical Analogues". *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*. Ed. W. H. New. Toronto: Unviersity of Toronto Press. 491-495.

Martin, George. 1995 (1887). *The Legend of Marguerite*. Ed. DWS. Ryan. St. John's, NF: Jesperson Publishing Limited.

Marquis, Thomas G. 1899. *Marguerite de Roberval*. Toronto and London.

Mendilow, A.A. 1952. *Time and the Novel*. Holland: Ysel Press.

Mickelsen, David. 1981. "Types of Spatial Structure in Narrative". *Spatial Form in Narrative*. Eds. Jeffrey Smitten and Ann Daghistany. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Morantz, Toby. 2001. "Plunder or Harmony? On Merging European and Native Views of Early Contact". In Warkentin and Podruchny, eds. 48-67.

Navarra, Margarita De. 1991 (1558). "Extremado amor de una mujer y austeridad de la misma en tierras lejanas". *Heptamerón*. Madrid: Cátedra. Trans. Soledad Arredondo. 521-524.

Nicholson, Linda J. Ed. 1990. "Introduction". *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York & London: Routledge. 1-16.

Parkman, Francis. 1983 (1865). *Pioneers of France in the New World*. New York: The Library of America. 145-174.

Perreault, Jeanne. 1995. *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Quadflied, Helga. 2004. "As Mannerly and Civill as Any of Europe: Early Modern Travel Writing and the Exploration of the English Self". *Perspectives on Travel Writing*. Eds. Glen Hooper and Tim Youngs. Vermont: Ashgate. 27-40.

Rose, Nikolas. 1997. "Assembling the Modern Self". *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present.* Ed. Porter, Roy. Ed. London & New York: Routledge.

Sharpe, Jenny. 1993. *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Slemon, Stephen. 2001. "Post-colonial Theories". *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Castle. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 100-116.

Slotkin, Richard. 1987. "Myth and the Production of History". *Ideology and Classic American Culture*. Eds. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.70-90.

Stabler, Arthur. 1972. *The Legend of Marguerite de Roberval*. Washington: Washington State University Press.

Spelman, Elizabeth V. 1990. *The Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. London: Women´s Press.

Thevet, André. 1575. "Histoire de trois personnes François, estans en Terre-neufue, & d'un Euesque Nestorien". La *Cosmographie Universelle d'Andre' Thevet Cosmographe Dv Roy. Tome Second*. Paris. Chez Pierre l'Huillier. Liure XXIII, Chap. VI. 1019-1021.

White, Hayden. 1989. "'Figuring the Nature of the Times Deceased': Literary Theory and Historical Writing". *The Future of Literary Theory*. Ed. Ralp Cohen. New York: Routlege. 19-43.

Woodcock, George. 1977. *Two plays*. Vancouver: Talonbooks.

Woolf, Virginia. 1957 (1929). *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Representing hegemonic masculinity: epistemology and the performance of male identity in documentary film

Vicente R. Rosselló Hernández
Universidad de La Laguna

Compelled and partly inspired by the flurry of change spawned by second-wave feminisms and several other prominent social movements across North America from the 1960s onwards, the status of men, for a long time deemed natural and incontestable, became subject, in unprecedentedly explicit terms, to an increasingly consistent scrutiny. The study of masculinity, a category once unmarked and thus (apparently) unproblematic, gradually emerged as a legitimate concern to be pursued –with widely differing objectives and results– both in popular culture and in academia. The growing amount of scholarship on masculinity today not only confirms the existence of a robust general interest in matters concerning gender, it also indicates the desire to make up for the perceived lack of a more specific analysis of this issue within already established disciplines like women's, gender, or gay and lesbian studies.

A privileged domain in this undertaking is the representation of gendered and sexual identity in all forms of cultural production, 'high' and 'low'; this means in practice an immensely wide range of texts –in the broadest sense of the term–, from literature to advertising. Among the visual arts, film has, ever since the birth of cinema, attracted its fair share of attention. Within this area, gender-based analyses of fiction film abound, but that is not yet the case with documentary –one of many examples of the comparative critical neglect of non-fiction film.

It is my contention that documentary provides a particularly fertile ground, so far underexploited, for an analysis of cultural portrayals of gender identity. The pervasive influence of what is generally termed poststructuralism in the humanities –a development roughly parallel to the social movements alluded to above, and continuing into the present– has pointed towards a broader questioning of traditional (Western) notions of truth, history, reason and the self, and has contributed crucially to the understanding and revision of documentary's epistemological status. It would therefore be interesting to survey the challenges to dominant, canonical documentary forms, even to the whole documentary enterprise, derived from such reconsiderations.

This article will first present an account, by necessity brief and incomplete, of the most significant contemporary theoretical work on gender, with an emphasis on the more recent emergence and consolidation of masculinity studies and its contributions –actual or potential– to the gender debate. It will then proceed to a survey of prominent views on representation (and on the so-called crisis of representation especially) in documentary studies, as well as of some remarkable intersections of documentary film and the representation of gender and sexual identity to date. The remainder of the essay will attempt to bring these two strands to practice in a discussion of the representation and critique of several forms of contemporary hegemonic (white, heterosexual, male) masculinity through a close reading of three 'documentary' films, all by white male directors: Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), Peter Lynch's *Project Grizzly* (1996), and Henry A. Rubin & Dana A. Shapiro's *Murderball* (2005).

Once an extensive academic consensus has been established on the social, cultural and political construction of gender, it is possible to examine the kinds of masculinity illustrated in these texts as ideologically-charged performative iterations of gender. *This Is Spinal Tap* is a clever example of that (arguably) hybrid genre commonly known as *mockumentary*: a fiction film that parodies documentary conventions, the rock documentary in this case. The film follows the members of a British heavy-metal band on their American comeback tour and can be read as a satire of the hypermasculine codes prevalent in popular music. The Canadian documentary *Project Grizzly*, about self-described "bear-researcher" Troy Hurtubise's quest for a second, perhaps final confrontation with the animal, shares with Reiner's film a detached view of hyperbolic masculinity and some degree of formal reflexivity. Finally, an analysis of the Oscar-nominated *Murderball,* a somewhat more conventional movie about the USA quadriplegic rugby team, could throw some light on the complexities and crises of modern American masculinity. All three films share, in varying degrees, the following elements: the depiction of some form of what is generally regarded as an exaggerated, hyperbolic masculinity and the relatively open (but not necessarily self-conscious) display of its highly prosthetic character; the

idealisation (with or without an accompanying demystification) of male bonding and the all-male group as an appropriate site for the expression of an allegedly essential male identity, where women are often figured as intrusive or downright disruptive, with the exception of those who agree to play an accessory, supporting or subordinate role; the remarkable but not exclusive use of the observational mode and the partially related effacement of authorial presence and intervention (the case of *This Is Spinal Tap* being slightly more complex in this respect);[1] and the particular significance of failure both as a spectre that constantly haunts the performance of masculinity and as an organising narrative principle, as well as the frequent overlapping of the two functions. Furthermore, the operations of national anxiety, underscoring traditional links between manhood and national formations, can be said to have a certain import in the three films selected, but this is most noticeable in *Project Grizzly* and, with heightened intensity, in *Murderball*.

It is not my intention to offer these texts as in any way perfect or even landmark examples of an ultimately effective, politically sound deconstruction of white heterosexual male masculinity –or as decisive subversive interventions in the debate around gender identity–, but as instances of the growing critical visibility and interrogation of the category and, most importantly, as powerful illustrations of the particular zones of anxiety, liminality and tension that contribute to its fundamental instability. Finally, a caveat: although I am aware of the traditional and persistent privilege accorded to the study of men –mostly in the guise of a neutral, universalised human(ist) entity– and of the theoretical as well as practical conflicts posed by an exaggerated emphasis on white male masculinity within the field, I believe there is still wide space for an examination of the fault lines of contemporary Western notions and displays of precisely this variant on which the whole masculine project, as a performatively maintained socio-historical construction, finds itself at risk.

1. This article follows Nichols's widely used typology of documentary modes of representation (latest revision in Nichols 2001: 99-138). Conventional popular notions of documentary film tend to associate the form as a whole with the rhetorical and didactic elements of exposition (authoritative voice-over narration, presentation and elaboration of an argument, evidentiary editing), but the actual range of documentary expression is obviously much wider. The six modes Nichols identifies are: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative. The observational mode, whose emergence was closely related to developments in portable camera and sound recording equipment during the late 50s, emphasises an allegedly more direct, spontaneous and unobtrusive engagement with the historical world and has often led to claims of unmediated access to reality. It is this deceptive realist aesthetic that other documentary modes –most notably, reflexive and performative– aim to counter.

1. Gender, in Theory: An Overview

It is hard to overstate the part played by second-wave feminisms in the gradual revisions of gender that were carried out in the second half of the twentieth century. A considerable amount of early feminist explorations of the gender order within this period focused primarily on the exposure and dissection of the mechanisms of patriarchy and on the positive re-evaluation of an allegedly distorted female identity. Accordingly, much effort was directed towards the denunciation of an oppressive system that creates and maintains unequal roles for women through the social and cultural reproduction of highly constrictive notions of femininity. Although proving politically useful in a number of ways, this approach became increasingly criticised for its totalising tendencies and eventually recognised as a form of reverse essentialism that kept the traditional binary model of gender identity firmly in place. Among the crucial contributions to this shift towards an anti-essentialist feminism were the demands for a greater attention to difference/s –as opposed to a hypothetically monolithic female condition– on the part of those groups within the movement (lesbians, women of colour) that claimed to experience additional forms of oppression, and the irregular but steady incorporation of several forms of poststructuralist thought into feminist theory.

It was precisely the growing currency of poststructuralism –and its persistent critique of liberal humanist ideas of a coherent, unified self– that would then lead to yet more radical theoretical reconfigurations of gender, promptly formalised with the emergence and development in the 1990s of the critical apparatus now commonly known as queer theory (Sullivan 2003: 37-39). Its proponents, like many gender theorists in other fields, insist on regarding gender and sexual identity as discursively constituted, and therefore contingent, discontinuous, fractured, multiple, fluid. This position enjoys wide academic acceptance, although it may at times lead to an unquestioning and vague celebration of the subversive possibilities of this queer subjectivity, with rather less notice given to the practical everyday effects of the heteronormative gender order and the need for more sustained, organised forms of resistance.

Judith Butler's work aptly illustrates the confluence of feminist theory, oppositional practice, and the impact on both of poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity. Among other things, she has contributed to a substantial destabilisation of the sex/gender distinction –one of the benchmarks of much contemporary feminist thought– by reversing the temporal, causal logic that used to bind the two terms, thus collapsing the boundaries. Butler (1990: 147) calls into question the usefulness of "the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics". Her notion of gender performativity lays out –and lays bare– the mechanisms whereby the performance and attributes of gender "effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (141; see also Butler 1993: 95); the practice of gender parody exposes the

fictional status of gender identity, which turns out to be, in her famous phrase, "an imitation without an origin" (Butler 1990: 138). The reality of gender –its ontology– thus manifests itself as illusory, radically inseparable from its enunciation and performance.

Feminism's comprehensive exposure of the workings of patriarchy and the challenges posed by the movement's accompanying projects of gender reform galvanised men's responses to the existing gender system –from reactionary to progressive (Connell 1995: 204-224; Gardiner 2002: 4)– and resulted in the broadening cultural attention to the components and determinants of the thus far underexamined category of masculinity. While much of this early literature, popular and otherwise, may have been simplistic, uninformed and sometimes unambiguously regressive, Newton (2002: 179) identifies a turning point in the late 1980s towards the creation of a respectable academic discipline that would carry out a serious, systematic analysis of men and masculinities. This comparatively recent interest in masculinity and its fragile construction inevitably entails a re-centering of the male subject, and has consequently been regarded with suspicion or reticence from various quarters. Solomon-Godeau (1995: 71), for instance, rejects the presumed novelty of the much-publicised contemporary crisis of masculinity –"there is ample evidence to suggest that there never is, never was, an unproblematic, a natural, or a crisis-free variant"– and questions the actual efficacy of a field of study that has so far proved unable to adequately address the ravages of patriarchy:

> While I suppose I am willing to grant that the current interrogation of masculinity is a useful project, perhaps even an index of positive social change, feminists and men who support feminism should be careful to distinguish a shared emancipatory project from intellectual masturbation. More disturbingly, the very appeal of approaching masculinity as a newly discovered discursive object may have less to do with the "ruination" of certain masculinities in their oppressive and subordinating instrumentalities than with a new accommodation of their terms—an expanded field for their deployment—in which the fundamentals do not change. (Solomon-Godeau 1995: 76)

This explains the frequently acknowledged need for masculinity studies to incorporate and actively pursue an openly progressive political project (Adams and Savran 2002: 6-7), and the careful attentiveness to feminism and feminist theory observed in several anthologies and prominent individual works on the issue (see May and Strikwerda 1992; Connell 1995 and 2000; Gardiner 2002). Gardiner (2002: 12-15, 23-24), in particular, spells out the mutual benefits of an explicit alliance between feminist theory and the study of masculinity, which stresses the fact that the latter is heavily indebted to the insights of immediately previous work on gender, and has developed along similar lines. Indeed, most

thoughtful scholarship on masculinity automatically assumes the category as ineluctably multiple –hence the more appropriate reference to masculinities–, constituted and modified in myriad (and multidirectional) ways by its intersection with structures like class, race, sexuality, nationality, age; it is also mindful of the particular power relations that regulate the interactions among existing kinds of masculinity, and their operation within the larger gender system, in different socio-historical contexts; finally, contemporary theoretical work on masculinities usually accepts and works on the basis of the performative character of all such constructs, as put forward by Judith Butler.

There is still, however, some resistance in the field to accept the full implications of much of its own theoretical apparatus. A case in point is the virtual effacement of the female in most discussions of masculinity. Both Sedgwick (1995: 12-13) and Halberstam (1998: 2) have drawn attention to the need for a systematic investigation into the structural challenges posed by female masculinity. In this sense, Connell's (2000: 29) rather strained insistence on a clear, ultimate link between masculinity and men –"Masculinity *refers to* male bodies (sometimes directly, sometimes symbolically and indirectly), but is not *determined* by male biology. It is, thus, perfectly logical to talk about masculine women or masculinity in women's lives, as well as masculinity in men's lives"–, together with his neglect of female masculinity in an earlier monograph whose title (*Masculinities*) and scope left less room for excuse, can be taken as fairly representative of the discipline's failure to wholly acknowledge and articulate the performative nature of gender. It is also indicative of the peculiar dissociation faced –embraced?– by masculinity studies, simultaneously presenting itself as a serious, committed and necessary discipline intent on identifying masculinity's illusions and possibly working to correct its most harmful effects, and recognising the only temporary, transitional character of the enterprise, and thus its eventual dissolution. After all, as Hopkins (1992: 197) cogently points out, there is little meaningful change to be expected "as long as masculinity is somehow viewed as an intrinsically appropriate feature of certain bodies".

2. Representation: Gender and Documentary

The paramount social and cultural weight of all forms of representation is extensively acknowledged, then, by practitioners of gender studies, for whom discourse and language remain enormously popular objects of analysis and interrogation. In this context, representations are commonly understood not as mere elaborations, imaginative or otherwise, of pre-existing identities –nor as silent mirrors to an allegedly external reality–, but as powerful interventions into their constitution. Masculinity studies does not significantly deviate from this trend. Most of the anthologies surveyed explicitly recognise the significance of representation in the production, dissemination, validation and critique of different notions of

masculinity: Berger, Wallis and Watson (1995: 7), for example, emphasise "how [...] images can produce and ultimately reshape notions of the masculine"; Adams and Savran (2002: 153) similarly highlight "the role of representations in creating and sustaining changing cultural ideas about masculinity"; and Whitehead and Barrett (2005: 141) identify "media imagery" as one of the "key arenas which inform and constitute the public world of men". They also include, in a more or less conspicuous fashion, writings that tackle the issue of masculinity and/in representation: there is a great number of individual essays that address such a link and it is not uncommon to actually find separate sections dedicated exclusively to the relationship between masculinity and representation.[2]

The absolute predominance of literature and film over other media in these accounts is easily explained by the cultural prestige and/or widespread exposure of these artistic forms. Fiction film, and most particularly Hollywood cinema, invites frequent and prolonged reflection; documentary film, on the other hand, has so far received scant attention, certainly nothing remotely approaching a thorough scrutiny. This seems to be, however, a rather general failing of gender studies as a whole. And though the situation is substantially improved in collections that address precisely gender and sexuality in relation to documentary film and video (see Holmlund and Fuchs 1997; Waldman and Walker 1999) –as well as in some documentary film theory (Nichols 1994; Bruzzi 2000)–, a strong impression remains that documentary studies is equally at fault for its long-standing disregard for gender matters and that a more sustained effort is needed to adequately redress the historical oversight.

There is a larger trend at work in this connection. Documentary's apparent imperviousness, for a great part of its long history, to broad, solid ideological examination of its very form has been the source of much wonder. In the early 1980s, with documentary film theory still pretty much in its infancy, Bill Nichols (1981: 172) found it

> odd that so much theoretical attention should go to those areas where the film itself (narrative, and now experimental film) at least calls attention to the fact of its being an illusion and so very little to documentary where the challenge of meeting this illusionism head on is greatest. It is only by examining how a series of sounds and images signify that we can begin to rescue documentary from the anti-theoretical, ideologically complicit argument that documentary-equals-reality, and that the screen is a window rather than a reflecting surface.

2. "Masculinity and Representation" in Berger, Wallis and Watson (1995); "Representations" in Adams and Savran (2002).

As a matter of fact, the rejection of documentary's unexamined epistemological assumptions –especially those of direct cinema, the form that would come to dominate the North American (mostly US) documentary landscape from the 60s onwards (Winston 1995: 203-204) and which usually claimed a privileged, unmediated access to reality and truth– was by then increasingly vocal. Waldman and Walker (1999: 6-11) sketch the prevalence, in the feminist film theory of the time, of the critique of realism after a brief embrace of conventional documentary forms on the part of the women's movement. The crisis and "exhaustion" of documentary, in both its observational and earlier expository modes, that took place in Canada during the 70s and 80s as described by Steven (1993: 21-22) were also highly symptomatic of the brewing shift of paradigm. The overhaul became widespread with the popularisation during the 80s of assorted postmodern attacks on grand narratives, in particular the Enlightenment project and its epistemological foundations; in other words, with the profound revision of the very notions of reason, truth, reality, objectivity and representation so historically crucial to the documentary enterprise. As Winston (1995: 243) succinctly noted, the "move to a postmodern scepticism throws the whole documentary idea into question".

The response by the overwhelming majority of writers on documentary has combined a qualified acknowledgement of the import of such challenges with an insistence on the continuing legitimacy and usefulness of the documentary form, albeit in increasingly self-conscious, modified versions. Waugh's (1984: xix) was an early, remarkably forceful vindication: "the new documentary theory has never even threatened to dislodge documentary as an important and discrete arena of committed film practice". Subsequent interventions in the debate have also attempted to downgrade the gravity of this apparent theoretical impasse, and so we have Nichols's (1991: 7) well-known assertion that "the separation between an image and what it refers to continues to be a difference that makes a difference", or the balance sought between documentary's necessary narrativity (Nichols 1991: 107-115; Renov 1993: 2-7) and its decisive gestures towards *the* world, the one that affects us all, even if it is never more than "a shared, historical construct" (Nichols 1991: 109). The degree to which we actually do share that construct is still, of course, a matter of extraordinary contention.

Documentary's traditional claims to truth (usually understood as unique and readily accessible) have thus undergone considerable re-examination. Both Nichols (1994: 1-6) and Williams (1993: 11) emphasise the new documentary's preference for situated forms of knowledge which would generate non-totalising, strategic, relative truth/s –a move which simultaneously justifies and, again, guarantees the continuity of the genre:

> It has become an axiom of the new documentary that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that

> construct competing truths –the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events. Yet too often this way of thinking has led to a forgetting of the way in which these films still are [...] documentaries –films with a special interest in the relation to the real, the 'truths' which matter in people's lives but which cannot be transparently represented (Williams 1993: 13)

The transformation is evinced by the broad, steady flow in the last three decades towards a tighter incorporation of the issues of subjectivity, identity, and reflexivity to documentary film (Renov 2004: 197). It is also patent in the considerable inroads of subjectivity and gender thinking into documentary theory. Pertinent examples of this are Nichols's expansion of his original typology of documentary modes (1991: 32-33) to include the performative (1994: 92-106), and Bruzzi's contention (2000: 125) that "[p]erformance has always been at the heart of documentary filmmaking", as well as her related (but not identical) notion of the performative documentary. These debates acquire a special significance for groups with a more precarious, conflict-ridden link to representation, that is, those that claim to have been historically under- or misrepresented (Rabinowitz 1994: 13). As far as gender and sexuality are concerned, both feminists and gay and lesbian activists found documentary useful for the deployment of new understandings of the political, and contributed to an enlargement of documentary's thematic interests (Waugh 1984: xxvi; Nichols 1991: ix; Steven 1993: 23, 41), but also to a complex renegotiation of its terms.

Waugh (1997) finds, in his study of gay and lesbian documentary of the 1970s, a tension (also present in much feminist politics) between the need for "positive images", usually conveyed in traditional realist form, and the more intricate problematising of identity carried out by several kinds of performative documentary: "realism was adequate for mustering ourselves as an electoral minority, but for *real* change (as we used to say), 'performance' strategies were preferred" (1997: 114). This captures a turning point in the history of documentary filmmaking marked by the convergence of identity politics (with its multiple and sometimes conflicting agendas) and poststructuralist-inflected understandings of both identity and representation. Waldman and Walker (1999: 13), in turn, assert their belief that both positions can be reconciled, that it is possible, as they put it, to find "a way of conserving the baby of vocalized struggle while draining out the bathwater of pseudotransparency".

Work with a clear focus on gender and sexuality in documentary film and video has been abundant ever since, although perhaps not too widespread or notorious for the most part. There are, however, some emblematic, highly successful examples which illustrate the ongoing modification of the dominant documentary canon and the unresolved tensions within the form. One of the most frequently discussed films in this respect is Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*

(1991). An examination –by an off-screen outsider– of the New York black/Latino drag ball subculture, this documentary exhibits, as has been already widely remarked (Rabinowitz 1994: 131-132; Bruzzi 2000: 156-157), a somewhat uneasy blending of conventional observational form and a theme and social actors that insist (albeit still ambivalently) on a performative conception of identity. In other words, there is not always a correspondence between the diversion from normative identity manifest in the subjects and actions depicted in the film and a similar critique of the very mechanism of representation –which might once more beg the question of documentary's ultimate responsiveness and adaptability to such concerns. The number of documentaries which deal with masculinity in an explicit way is much more restricted, and these are often allied with various forms of progressive activism, such as Marlon Riggs's controversial *Tongues Untied* (1989), an epitome of the performative mode of representation, and already a much-celebrated classic of documentary video, which problematised black gay identity in an unusually sophisticated way. It is not, however, characteristic of the overall picture and of the difficulties that surround the portrayal of masculinities in documentary film.

Normative (heterosexual, male) masculinity is indeed, strictly speaking, in no need of representation –the hegemonic white variant even less so. Its representation is always already ubiquitous, but for a long time it has also been, paradoxically, transparent, unmarked. Its potential susceptibility to open and judicious documentary inspection is further complicated by hegemonic masculinity's historical investment in the documentary enterprise, a link that encompasses conventional epistemology and patriarchal rule:

> The principle of universal reason, touchstone of post-Enlightenment thought, was massively facilitated by the growth and refinement of the nation-state during modernity's two-hundred-year reign. It is here that one encounters the confluence of an incipient documentary project, particularly alive in the Soviet Union and Great Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, with the nation-building imperative of that age. The most ambitious documentary efforts have often coupled a zealotry for science and nation. (Renov 2004: 133-134).

The United States and Canada were not exceptions to this sweeping unifying impulse, facilitated by state-sponsored documentary filmmaking during crucial periods in their recent history. In this connection, one should not overlook documentary's well-established status as one of the "discourses of sobriety" –"vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will"– identified by Nichols (1991: 3-4). Traditionally, then, documentary has not differed much from other areas of the cultural establishment in its ideological underpinnings and institutional practice, most of it clearly masculinist. The films analysed below portray masculine identities and male practices that tend to

straddle the relatively permeable boundaries between the hegemonic and the complicit (see Connell 1995: 77-80). They testify to the increased but still insufficient critical visibility of North American hegemonic masculinity, and remind us of the viability and potential effectiveness of an integrated reassessment of masculinity and documentary film.

3. *This* is *Spinal Tap*; Or, The Reality of Ineptitude and the Ineptitude of Reality

> There's no way to promote something that doesn't exist.
> (David St. Hubbins)

This Is Spinal Tap (1984) may at first strike as an odd choice for a discussion like this. It is, after all, most emphatically not a documentary film. Yet there seems to be a considerably widespread acceptance, within documentary studies, of the mockumentary form in general (Sánchez 2005: 85-86) and of this movie in particular –as suggested by its inclusion in certain accounts of non-fiction film (Grant and Sloniowski 1998). While the seemingly unproblematic accommodation of this form may be taken to accentuate the increasing, self-critical flexibility of the documentary genre, one must bear in mind that the mockumentary, as defined by Roscoe and Hight (2001: 49), remains a largely external threat, with the double-edged implications of such a category as regards the possible reach of its critique (186). As an avowedly fictional text, it can easily circumvent the predicaments of documentary's enduring investment in the real, but at the same time risks having any critical advances crucially checked by its very outsider status.

Actor Rob Reiner's feature-length directorial debut, the movie documents "legendary" British band Spinal Tap's hilariously disastrous American tour. It opens with documentarian Marty DiBergi (played by Reiner himself) introducing his film as an attempt to "to capture the sights, the sounds, the smells of a hard-working rock band on the road", in what constitutes an exaggerated replication of observational documentary's most fanciful claims. *This Is Spinal Tap* combines the merely observational with conventional concert footage, interviews, superimposed titles, photographs, and archival TV material of the band's musical past, all of them essential to the film's comedic success.[3]

An early exchange serves to make fun of the quirky workings of popular music mythology and its rampant clonism, and to hint at the band's rather muddled ontological status within the industry. David St. Hubbins (lead guitar and singer, played by Michael McKean) and Nigel Tufnel (lead guitar, played by

3. See Plantinga 1998 for a more detailed account of parodied intertexts and (rock-) documentary conventions.

Christopher Guest) recount how they joined up after leaving their respective initial groups, The Creatures and Lovely Lads. The resulting band, called The Originals, having learned of another group in the East End with that exact name, decides to turn into The New Originals; when the other band renames itself The Regulars, they consider they might as well go back to their first choice, "but what's the point?" This scene implicitly raises an important issue that is emphasised all throughout the film: the inherent, obvious constructedness of commercial public identities. As Roscoe and Hight (2001: 120) indicate,

> A significant feature of rockumentaries, which complicates th[e] naturalist argument [on which much documentary practice relies], is that they are recording events which are themselves constructed theatrical performances. [...] This places mock-rockumentaries in an interesting position of offering a parody or satire of an event or band or persona which is, to some extent, already acknowledged as a fictional construct.

Clips of the band's previous musical incarnations –from "beat" to "psychedelic" (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 122)– suggest a morphing ability that is ultimately dependent on fluctuating, and sometimes rather arbitrary, market dynamics. They also underline the shifting standards of acceptable manhood (as culturally represented) and thus the category's intrinsic contingency. The band's (current) heavy metal phase is strenuously marked by the need to sustain a hypermasculine façade that seems quite at odds with the rather goofy, adolescent and unself-conscious masculinity of its most prominent members.[4] The very fact that it *must* be sustained points to its inevitable performativity, here visually supported by the recurrent use of various props: rough hairstyle and make-up, phallic guitars, dark elaborate sets, and, in the infamous airport security scene, a cucumber wrapped in tinfoil that Derek Smalls (bass, played by Harry Shearer) is required to take out of his spandex trousers.

This peculiar prosthesis had already been noticeable in an earlier concert scene –stressed by one of the not infrequent crotch-level shots that betray the camera's complicity with the band's self-presentation and myth-making process (a general feature of rock documentaries)– and it reveals the fundamental role of hyperbolic masculinity in heavy metal's imaginary and audience composition. As Nigel clumsily explains, "Really, they [the females] are quite fearful. That's my theory. They see us on the stage, with tight trousers. We've got, you know, armadillos in our trousers. I mean, it's really quite frightening, the size. And, and they, they run screaming". Needless to say, macho posturing and aggressiveness

4. Indeed, the film's greatest source of comedy, and the crisis that structures much of the narrative, is the band's utter inability to live up to the expectations raised by their hypermasculine musical personae.

permeate all other areas of their broad masculinist performance: from misogynistic lyrics with barely concealed sexual innuendo –"Sex farm woman, I'm gonna mow you down / Sex farm woman, I'll rake and hoe you down / Sex farm woman, don't you see my silo rising high, high, high"– to grotesque displays of virtuosity (Plantinga 1998: 325). The band's performance also reveals an unquestioning adhesion to the music industry's discourse of transnational competition and their yielding to the pressure to conquer foreign markets.

Gender-based conflict also figures as central to some of the band's misfortunes. The proposed cover for the album they are promoting (*Smell the Glove*) is refused for being sexist and the company is forced to change it. More tellingly, the sudden appearance of David's girlfriend, Jeanine Pettibone (June Chadwick), destabilises the band's idealised all-male unit –aptly encapsulated in another song: "I don't need a woman, I won't take me no wife / I've got the rock and roll, and that'll be my life"– and challenges managerial authority, eventually causing both Ian (the manager) and Nigel (who resents the divided attention of his childhood friend) to leave the group. Ian's misogyny is remarkably candid: "I'm certainly not gonna co-manage with some girl [...] I am not managing [the band] with you or any other woman". These and other examples constitute masculinity as a carefully enclosed territory that is nevertheless constantly endangered by outside forces. Hence the band members' self-suppression of any remote deviation towards femininity and the features conventionally associated with it –for instance, when Nigel is playing a delicate piece on the piano and finally announces its projected title to be "Lick My Love Pump", as if to immediately ward off any perceived departure from hyperbolic masculinity– and the sparse but unequivocal disparagement of homosexuality (Plantinga 1998: 328).

Charming as the film's satire of hypermasculinity may be –in itself a pretty safe and limited undertaking–, any appreciation of the overall effectiveness of its critique should be heavily qualified. Jeanine's portrayal is distinctively unflattering, and the movie is unambiguous about her inability to manage the band. Moreover, the male order is finally restored: Nigel reunites with the group and there is a suggestion that Ian has taken up management again. The film, however, opened the way to the derision of several forms of masculinism in the music industry, spawning a considerable gallery of imitators.[5]

5. *Fear of a Black Hat* (1992) is an extremely pertinent example. A fake documentary by fictional director Nina Blackburn, it applies *This Is Spinal Tap*'s lampooning method, almost down to its last detail, to (black) rap culture's hyperbolic performance and celebration of masculinity. The targets of scorn here are predictably similar –male ineptitude, misogynistic attitudes, aggressive song titles and lyrics– and there are some striking parallels between the two movies. Consider, for instance, the phallic gun-showing scene that clearly references Nigel's guitar exhibit in Reiner's film, or the peculiarly sensitive "love song" written by one of the group's members –"I want to make you mine, slap your fat behind, tie you down and make

The depth of *This Is Spinal Tap*'s revision of documentary's claims on representation is also questionable. The mode employed in the film is admittedly never purely observational; its frequent steps in the direction of the interactive/participatory –DiBergi often appears on screen, band members and other subjects are routinely interviewed, the presence of the camera is directly acknowledged at several points– may perhaps suggest a more nuanced approach to the reality of the historical world. A case in point is DiBergi's rather more vigorous intervention –on Nigel's side– during the latter part of the film, which effectively breaks the illusions that sustain the traditional observational stance. But there is more interest in crafty, humorous imitation of documentary's most easily recognisable conventions than in any comprehensive undermining of its epistemological structure and supports. The point is nicely captured by Roscoe and Hight's placement (2001: 119-125) of *This Is Spinal Tap* –and possibly of the entire mock-rockumentary corpus– within the first, most innocuous degree ("parody") of their three-tier mock-documentary schema (68-75).[6]

Here it may be appropriate to consider the pervasiveness of self-referentiality, extensively surveyed by Dunne (1992), in what he calls the "hypermediated world of American popular culture" (1992: 161). While Dunne himself refrains from any extended discussion of its ideological and epistemological implications, it becomes apparent that the phenomenon as a whole rarely ventures, or aims, beyond the thrill of recognition and the confidence of guaranteed commercial self-perpetuation. There might be some substance, then, to Doherty's (2003: 24) characterisation of the mockumentary as "at heart a soothing genre. It repays a lifetime of arid channel surfing with an oasis of cool attitude and flatters spectators with assurances of their media sophistication and oh-so-wry sensibility".

4. Going to Meet the Man: The Beast Without in *Project Grizzly*

> The wife says I'm nuts; I talk to things, they become real.
>
> (Troy Hurtubise)

If *This Is Spinal Tap* parodies documentary codes from the confines of fiction, *Project Grizzly* (1996) partially reverses the perspective. A National Film Board of Canada (NFB) production, this highly unconventional documentary portrays a man's prolonged obsession with grizzly bears as he prepares for a much sought-after repeat encounter. The film effects a parodic deployment of various fiction

---

you whine, I want you to scratch my itch, and be my bitch, cause I love you girl" –that supposedly manifests "his whole vulnerability".

6. The other two degrees, in order of potential subversiveness, are critique and deconstruction. Parody, as these authors argue (2000: 100), often amounts to simply an "'innocent' appropriation" of documentary aesthetics.

film generic conventions and popular culture narratives, registers the fictionalisation of reality and the realisation of fiction, and generally disrupts the already loose boundaries that attempt to separate/install the two domains. Peter Lynch's film also radically departs from the customary institutional preference for works aimed at public education and socio-political utility, veering instead towards sheer spectacle (Longfellow 2003: 197-198).

Troy Hurtubise is a scrap-metal worker from North Bay, Ontario, who has dedicated the last seven years of his life to "grizzly research", the professed purpose of which is the potentially fatal re-enactment of his previous traumatic confrontation with a bear. Both the details of this episode in Hurtubise's past and the motivation that drives his present quest are at first intentionally obscure: "It just happened because it happened, and, in that the bear didn't kill me, I've been on its trail ever since". In preparation for the event, he builds a bulky armoured suit, the Ursus Mark (now in its sixth model), which he patiently tests in all sorts of extreme ways. The enterprise is routinely shrouded in pseudo-scientific language –Hurtubise speaks gravely of his "research team" and at one point suggests there has been some kind of consultation with university experts– but at the same time it takes on almost supernatural, mythic dimensions. The movie's opening shots show a desolate, imposing landscape, and Hurtubise slowly emerging out of the woods to relay his memories to the camera. In his story, the grizzly –wholly personified (and idealised) in the figure of what he calls "the Old Man"– becomes a site for the projection of Troy's psychological and emotional anxieties.

His relationship with the bear is articulated in characteristically masculine terms, within the framework of an exclusively male ritual of power in which the young and the old vie for authority. The exact same rhetoric is at work when Troy explains why he does not bring his father on his expeditions: "Too many chiefs. My father likes to be in command too. So when I go out with my father, it's always like you're pitting against each other". From this moment onwards, then, this strand of the Oedipal narrative that inflects Troy's project becomes explicit, its haunting force rendered even greater by his father's total absence from the film; the unresolved conflict is thus effectively displaced "into [the grizzly's] territory". This interpretation –the projected, largely specular character of Troy's desired confrontation– has already been suggested by the editing on two separate occasions, in illustrational stock footage where instead of, say, a lone menacing bear, it is two bears fighting (or ready to fight) each other that we are shown.

As that example indicates, despite the film's strong impression of detachment and delegated control –it completely eschews, for instance, voice-over narration and on-screen authorial presence, and appears to grant observation a prominent place–, Lynch makes good use of all other means at his disposal to structure the

material and, more important, to actively convey his own reading of Troy's mission and persona. For one thing, the actions observed are, in fact, hardly spontaneous:

> The film –and this is, perhaps, its biggest deviation from classical conceptions of documentary– is fully narrative, interventionist, and self-reflexive. Not only are numerous sequences obviously staged, but the principal dramatic event, Hurtubise's would-be encounter with a grizzly in the foothills of the Rockies, is deliberately choreographed by the film production, which subsidizes and arranges the transport of Hurtubise, his posse of seven men, and a small arsenal of guns and ammunition to Alberta. (Longfellow 2003: 199)

It is of course Troy's peculiar figure that serves as the crucial inspiring agent of Lynch's cinematic manipulations and critical commentary. His exuberant self-presentation –his attire, poses, gestures, demeanour– and the steady allusion to relevant texts (mostly visual) and myths of the US popular imagination give us the measure of an avowedly hypermediated identity –in Longfellow's (2003: 201) words, "a walking pastiche of American popular culture, if there ever was one". His childhood memories –spurred by his mother's recollections of Troy's early penchant for destruction (shooting light bulbs off a Christmas tree, building a volcano)– mingle with episodes of *The Brady Bunch*; his bear-proof suit borrows from the hardened 80s masculinity of *Robocop*'s cyborg policeman –as Lynch makes clear in the dexterous juxtaposition at the abandoned drive-in movie theatre; and the 1994 epic Western drama *Legends of the Fall*, together with a plethora of unnamed, more classical examples of the genre, infuses much of Troy's sense of quest and personal fate.[7]

Lynch's ability to play on the tenuousness of Hurtubise's link with the substance of such cultural references is perhaps most evident on the aural plane. The use of militaristic music and Western-style melodies as accompaniment to Troy's antics throughout the film underscores, without being exceedingly intrusive, the ironic distance between the over-assertive, inflated masculinity of his cinematic and other cultural exemplars, and his own deficient, tragically out-of-place performance –an unbridgeable divide that has an obvious correlation on the national scale. By commenting on a type of mediation that bears all the marks of cultural colonialism, *Project Grizzly* implicitly raises for consideration the disparity between the United States as an imperialist superpower capable of large-scale ideological export and Canada as a nation permanently at the margins of empire, and asserts, if not the authority to completely transcend the former's

7. *Moby Dick* is another obvious cultural allusion, somewhat apart from the more popular references and intertexts, and less explicitly developed. In any case, the idea of Troy as a latter-day Ahab proves here just as anachronistic and ludicrous as the other parallels.

overwhelming influence, at least some potential for parodic revision and undermining (Longfellow 2003: 199-200, 203). The opposition is, to a certain extent, also important to understanding what could be regarded as an almost schizophrenic approach to nature that combines notions of the Western frontier myth (of particular, though not exclusive, import to the US imaginary) with echoes of the less intrepid, quintessentially Canadian garrison mentality –both variations of a single masculinist theme: civilisation and nature united by a logic of domination–, all of which is complicated, in Troy's eclectic fashion, by a certain appropriation of Native American/Canadian spirituality. [8]

As shown in the film, Hurtubise's endeavour moves hesitantly between defiance and submission. His unwavering determination to challenge the "Old Man" superficially conforms to the courageous, tough-minded, rugged individualism of the frontier mythology, of someone who is ready to confront the wilderness and come out victorious. But the whole idea crumbles away when we consider that Troy's suit, a rigid, clumsy 7'2" monster that can barely move, will not possibly allow for much beyond mere survival, the ability to simply stand the bear's attack and escape relatively unscathed. (Protection from the outside also seems to have been the principle behind his father's greatest project –the building of an Iroquoian village–, "a monument in [Troy's] mind" to which he explicitly links his own.)

The ambivalence is further illustrated by Troy's narration of a recurring dream, one that has him falling into a "black abyss" where paralysing fear mixes with attraction: "I wanna go down deeper 'cause I wanna explore". This vision alone may call to mind Troy's earlier depiction of the grizzly's eyes as "little fathomless pits", and Hurtubise immediately brings the connection to the surface: he believes that dream has, in the past, invariably anticipated bad luck (which evinces a form of superstition that would seem at odds with the pretended scientific character of the project) and forebodes now, the medicine man claims, a deadly outcome to his current enterprise; "but he says [...] that's a good way to die", and Troy himself appears to relish the prospect.[9] Hurtubise also consistently refers to his suit as "she" and "good girl", providing excellent

8. Indeed, the film also plays out the East/West divide within Canada's own national imagination and their contrasting myths of encounter with the land.

9. This particular scene is even more significant when considered against a similar reference, later in the film, in which Troy recalls the identically phrased warning of a *fictional* Native Indian: "You gotta have a sense of humour. I mean, the worst that can happen is you can die, and as in *Legends of the Fall* the chief said 'It's a good way to die'". While it is entirely possible that the medicine man consulted by Hurtubise (whom we know nothing about) did in fact convey to him that exact meaning in interpreting his dream, the film's inclusion of this similitude nonetheless reinforces the impression of a remarkable epistemological confusion that Lynch, tellingly, never attempts to disentangle.

fodder –to those so inclined– for a psychoanalytic reading of his quest as a feminised, masochistic fantasy.

The film touches as well on the conflicting demands of male bonding and married life, and inspects the importance of the former in the maintenance of normative notions of male subjectivity. Hurtubise, who is "allowed out every second night", finds in the all-male enclave a space of temporary freedom from everyday responsibilities and a springboard for excitement that might assuage his "biggest fear [...] monotony, being bored, being average". As several scenes manifest, the sentiment is shared by his friends and crew, one of whom explains his war experience in those terms: "One of the reasons why I went to Vietnam, I s'pose, was for the fun travel and adventure, and to get a feel for what it was like in combat". He then goes on to relate the particulars of a near-suicidal game ("outrun hand grenade") he and fellow soldiers used to play for the sake of "adrenaline rush". The military analogy is highly appropriate in a film that portrays a form of masculinity based on recklessness and hyperbole and whose occasional extravagance may conceal the widespread social acceptance it actually enjoys.

Troy's ultimate failure to stage and consummate the encounter –quite tellingly, on account of the suit's preposterous inappropriateness to the terrain– highlights the crucially ambiguous function of non-accomplishment in his narrative. Troy's dream retains its grip as long as it is not fulfilled and becomes, for that very reason, "what keeps [him] going", just as masculine ideals –far from being an effect of fixed natural embodiment– remain perpetually, necessarily elusive, never completely attainable. Therein lies their resilience. *Project Grizzly* reveals masculine performance as constant and constantly lacking. As we are properly reminded in another scene –Troy, in front of a mirror, shaving with a huge bowie knife (the film's most phallic prosthesis, together with the gun)–, the maintenance of normative masculinity is, indeed, "a delicate operation".

5. *Murderball* and the Rewards of Unabashed Mastery

> We're not going for a hug, we're going for a fucking gold medal.
> (Scott Hogsett)

The very recent *Murderball* (2005) provides a fairly compelling indication of the difficulties encountered by the (critical) representation of hegemonic masculinity at the present juncture and can be used, I believe, as a template for the assessment of its immediate and long-term challenges. While the film illustrates many of the burdens, trials and tribulations of normative white masculinity in contemporary North American culture, it does not sufficiently problematise them, often working instead, as we shall see, towards hasty, conveniently facile solutions. Nor does the film dig much deeper into epistemological ground. *Murderball* is not

openly concerned with the problems of documentary representation, and, despite its relatively successful exploitation of a number of recognisable narrative patterns and codes associated mostly with fiction film, the emphasis is not on reflexivity or the potential for productive epistemological equivocation, but primarily on heightened emotional, dramatic impact. Furthermore, and unlike the two films discussed previously, *Murderball* is utterly devoid of satiric intent.

Through the organising prism of professional quadriplegic rugby, the film –co-directed by second-time documentarian Henry A. Rubin and journalist Dana A. Shapiro and partly made in conjunction with a 2002 article for the racy men's magazine *Maxim*– offers valuable glimpses into the lives of men who would appear to have a rather complicated relationship to hegemonic masculinity. As Connell (2000: 189) accurately notes, commercial competitive sport is a crucial vehicle "for the promotion of dominant forms of masculinity" and its use "as the dominant symbol of hegemonic masculinity appears to be on the rise globally" (65); it is also a site where masculine performance is consistently and conspicuously material, its marked bodily dimension making "gender [...] vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained –for instance, as a result of physical disability" (Connell 1995: 54).

It is precisely the radical disavowal of disability that allows most of the men in the film to reclaim their sense of masculinity and, by common extension, of personhood itself. [10] The first scenes indicate the pervasiveness of resentment and aggressively defensive attitudes; it is evident in Mark Zupan's nonchalant willingness to fight (disabled and able-bodied guys alike) –"What, you're not gonna hit a kid in a chair? Fucking hit me, I'll hit you back!"–, in the players' forceful rejection of stereotypes of the disabled as weak and pitiful, or in Andy Cohn's casual comment that the mobility impairment in his hands make them particularly suitable as "spatulas for pancakes or [for] fucking people off". The mechanism at work in examples like these could perhaps be described as one of masculine overcompensation in the face of limiting conditions, but one should be careful not to assign undue weight to this explanation. A broader social trend is suggested when one of his high-school friends confidently asserts that Zupan always was "an asshole", and the causes for the present disability of some of the players –which include car accidents, one of them alcohol-related, and a fist fight– are also very telling in this respect.

10. A different perspective –one that is probably representative of the early stages of rehabilitation– is provided by Keith Cavill, tellingly the only major character in the film who is not yet involved in quad rugby. He painfully recognises the importance of the bodily dimension of identity and the challenges disability poses to its integrity: "When you go down to that gym, you realise how much you're broken down. You're really almost at an infant's level. [...] I can't even make a firm grip with my hand to present myself".

In this context, the case against the negative effects of competitive sports that use the male body for different degrees of violent spectacle –and which constitute "a major threat to men's health" (Connell 2000: 189)– is further complicated by the fact that in wheelchair rugby that body is, to a considerable extent, already wounded, verging on numbness, and therefore an adequate surface for extreme ideological inscription. Whatever social concern (arguably pretty faint) there may be with bodily aggression and harm in traditional mainstream sport is thus here radically diminished. The history and particulars of murderball –as the game was originally called– are, however, of limited significance to our discussion, and they occupy a minimal portion of the film itself; suffice it to say, then, that it is as physically brutal as its mainstream counterpart.

Of rather more interest are the mentality and values behind the sport, and what they can reveal about the larger culture. Among the sport's most highly regarded functions is that of enabler of homosocial bonding and the proud expression of male prowess. Competitiveness is exalted here in a relentless, all-consuming drive for unequivocal domination. The wheelchair, often taken as a shameful mark of impotence, is deftly transformed into a weapon, and draws grandiose comparisons with filmic exemplars of militant virility (*Mad Max*, *Gladiator*). The court where the game is played frequently becomes, in turn, a theatre for the representation of national/ist anxieties; these are evident, for instance, in the pervasive resentment at the 2002 World Championship towards US arrogance and their continued dominance in this sport.

Conflicts around nationhood and competition are mostly encapsulated in the person of Portuguese-born Joe Soares, coach of Team Canada and former US quad rugby player. Soares's bitter departure from Team USA and his unremitting struggle for victory accentuate the tensions inherent in the logic of competitive sport, and unleash the paranoid rhetoric of border anxiety, espionage and treason that helps perpetuate a national imaginary.[11] At one point he is flippantly compared to Benedict Arnold –emblematic traitor figure in American history– and the accusation recurs at other times in equally explicit terms ("How does it feel to betray your country, man?"). Soares's responses cover a rather limited range: from silent complicity in that discourse to a half-hearted effort to refuse its most serious implications by sensibly reminding his accusers that it is, after all, just a sport they are talking about. As the film repeatedly shows, not everyone is ready to agree on this last point, and some players seem to take slight

11. The reference to this episode brings up the issue of masculinity's strained relationship with age, an element too often ignored in studies of gender. A female Team USA manager concisely captures the link, in very pragmatic terms: "In '96 Joe was the man. (…) Unfortunately his speed started going down, he became older, so he got cut".

affronts to heart –to wit, Mark Zupan: "If Joe was on the side of the road on fire, I wouldn't piss on him to put it out".

Examples of cocky boastfulness and displays of masculine bravado –many of them reminiscent of *Spinal Tap*'s immaturity– are predictably copious throughout the film and serve to heighten awareness of the performative character of the hypermasculine identity they attempt to salvage. The performance on court is remarkably elaborate: ritual chanting, battle cries, defiant posturing, threatening looks. Manhood is figured as an incremental achievement, an imprecise quality to be approximated through adequate feats and gestures, and one that is easy to lose –this is what enables Soares to taunt Zupan with suggestions of his not being "man enough". It goes without saying that masculinity's self-conscious public exhibition carries on well beyond the sporting arena, and the filmmakers offer engrossing instances of its off-court performance.

Not surprisingly, concerns over the capacity for sexual activity receive lavish attention. Its relevance to male subjectivity is grotesquely summarised by Scott Hogsett's wisecrack, "I'd rather be able to grab my meat than grab a toothbrush". Cohn labels his first sexual act after the accident "a very great moment in [his] life" and the recovery of sexual potency is officially recognised as an important part of rehabilitation.[12] More remarkable, yet still perfectly consistent with the operations of patriarchy, are the occasional but nevertheless enthusiastic female celebrations of active male sexuality:[13] Hogsett recounts having an erection while being bathed by a nurse who apparently "got so excited that [he] got a woodie" that she ran to tell his mother. Heterosexuality is taken for granted, and its boundaries are carefully, if at times semi-facetiously, policed. There is a truly puzzling scene where a player is mocked by some of his team-mates for not liking girls with "big tits", preferring instead athletic women; his equally perplexing response –"I'm ok with my sexuality"– gives some indication of how restricted and meaningless their idea of acceptable sexual dissent can be.

The father/son dynamic that structured part of *Project Grizzly*'s masculine narrative becomes, in *Murderball*, more explicit and central to its illustration of the conflictive transmission of normative masculinity. Joe's son, Robert, is soft-spoken and sensitive, gets excellent grades, plays the viola and –much to his father's thinly disguised disappointment– seems uninterested in either sports or violence. He speaks admiringly of his father, but complains about having to dust the shelves of his "trophy wall". The film articulates the heavy toll Soares's

12. The film includes excerpts from the bizarrely-titled hospital video "Sexuality Reborn: Sexuality Following Spinal Cord Injury", a rather cheesy and unintentionally hilarious piece –perhaps the closest *Murderball* comes to an ironic distancing from its subject.

13. Women's roles in most other areas shown in the film seem to be also secondary, barely acknowledged (Leader 2006: 5-6), and largely supportive of aggressive masculinity.

obsession with competition, discipline and success takes on his family life and, most crucially, his own health. The paternal conflict and its apparent resolution are, however, handled in a rather formulaic way: the severe father undergoes a (partial) conversion after suffering a heart attack; he matures, at least according to his sisters; and a later scene has him flying back home early from a match to proudly attend his son's school-concert performance –a veritable staple of family film drama. *Murderball* provides, without much questioning, what looks like a premature and profoundly unconvincing closure. Robert's deviation from hegemonic masculinity is contained by the reification of talent and its incorporation into the ethics of competitive-based accomplishment –the boy's own school awards are eventually allowed some space on his father's shrine. The validation is reinforced by means of an explicit link with enduring narratives of the US national imagination: the ethos of individualism, hard work and thrift, the American dream, and the contribution of the immigrant experience.

US/Canadian rivalry becomes again the major focus of attention at the 2004 Paralympics in Athens. Both teams fail in their quest for gold, but this only leads to a strengthening of the framework of commercial competitive sport, which is never subjected to any significant interrogation either on the part of the filmmakers or of those most directly involved. Even more troubling is the documentary's (quite literally) last-minute showcasing of a quad rugby demonstration for disabled Iraq war 'veterans'. Given the brevity and unexpectedness of this epilogue, it is hard to determine with certainty what its import might be. In a different film, the opportunity would be taken to acknowledge the existence –and supremacy– of a socio-cultural apparatus that sanctions both the sport's ideology of aggression and domination, and a murderous imperialistic adventure based on precisely those values. *Murderball* excludes further context, does not recognise any explicit link other than the one observed (quad rugby as one possible passage back into civilian life) and refuses open commentary.

The film is obviously not without its merits (considerable technical adroitness, a keen sense of rhythm and structure) and it contains some honestly moving moments and inspirational stories. Its examination of hegemonic masculinity is, however, ultimately unsatisfactory. Many of the fissures are brought to the surface –the anxious recovery and reinscription of the wounded male body, masculinity's unstable link with nationhood, the tensions of transmission– only to be rapidly, and sloppily, sutured. This might suggest the particular weight, in the current North American context, of a certain (officially encouraged) movement back to traditional, unabashedly aggressive forms of masculinity. But this recent backlash is not altogether uncontested and could prove short-lived.

What these texts illustrate is the increasing pressure to face the constructedness of masculinities, their fractures and effects, as well as the vagaries of documentary representation and the collapse of previously firm reality/fiction

dichotomies. The three films focus on hyperbolic instantiations of hegemonic masculinity, a choice that risks diverting attention from its more 'ordinary' embodiments or that could often result in the containment of outrage through safe gestures of derision. Despite their failings, however, they demonstrate that documentary can also have a role in deconstructing normative masculine identities. They constitute, in any case, only a small sample of a corpus not yet fully explored by either masculinity or documentary studies. With this in mind, it is to be hoped that comprehensive analyses of masculinity will also find a more regular place for critical contribution within the larger field of gender studies.

Works cited

Adams, R., and D. Savran, eds. 2002. *The Masculinity Studies Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Berger, M., B. Wallis, and S. Watson, eds. 1995. *Constructing Masculinity*. New York: Routledge.

Bruzzi, S. 2000. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge.

Connell, R. W. 1995. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Connell, R. W. 2000. *The Men and the Boys*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Doherty, T. 2003. "The Sincerest Form of Flattery: A Brief History of the Mockumentary". *Cineaste* 28 (4): 22-24.

Dunne, M. 1992. *Metapop: Self-Referentiality in Contemporary American Popular Culture*. Jackson, Miss. and London: University Press of Mississippi.

Fear of a Black Hat. 2003. Dir. Rusty Cundieff. Perf. Rusty Cundieff, Larry B. Scott, Mark Christopher Lawrence. 1992. DVD. Avatar.

Gardiner, J. K., ed. 2002. *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Grant, B. K., and J. Sloniowski, eds. 1998. *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Halberstam, J. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press.

Holmlund, C., and C. Fuchs, eds. 1997. *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Hopkins, P. D. 1992. "Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities". *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations*

in Light of Feminism. Eds. L. May and R. Strikwerda. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield. 111-131.

Leader, R. 2006. "*Murderball*". [Review] *Adonis Mirror*. 20 Mar. <http://adonismirror.com/pdf/01292006_leader_murderball.pdf>. 1-9.

Longfellow, B. 2003. "Hyperbolic Masculinity and the Ironic Gaze in *Project Grizzly*". *Candid Eyes: Essays on Canadian Documentaries*. Eds. J. Leach and J. Sloniowski. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

May, L., and R. Strikwerda, eds. 1992. *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Murderball. 2005. Dir. Henry A. Rubin and Dana A. Shapiro. Feat. Mark Zupan, Joe Soares, Keith Cavill. 2005. DVD. THINKFilm.

Newton, J. 2002. "Masculinity Studies: The Longed For Profeminist Movement for Academic Men?" *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*. Ed. J. K. Gardiner. New York: Columbia University Press.

Nichols, B. 1981. *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. 1994. *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. 2001. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Paris Is Burning. 1991. Dir. Jennie Livingston. Feat. Dorian Corey, Pepper Labeija, Venus Xtravaganza, Octavia St. Laurent, Willi Ninja. DVD. 1991. Miramax Home Entertainment.

Plantinga, C. 1998. "Gender, Power and a Cucumber: Satirizing Masculinity in *This Is Spinal Tap*". *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*. Eds. B. K. Grant and J. Sloniowski. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 318-332.

Project Grizzly. 1996. Dir. Peter Lynch. Feat. Troy J. Hurtubise. 1996. DVD. Reaction.

Rabinowitz, P. 1994. *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. London and New York: Verso.

Renov, M., ed. 1993. *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge.

Renov, M. 2004. *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Roscoe, J., and C. Hight. 2001. *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Glasgow: Manchester University Press.

Sánchez-Navarro, Jordi. 2005. "(Re)construcción y (re)presentación. Mentira hiperconsciente y falso documental". *Documental y vanguardia*. Eds. C. Torreiro and J. Cerdán. Madrid: Cátedra. 85-108.

Sedgwick, E. K. 1995. "Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!" *Constructing Masculinity*. Eds. M. Berger, B. Wallis, and S. Watson. New York: Routledge. 11-20.

Solomon-Godeau, A. 1995. "Male Trouble". *Constructing Masculinity*. Eds. M. Berger, B. Wallis, and S. Watson. New York: Routledge. 69-76.

Steven, P. 1993. *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary Film and Video*. Toronto: Between the Lines.

Sullivan, N. 2003. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press.

This Is Spinal Tap. 2004. Dir. Rob Reiner. Perf. Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer, Rob Reiner, June Chadwick, Tony Hendra. 1984. DVD. MGM Home Entertainment.

Waldman, D., and J. Walker, eds. 1999. *Feminism and Documentary*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Waugh, T., ed. 1984. *"Show Us Life": Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. Metuchen, N.J., and London: The Scarecrow Press.

Waugh, T. 1997. "Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period 1969-84". *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*. Eds. C. Holmlund and C. Fuchs. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. 107-124.

Whitehead, S. M., and F. J. Barrett, eds. 2005 (2001). *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity.

Williams, L. 1993. "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary". *Film Quarterly* 46 (3): 9-21.

Winston, B. 1995. *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations*. London: British Film Institute.

The dismantling of the oedipal dyad in two american women poets: the dynamics of maternal desire

Dulce María Rodríguez González
Universidad de La Laguna

Mom –we often think– represents yards of knotted aprong strings.
Paula Caplan

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
[…]
Anne Sexton

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor sooth it. I made you to find me.
Anne Sexton

In this essay, my intention is to probe the Freudian Oedipal narrative in two poems composed by two American women writers. The analysis and revision of the function of the Oedipal dyad in women poets of the last decades of the 20th century could reveal how the traditional "couple", conceived and studied by Sigmund Freud, loses significance and it is dismantled and replaced by a different

type of relationship formed by the mother-daughter dyad which appears in the literary landscape of the past century and continues to be present today.

It is well known that in our Western civilization we are often lead into what the poet Theodore Roethke (1937: 81) called "the hutch of reason – that dready shed". Indeed, we are taught to favour "facts" rather than to live with doubts. The Cartesian approach to life and science imposes a rationalist philosophy, leaving little room for a different type of approximation in which intuition could have its own role. That has been the general panorama in the past centuries. Nevertheless, numerous feminist critics in the 20th century have harbored the notion that woman is perhaps not kept in her old bewildered place, stripped of her hegemonic power by patriarchs of conspiracy but finds herself at the mercy of archaic transactions engrained at the core of the mother-daughter dyad. This epiphanic intuition lets us envision a connection to which many have, in the past, turned a blind eye. The acknowledgement and relevance of this relationship made the French feminist Luce Irigaray (1981: 86) claim that: "In our societies, the mother/daughter, daughter/mother relationship constitutes a highly explosive nucleus. Thinking it, and changing it, is equivalent to shaking the foundations of the patriarchal order".

Sigmund Freud, relying on the mythological narrative of Oedipus, developed the theory of the Oedipal conflict: little boys undergo the Oedipus drama. Initially, they are attached to mother seeking her love only to find that mother has already been taken by father. Deep down the child wants to kill his father and have sexual relations with his mother. The father's authority is imposed upon the child who develops fear of castration. This stage is brought to an end when the little boy replaces the anxiety of castration with the more tolerable identification with his father. Nevertheless, this process is not so clear in the case of the little girl, for she does not suffer from the castration complex since she is already "castrated"; therefore the attachment to her mother is not punished. Indeed, Freud (1931: 226) admitted at the end of his life his doubts and uncertainties regarding women, and acknowledged the importance of the pre-Oedipal attachment between mother and daughter. This insight was illustrated by the Austrian psychiatrist with the archaeological image from the Mycenean culture's findings, prior to the Greek civilization:

> If you want to know about femininity, inquire of your own experiences of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give a deeper and coherent information. […] Our insight into this early pre-Oedipal phase in girls comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery, in another field, of the Minoan-Mycenean civilization behind the civilization of Greece. […] Everything in this sphere of the first attachment to the mother seemed to me so difficult to grasp in anlysis –grey with age and shadowy and almost

> impossible to revivify- that it was as if it had succumbed to an especially inexorable repression.

Hence, mothers and daughters enjoy an attachment that goes beyond the first and second infancy, which can even be transferred into adulthood: the mother continues to be an intimate object of desire throughout adult life. According to the feminist critic Nancy Chodorow (1984: 169-173), who advocates for the theory of "object relations",[1] the mother identifies herself more with her daughter –whom she considers an extension of herself– than with her son, thus the boundaries between both of them are more fluid and less defined. Due to this particular situation, the process of individuation in girls is different from that of the boys, since they identify more with the mother too, keeping this primary relationship with her. Chodorow (1984: 109-110) affirms:

> Because they are of the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons. In both cases, a mother is likely to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her infant. However, this sense is stronger, and lasts longer, vis-à-vis daughters. Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tend to be stronger and cathexis of daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of a mother herself. […] Mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves. Correspondly, girls tend to remain part of the dyadic primary mother-child relationship itself.

The daughter achieves her identity through family relations, being the mother the central figure who defines or outlines her future roles. The drama appears when the daughter overidentifies with the mother, or just the opposite: when the daughter, in order to achieve her own identity needs a radical separation from mother and, in avoiding an undesired symbiosis, defines herself through opposition, what Chodorow (1984: 137) has termed as "negative identification"; to use her own words: "I am what she is not". A further complication appears on the scene when the mother needs the daughter to confirm her own identity (bringing about a reverse view of the Lacanian "mirror stage"),[2] or when the

1. "Object relations" theory is one of the branches of psychoanalytic theory that gives priority to the infant's relationship with its mother. It emphasizes the first attachment between mother and creature, while it also supports qualities which are the basis of the mother-infant pair: caring, relating, intimacy, and emotional needs.

2. In the "mirror stage" the child must learn to see itself from outside before it can have an internal identity. At this stage the mother plays a special role since she becomes the mirror where the child grasps his/her first image, as I will explain later.

mother does not accept the daughter's individuation and looks for substitutes to fill the emotional void left by her daughter's absence. In the two last cases, we are in the presence of a mother-daughter dyad in which the pre-Oedipal bonds have been extended far beyond the first stages of infancy and into adulthood. As I will try to show later, each of these two situations can be seen in two poems by the Northamerican poets Anne Sexton and Alicia Ostriker. "The Double Image" and "Listen", respectively, reveal the bonds established between mothers and daughters which, according to the feminist critics who rely on the Freudian theories, and later on Lacan's, arise from the pre-Oedipal relationships.

After Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan can be considered the most controversial psychoanalyst. Lacan makes a new reading of the Austrian psychoanlyst's texts placing his theories within the context of language. This new approach was a source of inspiration for an important sector of feminist criticism: both French and Anglo-American of the sixties and following years in the twentieth century. In words of Elizabeth Grosz (1990b: 9), Lacan "stresses Freud's originality and subversiveness and helps to vindicate psychoanalysis in feminist terms, enabling it to be used as an explanatory model for social relations". Thus, Lacan displaces psychoanalysis from the biological-medical context and from the frame of the ego philosophy (basically conservative), to a philosophical-literary context, and through his peculiar reading, presents Freud's analysis as a provocation, a challenge to reason and to traditional linguistics that presupposes language as a vehicle of communication which permits a faithful representation of reality. Lacan emphasizes the division of the ego (making reference to the Freudian "split subject") which finds itself hopelessly split between rationality, which believes itself to be the centre of subjectivity, and the illogical unconscious which constantly subverts such a belief through its own existence, producing as a result disturbing tensions in the subject (Grosz, 1990a: 72).

Lacan is interested in what seems to be the most subversive and threatening of Freud's investigation: the unconscious, displacing it to the field of linguistics. As Grosz (1990a: 72) asserts: "Placing psychoanalysis within the register of language and signification, [Lacan] positions Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious in the most explanatory context of language. This is encapsulated in his most famous dictum: 'the unconscious is structured like a language'". And thus, as Freud came to be the first to discover the scientific method to study the unconscious, Lacan articulated the means through which the unconscious speaks, explaining its language and its effects on conscious discourse.

For Lacan, the unconscious and sexuality are not a biological and natural essence, as they are for Freud, but a product of the subject's constitution in language within what he terms the "Imaginary" and the "Symbolic" orders. These structures are symbolic systems that produce meaning which are of a great importance for Lacan, who is interested in describing the construction of the

subject in relation to meaning. According to the Lacanian model, the child is not born a subject but:

> It becomes a subject only through a specific social intervention (the Oedipus complex or the Name-of-the-Father), through which it at once and the same time becomes a social speaking subject; a being definitively separated from others, particularly mothers; and acquires a sexual identity and position. […] It becomes a subject only in taking up either masculine or feminine position and identity. (Rowley 1990: 184)

While Freud distinguishes two forms of sexuality and pleasure for each sex (the already mentioned "pre-Oedipal" and "Oedipal" phases), Lacan reformulates these terms of human development establishing a difference between the above mentioned Imaginary and Symbolic orders. The Imaginary order coincides, approximately, with the pre-Oedipal phase when children, regardless their sex, are involved in an intimate relationship with the mother. It is a time when they feel a total duality, although that "totality" is "imaginary" or based upon an illusion. During that time the child communicates with the mother through presence, contact, without any dialogue, though there might be a type of language constituted by very personal sounds that mother and baby share as a means to communicate. As Terry Eagleton (1983: 63) asserts, paraphrasing Lacan, it is a time when "no gap has yet opened up between signifier and signified". All this takes place before the baby has any notion of its ego, before acquiring language or before submitting itself to the demands of the Freudian so-called "reality principle".[3]

When analyzing this stage, Lacan is conscious of the child's difficulty in that precarious task of acquiring its identity, its sense of being: How does the child achieve the separation from the mother? Lacan (1981: 257) suggests that that long process starts with what he has termed the "mirror stage". Up to that moment, according to Lacan, the baby's experience had been one of having a fragmented body, but around the time the baby is eight months old, when it is believed to begin the mirror stage, the baby starts to have a unitary image of its body: the baby gets a specular image of itself which might be originated in the reflexion of its own body in a real mirror, or of its own image reflected in the mother's eyes. The child observes its own image as a kind of "signifier", something capable to produce meaning, and thus, the image reflected in the mirror comes to be some kind of "signified": in a sense the child starts to find the meaning of itself. Little by little the child engages itself in a process towards the eventual adquisition of its social

3. The "pleasure principle", together with the "reality principle", are categories developed by Freud which correspond to the baby's need and desire for satisfaction and the acceptance of deprivation, respectively. One is displaced by the other in order that the baby advances in the process of its physical and psychological development.

identity, which is achieved with the resolution of the Freudian Oedipal crisis. The result of this process is the child's submission to the reality principle and thus its entrance into the social order (Morris, 1993: 103-4).

Nevertheless, some feminist critics have pointed out that in some women writers, especially in the case of mother-daughter relationships, the pre-Oedipal bonds (which correspond to the Lacanian Imaginary stage) do not completely disappear, but may remain until adulthood, and could emerge in their literary production letting loose problems of symbiosis, separation, and individuation which are not always successfully solved. According to the psychologist Margaret Mahler, when the baby is born, it has a total sense of unity with the mother; the technical word for that closeness is *symbiosis*. Slowly, though it is still dependent on the mother, the child is exhilarated by the possibility of autonomy, overcoming a state of powerlessness which leads him/her to separation. These two aspects of differentiation have been termed respectively by Mahler (2000: 42) as *separation* and *individuation*. Jane Flax (1978: 172) specifies the nature of those two phases that start out from the initial symbiosis:

> Separation means establishing a firm sense of differentiation from the mother, of possessing one's own physical and mental boundaries. Individuation means the development of a range of characteristics, skills and personality traits which are uniquely one's own. Separation and individuation are the two "tracks" of development; they are not identical but they can reinforce or impede each other.

The baby sets off in its life in a total symbiosis with the care taker; this symbiosis works in both ways, since it is extended to the mother who feels psychologically bound to her creature, drawing from this union a sense of plenitude. Nancy Friday (1979: 58) comments that "in a sense we [children] continue to be physically connected to her, just as the mother psychologically still experiences us as almost a part of her body, her own narcissistic extension. The symbiosis is mutual, complete, and satisfying". In many cases, the mother needs the child as much as the child needs her, to the point that an inversion of a state of dependence may appear. The daughter, in her quest for autonomy, has to drastically separate from her mother in order to achieve her individuation; to use Adrienne Rich's (1986: 236) words: she "has to perform radical surgery", while the mother will endure this separation painfully. In some instances she will be looking for substitutes to alleviate the absence of her missing daughter.

These theories are applicable to the poems object of the present study. Such is the case of the Confessional poet Anne Sexton, who reflects in her poem "The Double Image" on certain problems of identity derived from the entanglements of her mother-daughter relationships. The poem is the story of a thirty-year-old woman who, after having given birth, has to leave her new born baby under the

paternal grandmother's care, due to her own precarious mental state, while she goes to live with her own mother. This is one of the first poems where Sexton's authentic voice, formally experimental and deeply confessional, is registered; it is constituted by seven sections which unveil, besides a mother-daughter relationships pervaded by guilty feelings and self-accusation, the construction of a dubious identity. The critic J. D. McClatchy (1988: 33) affirms that "confessional poets are driven back to their losses, to that alienation –from self, from others, from sanity and from love– which is the thematic center of their vision and work". Loss is, indeed, the feeling that underlies the poem; loss of her daughter Joyce's first infancy, to whom the poem is addressed, and loss of her mother, victim of cancer. In this itinerary of losses, Sexton tries to reflect in her poem "The Double Image" her place within a matrophobic matrilinearity where one of the three protagonists has to die;[4] it seems to be impossible that the three generations who are present in the poem, the poet's mother Mary, Sexton herself, and her daughter Joy, could be alive and healthy all at the same time. One will live at the expense of the other, as if it were a pathological case of symbiosis. Mothers, instead of being a model for the construction of their offspring's identity, seem to be locked in self-destructive patterns which perpetuate themselves in a series of endless specular images ("And this is the cave of the mirror / that double woman who stares at herself"). While Sexton (1991: 40) was composing "The Double Image", she commented in a letter to her friend poet W. D. Snodgrass when making reference to the theme: "Who do we kill, which image in the mirror, the mother, ourself, our daughter????? Am I my mother or my daughter?" This reveals a serious problem of identity in Sexton's adulthood, when she was expected to be the model upon which her daughter Joy could build her own identity.

The title, "The Double Image", functions as a metaphor which condenses and interprets a mother-daughter emotional dynamics of a guilty nature, with the peculiarity that Sexton turns herself into the axis around which matrilinearity revolves, since she addresses her mother as much as she addresses her daughter Joy, being Anne the generational pivot. The poem's central image is a pair of portraits of Sexton's mother and of herself that her mother Mary had ordered in the convalecence of both of them: Anne's after her double suicide attempt, and Mary's after her surgery due to breast cancer. Both portraits were done, thus, at the threshold of a possible and approaching death: mother and daughter linked in the canvases when both were besieged by death, suggesting problems of symbiosis and separation, and thus a disavantage for the poet's identity, who was engaged in a problematic and excessive identification with her mother:

4. According to the feminist critic Adrienne Rich (1986: 235), who relies on the terminology coined by the British poet Lynn Sukenick: "matrophobia is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*".

[…] She had my portrait done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did the best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait
done instead.
[…]

"The Double Image" reveals a woman deeply marked by the need to lean on somebody else, showing a vulnerable personality, and driven by the mental anguishes which led her to her first attempt to commit suicide. Her desire for connection was even more evident in her precarious estate, having the compulsion to be accompanied by others:

[…]
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
[…]
[…] She had my portrait
done instead.
[…]
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.
I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait
done instead.
[…]

All the stanzas of this second section are ended with a sort of refrain that hammers on the same idea of the reflection of both portraits: the symbiosis between mother and daughter was crystallized for ever in art, being one the reflection of the other.

Sexton poses as a model, "freezing in time her dependence on her mother, herself as a reflection of that '*mocking mirror,*' and her refusal to become that bitter woman" (George, 1987:11). This is the drama performed in this early

poem by Sexton: the drama of individuation. In "The Double Image", the tight dependencies woven in the mother-daughter relationships and the daughter's struggle to achieve her individuation in the construction of her identity become a tragedy, since one of them feels deadly wounded by the other: "[…] Only my mother grew ill. / […] On the first of September she looked at me / and said I gave her cancer. / They carved her sweet hills out / and still I couldn't answer".

Symbolically, both portraits were hanged on opposite walls, located one in front of the other as a reflection, an echo, bathed respectively by the light of the North and the South. In a display of coincidences, Anne had been portrayed in a similar pose to that of her mother's, "matching smile, matching contour", emphasizing even more their likeness:

> […]
> And this was the cave of the mirror
> […]
> In north light, my smile is held in place,
> the shadow marks my bone.
> What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
> all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
> of the smile, the young face,
> the fox's snare.
> In south light, her smile is held in place,
> her cheeks wilting like a dry
> orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
> love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
> that stony head of death
> I had outgrown.
> […]
> that double woman who stares
> at herself, as if she were petrified.
> […]

The reflection of both images achieved through the location of one portrait in front of the other, with an almost specular projection ("the cave of the mirror"), led me to a Lacanian reading of the poem. Sexton was sure that her first image had been her mother ("my first image"), but that maternal mirror had turned itself into a "mocking mirror", and her mother in "my overthrown / love". Sexton goes backwards in time and returns to her infancy in order to recognize herself in her mother's gaze, as well as she comes back to the present –in a retrospective manner– and reads in her mother's eyes reproaches ("I could not forgive your suicide, my mother said") and premonitions of death ("that stony head of death"). The emphasis on the idea of reflection points out the difficulties many women experience in their attempt to establish their own identity,

suggesting the blurring of frontiers theorized by Chodorow. As the critic Karen Elias-Button (1980: 197) comments: "[If] mother and daughter can only become mirror-images of one another, where is a separate sense of self?" Certainly, the sense of a separate being is in jeopardy: the mother-daughter reflection, their convalescences, and their mutual reproaches lead the poetic persona to an emotional mirage which reveals such a condition, "that double woman who stares at herself". The mother's image unfolds itself and it is the mother and her daughter at the same time: the one encloses the other. As Irigaray (1981: 61, 64) asserts: "[…] I came out of you, and here, in front of your eyes, I am another living you. […] You desired me, such is the love of yours. Imprisoned by your desire for a reflection I became a statue, an image of your mobility". That is the idea projected in several stanzas of the poem: the daughter trapped in the mother's orbit. Middlebrook (1984: 17) comments on the tragic consequences of such an attraction: "The mother's effort to remake the daughter in her own image and dissolve the boundaries between their identities has a tragic outcome when the daughter's unforgiven deathwish shows up in her mother's aging body".

In the poem's hesitant direction, Sexton is aware that her daughter Joy places her in the position of the mother, although she tries to keep at bay that privileged position. As a matter of fact, Sexton speaks in this poem "*as* a daughter *to* a daughter, *against* the dominance of mothers. Motherhood in this poem", affirms Middlebrook (1984: 17), "is depicted in images of invasion of personal boundaries". Nevertheless, in spite of this apparent maternal nearness there is a certain arrogance which not only jeopardizes the construction of the daughter's identity but also unlooses, once more, her matrophobic fears instigated by a series of guilty feelings scattered along the poem:

> […]
> I remember we named you Joyce
> so we could call you Joy.
> You came like an awkward guest
> that first time, all wrapped and moist
> and strange at my heavy breast.
> […]

The new encounter with her daughter makes her face her own contradictions: Sexton would rather annihilate herself ("chose two times to kill myself") than live in her family accepting her role of being Joy's mother. "Why did I let you grow in another place?" she asks herself; her incapacity to assume this role of wife and mother who needed help from her relatives was disturbing for her. The speaker distances herself from her own daughter due to this incapacity to take care of her; she lies to herself and pretends an inexistent nearness, although her deep confessional tendency pushes her to unveil the truth:

[…]
[…] And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came: I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly been cheecks,
disobedient three, my splendid stranger. […]

Sexton makes reference to the pain produced by her baby's separation until her baby's return in 1958, "[when] you stay for good […]. You learn my name, […]. You call me *mother*". In spite of the emotional confusion, the poetic persona makes a distinction between her behavior with respect to her own mother and her daughter. The negative nature of her feelings towards her mother is revealed when Sexton defines herself as "an outgrown child", who inhabits her mother's house as an unwanted guest: "I lived like an angry guest", while she had to subject to her mother's implacable resentment due to her attempt to commit suicide. In contrast with such feelings, Sexton makes a totally different description when she makes reference to the arrival of her daughter Joy:

[…]
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,
only a girl, a small milky mouse
of a girl already loved, […].
[…]
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

If initially Sexton saw herself reflected in her mother, accepting somehow this identity, towards the end of the poem there is an inversion of the Lacanian specular process. Sexton's mother was not anymore her referent, instead her daughter Joy transmuted herself into the mirror that was going to confirm Sexton's identity, offering an image that had begun to vanish. The textual I, that is to say, the mother, doubted of her own identity ("I, who was never quite sure / about being a girl"), in such a manner that she needed to confirm it addressing her daughter in an almost desperate way: "I made you to find me".

"The Double Image" dramatizes a generational dilemma where Sexton gives the impression to be threatened by the image of matriarchy; her fixation with her own childhood seems to make her incapable to evolve towards an adult personality, a stage where she still felt the void produced by the absence of a solidly constructed identity. Thus, making an inversion of the Lacanian paradigm,

Sexton seeks in her own youngest daughter the mirror that would reflect her true identity.

After composing "The Double Image", Sexton (1991: 43, 28) was afraid and exultant at the same time; in this poem she believed to have found her own voice. Its composition helped her to make order in her experience: "[…] my own need to make form from chaos". When Sexton started to include it in her public readings she made the following introduction: "The great theme is not Romeo and Juliet… The great theme we all share is that of becoming ourselves, of overcoming our father and mother, of assuming our identities, somehow".

But such an introduction was a generalization. "The Double Image" is actually about the loss of the "I" that many women experience in relation to their mothers. The central idea is based on the reflection of the two paintings of mother and daughter, suggesting problems of symbiosis and separation; underlying this situation I believe there is a matrophobic dynamics instigated by accusations and guilty feelings that can be traced along the poem like a trickle of gunpowder. The specular game pivots upon a generational axis embodied by the poetic persona who addresses her mother –who does not seem to be the appropriate person upon whom to construct her identity– as much as her own daughter, to whom she turns to in order to recognize herself, as I have already said. The textual I manifests desires for connection which constitutes a contradiction with regards to the central drama of the poem: the need to achieve her individuation. This need is somehow besieged by the confusion of boundaries among the protagonists of the poem and the emotional mirage produced by such confusion.

As a conclusion of this first part, I would suggest that, according to the Lacanian principle and other theories of Psychology, the personal identity is constructed upon the reflection of valid adult models; in the case of little girls that model is generally the mother. When that model turns itself into an invasive entity that threatens with the dissolving of the daughter's personal boundaries, which in the first place are to be constructed, the mother more than a model becomes a menace, putting at risk the construction of her daughter's identity. It could be possible, as it occurs in the commented poem, that the central protagonist, in the absence of a reliable model, projects herself towards the future and turns towards her own daughter looking for affirmation. Sexton, going against nature, concludes her poem with an assertion as astonishing as paradoxical:

> […]
> I, who was never quite sure
> about being a girl, needed another
> life, another image to remind me.
> […]
> […] I made you to find me.

This type of conclusion gives evidence of the direction that the process of the construction of her own identity had taken, being presented as something hesitant and not completely achieved in her adulthood. In my opinion, "The Double Image" can be regarded as an extraordinary example of a reversal view of the Lacanian mirror stage, where an inmature and vulnerable mother had to turn to her own young daughter in order to affirm her identity. Likewise, it is a good exponent of the mother-daughter dyad that not only displaces the traditional Freudian couple, but also reveals in a very profound manner the dynamics of maternal desire.

If Lacan has been my critical support for the analysis of Sexton's poem, the psychological theories dealing with the different stages of the child's development of symbiosis, separation and individuation, will be the foundation for the approach to Alicia Ostriker's poem "Listen". This poem is composed by four sections, the plot of which reveals a mother-daughter relationships where the mother longs for the lost symbiosis of the dyad; as Ostriker (2003: 158-159) clearly points out in her "Notes" on the poem:

> The beloved oldest daughter had been in San Francisco on leave of absence from college, living with the boyfriend, working at the Tower Records, learning to play the bass guitar, having a good time. The mama was tangled, clotted up, hogtied by her own confusion. There was the distress stemming from the daughter's personal coolness to her, which had been creeping along like a mist for –what was it, a year or three. Or was she inventing it. An equal and opposite distress was the anxiety that the daughter was in fact still too attached to the mama, appearing to drift but actually tethered, unable to set her own course, though the mama had thought she was raising the girl toward freedom and autonomy.

Although the distress is mutual, which proves the strength of the bond between the two members of the couple, the mother is deeply disturbed along the poem by the daughter's achievement of her own independence. There are three characters in "Listen", who are embodied by the mother-professor, her daughter who leaves home, and the students; the latter will eventually take the place of the missing daughter. Thus, the poem narrates the emotional drama a mother undergoes when her daughter achieves complete separation from the family constellation; this personal maternal crisis seems to be overcome by substituting the absent daughter for several students of the mother-professor who are all too eager to please the sad and anxious mother, giving her some kind of fulfilment. Hence the poem is pervaded by a sense of loss and a strong need to establish connections.

From the first line, Ostriker reveals in her poem a desire for possession: "Having lost you, I attract substitutes", although she comments on her "Notes" (2003: 159) just the opposite:

> The mama had thought she was unpossessive. She wondered exactly how self-deluded she might be. Racked by fear, she was uncertain what she feared. If everything was going just as it should, the daughter properly freeing herself and finding a path, or if everything was going all wrong, the daughter wasting herself, how would the mother, knotted in good intentions and greedy need, how would she know.

In this passage, the reader notices how the poetic persona suffers from a sense of confusion and fear of treading unknown paths. In spite of perceiving herself as "unpossessive", what is most evident in the poem is the presence of the possessive mother, who needs to reconstruct the lost bond with her daughter, something she does through strangers, alien to the family circle. The mother, thus, is the one who suffers and dramatizes separation; the vacuum left by the daughter's absence is unbearable, hence her desire to attract her students: "The students poets visit me", she says at the beginning of the poem. In a process similar to the one followed by Sexton, Ostriker enacts another reverse performance of the natural development: while the daughter tries to achieve separation and individuation, the mother clings to the former symbiosis which gives her satisfaction and a sense of acknowledgement. She looks for faithful students who would "Think me wise / Think me generous, confide in me". Professor and students ("mother" and "daughters") engage in a relationship of respect and admiration; both need each other. In this context, the poetic persona reveals a reverse journey to childhood when mother's indications and approval were necessary:

> […]
> And I sympathize. Then they try on their ambitions
> Like stiff new hiking boots, and I laugh
> And approve, telling them where to climb.
> […]

In this relationship of substitutions, where the two members of the dyad were initially strangers, an exchange of complicities takes place: there are presents and platonic moments, which reveal a mother-daughter closeness. The "adopted daughters" bring their "substitute mother" delicacies:

> […]
> They bring me tiny plastic bags
> Of healthy seeds and nuts, they bring me wine,
> We huddle by the electric heater

When it is snowing,
We watch the sparrows dash
And when they leave we hug.
[…]

Ostriker (2003: 160) is lucid about the situation, and very much aware of her emotional state since she says referring to her poem: "I boast and am grateful that my desire to mother people through sympathy and support seems needed and used by students". She endures a reality hard to accept: "It is ironic", she claims, "that they confide in me more than my own children do" (2003: 160). This strange symbiosis between adults involves, in Ostriker's words, "some light sense of erotic connection". It could be a dim reflection of the initial mother-daughter intimacy, when there were no boundaries between them and, according to Chodorow, all the personal frontiers were open.

In spite of this rapport, the mother does not lose contact with reality since she can hear the mocking voice of her biological daughter protesting. She is not "unaware" of how things should be:

[…]
Oh silly mother, I can hear you mock.
Listen, loveliest, I am not unaware
This is as it must be.
[…]

Indeed, she questions her daughter about the right to mock her mother: "Do daughters mock their mothers?" the poetic persona inquires. The resentful mother enacts a performance through a series of rhetorical questions in which she unveils her discontent for a separation imposed by her daughter, recalling mythological and ancient literary figures such as Dionysius and Sappho. It is a game of "wanting" and "rejecting", or perhaps even worse, one of "desertion", as the poet points out:

[…]
And other Dyonisiac dances,
And did not even Sappho tear her hair
[…] Do your pouring hormones
Cause you do the slam
And act undignified, when the maiden
She wanted, the girl with the soft lips,
The one who could dance,
Rejected/deserted her?
[…]

The mother feels helplessly deserted by her daughter, observing how the once loving dyad has come to an end. The mother, instead of being proud of her daughter's emotional autonomy, is almost bitter and engages herself in a quest looking for the missing partner of the dyad: "She wants her daughter as Sappho wanted her favourite girls", Ostriker (2003: 161) explains in her Notes on the poem.

The mother, thus, seemed to remain within a logic of nostalgia, but all of a sudden there is a tour de force that bounds the poem into a different direction. Indeed, the narrative of the poem takes an interesting path since the complaining mother envisions a whole world of promises and possibilities for her daughter. According to Ostriker (2003: 161), in the third section "the poem pushes further into the reality of maternal desire". In Ostriker's words: "It is not that the mother wants the daughter to 'succeed' or to be 'happy.' No, what she wants is far more aggressive, more wilful, more laden. She wants the daughter to excel her, specifically. She wants to have launched the daughter, to have sent her forth, further than she herself hopes to go" (2003: 161):

[…]
Do I suffer? Of course I do
I am supposed to, but listen, loveliest.
I want to be a shrub, you a tree.
I hum inaudibly and want you
To sing arias. I wan to lie down
At the foot of your mountain
And rub the two dimes in my pocket
Together, while you dispense treasure
To the needy. I want the gods
Who have eluded me
All my life, or whom I have eluded,
To invite you regularly
To their lunches and jazz recitals.
[…]

The mother has evolved from a politics of greediness to a dynamics of generosity. Nevertheless, this maternal desire could become an overwhelming weight on the daughter, who feels the pressure of an anxious mother too eager to collect the daughter's achievements. As Ostriker comments (2003, 161-162), "there is also all that pushing, […] the will to direct and control, that unconscious seeing of the daughter as an extension of the mother's self instead of another being whose direction will not be tied to the mother's direction". It seems that the mother of the poem is the victim of her own motherhood, unable to experience her daughter as something different from being her personal extension, as Irigaray (1981: 166) points out, being "trapped in a single function -mothering". The

mother dreads the nature of her own desires, no matter how legitimate they could be; these desires might be too heavy a load for her daughter to bear. Paraphrasing Chodorow's and Contratto's ideas (1992), Ostriker enacts in the fourth and last section of "Listen" the "fantasy of the perfect daughter". To keep at bay this logic of desire it seems that death is the only way out. Indeed, Ostriker (2003:162) dreads that "the daughter's life depends on the mother's death. That if the mother were suddenly removed, the daughter would become immediately stronger". The poet materializes these feelings through an imagery of radical separation:

[…]
Moreover I wish to stand on the dock
All by myself waving a handkerchief,
And you to be the flagship
Sailing from the midnight harbor,
A blue moon leading you outward,
So huge, so public, so disappearing-
[…]

It was all to no avail. The mother makes explicit her dispair and her heplessness in a sea of confusions:

[…]
I beg and beg, loveliest, I can't
Seem to help myself,
While you quiver and pull
Back, and try to hide, try to be
Invisible, like a sensitive
Irritated sea animal
Cought in a tide pool, caught
Under my hand, can I
Cut off my hand for you,
Cut off my life.

The poetic persona acknowledges the impossibility of stopping herself from begging her daughter to excel her; she fears that her daughter, far from having successfully escaped her mother's influence, is still beneath the shadow of her monster hand, avoiding her wishes, trying to protect herself from the powerful mother and becoming smaller, thus unfulfilling the mother's desires. On the other hand, Ostriker (2003: 162) analyzes the final part of this poem affirming that "the emotional cause and poetic effect is a sense of exhaustion, of having reached the end of one's rope, or having passed through door after door and arrived at a blank wall". It may appear that the formulation of the last question at the end of the poem is useless, it is "a blank wall"; in fact, the question mark does not even appear in the text, as if the possibility of a last answer had vanished.

"Listen" is a poem where the bond among women is the focal point; some of the protagonists involved in the poetic narrative dread, to different degrees, separation and long for connection, while another one is engaged in a quest for autonomy. This process, which leads the daughter of the poem into adulthood, is threatened by a possessive and controlling mother, which makes evident the dynamics of maternal desire.

As a conclusion, I believe that Sexton's and Ostriker's poems perform a drama whose female protagonists are engaged in mother-daughter relationships with different settings and motivations. Undoubtedly, in both poems the relationships between the partners of the dyad bring forth the importance of the pre-Oedipal attachment that in some women lasts very long. This bond between women from such an early age leads, in the two poems, to the dismantling of the hegemonic traditional Freudian couple in which mothers related to daughters have been absent. Mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, but where were these women? Sexton and Ostriker, among many other women writers of the last decades of the 20th century, have given them back their ancient relevance and their voice. Composing these poems they claim the importance of this long lasting relationship, and going against the current they manifest, painfully or proudly, the dynamics of maternal desire, confirming a reality to which the male canon, and art in general, have been blind in the past.

Works cited

Benjamin, J. 1990 (1980). "The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination". *The Future of Difference*. Ed. H. Eisenstein and A. Jardine. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP. 41-70.

Caplan, P. J. 1990 (1989). *Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship*. New York: Harper.

Chodorow, N. 1984 (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U. of California.

Chodorow, N. and S. Contratto 1992 (1980). "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother". *Rethinking the Family.* Ed. B. Thorne and M. Yalom. Boston: Northeastern UP. 191-214.

Davidson, C. N. and E. M. Broner, eds. 1980. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. New York: Unger.

Dienstfrey, P. and B. Hillman eds. 2003. *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*. Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleya UP.

Eagleton, T. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P.

Eisenstein, H. and A. Jardine, eds. 1990 (1980). *The Future of Difference*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

Elias-Button, K. 1980. "The Muse as Medusa". *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature.* Eds. C. N. Davison and E. M. Broner. New York: Unger. 193-206.

Flax, J. 1978. "The Conflict Between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and Within Feminism". *Feminist Studies* 4 (2): 171-189.

Freud, S. 1905. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* Ed. James Strachey. 24 vols. Hogarth, (1953-73).

Freud, S. 1931. "Female Sexuality". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* (21): 225-243.

Freud, S. 1933. "Femininity". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* (22): 112-135.

Friday, N. 1979. *My Mother, My Self*. London: Fontana.

George, D. H. 1987. *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*. Chicago: U of Illinois P.

George, D. H. ed. 1988. *Sexton: Selected Criticism*. Chicago: U of Illinois P.

Grosz, E. 1990a. "Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity". *Feminist Knowledge.* Ed. S. Gunew. London: Routledge. 59-120.

Grosz, E. 1990b. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge

Gunew, S. ed. 1990. *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct.* London: Routledge.

Irigaray, L. 1981. "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other". *Signs* 7 (1): 60-67. Trans. H. V. Wenzel.

Lacan, J. 1981 (1978). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton. Trans. A. Sheridan.

Mahler, M. S. et al. 2000 (1975). *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation.* New York: Basic Books.

McClatchy, J. D. 1988. "Anne Sexton: Somehow to Endure". *Sexton: Selected Criticism.* Ed. D. H. George. Chicago: U of Illinois P. 29-72.

Middlebrook, D. W. 1984. "Becoming Anne Sexton". *Denver Quarterly* 18 (4): 7-21.

Morris, P. 1993. *Literature and Feminism.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Ostriker, Alicia. 1986. *The Imaginary Lover*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Ostriker, A. 2003. "Notes on 'Listen'". *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood.* Ed. P. Dienstfrey and B. Hillman. Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleya UP. 155-164.

Rich, A. 1986 (1976). *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution.* New York: Norton.

Roethke, T. 1937. *Collected Poems*. New York: Doubleday.

Rowley, H. and E. Grosz. 1990. "Psychoanalysis and Feminism". *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct.* Ed. S. Gnew. London: Routledge. 175-204.

Sexton, A. 1981. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton.

Sexton, A. 1991. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Ed. L. G. Sexton and L. Ames. Boston: Houghton.
Thorne, B. and M. Yalom, eds. 1992. *Rethinking the Family*. Boston: Northeastern UP.

'Too bad mihijita was morena': Anzaldúa's autobiographical encounters with her mother

María Henríquez Betancor
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

> Chicana identity is borderland identity, a continual process of negotiating multiplicity and contradictions, just as autobiography is a borderland genre, constantly negotiating position and parameters of genre. (Zamora Lausch 2003: 20)

1. Chicanas' autobiographical texts in the last two decades of the Twentieth Century

Chicana autobiography is not a solid identifiable genre as such, where all literary works share at least the cannonical first person narrator who presents the writer's life within a chronological timeline in prose. The creative flexibility with which Chicana writers have approached the written articulation of their lives is probably the only commonground for their autobiographical works. The inclusion of poetry, photographs, fictionalised memories, cooking recipes, other people's stories, and pieces of artistic material together with Chicanas' life narrations became more and more frequent during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Besides, "they undermine linguistic norms by using a mixture of English, Spanish and Spanglish" (Torres 1998: 276), adding another specific feature for their collective construction as a genre.

In this essay I intend to contextualize the innovative arena that Chicana autobiography brought to the last two decades of the twentieth century and

Gloria Anzaldúa's autobiographical production in particular. Having a framework for the Chicana autobiographical genre will be a pathway for the analysis of Anzaldúa's relationship with her mother in her work as well as her search for a new mother figure that fulfills the voids and restores the damage left by their interaction. Anzaldúa broke the secrecy of her various conflicts with her mother, helping us to understand the family and gender roots of her identity.

During the 1980s Chicanas' autobiographical texts were predominant amongst their literary works in the United States. Experimentation with the form of life writing became a space of freedom to be explored by several Chicana writers such as Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Norma Cantú, Cherríe Moraga, Sheila and Sandra Ortiz-Taylor, amongst others. In all cases the borders of cannonized autobiography were being challenged and transgressed in the same manner that their own lives had also been daring journeys into the redefinition of their cultural and sexual identities.[1] The elements frequently shared by Chicana writers are directly connected with codeswitching as both English and Spanish are often combined in their texts; multiple subjectivity as a form of breaking and repositioning the first person voice, as Zamora Lausch (2003: 19) states: "Notions of the 'I' split when that 'I' is an individual who asserts multiple subjectivity, when that individual is marginalized, and much more so when that marginalization is multiplied by gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation". Gender and cultural self-affirmation which reverberates in the collective identity is also present in these Chicana autobiographies which often inform the reader of customs, forms of cooking and eating, Mexican traditions that survive in the U.S., and ancient forms of healing (such as with a "curandera"). Writing Chicanas' lives is rooted in their individual story but there is also a political commitment with the community. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Norma Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Cherríe Moraga's *Love in the War Years* are all examples of Chicana texts with an important autobiographical content where all these elements combine in various manners contributing to the creative fluidity that characterizes autobiography.

In the case of Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1997) the author combines the protagonist's narration of her life with several black and white pictures of herself and of a number of members of her family. Cantú plays with the world of the imagined and the real, expanding the borders of "truth" which is so much part of the autobiographical debate and exploring the ethnographic content of her family life. Not in vain did she coin it as "a fictional autoethnography". *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*

1. For years Gloria E. Anzaldúa as well as Norma E. Cantú worked very hard to transgress their working-class family circumstances to pursue their dreams of becoming writers and academics.

(2001) is the result of a group of Latinas who met for seven years before they gathered these *testimonios* and personal stories together. In it Cantú includes autobiographical essays, together with other diverse Latina women's autobiographical stories. Sandra and Sheila Ortiz Taylor's book *Imaginary Parents: A Family Autobiography* (1996) combines their respective skills as a writer and artist to elaborate an autobiographical perception of their parents. Sandra offers 3D collages which represent her experience of her parents whereas Sheila recreates the family life experiences in a string of vignettes which can be read as film clips. The sisters' individual family experience is the subject of exploration, away from their own individuality, once again multiple subjectivity as opposed to the individual writing about his or her own life.

As a commonground to all these works, the articulation of the concept of border becomes more complicated when the different cultures in which Chicana literature is rooted intervene: the Aztec, the Mexican, the Spanish and the Anglo American (these last two with their respective influences):

> […] these autobiographies break away from normative language structures by implementing a very critical aspect of their culture by mixing Spanish and English. Some stories are non-chronological and break any sequence of time, unlike Euro-centric autobiography. Women of color have demonstrated through their work how fragmented their lives can become and as a result their literary production reflects this reality. Many combine biographical details, myth, fiction, and pieces of fantasy. Moreover, the lay-out of the narratives are composed of vignettes, essays, sketches, photo-albums, poems, short-stories, plays and diary entries. All these elements give life to the identity and voice of women of color and the array of styles are a subversive production to mainstream autobiography. (Flores 1999: 6)

Chicanas' autobiographical writing in the 1980s was articulated within a context of change and construction of images of self-value for women. The power of self-steem, women's financial and social independence, and the importance of personal experiences perceived as a source of learning and inspiration, were factors conducive to feminist autobiographical creations. Chicanas wanted to break the silence, which had been a permanent part of their history, and dared to speak of their desires, their origins and their courage in their autobiographical works. In doing so, they could set free old repressed feelings and be united with other women who had struggled through similar experiences. Besides, they could start being a real part of the American literary world in which they had always been invisible. Through their literary presence their existence in the country improved in importance, they travelled the long way from repressed silence to active assertiveness.

The 1990s meant a continuation from the 80s into a literary world that now existed where Chicana writers had a voice and were no longer invisible. The areas of study start to move away from autobiography into more academic writing. The awareness of Chicana feminism has increased and Chicanas themselves analyse their works using their own literary criticism.

The issues that Chicanas worked on during the 1990s range, according to Rebolledo and Rivero (1995: 25), "from taboo issues of sexuality to identity, to a coming of consciousness, to reflection on gender and ethnicity". These are all areas which had already started to be dealt with in the 1980s but which are still very relevant in the 90s for the definition of Chicanas. In 1993 *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race and Gender* is published, edited by Teresa Córdova and a committee formed by members of NACCS.[2] The essays in this volume include amongst the main issues: politics and work conflicts, historiography, language and literature.

In the same year a group of researchers from MALCS[3] published *Chicana Critical Issues* (both in English and Spanish). In the introduction they define themselves as a group who shares many lived experiences (as socially and politically-committed working-class Chicanas). It is particularly important to emphasise this group's social and interdisciplinary dimension as their work within the Chicana community is not only limited to the space of intellectual thinking but it connects with Chicanas' needs and problems.

On the other hand, the Chicanas of the 1990s will look into their sexuality through the analysis of tradition, society and female myths such as *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, *la Malinche,* and *La Llorona*.[4] Various are the Chicana writers who

2. NACCS stands for the "National Association for Chicano and Chicana Studies" which organises an annual conference since 1976 in which several research works are presented on issues connected with Chicana and Chicano literature and culture.

3. MALCS stands for "Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social" from the University of California, Davis, since 1983.

4. The figure of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* stands as a mythical representation of motherhood within the Chicano community. She embodies all goodness and positive forces. She is not God but intercedes for all Chicanos/as who come searching for her help. She is a powerful reference for Chicana motherhood, becoming untouchable and unreachable for human beings. *La Malinche* stands as another cultural mother for Chicanos/as but is generally seen as a *vendida* or traitor as she was Hernán Cortés' translator and lover and bore the "first" *mestizo* child. Feminist writers and critics have revised her figure as a powerful cultural translator and a woman who was sold by her family into slavery to be at Cortés' service. In the case of *La Llorona*, her story is part of a legend which changes depending on the part of Mexico or the United States where the story is told. She became desperate when her husband abandoned her and she drowned her children in the river. Her spirit hollers around rivers while searching for her dead children. Such destructive vision of the mother figure has been analysed and revised by Chicana feminist writers to question matters such as how the AngloAmerican patriarchal system has killed Chicanos/as' socio-cultural identity.

present a revision of Chicana female myths, offering new versions which adopt values with which they have not traditionally been associated such as strength and action (as opposed to passivity). In 1996 Ana Castillo edited *Goddess of the Americas* in which many Chicana writers (and some Chicanos too) revise the figure of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the myth which has been so influential for the permanence of a model of a passive and submissive woman within the patriarchal system. We can affirm that the Chicanas writers of the 1990s "are women who are taking control of their lives and of their sexuality" (Rebolledo y Rivero 1993:28). These are mostly writers who have been strongly influenced by feminist ideas and who have followed the Chicanas' revolutionary steps started during the sixties. Some of them are also academics such as Norma Cantú, María Herrera-Sobek, Tey Diana Rebolledo, and Gloria Anzaldúa. They became aware of their gender models and fought to revise and reconstruct them as it was the case with *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. By revising the values transmitted by *La Virgen de Guadalupe,* in many cases they were analyzing their own mothers and grandmothers's gender models and deciding what they wanted to perpetuate and what to leave out of their lives. One example of a Chicana writer who questioned the passivity and silence the *Virgen* represented as a model for her life was Sandra Cisneros' "Guadalupe, the sex goddess" (1996: 46-51).[5]

Various are the ways to approach their own autobiographical material, here we have only mentioned some examples. As critic Rebecca J. Zamora Lausch (2003: 19-20) states when referring to the nature of contemporary Chicana autobiography:

> The very term "Chicana autobiography" is itself a realm of contest and contradiction, for, as is evident, the genre of autobiography is slippery, constantly shifting, and sometimes almost disappearing. Pairing autobiography with Chicana adds complexity, for "Chicana" brings with it reference to material experience as well as connotations of history, ethnicity, race, gender, politics, and also individual imaginaries.

I agree with Zamora Lausch on the almost 'obligatory' flexibility that the autobiographical genre has developed within the last two decades of the twentieth century, especially within the representation of ethnic and cultural minority women's life texts in the United States. The articulation of the individual female experience is loaded with the gender, racial and cultural conflicts generated by every Chicana's personal borderlands; yet, at the same time it is generating rich creative forms to suit each writer's demands of self-expression.

5. Many were the artists who painted the *Virgen de Guadalupe* in different active attitudes such as reading the newspaper, sewing in her machine (Yolanda López), or in a bikini as in Alma López's controversial "Lupe".

2. *Borderlands / La frontera*: Anzaldúa travels across the borders of identity

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa is widely known as an outstanding contemporary Chicana writer, brave critic, and social fighter. She is well-known for frequently mixing her personal life with her academic insights and theories. She is the perfect example of somebody who has transgressed the cannonical rules of academic writing and whose creativity in writing has impulsed the perception of life experience as fragmented in form and content.

In the case of Anzaldúa's masterpiece, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), many have been the academic attempts to classify it within the Western cannonical literary genres. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is at the same time a collection of academic essays, a book of poems, a historical account of Chicanos' past, and an autobiography. As Chicana critic Sonia Saldívar-Hull (1999: 3) states in the introduction to the second edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "the *Borderlands* genre continually refuses stasis. Shifting from Mexico-*tejana* History, to personal testimonial, the text moves restlessly onward to a history of a larger political family". The book is based on Anzaldúa's idea of the physical, the cultural and the psychological borders between Mexico and the United States primarily. She addresses her reality which is commonground to many other Chicanas who are permanent inhabitants of several borderlands. Anzaldúa (1987, preface) clearly presents this concept in the preface to the book: "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy".

Anzaldúa dared to "break the silences" (Adams 1994: 137), giving voice to her own borderlands and making it possible for other Chicanas to try to understand theirs.[6] Digging in the community and the family life, while dealing with the socio-cultural AngloAmerican interferences, turns Anzaldúa's autobiographical basis of *Borderlands/La Frontera* into a profound search for self-knowledge. On the contrary, *Borderlands/La Frontera* emerges as a complex piece of work mingling poetry together with seven essays on cultural history of the Mexican and Indian peoples, all framed by what could be coined as a "gendered cultural autobiography". *Borderlands/La Frontera* does not follow Westernized chronological conventions of time and place. Her strength comes from the symbiosis between the confession of her experiences as a

6. Kate Adams uses this expression to refer to the daring work of Anzaldúa, Moraga and Marmon Silko. All three writers belong to ethnic and cultural minorities in the US and have broken the old silences.

Chicana lesbian and her claim of the presence of the Chicanos as a colonized people in the United States.

In the next sections I will explore the autobiographical relationship of Anzaldúa with her mother, whom she mentions several times throughout her work. Her feelings of shame, pain and fear are a significant border where Anzaldúa once again breaks the canonical limits of autobiography. Anzaldúa's confessions about her mother are scattered and correspond to various moments in her life. The relationship with mothers and grandmothers are present with more or less intensity in all the Chicanas' autobiographical works mentioned above. In the case of Anzaldúa, our looking into this intimate area of her personal world will help us to see the little girl's pain which influenced the rest of her literary life.

3. Gloria Anzaldúa and Her Relationship with Her Mother: a Significant Borderlands in Her Life

> "Yet, while she would try to correct my more aggressive moods, my mother was secretly proud of my 'waywardness'" (Anzaldúa 1983: 201)
>
> "[...] being afraid that my friends would see my momma, would know that she was loud-her voice penetrated every corner". (Anzaldúa 1983: 201)

Through the reading of Anzaldúa's work and the passing of time I noticed that her relationship with her mother was not ever-present. However, when addressed, Amalia, her mother, seemed to be mostly both a disallowing as well as a suffering figure. Anzaldúa's words on her mother made me question what Amalia's influence had meant on her early childhood and adolescence and how she affected the development of Anzaldúa's later work as a writer. It seemed to me that it was Amalia's insistence on Anzaldúa being and behaving as a proper Texan *Chicanita* (obeying her at all times and following pre-assigned traditional gender roles) that pushed her even more powerfully towards a totally opposite behavioural direction, which she had chosen early in childhood anyway. This rebellious path in her life led the author towards the search of her own freedom as an independent Chicana who had her own political ideas as a Marxist and openly declared a forbidden sexual orientation as a lesbian. The road towards personal choices was one Amalia had not walked herself and, therefore, could not understand or support for many years.

Anzaldúa's life is the story of a Chicana woman who fought from the very early stages of her life to be faithful to herself and her ideas. She broke the gender expectations that her mother and her family had for her, deciding not to follow the traditional model of espouse and mother; besides, she openly declared her lesbianism despite the personal problems that this decision carried with it.

Anzaldúa suffered the profound rejection of her family who did not accept her attitude and her work or her explicit positioning before her homosexuality. She was always conscious of the patriarchal seclusion of Chicano society and of the familial and social consequences that her outspoken and revolutionary attitude generated. Anzaldúa's working-class roots are closely connected to the relationship with her mother, to rural Texas. She grew up in a profound countryside atmosphere, between ranches and farms; her family worked the land and barely earnt enough money to sustain themselves. After her father's sudden death, when she was only twelve, she had to work the land every weekend and all summers until she finished her university studies. Her free time was spent reading and drawing, this last one turned into one of her favourite ones and later on into one of her frustated vocations: "I had to give up the idea of doing visual art –not enough time to practice and be good in two art forms, to buy oil paints, brushes, and other art materials". (Anzaldúa 2000: 236) However, none of these circumstances prevented her from living as a Chicana woman and as an artist. No doubt, her past helped to forge her broad perception of the Chicana/o reality, which ranges from her years of experience working the land to her development as a writer and an intellectual.

Anzaldúa writes her memories of her mother as an adult Chicana writer who recalls her mother's words of advice and also her silence, her painful and lonely life as a young widow. We can hear Anzaldúa's voices both as a little daughter and as a mature writer, when she decides to write or talk (as it is the case of the interviews) about her mother. At times we feel the pain of the daughter when she was a child and an adolescent, other times we confront the clever analysis of the narrator as a strong adult; in both cases we hear the voice of a woman who dares to write about old and painful experiences. Sometimes she exposes her fragility more blatantly as in "La Prieta", her most autobiographical essay about her relationship with her mother. Yet, in her interviews, published in 2000, Anzaldúa seems to have assimilated the pain caused by their relationship and to cherish the most rewarding moments with her mother.

However, from a general perspective I understand their mother-daughter relationship as a richly complex "psychological borderlands" in the author's life where her powerfully contradictory feelings for her mother intermingle; as Anzaldúa (1987 preface) herself stated in *Borderlands/La Frontera* such space is not a "comfortable place to live in".[7] When imagining this particular borderlands, I wonder which are the borders that shape each mother-daughter relationship,

7. The term "borderlands" is used in the preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera:* Anzaldúa expands the original geographical meaning of the term –which refers to the US-Mexican border– to more inner personal areas such as this one.

which need to be transgressed and which have to be respected to keep a healthy independent mind as well as a close nurturing connection.

In *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, Estelle Jelinek gathers various essays on the different aspects of female autobiography in the United States and the United Kingdom. Jelinek (1980: 12-15) searches for commongrounds and differences between male and female autobiographies, in her attempt to provide a definition of women's autobiography. In general Jelinek highlights the importance given to professional and intellectual success in male autobiographies, whose narrations are especially connected to their historical moment.

However, in the case of women's autobiographers, Jelinek points out that their life narrations are usually not so closely attached to the times they live, they hardly emphasize their social or public life, and concentrate mostly on minor daily issues, on friends, and on the dificulties within the family. Jelinek continues to state that the one area where male and female autobiographies converge is in the absence of painful or intimate problems. These frequently avoided conflicts in the majority of the cases are related to the family, children, and love or intimate relationships. Taking Jelinek's conclusions as a faithful cannonical guide for women's autobiographies written in the United States, we can affirm that Anzaldúa has certainly contributed to the revision of the construction of these borders when writing about her life from her outspoken working-class Chicana lesbian perspective. Her words on her mother are one more transgressed border because she breaks the taboo of revealing the conflictive sides present in her mother-daughter relationship. The conflicts vary as we shall see in the following pages but they are all quite intimate, mainly contextualised within the family and expressed rather blatantly by the author. This transgression is especially relevant for the Chicana literary scene as within the Chicano community the mother figure has been dearly sublimed.

In her essay "La Prieta", Anzaldúa makes various explicit references to her mother and to her relationship with her. This text is the one with the richest autobiographical content, and in its first section she openly addresses several conflicts with her mother. One of them is directly connected to the difference in the experience of race for her mother and for herself. She states that, for her mother, being Mexican could easily be mistaken for being dirty and Indian, racist stereotypes she wanted to avoid at all costs: "Don't go out in the sun," my mother would tell me when I wanted to play outside. "If you get any darker, they'll mistake you for an Indian. And don't get dirt on your clothes. You don't want people to say you're a dirty Mexican" (Anzaldúa 1983: 198). As an adult Chicana writer, Anzaldúa reorganises the experience of her mother's rejection of their Indianness. Her mother is scared of being rejected for their darkness, which is exactly what she herself rejects in Native Americans. Anzaldúa (1983: 198) looks back on her mother's words and realizes how her mother's messages also lacked a profound

racial awareness: "It never dawned on her that, six-generation American, we were still Mexican and that all Mexicans are part Indian. I passed my adolescence combating her incessant orders to bathe my body, scrub the floors and cupboards, clean the windows and the walls".

Anzaldúa (1983: 198) soon acknowledges the presence of Indian blood in her racial inheritance and even plays with her mother's words: "Too bad mihijita was morena, *muy prieta*, so dark and different from her own fair-skinned children. But she loved mihijita anyway. What I lacked in whiteness, I had in smartness. But it *was* too bad I was dark like an Indian". By juxtaposing both voices, Anzaldúa is presenting us with the shame her mother felt for her looking Indian and the fear of being rejected for the racial difference. The association of being Indian, dirty and poor becomes evident for a family who has suffered the consequences of such painfully racist stereotype. It seems ironical to think that the perpetuation of the stereotype of the "dirty Mexican" is in the hands of her own Mexican mother who was in turn likely to be a victim of it. This racist lesson was very close to Anzaldúa's upbringing and long to be overcome by her: "But it's taken over thirty years to unlearn the belief instilled in me that white is better than brown –something that some people of color will *never* unlearn" (Anzaldúa 1983: 202).

Another conflictive zone in Anzaldúa's mother-daughter relationship is the one related to her extremely early menstruation when she was only three months of age. This rare physical dysfunction marked the rest of her life. Such an intimate problem is revealed at various times across her work. She refers to it as an extremely important source of physical and inner psychological pain:

> When I was three months old tiny pink spots began appearing on my diaper. "She's a throwback Eskimo," the doctor told my mother. "Eskimo girl children get their periods early". At seven I had budding breasts. My mother would wrap them in tight cotton girdles so the kids at school would not think them strange beside their own flat brown mole nipples. My mother would pin onto my panties a folded piece of rag. "Keep your legs shut, Prieta." This, the deep dark secret between us, her punishment for having fucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born. (Anzaldúa 1983: 199)

Where did her mother's fear originate? Was there an implicit fear of premature pregnancy when her woman's body became visually fertile? Anzaldúa's mother perceived her daughter's body changes and evolution as a dangerous space; Gloria Anzaldúa suffered her physical dysfunction as a silent frontier of difference between her mother and herself. As personal as it sounds she details how this dysfunction paralysed her life and her relationship with the world around her: "Every 24 days, raging fevers cooked my brain. Full flowing

periods, accompanying cramps, tonsillitis and 105º fevers. Every month a trip to the doctors. "It's all in your head", they would say. "When you get older and get married and have children the pain will stop". A monotonous litany from the men in white all through my teens" (1983: 200). No doubt these "men in white" embody the patriarchal thinking dominating her upbringing and adolescence when imposed marriage and motherhood suddenly were to be the agents of her body healing transformation. For a long time, her mother tried to hide this situation as if ashamed, even within the family: "My sister started suspecting our secret –that there was something 'wrong' with me. How much can you hide from a sister you've slept with in the same bed since infancy?" (Anzaldúa 1983: 199). In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa (1987: 42-43) refers to this reality as *el secreto terrible* ("the terrible secret"), and explains in more depth her feelings of shame for being different:

> By the worried look on my parents' faces I learned early that something was fundamentally wrong with me. When I was older I would look into the mirror, afraid of *mi secreto terrible*, the secret sin I tried to conceal – *la seña*, the mark of the Beast. I was afraid it was in plain sight for all to see. The secret I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien, I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside.

The tabooed secrecy and the silent shame that surrounded Anzaldúa's early periods made her feel guilty for being the way she was and she entered her own otherness within the family. The development of her body became the source of personal and family shame and the secret had to be locked away in a space smaller than the domestic. Only her parents knew, and after her early father's death, only her mother and herself.

Her mother's personal difficulties to show affection to her is another emotional area where she encounters her mother through her writing: "Though she loved me she would only show it covertly –in the tone of her voice, in a look. Not so with my brothers –there it was visible for all the world to see" (1983: 201). On her part, Anzaldúa (2000: 85) admits how much she loved her and cared for her: "I love my mother, I always tried to make things easy for her. I bought her stuff, I made sure she didn't work too hard, and even if I hated washing dishes all the time, I'd help. I looked after her. When we cooked, I made sure she got good food, instead of my brothers always getting it. She was like a prima donna to me". It is Anzaldúa's loving attitude that we hear in her words, while her mother seems to have more problems to verbalize and express affection. The author's protecting behaviour with her mother places her in a motherly position as the oldest child who becomes aware of her widow mother's need to be looked after. In the same interview she also confesses having felt rage for her mother: "I really got into hating her when I was an

adolescent. I wanted to hurt her, stick the dagger in her back. There was this love-hate between us, but I think a lot of it had to do with sexuality and being at the age when you want to establish an independent life of your own-fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. For me, I think it was earlier" (2000: 85). Taking Caplan's (2000: 241) words as a reference when she states "[…] no one is free until the truths about mothers are highlighted […]", we can see how Anzaldúa is once again exposing her inner freedom when expressing her personal feelings about her mother so much in the open.

Anzaldúa (1987:16) also confesses how she was always stubborn and disobedient since she was little: "At a very early age I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. It tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms no matter how unsuitable to others they were. *Terca*. Even as a child I would not obey". These attitudes were not considered feminine or acceptable at all by her mother. Her confrontation with her mother was her first rejection to the established rules in patriarchal society: "What my mother wanted in return for having birthed me and for nurturing me was that I submit to her without rebellion. Was this a survival skill she was trying to teach me? She objected not so much to my disobedience but to my questioning her right to demand obedience from me" (1983: 199). Anzaldúa challenges the mother figure as an authority from an early age and desastibilizes her mother's patriarchal understanding of a daughter's correct and adequate behaviour. In a later interview Anzaldúa deals with her disobedient attitude with her mother too: "My mother didn't know how to handle me. Out of all her children, she says, I've been the most disobedient and given her the most trouble; I've been the rebel, the black sheep, everything. But I haven't, I've just been myself" (2000: 85).

Anzaldúa's mother also disaproved of her appearance and of what she perceived as her daughter's "male" behaviour: "Machona-india ladina (masculine-wild Indian), she would call me because I did not act as a nice Chicanita is supposed to act" (Anzaldúa 1983: 201). Anzaldúa was frequently seen as a tomboy by her mother who could not accept that her oldest daughter liked to wear boots, was not scared of knives or snakes and rejected traditional gender roles. As Anzaldúa (1983: 202) herself wrote: "The traditional role of mujer was a saddle I did not want to wear. The concepts 'passive' and 'dutiful' raked my skin like spurs and 'marriage' and 'children' set me to bucking faster than rattlesnakes or coyotes". From an early age Anzaldúa enjoyed reading, a habit which was not accepted in her environment, and, certainly not by her mother who expected her to be doing the housework when being at home: "She [her mother] always embarrassed me by telling everyone that I liked to lie in bed reading and wouldn't help her with the housework" (Anzaldúa 1983: 201). In another stance, when being interviewed by Christine Weiland, she addmitted: "I

stopped cooking for the same reason that I stopped obeying my mother: because it was a female role" (Anzaldúa 2000: 86).

The price of rejection for her freedom and independent thinking on her family side, as well as on her mother's, did not take very long to appear: "[…] my mother and brothers calling me puta when I told them I had lost my virginity and that I'd done it on purpose. My mother and brothers calling me jota (queer) when I told them my friends were gay men and lesbians" (Anzaldúa 1983: 204). As Chicana critic Jennifer Browdy de Hernández (1998: 246) states: "Lorde and Anzaldúa bitterly describe their mothers as agents of the patriarchal status quo who disapproved of their daughter's independence, nonconformity, and creativity".

Yet, Anzaldúa perceived her mother's silent acceptance of her work: "[…] while she would try to correct my more agressive moods, my mother was secretly proud of my 'waywardness.' (Something she will never admit). Proud that I'd worked myself through school. Secretly proud of my paintings, of my writing though all the while complaining because I made no money out of it" (1983: 201). Was this approving silence enough to satisfy the daughter's search for the mother's recognition? How did Anzaldúa's mother deal with her own contradictory attitude with her own daughter? According to Rosario Arias (2005: 409) when studying the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship, "the mother appears as an ambivalent figure, since the daughter manifests contradictory feelings of continuity and separation; she is a site of identity but also of difficult closeness". Was Anzaldua's separation from her mother's traditional behaviour a matrophobic way to differentiate herself from her?[8]

Yet in the above mentioned interview Anzaldúa (2000: 81-82) speaks of her mother as a woman who had her voice in the domestic arena: "She had a strong voice in the household and stood up to my father. I think my father was weak only to her […] There were certain points where she put her foot down. He probably listened to her more than she listened to him". Anzaldúa (2000: 82) continues to say: "I don't know where my mother got this thing about women being subservient to men because she never was-not to her brothers, not to her father, not to my father. But she paid lip service". Amalia's contradictions in her own behaviour bring me back to the "psychological borderlands" –mentioned at the beginning of this analysis– where the mother-daughter relationship takes place. Anzaldúa, as an adult writer, is aware of Amalia's patriarchal discourse when it concerns women's gender roles, yet Amalia contradicts her own ideas on traditional women's passivity whenever she was not silent and submissive as a woman in her relationship with men. Anzaldúa could not understand the

8. "Matrophobia" understood in Adrienne Rich's sense: fear of becoming similar to one's mother.

incoherence of Amalia's conservative gender discourse in view of her clear, resistant and claiming voice before male power figures. Amalia was not a passive and silent mother figure, accepting male rules. In Anzaldúa's words she was a woman who was ready to fight for herself and for her children. As O'Reilley and Abbey (2000: 10) state: "What the mother models for her daughters is […] not necessarily success but struggle: an everyday lived resistance to the world that seeks to claim and control mothers and their daughters […]". Amalia's success was her permanent struggle to survive as a poor Mexican mother of many. According to Judith Arcana (1979: 33): "If we want girls to grow into free women, brave and strong, we must be those women ourselves". Anzaldúa is certainly a brave and strong writer model for Chicanas and for women in general, like her mother who was brave and strong, during times of personal and financial struggle. The writer tries to reconcile her painful experiences as a daughter with that of her mother's, understanding her pain and loneliness as a very young widow, mother of four, and hard-worker in the fields:

> It was not my mother's fault that we were poor and yet so much of my pain and shame has been with our both betraying each other. But my mother has always been there for me in spite of our differences and emotional gulfs. She has never stopped fighting; she is a survivor. […] I can hear her crying over the body of my dead father. She was 28, had had little schooling, was unskilled, yet her strength was greater than most men's, raising us single-handed. (Anzaldúa 1983: 202)

Yet I think Anzaldúa breaks the myth of the good-bad mother to present a woman who created herself through painful identity borders, a woman who teaches, with her own example, valuable skills for survival. Anzaldúa learnt from a very early age that being in a disadvantageous position is not synonymous of failure. Her mother was the victim of her own patriarchal and cultural stereotypes of Mexican (or Chicana) women and she paradoxically responded to them fighting (at least externally) against her daughter's stubborness. However, Anzaldúa (1983: 199) questions her own written representation of her mother when she asks: "But above all, I am terrified of making my mother the villain in my life rather than showing how she has been a victim. Will I be betraying her in this essay for her early disloyalty to me?"

At the beginning of this discussion I mentioned how Anzaldúa deeply questioned the borders of her maternal relationship, yet she has also collaborated in the reconstruction of the mother-daughter borders when she finds the common space for both of them: they are both survivors in their own battlefields. Amalia had to survive poverty, widowhood, and extremely hard work in the land in order to raise her children and not let them starve to death. The priorities in her life were set for her in advance. Amalia did not have the racial and gender awareness Anzaldúa wanted and needed but, could she actually have access to it? Was she not

another victim of patriarchal and racist thinking within her own community? How can a poor woman suffering inner sexual and social oppression be liberated from it to satisfy her daughter's future needs?

We hear Anzaldúa's frustration but Amalia's remains unheard. The mother figure is very present in connection with the history of the land her family cultivated. The family's survival depended on the land and the produce from it, her mother's story is the land's. The drought they suffered in South Texas for three years in a row, the animals dying, and her father's death were her mother's reality. *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa (1987: 8) tells us about her grandmother's story as if told by her own mother: "*Mi pobre madre viuda perdió* two-thirds of her *ganado*. A smart gabacho lawyer took the land away *mamá* hadn't paid taxes. *No hablaba inglés*, she didn't know how to ask for time to raise the money". By telling us how her mother suffered the social injustice of having her family land stolen on the basis of linguistic disadvantage, Anzaldúa is also recalling the collective history of the Chicanos who suffered the Anglos' abuse of power as many Chicanos were not fluent in English and had no education to defend themselves; her grandmother's was not the only case.

On a different and more positive level, Anzaldúa also tells us of the time she and her mother worked in a farm weighing and packaging eggs, and how they attended several meetings where they were told about healthy eating. As a result of these classes, a cooking book was published in which her mother participated: "How proud my mother was to have her recipe for *enchiladas coloradas* in a book" (1987: 9). This is the only time we hear about some external recognition of her mother's work. For the first time we also see Amalia, the woman (not strictly in her role as a mother), proud of herself, able to contribute with her recipe to a cooking book.

4. Anzaldúa And Her Search Of The Mother Figure In Coatlicue

> "Coatlicue is one of the powerful images, or 'archetypes,' that inhabits, or passes through, my psyche. For me, *la Coatlicue* is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche". (1987: 46)

Having analysed Anzaldúa's relationship with her mother from various perspectives, there is a void in a gender and cultural referential level which needs to be fulfilled. For Anzaldúa there were cultural and personal identity needs that her mother figure could not cover. Her personal search as a Chicana writer who was constructing the complexity of her individual and collective identity focused on a female reference where she could find strength and which could mirror her dark side too. Amalia's racial shame and her fears of becoming part of the racist stereotypes of being Mexican meant the rejection of an old

Indigenous past for Anzaldúa, the rejection of traditions and knowledge that Anzaldúa later on felt were going to be part of her personal reconstruction. Amalia's patriarchal message on the limitations of female gender roles talked of a restricted space Anzaldúa wished to abandon. Thus Anzaldúa searched for the mother figure in female goddesses such as ancient Aztec goddess Coatlicue. This way Anzaldúa was becoming her own mother, gestating, and therefore, transforming, the afflictive inheritance of her own biological mother to adopt Coatlicue's powerful image. Anzaldúa was giving birth to her re-born identity, she was delivering (not without aching effort) the vision of her new self, one which accepted her contradictory powers like Coatlicue's.

Coatlicue is a very complex pre-Hispanic deity, she is the opposite of the traditional and patriarchal image of a loving submissive mother such as *la Virgen de Guadalupe.* The traditional role of the good and always nurturing mother is represented in *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, who accepts God's decisions and orders and transmits them to human beings. Coatlicue has her own will and power, her strength is not dependant on any god or being. Not in vain was she removed when the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived in Mexico to have *la Virgen de Guadalupe* instead. Coatlicue meant a threat for the Spaniards' colonization process, she could make women think they had access to "too much power". As Rebolledo (1995: 50) explains: "Coatlicue is both goddess and monster, beneficient and threatening. Coatlicue is sometimes seen as decapitated earth goddess". Coatlicue's stone sculpture represents a solid, threating figure who is covered with a necklace of hands and a skirt of serpents. But what her scary features do not reveal are her powers to create life. Rebolledo (1995: 51) continues:

> Coatlicue (incorporating aspects of Tonatzín and Tlazoteotl) was seen as a goddess of love and sin, with the power to create and devour life; thus, she was the 'symbol of ambivalence…personification of awesome natural forces, monster who devoured the sun at night [and] brought it to life in the morning…coatlicue, therefore, represents all aspects of a dual nature and is a cyclical figure' (Anton 1973: 59)

Coatlicue connects Anzaldúa with her ancient Indian roots, a long suffered stereotyped aspect of her identity which was rejected by her mother. As Browdy De Hernandez (1998: 248) affirms: "Anzaldúa takes a more metaphorical approach, seeking an identification not with her biological mother, who remains unavailable to her even in fantasy, but with the pre-Aztec Mayan goddess Coatlicue, who becomes the symbol of female power and resistance in her text".

It was Anzaldúa who retrieved the figure of Coatlicue and theorized it in her study of Chicana identity. There is a whole chapter dedicated to the meanings she gives to her interaction with this deity in *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State". In this chapter Anzaldúa named the concept of

the "Coatlicue state", which is the painful transition and transformation towards her self's inner awareness. It is through the "Coatlicue state" that she walks towards the construction, destruction and reconstruction of her own compelling identity to give birth to a new self:

> I spent the first half of my life learning to rule myself, to grow a will, and now at midlife I find that autonomy is a boulder on my path that I keep crashing into. I can't seem to stay out of my own way. I've always been aware that there is a greater power than the conscious I. That power is my inner self, the entity that is the sum total of all my reincarnations, the godwoman in me, I call Antigua, mi Diosa, the divine within, Coatlicue-Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteotl-Tonantzin-Coatlalopeuh-Guadalupe-They are one. When to bow down to Her and when to allow the limited conscious mind to take over-that is the problem. (1987: 50)

Anzaldua's embracing of the pre-Aztec deities calls for her indigenous recognition of her Indian self, in its most profound sense. She also invoques *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, along with the other pre-Columbian goddesses such as Tonantzin and Tlazolteotl. Tonantzin is an aspect of Coatlicue, her power to die and resurrect. Tlazolteotl is the goddess of filth: "Filth, in the Aztec world as in the Christian world, was symbolic of sin, but Tlazolteotl has four phases, related to the four phases of the moon, and in the third phase, she has the power to cleanse or 'forgive' all sin" (Rebolledo 1995: 50). It is the ancient female power, the identification of their presence in herself that positions her in a different state of mind and spirit.

This deity's main aspect is her inmense power of transformation, a model Anzaldúa provided herself with in her search of transformative answers for her questions on her gender and cultural identity. In "the Coatlicue State" Anzaldúa (1987: 51) writes about the overwhelming takeover of this transformation in her:

> I see *oposición* and *insurrección*. I see the crack growing on the rock. I see the fine frenzy building. I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing *la Coatlicue*. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually takes dominion over serpents- over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents'- just ours, mine.
>
> And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. *Completa*.

The transformation is complete when the fusion with Coatlicue is the result of her personal journey into herSelf. It is a spiritual birth but it is also intellectual

and physical, Anzaldúa becomes Coatlicue and Coatlicue metaphorically cracks her stony nature to embody her. The new being has been born, the mother and the daughter are one in their mutual midwifery.

Anzaldúa's mother lived her own gender and personal limitations in her life and transmitted them to her in various direct and indirect forms as we have seen here. She was a woman who had to follow the patriarchal rules of a world where her voice was invisible. She was not aware of her power as a woman or as a mother. She did not experience the power of individual freedom of choice. On the other hand, Coatlicue represents the idea of a strong and brave mother (as we analysed above) but she embraces no limits to her power. As Adrienne Rich (1976: 246) states: "The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand the sense of actual possibilities". Coatlicue's empowering figure expands Anzaldúa's personal possibilities to limits she (or her mother) never imagined. In her turn Anzaldúa's recognition of Coatlicue in *Borderlands/La Frontera* illuminated and expanded such limits to all Chicanas (and women in general) who are willing to learn from Coatlicue, a female goddess who creates a new reference of strength and independence from male domination. The image of the mother here is not only a biological figure for Anzaldúa, it stands for the symbolic presence that creates, reinforces and constructs her complex multicultural and multiethnic self:

> When we look closely at the different uses to which Lorde and Anzaldúa put the figure of the mother, an interesting dichotomy emerges: the autobiographical narrators' disappointment and even anger with their biological mothers, contrasting with the idealized images they present of the mother-goddesses who serve as models for their independent, emergent sense of self. In reimagining their mothers as powerful female goddesses, Lorde and Anzaldúa rewrite their own roles as women, transforming themselves autobiographically into the writers –or the mothers– of their own destinies. (Browdy De Hernández 1998: 246)

Anzaldúa is also a Mother to herself as she recognizes the contradictory aspects that characterize these goddesses in her. She has the power to construct a world of words, concepts and spirit as well as to try to unlearn her mother's restrictive upbringing patterns of gender and cultural behaviour. This way the mother figure expands from the personal experience into a more universal force, a goddess she presents to any reader willing to acknowledge inner transformation in its full painfulness.

To conclude, Gloria Anzaldúa was a social and literary rebel, her creative and editorial work transgressed the cannonical borders of Western literature. The mother becomes a fundamental agent of Anzaldúa's self-determination and self-

perception. Initially it is through her mother's denial of their racial inheritance that she is compelled to analyse and go through an unlearning process in which she questions her ethnic origins and acknowledges her belonging to a pre-Columbian people. By identifying her mother's attempt at imposing her gender roles and racist stereotypes, Anzaldua tackles the origin of her own lack of self-love, her need to recuperate and accept who she is as a woman in the borderlands of race, class and gender. According to Rosario Arias (2005: 410): "All in all these attempts to reclaim, unearth, and recover the daughter's relationship with the mother, contradictory and ambivalent as it might be at times, are deeply empowering for the writers and show a way of constructing a female subject who is defined in relation with the mother". The analysis and recreation of her mother also becomes a starting point to search for other mother figures which can meet her personal needs for an intense connection to the female. Coatlicue represents this gynocentric mother figure with which there is no emotional personal attachment but a desired inner and transformative connection. According to O'Reilley and Abbey (2000: 9): "The empowerment of daughters thus depends on the deconstruction of patriarchal motherhood [...]" which is the main task Anzaldúa undertakes whenever she is analysing her mother. The author dismantles the patriarchal attitude her mother used in her raising Anzaldúa as what a Chicana woman is supposed to be. Anzaldúa reinvents the maternal to reinforce her own multi-ethnic and multicultural identity which, like Coatlicue, can be the source of creative and destructive effects to herself. The multiple borderlands which reside in Anzaldúa needed a female image at peace with her forceful contradictions, such as the mother goddess Coatlicue. Because of her conflictive relationship with Amalia, Anzaldúa started her search for the mother figure she and other Chicanas could relate to as an identity icon. Amalia's survival modeled for Anzaldúa's who in turn seeked for Coatlicue, the great female survivor, connected to her cultural pre-Hispanic past and to her racial roots as an Indigenous woman. Anzaldúa's words on her mother-daughter conflicts and deciphering are an open gate to encourage other Chicanas to break their secrets and set their identities free.

Works cited

Adams, K. 1994. "NorthAmerican Silences: History, Identity, and Witness in the Poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Leslie Marmon Silko". *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. E. Hedges and S. Fisher Fishkin. New York: Oxford University Press. 130-145.

Anzaldúa, G. and C. Moraga, eds. 1983. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press.

Anzaldúa, G. 1983. "La Prieta". G. Anzaldúa and C. Moraga. Eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table. 198-209.

Anzaldúa, G. 1987. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Books.

Anzaldúa, G. 2000. *Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews/Entrevistas*. Ed. by Ana Louise Keating. New York: Routledge.

Anton, F. 1973. *Women in Pre-Columbian America*. New York: Abner Schram.

Arias, R. 2005. "Mother/daughter relationship". *The Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography*. Ed. V. Boynton and J. Malin. Westport: Greenwood Press. 407-410.

Arcana, J. 1979. *Our Mothers' Daughters*. Berkeley: Shameless Hussy Press.

Browdy de Hernández, J. 1998. "Mothering the Self: Writing through the Lesbian Sublime in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera". Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*. Ed. S. K. Stanley. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 244-264.

Caplan, P. 2000. "Don't Blame Mother: Then and Now". *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, & Transformation*. Ed. A. O'Reilly and S. Abbey. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 237-245.

Castillo, A., ed. 1996. *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Cisneros, S. 1984. *The House on Mango Street*. Nueva York: Vintage Books.

Cisneros, S. 1996. "Guadalupe, the sex goddess". *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe* Ed. A. Castillo. New York: Riverhead Books. 46-51.

Córdova, T. et al. eds. 1986. *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press y NACCS.

Flores, E. 1999. "Chicana Testimonio and Autobiography: Memory, Representation, and Identity in Lucas, Ruiz, Moraga, and Anzaldúa". Unpublished dissertation. University of Arizona.

Jelinek, E. C. ed. 1980. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social, eds. 1993. *Chicana Critical Issues*. Berkeley: Third Woman Press.

Moraga, C. 1983. *Loving in the War Years*. Boston: South End Press.

O'Reilley, A. and S. Abbey. 2000. "Introduction". *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, & Transformation*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 1-18.

Ortiz-Taylor, S. and S. 1996. *Imaginary Parents: A Family Autobiography*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Rebolledo, T.D. and E.. Rivero, eds. 1993. *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Rebolledo, T.D. 1995. *Women Singing in the Snow. A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Rich, A. 1976. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton.

Saldívar-Hull, S. 1999. Introduction. G. Anzaldúa. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2nd.ed). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books. 1-16.

Torres, L. 1998. "The Construction of the Self in US Latinas Autobiographies". *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. S. Smith and J. Watson. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press. 276-287.

Zamora Lausch, R. J. 2003. *Embodying Autobiography and Mothering Feminist Theory: Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and the (Re)Visionary Practice of Auto/Historia and Teoría*. Arizona State University. Unpublished Dissertation.

Ganzfeld or the ontology of escape in Robert Kroetsch's *The hornbooks of Rita K*[1]

Mladen Kurajica
Universidad de La Laguna

> Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never (Kafka 1971: 431).

What happens to the concept of identity when it vanishes from the plane of the western dialectics? What happens to love when one of the lovers is gone? What happens to the poet when her need for writing turns into ink? What happens to God when we stop looking vertically? What happens to sound when it dissipates into silence? What happens to light when it is switched off? Or, to put it bluntly, "what remains of what does not remain?" (8).[2] There is something common to all these wonderings: "the question is always a question of trace" (8). At least this is what Raymond, an ambiguous, tricky and fully postmodern narrator, thinks as he tries to bring back to life the memory of the vanished poet, and his lover, Rita Kleinhart. This he tries by ordering and putting together her hornbooks, "neat stacks of scrawled notes, manuscripts, partially filled notebooks" (8), left at her ranch in the Canadian prairies. As we are told, "Kleinhart was invited, during the late spring of 1992, to visit Germany and lecture briefly to the Canadianists at Trier

1. This research that is here reported on has been funded by a grant awarded by University of La Laguna/ Caja Canarias 2006.

2. Robert Kroetsch (2001) *The Hornbooks of Rita K.*

University. On her way back from Trier she paid a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt and while at the museum mailed a number of postcards to friends. She was not seen alive thereafter" (8). Her sudden and unexpected disappearance into the artist James Turrell's light installation named "*Twilight Arch*" (37) triggers Raymond's labyrinthine trip towards the mystery of art, writing, death and life itself. Her act, in other words, compels Raymond to play a role of a "sleuth" (57), an archivist of the past that looms over the present, a "half technician to her sometimes obscured intention, half lover of the plain truth" (7).

But what is our narrator going to find? Where did the poet, his alleged lover, Rita, go? Why did she choose to disappear? We can never be sure, since the text never reaches a satisfying conclusion. Yet we imagine, experiment with the possibilities and directions that the text and Rita herself offer us. We can connect, we can map. We can enter the silence. Why not? As we follow the chaotic flow of Rita's fragments, and enter the *back doors* that Rita herself has left opened, we, as readers, become, with the narrator, witnesses of the unfolding of something outrageous, something that we can interpret as a new beginning, a will of becoming. Far away from the tyranny of the language and the western system of thought based on the logic of dialectics, and in turn on its eternal displacing, Rita's traces point to new and unforeseen dimensions, to the birth of invisible architectures, spaces not yet populated, a stranger with a knife who knocks on our *back door*. Knock, knock. The discovery implies violence, the re-rooting of the plant. But still, these places remain unreachable if we rely on words, which are as Rita told once Raymond "lock, not a key" (33).

We cannot give clear answers because that which has not been experienced yet cannot be seized or defined. But have we forgotten, in these days of the advanced postmodern era, the grammar of our past, "the bones of the saints" (4) that *one* has been obliged to visit for so long? It does not seem so. We (you, me, Raymond, Kroetsch, the thirsty critic, the hungry historian, the God-like Deemer, the Kafka's man before the door of the Law) all remain imprisoned in the house of language. Yes, "there is nothing outside the text" Derrida (1976: 158) reiterates in order to embrace Descartes' cogito, in a similar way that the Cartesian subject seeks to embrace the world. But, is not love, a Christian-made and therefore western idea, another mask of Presence? Is not language, after all, "the hypotenuse that lovers dream" (54), but which separates them forever? And if language is understood as bracketing and dividing, could there be a poetics where the "fence is down" or where all objects, places and people remain undisturbed? (16). A poetics of desire instead of the one of love? A poetics of silence instead of language? And then, could it be that while we are imprisoned on the fictitious "flatbed earth" (28) of the blank page as Raymond is, Rita by her act of disappearance manages to free herself from the language of love, and thus to escape the spell of the western logic, an infinite and tireless loop of the Hegelian master play? If there is a possibility, Rita Kleinhart is certainly on her

way to asking what it is (42). Not answers, but questions. Not points but lines. Not embrace, but surround (40). The riddle of silence.

Said that, I propose this essay as a trip toward that space which renders Rita K invisible to the *eye* of Man-sleuth embodied by Raymond and his apparently common sense. Nevertheless, far from giving an account of the events that occurred at the level of the story, what really haunts me as a reader and critic are the consequences of her conduct and motivations behind such act. And if there is really something at stake here it is certainly the issue of the representation of subjectivity. As I perceive it, her wilful disappearance comes to stand not only as powerful blow against traditional modes of conceiving subjectivity but as a serious challenge to any kind of representation stemming from the binary operations of the machine we call language. Along these pages, hence, I will focus on how and in what sense Rita's self-erasement disrupts the orderly understanding of subjectivity and at the same time it attains to draw the reader's attention toward alternative ways of perceiving, employing, and experiencing language and text.

As a philosophical guideline, I find Deleuze and Guattari's work to be a highly appropriate companion for this short trip into the exciting conceptual spaces opened up by Rita. This is because of their strong emphasis on intuition, experiment and rupture as the herald of any kind of organizational principle. Furthermore, their understanding of subjectivity as a never-determined set of multiplicities, each of them in turn composed of series of flows, unpredictable movements, random velocities, surprising effects and so on, not only offers an alternative and anti-ontological model but implicitly conveys the possibility of individual, social and artistic transformation. Finally, their approach to the notion of world as a single substance where everything is about possibilities and connections, no matter of what sort they might be, leaves *doors* widely open for the dreamers of the 21st century. It is precisely this last idea that functions as the nexus between *The Hornbooks of Rita K* and the title of this essay, for *ganzfeld* in German means literally, a total field, that is, a homogeneous space where all angles, axes, perspectives and appearances fade out into what Deleuze and Guattari would refer to as a plane of immanence. Accordingly, the ontology of escape is an attempt to map Rita's silence and to examine the relationships between such experiment and Deleuze and Guattari's conception of subjectivity. But let us begin now if there is still someone who thinks we have not already begun to flee.

In his essay "Freed from Story: Narrative Tactics in Badlands", Lecker (1984-85: 160), in his response to Kroetsch's remark that "'falling out of cosmologies is at least an illusion of freedom, of becoming a fragment again, of opening up possibilities'", points out that "the true freedom [in Kroetsch's novels] means not telling the story". His reflection is grounded on the idea that "to be involved in

story is to be involved in temporality, and temporality, in human terms, implies death" (Lecker 1984-85: 160). The story, as we understand it, is a set of rules, codes, patterns and forms historically and culturally negotiated and therefore identifiable by all of us. It is a framework provided by language, which in itself is nothing else but a trace of other times, people and places or, as Rita puts it forward, the traces of languages we sometimes do not remember knowing (14). This idea goes hand to hand with the conception that Deleuze and Guatarri have of language as *mot d'ordre*, a *story* that rather than transmitting information, allowing communication or enabling free flow of creative energies, enforces an order by commands and imperatives. The example that Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 95) provide us with is that of a teacher who "imposes on the child semiotic coordinates with all the basic dualisms of grammar (masculine-feminine, singular-plural, substantive-verb, subject of speech [*sujet d'énoncé*]-speaking subject [*sujet d'énunciation*], etc.)," to conclude that "the elementary unit of language -the statement [*énoncé*]- is the *mot d'ordre*". After receiving these coordinates, the child's potentially unpredictable experience with language gets reduced to already codified and experimented usage. Similarly, McCaffery (1986: 94) sees this transmission in terms of repression of biological drives. As he observes, "classical discourse is our inheritance; lodged within the bastions of grammar, it repress all manifestations of libido within rigid vessels of content, freezing energy into representation".

In *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, for instance, that idea of code transmission appears described in a quite ironic and even comic sense: "Poetry is excrement, a discharge of the body. It is marginally useful as fertilizer. In using it as fertilizer we run the risk of transmitting a variety of venereal diseases" (44). Indeed, to accept the story as it comes from generation to generation is to acknowledge our debt to the system we have inherited within it. In turn, to employ the logic of its language is to accept the rules of the game which have clearly defined our position and possibilities much before we started to play. That is why Rita tells us that she has lived in a world where everything has happened (54). Freedom is equated then with not accepting the rules of the game, or even with not playing the game at all. But is that possible? Can the idea of freedom be found in Kroetsch's works? According to Lecker (1984-85: 161), freedom, the concept he equates with the "anti-story", cannot be achieved by Kroetsch because to do so would imply not writing, and writing, Lecker goes on, "is the only way he can distance himself from the kind of writing which implicitly questions the writing act that defines him". In other words, Kroetsch –and also his characters– need language in order to defy the language that incessantly tells them who or what they are. But this certainly traps them in a double bind, a kind of Sisyphus-like game of beginnings and endings, a wobbling of the Derridean *pharmakon* from One to Two, with, I dare to say, its programmed western tendency of becoming Three. Consequently, we may say that what stops actually Kroetsch's characters

from attaining freedom is precisely their acceptance of the paradox formulated in terms of the opposition story/anti-story.

Indeed, along these last decades, many critics have suggested that Kroetsch's previous work is deeply grounded on the postmodern stance which consists of "the refusal to pick sides, the desire to be on both sides of any border, deriving energy from the continual crossing" (Hutcheon 1988: 162). Taking, in this sense, as a point of departure the Derridean idea of "a double gesture, a double science, a double writing" as the only way of "overturning of the classical opposition, and a general displacement of the system" (Derrida 1982:195), numerous critics see in Kroetsch a picture of a world wherein the impossibility of fulfilment of his characters becomes the bedrock of their existence. Their attempts to reaffirm themselves as free and self-sufficient individuals are constantly thwarted by their own belief in the possibility of such an enterprise. Embodying the Cartesian assumption that the subject can grasp its own meaning by a systematic comprehension of the world-object, Kroetsch's characters yearn to position themselves as the only possible centre or point of departure of understanding of what surrounds them. And they seek to gain power by writing, recording or collecting. Think, for instance, of Demeter in The *Studhorse Man* (Kroetsch 1969), trying to write a biography of the chaotic life of Hazard Lepage; or, Anna Dawe in *Badlands* (Kroetsch 1975), who tries to liberate herself from the past by writing an autobiography upon the silence of her gone father; or Dorfendorf's collecting for the mysterious Deemer in *Alibi* (Kroetsch 1983), among many other examples. All these characters embark on journeys for a final completion of themselves. In order to achieve that, as Thomas (1982: 11-12) suggests, they "must deny or usurp the Other, gain freedom from relationship and connection, and by doing so wither into Narcissistic sterility or maintain an absurd and frantic dance of self". They all crave the promise of self-presence, an image of world as the mirror of their doubtful souls. But what they find is a completely different thing. Instead of embracing the glory of the self-present subject, they come to embrace its absence in the same way Narcissus' self-love embraces death. Not only do they find that the world around them is impossible to seize by the act of writing, but that they themselves are profoundly contradictable, divided and split by the same language they try to use. In other words, they realize that they always need the other to assert themselves.

In his essay "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction", Kroetsch (1989a: 76) comes to describe that idea in a very explicit way. He establishes "the basic grammatical pair in the story-line of prairie fiction" in terms of oppositions horse/house, masculine/feminine, on/in, motion/stasis. However, the resolution of the dialectic cannot take place mainly because "the male cannot enter into what is traditionally thought of as marriage -and possibly nor can the female". As he points out,

> [h]e approaches the female. He approaches the garden. He approaches the house....And only then does he realize he has defined himself out of all entering. If he enters into this marriage –and into this place– it will be he –contrary to the tradition of the past –who must make the radical change. It will be he –already self-christened –and not the woman this time –who must give up the precious and treacherous *name* (Kroetsch 1989: 82-83).

Seen in this light, the trace –the writing– they leave behind themselves can only be fragmented and polarized. Hutcheon (1988: 162) writes that "in terms of form those contraries appear in the tensions between structure and randomness, between the closure and continuity of linear narrative and openness and discontinuity, between the conventions of realism and the play of parody". Accordingly, their quest can turn only into the acceptance of their original difference. Or, as Hutcheon (1988: 161) suggests they can only be "doubles that stay double" as their writing is. That is, Demeter recognizes that he is the object of his biography; William William Dorfendorf understands that from the very beginning he was doomed to stay double forever. This is why Lecker (1984-85:161) finally concludes that "none of Kroetsch's characters has truly embodied the drive to anti-story that Kroetsch both evokes and evades".

Now, does this mean that there is no way out from the postmodern paradox and indeed from language itself? Does this mean that the concept of character in Kroetsch's work has imploded, in the Baudrillardian sense of the word, on the worn-out plane of the western logic which has reached its highest point with the arrival of poststructuralism? Will there be an alternative way to approach the idea of freedom? What would it happen if one simply does not accept difference as the unique way of understanding language? Is there the possibility of a place prior to the mere formulation of freedom, a plane of immanence, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it, a field without substantial or consistent division? A space of pure becoming rather than that of being? A place where freedom, before turning into the concept of freedom and its inevitable double binds, could be possible? On the other hand, have we not come to the point of entropy where the Hegelian story of One and Two that becomes Three and its Derridean challenge have become dangerously similar, the meta-narrative of *yes* and that one of *no*, the story and the anti-story? Is not difference, after all, a will to go back to the roots? Finally, does not the postmodern era run the risk of drowning itself, as Narcissus did, in the beauty of the past which gave it birth? Too many questions perhaps. But, what is literature if not the questioning of its own limits and possibilities? As Kroetsch (1989b: 25) puts it forward, "instead of answers we have questions. Instead of resolution we have doubt". *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, probably the most complex work from Kroetsch to date, gives us a thrilling hint.

At the beginning of this paper, I have raised a question about the possibility of comprehension of that which escapes our bonds of expectation. Similarly, I have

pointed that all that which escapes our scope of understanding –Rita's act of disappearance– immediately starts up a project of decoding –Raymond's task of putting together her scattered poems– that would shed a light upon the possible meanings and motivations that had caused the act in question. However, and in spite of the apparent presence of a double structure, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* appoints new directions, both, thematically and structurally. Far from perpetuating the double bind that has characterized Kroetsch's previous works, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* shows a will to open up new spaces for creative writing and thinking. And it does so precisely in terms of seeking other possibilities in language that would go beyond the bonds of deconstructive strategies (which have become somehow reductive). Rather than limiting itself to the mere inscribing and reinscribing of undecidables within the text, so that its orderly functioning could be disrupted, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* uses these concepts as the building units of parallel worlds that would allow it and us to situate language within a larger non-discursive field of differences and forces. The aim is then not so much to move between the given coordinates –"the assumed story" (Kroetsch 1989b: 21)– but to experiment with that we do not yet know about.

In that sense, the deconstructive approach could be understood as an important obstacle. Because it is conceived as an essentially linguistic activity, it limits the space of action of our understanding of the world exclusively to the inner binary operations of language or, in other words, to that which is already given. Additionally, its aim is not to invent but rather to "unhide the hidden", as Kroetsch (1989c: 58) would have it. The problem would reside in that, in the light of deconstruction, all discourse, even the discourse of unhiding, is, after all, an attempt to hide the original difference. This implies that to be engaged with deconstructive practice conveys involvement in an interminable analysis and subversion of the binary oppositions that structure discourse and that constantly reassemble to restructure discourse. And, as Bogue (1989: 159) observes, "[i]f thought must engage in an endless struggle with metaphysical dualisms, it becomes trapped in an agonistic, oppositional, and reactive relationship that perpetuates as well as subverts the dualisms it fights". This is probably why Rita claims that "river of no flow over us. /Nothing is new" (14).

Still, there is still another problem concerning deconstruction which I find quite significant to understand the larger implications of Rita's "disappearance into silence" (22). The deconstructive approach, as stated above, was meant to be an effective strategy to displace the logic of the metaphysics of presence, which places the logos at the centre of western epistemology. This logic is what Lyotard (1984: xxiv) has labelled a *metanarrative*, that is, a dominant, global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience. Accordingly, he defined postmodernism as "an incredulity towards metanarratives". Now, the great paradox lies in the fact that contemporary

western society has almost completely, if not fully, assimilated the Derridean notion of original difference, that is, the idea of unsustainability of the single meaning or truth, be that in terms of literature, politics, culture, religion, history or even traditional sciences such as medicine, biology, physics, mathematics and so on. One does not have to go far to realize that the discourse of difference has saturated most spheres of our daily life. One, thus, might even say that differance has become another metanarrative. So, how to proceed now that difference gradually usurpates the place of *logos*? Does this mean that we will soon see the deconstruction of the metanarrative of difference itself? Probably. But insofar as we rely on the deconstructive methodology, we will be trapped in an endless game of negations and rejections that somehow echoes the Hegelian doctrine with the exception that instead of going towards the glorified end, we are going nowhere but to the language itself and its system of differences.

However, it is undeniable that deconstruction has provided us with a set of effective tools and strategies for displacing the hierarchies that operate in the fields of politics, history or social and cultural studies in general. It has liberated contemporary society from the tyranny of *logos*, making, thus, possible the inscription of diversity and difference into discourse. Still, I believe that in terms of artistic explorations of those unexplored zones, it has turned into a dangerous ally: being conceived as a tool for revision and dialogue with the past, it has placed every artistic creation under a question mark. Principally, this is due to its strong disbelief in the emergence of something different outside the binary structures. And, in this sense, it is so profoundly historical and highly dependent on the metaphysics of presence that it cannot avoid conceiving difference as a mere variation of the previous meaning and the system that has launched it into circulation. The meaning does change but, according to deconstruction, it happens always inside the already given coordinates. Viewed in this light, every potentiality of total rupture is systematically knocked down beforehand without any consideration. For instance, if we pay a close attention to a good part of the postmodern art of the last two decades –mostly based on deconstructive practices– we will see that its basic premise appears to be that all forms of novelty and rebellion have already been explored, and that even if that was not so, the rejection of old models is understood as a clear handicap to the artist's creative development. Thus we could argue that postmodern art, in general lines, comes to stand as reconciliation of itself and its past. Accordingly, and due to the artist's collecting and employment of influences from all periods and schools the product which emerges under this condition frequently adopts a pastiche-like form. In a sense, the artist's acceptance of that legacy as the point of departure is, in the end, the permanent contract with the logic of the metaphysics of presence.

Now, I am not saying that there is something wrong with the deconstructive approach. As I have said earlier it is very useful for many social, political and cultural purposes. It is simply that its revision of history and its binary structures

has become so dominant in the contemporary art and literature (take a look at all those top best-sellers perfectly aligned in the superstores of our cities like big, green and shiny apples in supermarkets singing in choir: eat me, eat me!) that the innovation has turned in something almost imperceptible, if not completely invisible. That is why something must be done if we want art to keep on going and surprising us. Definitely, "the poet must move on" (31). And indeed, poetry has always escaped the dominant epistemology that pretends to shape art according to its own semblance. Still, the question remains: how to get out from the postmodern paradox? Or, to put it bluntly, how to escape the logic which always defines us in terms of binary beings, be that self-present or split being?

One possibility that *The Hornbook of Rita K* offers us is the silence embodied in Rita's will to erase herself. Instead of a pen, for her birthday, she asks for an eraser (34). Instead of trying to assert her identity within the confines of the contemporary discourse just to find that she has been identified beforehand, she draws her own line of flight that breaks her organism and dissolves her inherited and regulated subjectivity into what Deleuze and Guattari call the plane of immanence or consistency or Body without Organs, a term which they borrow from Antonin Artaud.[3] This is the place of pure desire, a space in which everything flows and where everything is made of uncontrollable flows which move each into the others.[4] Herein nothing can *be* as such because everything is a pure becoming or free and random interaction of flows. In this sense, the Body without Organs comes to mean the lack of organization, or the fact that it is not divided into parts (organs) distinct from each other. In other words, it is a single substance, where all pre-eminent forms, structures or binary distinctions, such as, male/female, subject/object, exteriority/interiority, mind/body, human/non-human are collapsed. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 266) point, in the Body without Organs "there are no longer any forms or developments of forms; nor are

3. The term Body without Organs appears in Antonin Artaud's radio play To *Have Done with the Judgement of God*. In the last chapter of the play, the author comes to propose the remaking of man's anatomy as a solution to his dogmatism and mechanical behaviour. This new anatomy, however, as Artaud (1988: 570-571) writes, should be free of organs. "Man is sick because he is badly constructed./ We must make up our minds to strip him bare in order to scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally,/ god,/ and with god/ his organs./ For you can tie me up if you wish,/ but there is nothing more useless than an organ./ When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions/ and restored him to his true freedom".

4. According to Deleuze and Guattari, what allows us to distinguish these flows from each other is a threshold which separates each of them. In other words, a flow can be understood as a restriction or cutting off of another flow. However, every flow tends to remain unrestricted. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is precisely this desire to flow unconstrained what characterizes Body without Organs. And since the desire is something real we may say that Body without Organs is also real.

there subjects or the formation of subjects. There is no structure, any more than there is genesis".

In accordance with that idea, those concepts we know as world, thing or subjectivity can only be constituted on the surface of the Body without Organs. For Deleuze and Guattari, these concepts come to appear as an effect when the process of territorialization takes place, that is, when these random flows are codified, structured and rigidly segmented for some concrete purposes. This is what they call the plane of organization. One of the many examples Deleuze and Guattari provide us with is that of the State Machine which, in order to exert its power and guarantee its order and values, assures the control of those unpredictable flows by establishing laws, rules and codes of behaviour. But, although the State machine does the best it can, there are always some flows underneath that attain to escape the control apparatus of the State. These flows Deleuze and Guattari refer to as movements or lines of flight.[5] And whenever this occurs, it is said that the process of deterritorialization takes place. It is basically its desire to flow freely and unconstrained working behind these flows of flight. Deleuze and Guattari describe this type of movement as "the line of gravity or celerity [...] with the steepest gradient" (1983: 71). It is the line of crack up that radically detaches itself from the rigid structure and launches itself toward an unknown destination, neither foreseeable nor pre-existent. Yet, though it seems to surge up afterwards, this line is opposed to destiny or to any end. It is rather a connection to that which "may be primary, with other [lines] deriving from it" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 71). What Deleuze and Guattari actually set forth is that these movements are the herald of all organizational principles; for after every deterritorialization follows the process of reterritorialization, that is, the new

5. When Deleuze and Guattari speak of subjectivity they distinguish three types of lines. Apart from the lines of flight there are also molar and molecular lines. The molar line is a rigidly segmented line such as: family/profession; work/vacation; family/then school/then army/then factory/and then retirement or male/female, good/bad, poor/rich and so on. These bundles of segmented molar lines stem from binary machines which operate as rigid frameworks that carve up and shape the human subject according to the static image of the State or organizational principle. Each time the human subject encounters and internalizes these dominant lines the State's power set-up takes place, making in turn the human subject homogenized and therefore, easy-to-handle. The other type of lines is molecular. They are also segmented lines but much more subtle than molar ones. Rather than being rigid segmented lines, they imply subtle flows with thresholds and quanta and trace out small modifications. These lines run between the rigid segments of the one and the other constituting the asymmetrical becoming of the two, which no longer responds to the large molar oppositions. Nevertheless, this is not to be understood as a synthesis of the two, "but of a third which always comes from elsewhere and disrupts the binary nature of the two, no more inscribing itself in their opposition than in their complementarity" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983:82-83). These three lines, however, are not separated, but always immanent and caught up in each other. Thus, it is said that they constitute the subjectivity in terms of multiplicities.

decoding and stratification of the flows. As they point, "[i]n some ways, these lines, the movements of flight, are what appear first in society. Far from being a flight of social, or from being utopian or even ideological, these lines actually constitute the social field, tracing its shapes and its borders, its entire state of becoming" (1983:91). For Deleuze and Guattari, thus, the whole State is based on this flow of deterritorialization.[6]

Now, the main point of Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of deterritorialization lies in the fact that it allows us to think of difference as something external to the epistemological models we have inherited from the past. In contrast to the Derridean deconstruction which operates only at the level of the rigidly and chronologically segmented plane of organization –"the overcoding machine" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983:93)–, the philosophical framework provided by Deleuze and Guattari seeks to decentre the established organizational logic by paying attention to those movements of flight which point to what is untimely, that is, the plane of immanence or consistency; "a time without rhythm, a haecceity like a wind that stirs at midnight, or at noon" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983:92). I perceive a clear parallelism between Deleuze and Guattari's thought and *The Hornbooks of Rita K* for the book constitutes itself as an offer of alternative and non-binary modes of conceiving difference and accessing knowledge.[7]

Under that perspective, Rita's self-erasement comes to stand as a refusal of remaining on the plane of organization. Or to put it other way around, it is Rita's desire of becoming something else, that is, something external to the binary logic that has been defining her, what pushes her to commit such an experiment. Instead of asking for conditions of possible experience Rita looks for the conditions under which something completely different might arise. "She had an aversion to intentional space" (36), we are said. Nevertheless, in the end, it is the simple formulation of the possibility of self-erasement that envisages *The Hornbooks of Rita K's* intention to transvaluate the concept of art, "art itself being the herald of an anticipated radical transvaluation of human values" (Sontag 1967: *screen* 39). Indeed, behind Rita's act lies one of the major

6. Although Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the process of deterritorialization is always prior to any organization or ontology it should not be understood in a chronological sense, or as something eternal. Rather, this process points toward what is untimely and immanent in all of us.

7. The very first lines of *The Hornbooks of Rita K* warn us that what we are going to find has little to do with the traditional way of perceiving things: "To see is not/ to see ahead./ We cannot see/ beyond the bed" (3). What these opening lines suggest is that our perception of the world leaves many things aside. Moreover, it could be understood in the sense that we cannot perceive the world behind the binary structure for the word "bed", in a traditional reading, conveys the idea of the love-game between opposites.

concerns of the western art, that is, art as the *back door* to life itself, to randomness, to the stream of blood and beat of the heart.[8] As Susan Sontag (1967: *screen* 39) writes:

> Behind the appeals for silence lies the wish for a perceptual and cultural clean slate. And, in its most hortatory and ambitious version, the advocacy of silence expresses a mythic project of total liberation. What's envisaged is nothing less than the liberation of the artist from himself, of art from the particular art work, of art from history, of spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations./ What a few people know now is that there are ways of thinking that we don't yet know about. Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn. The sense of urgency, the spiritual restlessness it engenders cannot be appeased. Surely, it's some of that energy which has spilled over into the radical art of this century. Through its advocacy of silence, reduction, etc., art commits an act of violence upon itself, turning art into a species of auto-manipulation, of conjuring — trying to help bring these new ways of thinking to birth.

Thus, silence can be understood as a continuation and exploration of thought. The renouncement of the epistemological models at the moment the silence is produced comes to stand then not as a revision of that what is known, but as the foreshadowing of that which is *unborn*. It is, as Rita tells Raymond, "a way of using everything toward originality rather than a way of working from originality toward everything" (60). In other words, it is the shift from exploring existence, its principles and its interrelations, to opening up new spaces of inquiry where things may simply go off in unforeseeable directions. In this sense, Rita, by her disappearing act, enters the space of non-organization, non-significance, non-subjectivity that does not recognize any differences or hierarchies and upon which everything is a pure becoming. Accordingly, she also proves to be a remarkably strong character, a dreamer, who, moved by her intuition that "somewhere out there, the fence is down" (56), frees herself from the postmodern stance that has determined her

8. This has a reference to John Cage's musical research on the issue of silence. His famous work 4'33" conceived as a totally silent musical piece achieves the breaking of all limits of the physicality of sound. That is, by being silent, it fuses itself with the environment where it is performed, hence, escaping organizational principles of the melody. Consequently, by being imperceptible, its duration becomes timeless. However, there is still another implication of this piece: silence does not exist. In this sense, the piece comes to suggest that one should simply listen and open one's ears. When this occurs, one realizes that everything that surrounds her/him is actually music. Even in a soundless chamber, as John Cage himself had experimented, one cannot stop hearing sounds of at least two things: the heartbeat and the coursing of the blood in the veins.

predecessors.[9] She cuts the Gordian knot by rendering herself invisible. "A Scene changes to an empty room" (Sontag 1967: screen 28).

It is not coincidental, then, that Rita's disappearance takes place in the experimental artist James Turrel's installation, which deals precisely with the questioning of our models of perception and understanding of the world. James Turrel puts in practice what is known as *ganzfeld*. As I have pointed at the beginning, *ganzfeld* means a total field. It refers to a visual phenomenon where depth, surface, colour and brightness all register as a homogeneous whole. In other words, the effect implies the blurring of all perceptual frontiers, producing in the viewer a complete and instantaneous disorientation and looseness which might lead even to vertigo. In James Turrel's light installation named *"Twilight Arch",* the viewer enters what appears to be a completely dark room. After a few minutes of total darkness, the viewer's eyes begin to adjust and s/he barely starts to perceive a faint blue glow on the opposite wall. As s/he approaches the blue glow in order to see what it is, the viewer suddenly realizes that what was supposed to be a thin luminous rectangular surface is actually an opening into another room filled with a dense blue light, an apparently infinite space receding further than s/he has imagined and which cannot be described. Because there is only light, no structure can be devised. Finally, the viewer becomes aware of the fallibility of her/his own way of perceiving. In turn, this recognition becomes the main subject of James Turrel's installation. What James Turrel's art comes to suggest is that there are other dimensions, other ways of perceiving the world which are thwarted by the faith in human judgement, its senses and indeed, by language itself.[10] As Turrel (Whittaker/Interview with James Turrel: screen 4) points, "learning is one path, one way, and we have learned one way, but this also creates a prejudiced perception that we are not totally aware of". After all, as Rita ironically suggests, if the knowledge we have were sufficient, "[w]hy else would I throw sand in your eyes?" (73)

The same happens to our approach to *The Hornbooks of Rita K*. Far from offering us a defined structure, it opens for us a door to the *ganzfeld*. That is,

9. What Deleuze and Guattari suggest is that the plane of consistency has no easy access. Though it is certainly always there it is not visible for everybody. Consequently, not everybody can trace the line of flight. As they state, "there are people who do not have this line, who have only the other two, or who have only the one, who live along it" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 71). We can argue that unlike other Kroetsch's characters that remain double Rita, by tracing her own line of flight, proves to have a strong potential for rupture and change.

10. "No object can be seen, no shadow. The picture's optical framework, made by light, has no foreground, middle and background. Everything is light -even the room. Here a process of perception begins that is hardly describable or nameable. The gaze is now at rest. The constant and fruitless attempts to fix one's eye on something have been given at last". Alex Muller, *James Turrel, 'Twilight Arch, 1991"* (Cited at the beginning of *The Hornbooks of Rita K*).

to the silence embodied by Rita herself, mapped by Raymond who, moved by her painful absence (30) and intrigued by her attitude, turns her "investigative poems" (14) into the book we are reading. This book, however, proves to be a completely disorderly mixture of Rita's incomplete poems, Raymond's own personal comments –"a footnote, a scrap of data [..] at most a word"–, and the "slightest anecdote[s]" (7) that had apparently taken place between them. Her desired silence, thus, gives rise to a chaotic flow of information distributed along a huge number of hornbooks that follow no logic order or direction. Because there is nothing given and organized beforehand, the whole text turns into the plane of consistency. It becomes the echo of what has been and what is yet to come. Therefore, there is no story but the genesis itself. There is no gender or identity contained within it but only a movement of positive forces and singularities chaotically scattered across the space with no limits. The concept of Rita's identity, on the contrary, comes to depend exclusively on the reader and his/her own approach to the book, which is always uncertain and unpredictable. In turn, the reader's incursion into the text becomes the questioning of her/his own entering, perceiving, ordering and interpreting the vast amount of formless information, which as Rita suggests, is nothing else but "a changing of the light" (84), "a risking business" (68). In the same way the silence of the actress in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) incites her nurse Alma to uncover her most hidden passions, Rita's silence reveals –for the lack of a given narrative bears the seduction of the unknown and the possible– the way we usurp the poet (61) in terms of binary operations, "a whole police force" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 102). Rita, in this sense, comes to resemble, to use John Cage's (1979: 11) words, "the maker of a camera who allows someone else to take the picture".

The Hornbooks of Rita K becomes "a hand-held mirror" (100), or even a primer, as the word *hornbook* itself suggests.[11] It becomes the absence that turns us into poets, but not into the poets of love for what we see in the mirror; we become the poets of desire for what we do not see. We "become, all of us, poets" (53) of becoming. In other words, we all become part of Rita, and Rita in turn becomes our own becoming. The idea goes hand in hand with the theory of chaos, in which fractals are understood as recursively constructed or self-similar shapes that appear similar at all scales of magnification, thus being infinitely complex. By turning invisible, or being literally "a ghost" (45), Rita becomes every single character and word –"the unavoidable accident" (86)– that appears on her surface. Her silence affects

11. *The Hornbooks of Rita K* gives us two definitions of hornbook, both, taken from *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (1998): "HORNBOOK... a leaf of paper containing the alphabet, The Lord's Prayer, etc., mounted on a wooden tablet with a handle, and protected by a thin plate of horn. / HORNBOOK... a treatise on the rudiments of a subject: a primer".

everything and in turn it is affected by every single entrance of the reader into the book, which is the *ganzfeld* itself or "an empty house" (68). This is known as the butterfly effect.[12]

In this sense, all identities within the text remain undetermined and open to all unforeseeable variations and interactions of meanings that are to come. There are no more stable or unstable identities, as in previous Kroetsch's works, neither are there distinctions between sexes and genders identified in terms of opposite forces. The reader witnesses rather a complete dissolution of the principles these concepts are grounded on. There are only positive forces which are neither dialectical nor antagonistic but united in an amorphous state which constantly changes its shape when it connects with new forces which are not necessarily human. In case of *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, those forces or flows appear in form of hornbooks where "each line [...] is a provisional exactness" (3). Every single force here resembles the whole, and the other way around. Every hornbook resembles the whole work and vice versa. Thus, Rita turns often to the slippage between the words "I" and "it" but also "he" and "she". It is "the unpredictable that makes [...] the poem" (55) move. The self, here equated with the poem, hence, can never be concluded or double, but is forever lost in a "floating world" of Rita's illegible signs (61) and "wavering red lines [of Japanese calligraphy] that avoid meeting" (58). There is neither love nor hate between Rita and Raymond, but a new spirituality based on complete interconnectedness which not only links them together but link every reader that draws his/her line of flight into this plane of consistency, that is, *The Hornbooks of Rita K*. There are only fractals. And it is precisely a fictionalized *Kroetsch,* who appears in the middle section of *The Hornbooks of Rita K* –spending some time in Japan with Rita and enjoying the night life in "a sushi bar" with "a bottle of beer and a glass of sake" (57)– who "realizes that a poem is a fractal" (60). As a response, Raymond tells Rita that he "preferred [Robert] way back when he argued, in a fit of blinding lucidity, that a poem is a poem [and when he] claimed that you cannot say what you mean, you can only say what you say" (60). However, Kroetsch –the author himself– seems to affirm his "growing interest in a chaos theory", when he declares "that society is just too complex for us to understand in certain ways, and yet there are structures operating, even in what we could call chaos" (Müller 2005: 333). Indeed, the randomness of positive forces is something that we cannot grasp by systematic reasoning and the consequent faith in human judgement, for it escapes all scopes of our understanding. Nevertheless, it is this flow of positive forces *The Hornbooks of Rita K* seeks to channel:

12. According to the theory of chaos, small variations of the initial condition of a dynamical system may produce large variations in the long term behavior of the system.

anchor	bottle	crazy	
doodle	entrance	fondle	gargoyle
handle	imprint	jester	
kibitz	laggard	mustard	
	number		
		ogle	
potter	query		rusted
sorrow		tunnel	ulcer
	vector	whittle	
x-rated	yodel		ziggurat

(74)

As I have been suggesting all along, Rita, unlike the characters of previous works by Kroetsch, does not intend to reaffirm herself through writing or to impose order upon what she is not, but rather to produce the *ganzfeld* effect which would make us aware of our own systematic reasoning, and by the same token, trigger that single process of production where everything resembles everything. Because the language is "not a departure at all but rather a kind of invasion" (55), she opens every meaning and launches it not into that eternal reinscription or wobbling between given poles, but to the space of radical indetermination, where the result is always something different than the expected. As she ironically writes to Raymond, "If you can't find me you know where I am./ We are always, and never ever, and even then, the same./ Our lives choose other genres./ Why do I feel such sorrow when I feel joy?" (61).

This idea appears to be even more reinforced when she claims that she is attempting to write an autobiography in which she does not appear (29). By stating this, Rita proposes a rather different kind of approach to writing, which, as I perceive it, announces her immersion into the pantheist spirituality of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical enterprise. Based on her conviction "that she might so write her poems that she would leave each object or place or person that fell under her attention undisturbed" (16), she decides to abandon the common use of language and follow "the deceptive randomness of wind and sky [and] the violence and the blinding inevitability of prairie sun" (36), that is, she follows the flow of life. As she goes on, "[a] patch of scarlet mallow appears each spring in the/ grasses on the edge of the coulee directly in front of my/ house. That little patch of orange-red blossoms, emerging/on a dry, south-facing slope, is one of my reasons for living" (36). Indeed, what really comes to captivate Rita is that mysterious power and positive force that make "that little patch of orange-red blossoms" emerge on a dry slope. It is her fascination with the power of life and her ability to overcome the difficulties that keeps Rita alive. Similarly, in the same

hornbook she tells us that she had "discovered that negligence is a gifted gardener" (36). For nature, once released from human models of thought and organization, escapes all bonds of expectation. It always moves by surprise.

Thus, somehow inspired by these positive forces of nature and the comprehension of the limitations of human thought, Rita embarks on the project of writing an autobiography of the free flows, of surprise and indetermination. She writes "river of no flow over us/ Nothing is new" for the second time. But this time, and though Raymond tells us that it does not appear in the body of the text, she writes the word "surprise" over "no", however leaving the word "no" unscratched. This narrative of surprise will be what Raymond labels as a "collective biography" (10). But far from what he imagines, this act will lead Rita to her final deterritorialization. As we are said, the collective narrative "could not be located in a system of beliefs or a narrative of origins" (10), nor in "religious or political or transcendental or the Platonic ideal or apparently, the narrative of love" (12); indeed, "it could only be located, literally and momentarily, in back doors" (10), which are the doors to the garden and life itself, or, as Rita proposes in her hornbooks, "the escape from transcendence," the "so called good neighbors and possibly from language itself" (10). As Muller (2005: 262) observes:

> Symptomatically blurring the lines of their individual thoughts, this passage undermines the tradition of a self (re)affirming identity through writing and, by equating the literal house and the edifice of poetry, points to alternative, non-metaphysical ways of both accessing and dispersing knowledge. Using back doors which would connect with the notion of the maze, as an escape from transcendence, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* draws its characters and readers into a genealogical labyrinth which is operated by the laws of chaos.

Indeed, Raymond himself seems to reinforce this orientation of Rita's narrative when he states that "Rita questioned and even rejected ideas of evolutionary development in art. She had other fish to fry" (9). Since every autobiography implies a movement towards self-reflection, even if that means the recognition of one's divided or multiple self, it always "make[s] [according to Rita] for a false narrative of what it is to be a poet or person" (17). The act of writing, thus, becomes a highly problematic task in the sense that it always leads to the establishing of meaning in terms of exclusions. Or, as she says elsewhere, the writing is as "love, that fatal pharmacy/ A choice of remedies: the (fatal) poem" (62). Certainly, there is a clear echo of Heideggerian and Derridean thought in Rita's conception of writing. For Heidegger (1962: 56-57) the final truth –*aletheia*– is forever suspended. This happens mainly because whenever one meaning is opened up, others are necessarily closed off. Similarly, for Derrida, who follows in many ways the paths of Heideggerian philosophy, writing, though being originally undecidable, always tends to show itself as a

coherent system capable of, on the one hand, providing the clarity of the meaning and, on the other, imposing certain ideology. Therefore, for Rita, every attempt to write turns into a criminal act (29). Affirmation through writing is a gesture which seeks to reduce the original contradiction to a coherent outcome, and whose main drive appears to be nothing else than the poet's rapacious need to claim the multitude by the small ordering of a signature (29). In this light, by understanding that the "words are lock, not a key" (33) and seeing that she cannot write her poems so "that she would leave each object or place or person that fell under her attention undisturbed" (16), she decides to "deny her own signature" (30) and disappear into art (40). With her disappearance into the silence of James Turrel's *ganzfeld*, she finally achieves what she was always negated by language, freedom.

As I have been suggesting, the idea of freedom embodied by Rita is of a different nature than that formulated by Lecker. Lecker observes, as we have seen, that true freedom cannot be achieved because that would imply not writing at all. And indeed, Rita decides not to write anymore. She leaves Raymond to "organize her papers and have them deposited in the vaults of the University of Calgary Special Collections Library" (45). But instead of a blank page as the logical result of not writing, we *do* have a story, albeit of a different kind. Unlike Kroetsch's earlier works, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* simply goes off in countless directions simultaneously. The story-line does not move in a straight or even fragmented course toward the end. There is "no longing for an end" (62), nor is there longing for a beginning. It is neither coming from, nor going in any specific direction. There is no double structure or double gesture that would displace the centre, because precisely there is no centre to displace. Instead, the story is "the text as empty as a temple" (62), "the hole in the middle of things" (101), and I would even say, in the middle of words:

We

Are Were

Always Never

Never Always

Lonesome

As seen above in the *"Hollow Hornbook"* (101), language is not as much the centre of the poem as it is its absence. And it is "the unspeakable" (101) of that blank space what pushes the words in all directions. The words appear here only as "a trace of what is fundamental and now is forgotten" (101). In other words, it tells us that there is something beyond our understanding, obscured by the language, some kind of "myth of undone" (86), which rather than appointing a hermetic disposition of binary structures, unveils the creative drives that flow underneath the text. In *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, as I see it,

the question is not anymore about embracing one of the poles or maintaining its balance "for their sliding centre to survive" (Lecker 1984-85:160), it is not even a matter of analysing, explaining and deconstructing; it is the question of opening up new possibilities whatever that might mean. Thus, "one must attempt the impossible poem" (101), not by writing what is possible, because this would "concede victory to the unspeakable" (101), but by giving 'the unspeakable' a surface that lets eye hear" (101).

It is in this sense that I perceive *The Hornbooks of Rita K's* moving away from that strategy of "seeing double", as Hutcheon (1988: 160) would have it, to enter the more complex arena of the theory of chaos and, indeed, the philosophical enterprise of Deleuze and Guattari. Though both chaos theory and deconstruction share many tenets and ample ground, specially in their vision of thought and language as a system of differences, Deleuze and Guattari, unlike Derrida, "do not treat philosophy primarily as a form of exegesis, nor do they believe that thought must remain within traditional philosophical discourse and forever do battle with metaphysics" (Bogues 1989:159). The argument that language and metaphysics are the unavoidable problems of philosophy is itself a fiction, and it is a fiction that often serves a disciplinary function. On the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari propose imaginary or alternative spaces made up not of given notions but of notions in the becoming. Thus, as Rajchman (2001: 17) foregrounds, their philosophy "cease to be correction of error, and turn to what in experience, or in life, is prior to subjects and the objects to which they refer". Where deconstructive theory attempts to correct and neutralize territorrialized couplings in a text, deterritorialization seeks precisely to decentre them or, in other words, to trace a line of flight, as Rita does. However, this does not imply judgement, negation, and the consequent construction of another dichotomy, but a desire to illuminate those spaces between and around binary structures. That is, instead of replacing that critical disjunction either/or, they, on the contrary, prefer to pay attention to those *and/and/ands* which appear between the couplings, and make them function as a general system. Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 57) call these conjunctions *rhizomes*. According to them, "[a] rhizome doesn't begin and doesn't end, but is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo". Unlike a tree, a root or *radicels*, which always fix a point and centre of departure and thus an order, the rhizome, on the contrary,

> connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states. The rhizome is reducible to neither the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five etc. It is not a multiple derived from the one, or to which one is added (n+1). It is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always middle

> (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills. It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the one is always subtracted (n-1). When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes in nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, the rhizome is made only of lines; lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature.

In this sense, the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari does not align itself with the determinism of the metaphysics of presence; nor with the linguistic idealism/nihilism of poststructuralism. For them, both philosophical stances, due to their strong dependence on the subject/object opposition, depart from a single point or root. In sharp contrast to it, Deleuze and Guattari seek to occupy the dimension between and around this dichotomy, hence creating a holistic logic rather than a closed system based on opposition. They believe that theoretical models which confine themselves to the binary of self/other are insufficient and anti-productive due to their obsession with what has already been given. After all, life and nature prove to be always something different from what it is thought. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari ground their thought on the experiment, which as they see, implies an experience prior to the formulation of any ontology. One simply must connect with other possibilities in order to keep on moving. According to Rajchman (2001: 7), "to make connections one needs not knowledge, certainty, or even ontology, but rather a trust that something may come out, though one is not yet completely sure what".

Seen in this light, the idea of rhizome provides an adequate model for the understanding of subjectivity, and indeed, for understanding Rita and her decision to deterritorialize herself from the limitations imposed by language. By rendering herself invisible she becomes the network of stems which is hidden underground, in-between the trees *and* plants, identities *and* genders, art *and* life, writer *and* reader, the hornbook as a hand-held mirror *and* the outside, *and* all concepts that appear on the surface of *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, but also those that are still to come. And when these new concepts arrive and territorialize themselves she will keep on searching and connecting. "Things happen, she writes, and then things happen. And there is sweet fuck else to it" (17). Rita and her hornbooks have no limits anymore precisely because they act like the rhizome. The hornbooks have no more secrets (she has given all three masks [her, Raymond's and Kroetsch's?] to a beggar in Japan [62]). They have become fractals just like everyone else, or more exactly, they have "made of everyone else a *becoming*. [They] have become clandestine, imperceptible, the

Pink Panther [who] has painted the world in his own colour" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 75); they are a blur, "a recluse, but also a snoop and a thief, a voyeur, a strange bird and, as some of her [good] neighbors put it, a nut case" (11). They do not proceed anymore by linking the symmetrical opposites, but by linking that which is asymmetrical, thus, carrying away the one *and* the other, the male *and* the female, *and* bringing at the same time the changing light *and* "the poem's weather" (100). Unlike the filiations of the tree or the root or the gender identity structured in terms of symmetrical opposites, Rita and her hornbooks form "alliance, exclusively alliance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 57). They are not a fixed point like the tree or root incapable of movement, but a line of flight that never ceases to connect heterogeneous points across the space that is a plane of single process of production or consistency. They, like the rhizome, reach a point only in order to leave it behind for the "every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both autonomy and a direction of its own" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 380). Unlike the tree which imposes the verb to be and the consequent formation of identities, "the rhizome is woven together with conjunctions: 'and... and... and...' In this conjunction there is enough force to shake up and uproot the verb 'to be.' Where are you going to? Where are you coming from? What are you driving at? All useless questions" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 57-58). Well, I think there is not much else to say on the matter but that "[i]n the end, we are [all] defeated by gardens. They know too much" (36). So, what remains of what does not remain "now [that] she has taken flight?" (28)

In the movie *Space Is the Place* (1974), Sun Ra argues that every-body is music.[13] In other words, every-body is a musical instrument supposed to play its own part in the tune of the universe. The problem lies, however, in that not every-body is aware of this potentiality. As it is suggested in his musical piece *There Are Other Worlds (they have not told you of)* (Sun Ra 1978), this potentiality appears rather concealed. Indeed, albeit contemporary music and literature, and all art in general, are full of examples of channelling these hidden flows, in real life nobody tells us how to escape, that is, how to trace our own line of flight. Perhaps it is simply because no one else but us can play our own

13. Sun Ra was an innovative free jazz musician and composer widely known for his cosmic philosophy. In his performances, as in all free jazz, the composition departs from a chaotic flow of sounds. Each musician plays her/his part in her/his own manner, that is, with own intensity, rhythm, velocity or choice or even rejection of music scales. Once the harmony or general synchrony between these positive forces is reached, each of them starts to push toward the disintegration as a necessary condition for new harmonies to emerge. Thus, every single force plays a crucial part in developing and determining the harmony or the plane of organization in Deleuze and Guattari's sense.

part. Perhaps not. But the fact is that if one wants to go beyond the limits of what has already been experimented one must go for it. Or, as Rita puts it, "[i]f you want to be a poet/ you have to be a poet" (100). What I am actually trying to suggest is that there is a need for detecting these creative forces for they might give rise to something new; a difference outside of the system of differences that would trigger that process of reterritorialization and thus allows us to create a new picture of the world and its more and more increasing complexity. And certainly, there is no better example to look at than the art at the threshold of the 21st century, for it best portrays artistic, cultural and socio-politic concerns of our time. We should be all puzzled by Rita's silence.

Works cited

Artaud, A. 1988. "To Have Done with the Judgement of God, a radio play (1947)". *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*. Ed. S. Sontag. Berkeley: University of California Press. Trans. Helen Weaver. 555-571.

Bogue, Ronald. 1989. *Deleuze and Guattari*. Routledge: London.

Cage, John. 1979 (1961). *Silence: [Lectures and Writings].* Middletown (Connecticut): Wesleyan University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. 1983. *On the Line*. New York: Columbia University. Trans. John Johnston.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University Press. Trans. Brian Massumi.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Gramatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. Trans. Gayatri Spivak.

Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Trans. Alan Bass.

Heidegger. Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. San Francisco: Harper. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *The Canadian Postmodern. A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Kafka, Franz. 1971. "The Silence of the Sirens". *The Complete Stories*. Ed. N. Glatzer. New York: Schoken Books. 430-432.

Kroetsch, Robert. 1988 (1969). *The Studhorse Man*. Toronto: Random House.

Kroetsch, Robert. 1982 (1975). *Badlands*. Toronto: General Publishing.

Kroetsch, Robert. 1984 (1983). *Alibi: A Novel*. Toronto: General Publishing.

Kroetsch, Robert. 1989a. "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction". *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford University. 73-83.

Kroetsch, Robert. 1989b. "Disunity as Unity". *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford University. 21-33.

Kroetsch, Robert. 1989c. "Unhiding the Hidden". *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford University. 58-63.

Kroetsch, Robert. 2001. *The Hornbooks of Rita K*. Edmonton: Alberta University press.

Lecker, Robert.1984-85. "Freed From Story: Narrative Tactics in Badlands". *Essays on Canadian Writing* 30:160-86.

Lyotard, Jean-François.1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of MinnesotaPress. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi.

McCaffery, Steve. 1986. *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986*. New York: Roof Books.

Müller, Markus. 2006. "Disguise and Masquerade in Canadian Literature: The Works of Frederick Philip Grove and Robert Kroetsch". *Dublin Core Metadaten*. Die Deutsche Bibliothek, Leibniz/ Frankfurt/ Berlin. 5 February 2006. <http://www.ddb.de>.

Rajcnman, John. 2001 (2000). *The Deleuze Connections*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): The MIT Press.

Sontag, Susan. 1967. "The Aesthetic of Silence". *Aspen*. 5+6: Item 3. UbuWeb Foundation 14 Abril 2006. <http://www.ubu.com/aspen>.

Space is the Place. 2003. Dir. John Coney. Perf. Sun Ra, Barbara Deloney, Ray Johnson, Christopher Brooks, The Intergalactic Myth-Science Solar Arkestra featuring June Tyson, John Gilmore, and Marshall Allen. 1974. DVD. Plexifilm.

Sun Ra. 1978. *Lanquidity*. CD. Evidence Records.

Thomas, Peter.1989. *Robert Kroetsch and His Works*. Toronto: ECW.

Whittaker, Richard. "Interview with James Turrel". *Works+Conversation*. #2. Society for the ReCognition of Art, Berkeley (California). 5 February 2006. <http://www.conversations.org>.

CONTRIBUTORS

Eva Darias Beautell (BA, MA, PhD) is Professor of American and Canadian literatures at the University of La Laguna (Canary Islands, Spain). She is the author of the books *Division Language and Doubleness in the Writings of Joy Kogawa* (University of La Laguna, 1998), *Shifting Sands: Literary Theory and Contemporary Canadian Fiction* (Mellen, 2000), and *Graphies and Grafts: (Con)Texts and (Inter)Texts in the Fictions of Four Canadian Women Writers* (Peter Lang, 2001). Dr. Darias is presently directing "Penelope's Embroidery: Literary Tradition, Cultural Identities and Theoretical Discourses in the Anglo-Canadian Fiction of the Late 20th Century", a three-year research project on the narrative production of contemporary English Canada.

María Henríquez Betancor received her Master on Commonwealth Literature from the University of Leeds (U.K.), and her PhD on Contemporary Chicana Autobiograpy from the University of La Laguna (Canary Islands, Spain). Her scholarly work looks at issues of identity, Chicana visual art, minority women's autobiography and feminist Chicana literature. Dr. Henríquez Betancor has published several articles on women's autobiography, on Chicana writers Anzaldúa and Norma Cantú and has also participated in *Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews/Entrevistas* (Routledge 2000), where her interview with Anzaldúa is included. She has been teaching undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain) since 1996.

María Jesús Hernáez Lerena teaches nineteenth-century American literature and contemporary Canadian literature at the University of La Rioja (Spain). She is the author of the books *Exploración de un género literario: Los relatos breves de Alice Munro* (1998) and *Short Story World: The Nineteenth-Century American Masters* (2003). She has been editor of *Journal of English Studies*, an academic journal published by her department, and her research has been devoted to the short stories of Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Barbara Gowdy, Sarah Orne Jewett, Wyndham Lewis, etc. Her most recent work focuses on the fictions generated by the history and geography of Atlantic Canada.

Mladen Kurajica graduated in English Philology from the University of La Laguna in 2001, where he also obtained his M.A. in 2004. Currently, he is writing a Ph.D dissertation in the field of Canadian Studies, for which he has been granted a Cajacanarias/University of La Laguna Postgraduate Scholarship. In addition to this, he also teaches chess at several elementary and secondary schools in Tenerife.

Finally, he is a founding member of the cultural association "Drone", which has been involved in the research of multimedia arts and experimental contemporary music since 2000.

Dulce Rodríguez González is a Ph.D. lecturer at the University of La Laguna, Tenerife, where she teaches North American Literature. She has worked on a psychoanalytic interpretation of the mother-daughter dyad in women poets of the second half of the twentieth century. At present she is conducting feminist research on the texts and biographies of various contemporary women poets of the United States. She has published articles on the work of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Alicia Ostriker.

Vicente R. Rosselló Hernández is a PhD student at the University of La Laguna, where he graduated in English Studies in 2003. He holds a predoctoral research scholarship from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture and is currently working on the fiction of U.S. writer Chuck Palahniuk. His main research interests lie in the areas of political documentary film, masculinity studies, and contemporary North American fiction.

Aritha van Herk is the author of five novels: *Judith* (1978), *The Tent Peg* (1981), *No Fixed Address* (1986), *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990), and *Restlessness* (1998). She has also published two works of ficto-criticism, *In Visible Ink* (1991), and *A Frozen Tongue* (1992), and an illegitimate history entitled *Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta* (2002). She lives in Calgary, Canada, and is Professor of English at the University of Calgary.

48 | Biblioteca de Investigación

SERVICIO DE PUBLICACIONES
UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA

UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA