

ResearchOnline@JCU

This file is part of the following reference:

Bartlett, Alison Joan (1994) *Jamming the machinery: ecriture feminine and the practice of contemporary women writers in Australia*. PhD thesis, James Cook University.

Access to this file is available from:

<http://eprints.jcu.edu.au/28853/>

If you believe that this work constitutes a copyright infringement, please contact ResearchOnline@jcu.edu.au and quote <http://eprints.jcu.edu.au/28853/>

Jamming the Machinery:
***Écriture Féminine* and the Practice of**
Contemporary Women Writers
in Australia

by Alison Joan Bartlett

Thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
James Cook University of North Queensland
November 1994

Statement on Access.

I, the undersigned, the author of this thesis, understand that James Cook University of North Queensland will make it available for use within the University Library and, by microfilm or other photographic means, allow access to users in other approved libraries. All users consulting this thesis will have to sign the following statement:

"in consulting this thesis I agree not to copy or closely paraphrase it in whole or in part without the written consent of the author; and to make proper written acknowledgment for any assistance which I have obtained from it."

Beyond this, I do not wish to place any restriction on access to this thesis.

30.11.84
.....

Statement on Sources.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

A.J. Bartlett.
30 November.1994.

Abstract

In this thesis I locate intersections between the concerns of contemporary women writers in Australia and *écriture féminine*, the theories of women's writing developed by French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. I have chosen the texts of Ania Walwicz, Margaret Coombs, Fiona Place, Inez Baranay, Susan Hawthorne, Sue Woolfe and Davida Allen, who have all published between 1988 and 1992, to trace the interactions between their practices and theories. Their texts allow me to explore a range of women's issues and feminist analyses, including our positioning in language, the discourses of medicine, psychiatry, health, sexuality, art, romance, economics and maternity. Writing (through) women's bodies emerges as an important practice for refiguring those narratives and for imagining desires and pleasures other than those offered by patriarchal structures.

In writing this thesis as a piece of contemporary women's writing and feminist theory, I have sought to apply and enact the theories I use — not only in relation to the texts I examine but also in the text I have produced. As such, I have been concerned to situate my knowledge and to represent myself in my writing, but not as the authoritative voice which might be expected in a doctoral thesis. Instead, I have chosen to orchestrate the multiple voices of the writers, their texts, critics, reviewers, theorists and myself. By interviewing each writer, I have sought to make her voice audible as a critical thinker. By experimenting with the form of my writing, I hope this thesis contributes to the intersections between theory and practice, which offer new reading pleasures and writing desires.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Ania Walwicz, Margaret Coombs, Fiona Place, Inez Baranay, Susan Hawthorne, Sue Woolfe and Davida Allen for their generosity in agreeing to be interviewed and then continuing to correspond with me: their contribution to this thesis was invaluable. Dr Gina Mercer has been an inspiring supervisor and friend, and I warmly thank her for her unflagging faith in my abilities. Professor Robert Dixon agreed to be my technical supervisor, for which I thank him. This thesis would not have been possible without an Australian Postgraduate Research Award, and I would also like to acknowledge Professor Tony Hassall and the English Department, James Cook University, for funding part of this project. Finally, I want to acknowledge all those who have made this part of my life richer for their presence; more specifically, thanks to Gab for doing hers at the same time, to Gabby for taking me to the forest and to Misha for always being there.

Table of Contents

	Page
1 Introduction	1
2 Polylogue: Writers Theorising, a Performance	8
3 "The Language [of] the Broken, the Hidden": Maternal Debt in the Language of Ania Walwicz' <i>Writing, boat, and red roses</i>	3 3
4 Reading Bodies	7 2
5 The Ailing Body: Women, Medical Discourse and Power in Margaret Coombs' <i>Regards to the Czar</i> and <i>The Best Man for This Sort of Thing</i>	8 1
6 A Fairytale Body? Writing a Way Out of Anorexia in Fiona Place's <i>Cardboard: The Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters</i>	11 0
7 No End to Romance? Sexual Economies in Inez Baranay's <i>Between Careers</i>	13 8
8 Could Irigaray be Eurocentric? Exploring the Desert, Epilepsy and Lesbian Writing in Susan Hawthorne's <i>The Falling Woman</i>	15 4
9 Writing Desire	17 6
10 The Daughter's Seduction: Sue Woolfe's <i>Painted Woman</i> as a Representation of the Woman as Artist	18 3
11 The Art of Desire: Davida Allen's <i>Close to the Bone: The Autobiography of Vicki Myers</i>	21 5
12 Performing Bodies	24 3
13 Reading Conclusions	25 0

	Page
List of Works Cited	254
List of Works Consulted	269
Appendix:	274
I. The Interviews	
Interview Methodology	275
Interview with Ania Walwicz, September 1992	280
Interview with Margaret Coombs, January 1993	313
Interview with Fiona Place, January 1993	335
Interview with Inez Baranay, March 1993	358
Interview with Susan Hawthorne, September 1992	379
Interview with Sue Woolfe, January 1993	394
Interview with Davida Allen, December 1992	411

List of Illustrations

	Page
Fig. 1. Front cover of <i>boat</i> , by Ania Walwicz	4 8
Fig. 2. Front cover of <i>The Best Man For This Sort of Thing</i> , by Margaret Coombs	9 2
Fig. 3. Front cover of <i>Cardboard</i> , by Fiona Place	1 1 2
Fig. 4. Back cover of <i>Cardboard</i> , by Fiona Place	1 1 3
Fig. 5. Letter from Davida Allen #1	4 2 2
Fig. 6. Letter from Davida Allen #2	4 2 3

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As feminist theory and practice are inseparably grounded in each other, my writing of this thesis has been profoundly affected by the texts I read in it. In examining the ways in which contemporary writing by women in Australia relates to French feminist theories of *écriture féminine*, my reading and writing also converge around those narratives and how they might be incorporated into an academic feminist thesis.

My understanding of *écriture féminine* comes largely through the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and, to some extent, Julia Kristeva. While undefinable, it is a style of writing marked primarily by its disruption to conventional reading, writing and representational practices as produced through, and supported by, patriarchal values. As texts produced through the lived practices of our cultural positioning as (among other things) women, *écriture féminine* is theoretically sourced in the bodies of women. "Writing the body" therefore plays a significant part in inventing new ways to speak and write about ourselves as women, rather than through the narrative structures of patriarchy. In contrast to the significance I give to writing the body in this thesis, I remember explaining to my supervisor at the beginning of my research that I did not want to delve into debates about "the body" as it seemed far too volatile and disputed an area. It has proved to be demanding, and rewarding, in requiring an unprecedented amount of questioning and rethinking about how I feel about my body. As Hélène Cixous warns, "writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned)" (Cixous 1986:86).

The seven women writers whose texts I have selected to study have all published between 1988 and 1992 (Ania Walwicz has an additional text published in 1982) and, like myself, they all live in Australia. Our location in and as part of "Australia" has an impact on our practice of reading and writing both fiction and theory. Considering the incorporation of "imported" feminisms, Susan Sheridan writes that Australian feminism "has certain indigenous features, notable among them being its capacity to graft those others on to its own growth and at times to

produce new species" (1988:1). Moreover, Sheridan sees this as a "*rewriting* of their discourses in different circumstances" (1988:1). Susan Hawthorne also regards our position in Australia as an asset in this grafting process in being historically "other" to the traditions of dominating Northern Hemisphere cultures, which don't necessarily translate onto our cultural landscape (see her interview in Appendix). The women writers in this thesis are part of that grafting process insofar as their writing is produced through the cultural conditions of living in Australia and contributes to the body of literature engaged in working through and interrogating feminist theories of women's writing.

The "politics of location" (Rich 1987) have meant that I have also been concerned to include myself as a speaking/writing subject. This is not only because, as Cixous writes, "woman must put herself into the text" (1976:875), but also because situating my knowledge is important in the recognition of difference (Haraway 1988). In positioning myself as one of the many speaking/writing subjects in this text, I wanted to dissolve the "expert" status traditionally associated with the author of a doctoral thesis. This follows a feminist pedagogy which questions the hierarchical and authoritative paradigm of teaching. Instead, it values knowledges derived from women's lived experiences and encourages the inclusivity of many women's voices self-reflexively situated in terms of race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality and so on. Patti Lather argues that "our different positionalities affect our reading" (1991:145), and the inclusion of this framework in our research methods means that "we deconstructively explore the relation between ourselves and how we negotiate the search for meaning in a world of contradictory information" (145-46). Nancy Miller regards such an "attempt to articulate the personal and the theoretical together" (1991:3) to be creating a "critical fluency" (25) between theory and practice, between the political and the personal. This is what Elizabeth Grosz argues is one of the attributes of feminist theory:

It is a threshold for the intervention of theories within concrete practices, and the restructuring of theory by the imperatives of experience and practice, a kind of hinge or doorway between the two domains. (1992:367)

In my discussion of women's current writing practices and feminist theories I want the two to interact and speak to each other, as if sitting in dialogue in that doorway Grosz imagines.

Dialogue is also a model I chose in deciding to interview the women writers whose works I examine. Because I argue that their texts practise and interrogate feminist theories, to ignore their voices as speaking/writing subjects would be to re-enforce the absence of women writers as critical thinkers. By recording their knowledges I am able to position their thinking alongside the authorised signatures of published reviewers, critics, theorists and other commentators, including myself. I use excerpts from the interviews as points of intersection and intervention where (im)pertinent. Although I control the selection and placement of phrases, I have endeavoured to include any relevant comment whether it coincides with my argument or not; those that resist my arguments, in fact, are often more productive. The writers' comments are not conventionally introduced or referenced but are indicated by a different font, distinct from my own text. Because we did converse and because I did not want to "use" their comments to support my work necessarily, it seems apt to have their voices intertwining with mine. This also serves to decentre my authoritative position. At the same time, I do not want their voices to be weighed down by any sense of a definitive reading or authorial intention on their part; almost all the writers were dubious about their spontaneous and transient thoughts, as recorded in the interview, being enshrined in print.

The idea of interviewing might seem problematic from certain poststructural positions. Indeed, one of my undergraduate lecturers asked me where he went wrong in teaching me critical theory when he found I was interviewing authors. As Nancy Miller remarks, however, "The removal of the Author has not so much made room for a revision of the concept of authorship as it has, through a variety of rhetorical moves, repressed and inhibited discussion of any writing identity in favor of the (new) monolith of anonymous textuality" (1986:104). Fox-Genovese also comments,

Surely it is no coincidence that the Western white male elite proclaimed the death of the subject at precisely the moment at which it might have had to share that status with the women and peoples of other races and classes who were beginning to challenge its supremacy. (in Lather 1991:28)

To speak of women as social subjects, it is important to allow space in which they can speak and be heard as knowing women.

As an extension of the dialogue process, I sent each author a draft of my chapter on their work for comment. This created an opportunity for them to "speak back" to the academy if they chose, and facilitated a more interactive debate with some writers. The extended relationships I developed with the writers through this process (not the least of which was imagining them as readers), along with the different positions I take up in relation to their texts, have meant that each chapter is quite different in tone and style. Again, in the interests of allowing space in which they can be heard (not just as excerpts chosen by me), the interview plus any additions the writers made and their comments on the draft chapter are included in full as a resource in the appendix to this thesis.

As well as using a model of dialogue through which to listen to writers theorising, I also wanted my writing to act like the doorway Grosz imagines for feminist theory: to hinge between theory and practice. The seven chapters which read the seven writers' texts are therefore interspersed by four pieces of more experimental writing, writing which questions what a feminist doctoral thesis might be, and what narratives might also be operating to limit that form. In its feminist construction as many women's voices speaking together, this thesis might at times be seen to have some of the characteristics Irigaray attributes to women's talk, where

"She" is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious ... not to mention her language, in which "she" sets off in all directions ... Hers are contradictory words, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. (Irigaray 1985:28-29)

Contradictions are brought together to find their points of tension and agitated comments are included as opportunities to "see differently" (as Susan Hawthorne exhorts in her comments) outside of the ready-made grids. My "ficto-critical" writing may seem whimsical or capricious as part of an academic thesis, but it

represents my desire to write in a different language — one which "sets off in all directions" — and the pleasures I find in that writing. It is a "style" which "is not a style at all, according to the traditional way of looking at things" (Irigaray 1985:78). As *écriture féminine*, however, it is part of a "different economy" which, Irigaray argues, "upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse" (1985:30).

The "Polylogue" begins one such diversion as Chapter Two, contextualising and personalising some of the multiple voices present (and absent) in the following chapters. The playful linguistic and structural interventions of Ania Walwicz' work, *Writing* (1982), *boat* (1989) and *red roses* (1992), enable me in Chapter Three to explore the notion of a female language and women's position in the symbolic order. Walwicz's non-English speaking background intensifies her speaking position and, I argue, problematises some of the work of Julia Kristeva. Chapter Four follows with a ficto-critical piece, "Reading Bodies", which imagines the interwoven relations between theory and practice, and reader and writer.

The next four chapters examine fiction which is concerned with representations of specific women's bodies in their contribution to theories of writing the body. In Chapter Five, Margaret Coombs' texts, *Regards to the Czar* (1988) and *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing* (1990) enable a discussion of how women's bodies are positioned by and produced through medical discourses, including psychiatry. Chapter Six continues this analysis with the help of Fiona Place's *Cardboard* (1989), the narrator of which writes her experience of anorexia nervosa into a recovery story. The importance of new storylines is a vital part of the next chapter's discussion of Inez Baranay's *Between Careers* (1989), which problematises the linear and climactic storyline of "romance" through a narrator who works as a prostitute. The patriarchal structure of storylines is further challenged in Chapter Eight through Susan Hawthorne's *The Falling Woman* (1992), a text which explores alternative perspectives on epilepsy through its lesbian

narrator(s). Located specifically in an Australian desert, Hawthorne's text is also shown to question Irigaray's possible biases through a discussion of readerly and sexual desire.

"Writing Desire" is the title of Chapter Nine, which is a meditation on how women's desires might be represented differently. Chapters Ten and Eleven then examine novels about women whose desire is to be a visual artist, and how this desire is complicated by the politics of representation and the conditions of production for women. Sue Woolfe's *Painted Woman* (1990) charts how a woman's body forecloses on the options available in the traditional art world. Women's equity, on the other hand, is both celebrated and problematised by Davida Allen's novel, *Close to the Bone: The Autobiography of Vicki Myers* (1991), whose narrator is a wife, lover, mother of four, teacher, daughter and artist. Chapter Twelve follows with a narrative entitled "Performing Bodies", which reflects on the act of performing feminist theory. This flows on to the concluding Chapter Thirteen which problematises endings and looks forward to many more beginnings.

The interviews and responses from writers which formed a major contribution to the process of this thesis are transcribed and contextualised with a formal methodology after the reference section, as I desire the voices of women writers to continue to speak after the conclusions of my text.

CHAPTER TWO

POLYLOGUE:

WRITERS THEORISING, A PERFORMANCE



I developed the idea of a "dinner party," which was to be a sort of reinterpretation of the Last Supper from the point of view of those who'd done the cooking throughout history. The guests at this dinner party were to be presented as images on plates, a reference to the way in which history had consumed rather than revered women of achievement.

(Judy Chicago 1982:210)

This is no dinner party.
The only food will be food for thought.

Acknowledgments.

Quotations have been liberally taken from the following sources:

Fiona Place interview, January 1993.

Sue Woolfe interview, January 1993.

Margaret Coombs interview, January 1993.

Ania Walwicz interview, September 1992.

Susan Hawthorne interview, September 1992.

Inez Baranay interview, April 1993.

Davida Allen interview by correspondence, December 1992.

Jackie Huggins, paper delivered at the Lilith Feminist History Journal Conference in Melbourne 1992, broadcast on ABC Radio National's *The Coming Out Show* on 3 July 1993 as "Tiddas Manifesto".

Liz Flanagan, *ibid.*

Catrina Felton, *ibid.*

Susan Sheridan. 1993. Paper delivered at Jane Gallop Seminar in H.R.C., A.N.U., Canberra, in June 1993; reprinted as "Australian Feminist Literary History: Around 1981." *Hecate* 19,1: 101-15.

Sneja Gunew. 1993. "Feminism and Difference: Valedictory Thoughts on the Australian Scene." *Australian Women's Book Review*, 5,2: 40-44.

The Characters.

ANIA Walwicz: small but hugely animated with her cat, Mr Boopee, beside her, and a cup of herbal tea.

SUE Woolfe: apprehensive but excited, with a glass of riesling which gradually relaxes and enthuses her.

MARGARET Coombs: timid and very nervous but passionately intense. A cup of Earl Grey tea in front of her (not her usual beverage).

SUSAN Hawthorne: lean and nervous but speedy and intense. A short black coffee.

INEZ Baranay: apprehensive, slightly suspicious and a little defensive, but also willing and open. Pot of strong coffee.

FIONA Place: lively, bouncy, boppy, younger than the others. Glass of orange juice.

DAVIDA Allen: a typewriter in front of her rather than paper and pens.

ALISON Bartlett: self conscious and nervous, feels like she is on trial but also feels that she should be mediating and facilitative. A glass of blood-red wine for her.

Guest appearances by Catrina Felton, Liz Flanagan, Sneja Gunew, Jackie Huggins, Susan Sheridan.

Cixous, Irigaray, *et al* ... there in theory.

GINA Mercer: a voice which is both present and not present, audible only to Alison; although hardly acknowledged, her voice is constantly there in the background, being supportive and urging, critical and inspiring. Here her voice seeps into the discussions as a conscience or check for Alison, almost like a "pause" button, enabling the play to explore those otherwise unarticulated silences.

The scene.

Centre Stage, a large round table seating ANIA, SUE, MARGARET, SUSAN, FIONA, INEZ, DAVIDA and ALISON. It is set with paper and pens in the place of plates and cutlery, so that everyone can see each other and dialogue can spring across the table. Most have drinks in front of them. While these characters are present for the entire performance, others drift in and out as required and where they choose.

Stage Left: A rectangular table with four chairs, directly facing the audience.

The stage should be simple but not stark. The back wall could have photographs or slide images of women writers, or images of women's art (Judy Chicago? Judy Watson? Davida Allen? local women artists?) to signify the differing and shared heritages of those in this performance.

All the characters in this play are fictional but may resemble real people. What those people have said about the experiences of writing as women draws strongly on personal, lived experience as well as using feminist theoretical ideas and has been taken out of context for the (usual academic) purposes of this enactment.

~~~~~

## ACT ONE.

*Lights up, centre stage.*

ANIA: Hmm. I always worry about saying anything about my work because later on, you know, I think, "Oh what did I say?" Or I disagree with myself very strongly. But that's the best way to think of things, that one can change one's mind.

GINA: Well that's a good start — undermine the entire night. I like it.

LUCE IRIGARAY: Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand ... it really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarisation toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse...

ALISON: I didn't want this to happen. The authorities are getting out of hand already. I want the writers to speak. [*Aside*] They seem a bit timid. No wonder with Luce starting to lecture. [*To table*] Read any good books lately? What sort of books do writers read? [*Pause*]

MARGARET: Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*.

ANIA: Was reading Dumas lately, *The Black Tulip*.

SUSAN: Janette Turner Hospital's *Isobars* collection.



FIONA: Jeanette Winterson. I read *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*. But I also like reading stuff like the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Financial Review*, business magazines, sport magazines.

SUE: My all time favourite writer is Marguerite Duras and *The Lover*. I'm reading her *Summer Rains* at the moment.

ALISON: What about you, Davida?

DAVIDA: *The Mint Lawn* by Gillian Mears. It was given to me by the author, whose sister is an artist and likes my work. Like answering your questions, Alison, I feel obliged to read this novel.

ALISON: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push you, Davida. I thought our reading habits might give each other some indication of where we're coming from at the moment, and give us all a chance to start talking. I've just been reading a book of Robyn Davidson's travel essays which were really interesting, especially the ones about Alice Springs, as I grew up there. Oh, and Jackie French's *Backyard Self-Sufficiency* — it makes me want to go out and create jungles of gardens. What about you, Inez? What kind of books are you into?

INEZ: Um, I don't know what, see this is one of the things — how do I describe the sort of books? I read the kind of books I like to read and that covers a whole range of things. I tend to read a lot of fiction, I probably like it most, and biographies. Now the thing I read recently was Colette's *The Vagabond* and rediscovering Colette, who I adored in my late teens and early twenties, has been the great reading pleasure of the year. And especially *The Vagabond*. But a lot of the time I'm really restricted by what falls into my lap. I can't afford to buy books lately.

ALISON: Mmm, cost is a limiting factor in access to books, isn't it? Obviously I use the university library as a resource, but I'm curious about how you might come across feminist theories in your reading — how does theory circulate outside of those institutional walls?

FIONA: I did a creative writing MA. I went to U.T.S. and I did my Lacan, I did my Cixous, I did my Irigaray, all that sort of stuff.

ALISON: So were you conscious of those theories when you were writing your novel Fiona?

FIONA: I hadn't been informed consciously by any theories, by anything. I mean I didn't even know about post-structuralism, didn't even know who Derrida was. I wouldn't have known any of that when I wrote the novel. Obviously, later on, I can see how a lot of the stuff that I'm saying in that is very, very post-structural. There's a whole lot of images and connections, but they came later. I mean, it was a very gut reaction, natural, instinct stuff. So yeah, I've taken all that theory. A lot of it I've found really interesting but now, it gives me a sense that I want to go off and write.

INEZ: I don't have any truck with universities. I went to university at a time when the English school was extremely conservative, you see, a time when there was a big kind of clash between the old conservatives who were like, really, patriarchal is the word we'd use now, and the people who were responding to all those exciting ideas that were around at the time, in the sixties. I was much more interested in the sex drugs and rock'n'roll of that era. But I didn't see that reflected anywhere in how the classes were conducted and what we were reading. Not only what we were reading but how it was talked about. I had to get over it. It was like, you know, you had to grow up and leave home.

ALISON: So you haven't come across any feminist theories in regard to writing?

INEZ: Well I probably have but they're put in disguise in novels I suppose, or in life itself, or something. A lot of these things are just names to me and they've been on my must-read-this-one-day list, but haven't fallen into my lap. So, not really. I mean, where do you? You have to go to University don't you, to come across that thing?

FIONA: For me, I would hope that I'm dealing with a lot of the ideas that the theorists are interested in, but for me the only way that I can deal with them is in fiction, and I hope that most people can read it in my fiction. I'm not sure that a lot of people do.

MARGARET: Well, I think it's extremely hard to say precisely how theory influences your writing, you know. I sort of guess, I think that if all this stuff has been fed into you that it's likely to change the way you write and affect the way you write.

FIONA: I mean, yeah, obviously you can't help but be informed by it. I mean the paradox was *Cardboard* was informed by it anyway. So yeah, obviously I've found a lot of those ideas quite useful and interesting, but I think I'll also move on from them. But yeah they'll always be there.

MARGARET: I'm certainly interested in trying to convey identity as fluid and the complexity, you know the idea that as soon as you articulate a highly constructed entity that it's not me, sort of thing. And that identity is a process, not a fixed essence. And that, what Foucault said about it, I mean I know he can be a sexist, hopeless, old creature, but, you know, I'm really interested in the power of knowledge.

ANIA: I am aware of the theoretical background too, but I'm not sort of coming to it from some sort of inquiry or research. Once I come across books like this I absorb them but I am not getting the idea of the way to write from those books. There is a difference. I don't have to have direct acknowledgment of sources, too, which an academic does.

FIONA: I find it extremely difficult to deal with them in academic language. I just find that so hard. And yet, I understand them in academic language and I go "yeah, yeah, yeah." But then my only way of talking about them is through fiction.

INEZ: Then I did go to university kind of through you, Alison. I read some of the theory that you sent me, and it was a delight and astonishment: language stretched to express familiar thoughts. In those essays, as in what follows, there was much "stuff I recognise".

MARGARET: I've been very interested in Liz Grosz's work, Terry Threadgold, Hélène Cixous — I really enjoy her work and find her inspiring — and I've certainly been sort of exposed to part of Irigaray's work but I'm much, much less familiar with Julia Kristeva's work, as far as, you

know, like maybe I've had it in mediated form from other people but Cixous and Irigaray are the ones that, I suppose, I've admired.

SUE: Yes, I have a friend who was always passing on articles which I would skim and dip into. And from them I cobbled together some theory.

SUSAN: What disturbs me about some of the French feminist theorists is that sometimes they're said to be the first to come up with that idea, when in fact a number of American radical feminists have come up with very similar ideas about five or ten years earlier. So what I was drawing on in my writing was much more my experience of the women's movement in the 1970s and the sorts of theories which were floating in the air but which were not written down at that time. And also reading from the States in particular about women's literature. And it was only then, after that, that I came to the French stuff. And they seemed to be saying very similar things.

DAVIDA: I am not aware of Helen Cixous or Luce Irigaray. Funny really, I have Peta, my 19 year old daughter, who is doing all this stuff at the A.N.U. Of course she won't ever mention her dumb mother in any of her essays on Feminism! But she knows all these names you know. I feel old and stupid. But there's too much I can do that you and Peta can't and so for my own sanity I just can't allow myself to get upset about what I don't know!

SUE: What happens when I read theory is that just a phrase creates such a whirlpool of images that I want to just go away and think and dwell on that and I don't want any more. There's so much in that writing that's so full of poignant phrases. A friend gave me an article, and it started "Mother with your milk I have sucked ice". Do you know that one? Wow. And that kept me writing for the last four months, that phrase. I just found it so, so rich. So full of meaning.

SUSAN: I remember in the late 70s there was a lot of discussion of the idea of "Is there a female aesthetic?" And this was before the French feminist stuff was available in English translation, and I don't read French. And, I mean, I remember having conversations about those sorts of things with people like Finola Moorhead and other friends, other

women who I know, and we often talked about how the shape of a woman's novel could be different.

ALISON: So if, as Susan says, theory follows life practices, do you think it adds anything to your writing practice?

SUE: I'm informed by the ideas that really hit home and they change my life, and by changing my life and my attitudes they certainly affect my writing. But in no sense am I doing an illustrated Irigaray. But, for example, when I read "Mother with your milk I suck ice", that meant so many layers of things to me, and someone, maybe it was Elizabeth Grosz, talked about the mother as a lost territory, that we look back through the mother as a lost territory and maybe that's why we write about her so badly. And that phrase struck home.

ANIA: I like the psychoanalytic approach to literary work, and the feminist, well, how my work would be seen as babble, and the female speech. But the relationship between me and theory is much more indirect than your relationship between me and theory Alison. But I still absorb it but it comes out in a different way. And it doesn't have to be a direct relationship. It's curious how authors are seen as always naive, as though they didn't know about basic theoretical things. Why is that?

MARGARET: I do feel there is a problem from the point of view of the writer like me, that there tend to be a handful of writers sort of very self-consciously interested in theory and who are mostly working within the academy and so sort of don't actually need to make a separate reputation outside of it. They've sort of got a ready-made power base. And on the other hand the vast majority of Australian writers seem to me to be extremely hostile to theory and, you know, well, sort of irritatingly naive and some of them are technically brilliant and so it's terribly frustrating to me when these people can write beautifully and not be aware of what their work is doing, what their work is, that it is sexist or you know supportive of values and power systems that are really odious.

ALISON: Yes, I can see what you mean.

MARGARET: And yet, it's quite difficult because on the other hand I feel a great deal of kinship with that group of people whenever I'm confronting the heavy-duty academic who doesn't understand how hard it is to acquire those technical skills and survive in a literary market place where the prevailing ideas are very romantic.

ANIA: That's the old idea of looking at the author as a sort of *idiot savant*, you know, they have this marvellous talent but they're sort of idiots, or mad.

SUSAN: I went to the States for six months as an "Adjunct" in the Women's Studies Department at San Diego. A lot of writers actually read in academic areas as well and there are numbers of academics who work in writing fields. So I don't think the divisions are anywhere near as stark as they're often made out to be and, I guess, I work in a range of different fields. I write academic papers from time to time and I write reviews of books and things like that, and I actually think that that's an important part of the work that I do because I think it's important to feed that critical work back into the literary community and into the feminist community. It's like those Venn diagrams, you know that you have at school, where you have a sort of circle and there are various parts of the literary world that are not overlapping with one another.

MARGARET: I feel that I sort of don't get enough support from the academic critics and that I've severely alienated the mainstream people, partly by trying to be a mediator between those two worlds and bringing those ideas to these people out here.

DAVIDA: I only hope to God the simplicity of my work is not analysed into complexity beyond its reason to be born.

MARGARET: I really enjoy reading theory and there's a part of me that would happily be a philosopher and, of course, you know, this is another thing: I mean I know I could be a philosopher, a feminist theorist. I know it. And especially in the last three years or so I've put an enormous amount of effort into reading and learning this sort of stuff and I sometimes go to academic things where I know a lot more of that sort of stuff than a lot of people who have nice comfortable jobs, as

tutors, if not lecturers, do. It does sometimes tempt me away from writing, partly because I guess I can see that theorists get taken so much more seriously.

SUSAN: I think that writers of fiction and poetry and the like have also contributed a lot to the development of critical theory because it's the writers who actually do it before the critics realise it's been done.

MARGARET: I've sort of self-educated myself to a point where, you know, I can do that stuff and feel I know what I'm doing, but I can't get it taken seriously because I haven't got the right credentials or I'm not in the right institution.

ANIA: I feel that I can have more of a voice now because the author's voice is invited back again, because of creative writing becoming a subject at universities. That's the difference. At Melbourne University I gave a lecture recently. Suddenly I appeared like a living textbook!

MARGARET: Someone I admire in the academic world is Terry Threadgold — that lecture I gave at Sydney University was at her invitation. She's prepared to, you know, expose her students to actual practising writers and try to set up some kind of dialogue. She takes risks, those sorts of risks and that's really important encouragement to a writer like me.

SUE: Mmm. Well I read bits of critique in the academy with horror. No terror is the word. Terror. Because I don't feel I fit in. I often read articles by critics who suggest that we should be writing about such and such, for example about women who are victorious, and we shouldn't be thinking about the struggle. And I think yes, this is right. But when I'm alone with myself and my writing what emerges — what *has* to emerge — is what I feel most deeply about. That probably comes from a pretty painful source. But that's what I *must* write. I am speechless when I think about what I should do. I agree there are things that desperately need to be done, particularly in women's writing. The fact is, I can only do what I can do. And, that's the reason for my terror.

ALISON: Yes, I must admit to a certain amount of terror when I consider that my work is going to be marked! I'm consciously operating within the academic framework so am privileged in that respect, whereas Margaret feels she is excluded. But this project is also a chance to incorporate some alternatives to that framework which I consider to be of value, like listening to you here today.

MARGARET: Yes well I think that it's a really interesting approach and really worthwhile because, you know, the whole idea of setting up an interchange and the possibility of influencing each other rather than a sort of hostility.

ALISON: You think it is a hostile relationship between the academy and writers?

MARGARET: Yes, it does tend to be suspicion, fear and hostility. I mean I thought, especially in "Protect me from what I want", I thought I was doing the kinds of things that the French theorists are getting at, which is not to have a rigid, linear argument, sort of stripped of all metaphors and so on and so forth. And, and I sort of think that that's good. But what happens is that unless you can somehow announce yourself to be doing that and to have those knowledges and be from somewhere and all that, it's assumed that you're just an ignorant writer who doesn't know how to write a "proper academic essay".

ANIA: Yes, and the creative genius comes out and they don't know what they're doing and someone has to elucidate it. That was the old framework, the theoretical framework to begin with, when I was at university it was like that.

SUE: I feel criticism is quite arbitrary.

INEZ: It is my impression, though, that certain writers, and they tend to be female, are more willing to expose/display/admit their own position from which they review and respond to the book in question. I am sorry when a female critic "playfully" calls for the destruction of books that go on excessively about menstruation and not only because I think she means me.



SUE: Yes, yes. One of the things that propelled me through *Painted Woman* and still propels me is this incredible loneliness that we're not known as females, that we're not known in any way, that there are no stories about us.

JNEZ: I love to see women's truths in writing, and menstruation fascinates me (I want to re-read *The Wise Wound* and anything of similar kind) as I was brought up competently to deal with and then considerately to ignore it but I believe our lunar/lunatic cycles must COME OUT in order to feminise the world which is something I also kind of believe in at present. Speak the unspeakable, find words for what is not said. I love it when I see something that does that.

SUE: Like, when you think, what's it like to be a mother? I'll pop to the library and get a few books about mothers. I don't mean, like how to mother, I mean like the imaginative experience of mothering, and there's nothing there. And it's easy to think, My god, I'm all alone. I'm the only person in the world who's a ramshackle mother and everybody else doesn't need stories about them, that's why there are no stories. Or sexuality. I think, how do I *feel* sexuality when all the stories seem to look at sex from the man's point of view? How do I feel sexual when I haven't got a whole web of stories inside me and I hold myself up and there are no stories to show me how other people who are women feel about it?

DAVIDA: I found dealing with sexual desire in the script easy because it's as much a part of life as anything else (probably one of the most important elements to MY female psyche). It was easy to write about it, as easy as the imagery of the poohy nappies.

SUE: I think there's this incredible gap that you feel as a woman that there's a whole lot of stories and a whole lot of language out there and it only partly fits you. You feel an outsider. You feel like someone crouching on the sidelines, wanting to join in but not being able to and thinking, "Well, the game is really not for me". And that compels me to write, that feeling that I want to tell.

ALISON: Well, I'm really glad that you agreed to join in and tell some of your stories here, Sue.

SUE: I think it's lovely you should bother. No, I mean that.

MARGARET: Yes, writers really need that kind of work, that kind of support and that kind of interest and approach and I think, you know, it's a good thing you're doing. I like what you said about your project in your letter.

INEZ: Because of the way you wrote about it was so interesting I didn't feel as threatened or whatever as I would be if some of the reviewers had wanted to see me — but they wouldn't you see. I just thought "Oh, what a lark! And doesn't this sound interesting, her approach. Look, it might be fun to hear about." And now that I've seen it in practice, I know it works! How do you do that? That's not how they wrote essays when I was at university, thank heavens.

ALISON: Well I'm glad because one of the things I'm trying to do is undermine one of the hierarchies which operates in academia to give greater credence to theories over fiction. It seems to me that the borders between the two are blurred, especially with the advent of ficto-criticism which very consciously yokes the two together. But in demonstrating how writing — like all of yours — subtly works through theoretical ideas and feminist issues, I'm trying to argue that writers of fiction put those theories into practice: put them to the test, if you like. I think theory and praxis seem inextricably woven together, and by creating a space from which you can all speak I'm hoping to give your views as writers as much credence as theorists' ideas.

SUE: I keep trying to read about post-structuralism, I feel it is a duty and I try to. I find it — the language — very difficult but I struggle with that.

ALISON: That language issue is very disempowering isn't it? Does anyone else feel alienated like that from particular discourses?

FIONA: I do think that the way women use language can definitely show how women are placed within phallogentric discourse. But no, I didn't have that sense, like, as a woman not being able to find her own words. No, I didn't. Not in the particular way where the words were difficult. But

that doesn't mean to say that I think language is easy for women if you know what I mean.

SUE: I fight with words all the time. I mean, a simple phrase can take two pots of tea. But I feel obliged to explore it. As if for the first time. I feel a tremendous sense of compulsion to write about life meticulously and to see it as truthfully as I can. So I want to mix up, say, ideas that fascinate me with minute details of how to shell peas, because that's been something that I've experienced. I want to move across that whole sort of spectrum of domestic and metaphysical truths, because that's, to me, how women's minds work, well, my mind works like that and my friends' seem to too, particularly friends with children. They're talking about an abstraction one moment and worrying about how to deal with a lettuce the next.

INEZ: In knowing quite clearly that form and content are one, that a woman who knows her body as a woman writes from that knowledge, and similar things not articulated, I am helped by my study of yoga: it is a language that makes sense of such things for me, not only the writings of yoga but its practice.

ALISON: Yes, actually I've found that yoga not only newly familiarises me with my body but that the language of it also breaks down those binaries that we are used to in everyday language. Instead of strong and weak in yoga there is strong and soft, both of which have a place and value in life. And I love the attention to minuscule detail like the orientation of my big toe or the turning out of a thigh muscle which forms an integral part of the overall flow of energy in a position.

INEZ: Yoga: it makes me practise what I work for in my writing: that attention, that constant refining, that precision. And intelligence that is diffuse in the body. A yoga instruction might be to bring intelligence to the big toe. And you find you can. And your intelligence is then expanded.

ALISON: It's like making new discoveries, isn't it? And it's amazing how our bodies relate in so many ways to our writing, too.

SUE: I think, in a way, it's wonderful to be a woman writing at this particular moment of this century because it's unexplored territory. We're exotic to ourselves. And so any little exploration we can make feels, well feels to the writer, exciting.

SUSAN: I think that women at the moment are experimenting more with form and with content, and style and with genre — the whole thing. I think this is true of women and I think it's also happening amongst other groups, like, you know, black writers, indigenous writers etcetera, people coming from cultures which are not currently in dominance. I think that part of the reason that's happening is because we haven't had a voice, and the old forms don't necessarily suit us. I think that when you have something different to say then you are forced to say it in different ways and so you have to seek out a form that's going to suit your needs, suit the needs of the text and of the content and the themes that you're dealing with, and the perspective because you've got to be able to challenge the way that people read and you've got to make them sit up a bit so that they actually take notice.

ALISON: I'm glad you brought that up Susan, because I am aware of the absence of Aboriginal women's voices here. Bringing this up as an issue here even seems marginalising, but from the work I have read by Koori and Murri women they seem to have a very different agenda in their writing to the ones I am addressing in terms of French feminist theories.

*[GINA begins walking across the stage, stopping to address ALISON.]*

GINA: Yes, well maybe that's a difference you should be addressing. Maybe the French feminists' theories you are using are limited in their applicability if they don't relate to Koori women writers. I suppose it depends whether your emphasis is on the French feminist theories or the writing being produced in Australia.

ALISON: But I want to show the interaction between the two, that they are not discrete texts but continually intersect and overlap, affect each other.

GINA: Have you made this clear? Why did you decide on French feminist theories? Why writing in Australia?

ALISON: Good question. Because they both appeal to me in their different ways.  
I like hearing women's stories.

*[Lights up on rectangular table, stage left, where SUSAN SHERIDAN is seated and cuts in, addressing both ALISON and the audience.]*

SUSAN SHERIDAN: The conjunction of women writers and the Australian literary tradition begins to sound like a given, rather than a choice to be theoretically defended.

INEZ: Well exactly! That's why I don't see myself as having, or being inside, any "tradition". Particularly, I can't relate to the demands I identify as primarily an "Australian" writer (rather than, for one thing, an English-language writer, or a writer who'll fall in love with Colette every couple of decades). I do, however, and probably for the first time, recognise and accept myself in a context HERE.

SUSAN SHERIDAN: A deconstructive critique of the gendering of this national discourse ... should become part of such a defence.

ALISON: A defence? What about that lovely feminist dictum, "Never Apologise, Never Explain"?

SUSAN SHERIDAN: Work on "Australian Women Writers" will have to theorise the position of women writing subjects as configurations of gender with race and national discourses.

ALISON: Well, okay. This is (an) academic play, after all. To some extent "Australia" provided an arbitrary boundary which acted to contain the content of fiction in my thesis. It provided constraints on my possibly infinite reading list. Also, by choosing Australian writers I was able to interview them. These are practical reasons, but not unrelated to my ideological positioning. Having been located in Australia for most of my life, those cultural influences operating within its (albeit imaginary) bounds have been active in the formation of my subjectivity. To acknowledge myself as a white female of Anglo-Celtic background living in Australia is to position myself in terms of a cultural milieu which, in some ways, resembles that out of which those texts have

been produced and circulated. Of course, the articulation of a subject position always leaves out more than it can possibly accommodate. I'm also a vegetarian, a chocolate lover, a cat owner, a bicycle rider, a Leo, and so on. But we'll leave that. I've tried to use Australian interpretations and "grafts" of French feminist theories for a similar reason; they seem to render the "Frenchness" more accessible, more relevant to me from where I stand and speak. And, if I can add this, I think the writing I've chosen is wonderful and important and I feel passionate about it — which always helps I find.

*[Light recedes from stage left.]*

SUSAN: I find it difficult to find the same kind of experimentation with ideas and form and style as we get here in Australia and to some extent I think also in New Zealand. And I think that's part of that whole thing of being part of the dominant culture or not, and that the problem of the American women's movement is that, like it or not, they are part of a dominant culture and they forget, they don't know what the other side sees. And the ones who are writing and doing different things in the States are not from the white population. They're usually black or Chicano or Native American. So, amongst those groups there is some exciting work happening, you know, I mean it's that sort of thing. So I think that Australian writing still has a long way to go in getting adequately recognised for the quality of the work that's coming out.

ALISON: That's good to know Susan.

GINA: Yes, but you still haven't talked about the absence of Koori women from this stage. Maybe you can find some way of giving them a piece of the platform.

*[An urgent rapping is heard from stage left. ALISON goes to door. Enter JACKIE HUGGINS, LIZ FLANAGAN, CATRINA FELTON.]*

ALISON: Oh, hallo Jackie. I'm glad you could make it, after all.

JACKIE: It's usually me who is the only Aboriginal woman going to these feminist things. My two Koori tiddas, Liz and Cat, also came this time with their criticism of white feminism.

ALISON: Great — let me get some extra chairs for you to join us. [JACKIE, LIZ and CAT walk past to the rectangular table, stage left. They respond to ALISON's questions by addressing the audience.]

JACKIE: These days I will only collaborate with non-Aboriginal women who are mentally and spiritually evolved, who have dealt with their own racism and where they stand in relation to us, and in doing so are making a conscientious effort to redress the situation of Aboriginal and other oppressed peoples in this country whether it be in public forums, within their own psyches, or as mothers of the future generations. [JACKIE sits back, as if she is not going to speak further.]

LIZ: As Koori women we aim to set our own culturally specific agenda and place our oppression within its racial, historical and political context. White feminist academics continue to hold the ethnocentric view that they know best. They are a part of the dominating culture and everyone else is "other". Therefore Koori women's viewpoints continue to be categorised as responses, with white feminists remaining at the centre as the norm. This approach sets the scene for a racist imperial relationship and it ignores Koori women's achievements, autonomy and capacity to be considered as active, and able to develop our own independent theories.

ALISON: Yes, that's a very different agenda to the one I'm addressing in terms of women re-writing discursive constructions of women's lives and bodies. Or is it? It also seems related.

LIZ: Feminism in Australia, as in many western countries, is seen as having a white middle-class background, and many feminists tend to ignorantly believe that their ideology has some cross-cultural applicability, and that all women should be embracing of their perception of feminism. This standpoint will never allow Koori women to have different methods of liberation, adaptation and survival, and feminists will continue categorising our experiences as responses to their own ideologies rather than being recognised as political strategies which deserve to be analysed on their own terms.

ALISON: Yes, I can see your point.

LIZ: The importance of us setting our own agenda is to eliminate the oppressive impositions of white domination. We have to resist being further indoctrinated by the dominant ideologies, which white feminism is a component. As Koori tiddas, we do not want to be locked into the constraints of a particular feminist framework, particularly when feminism in this country, our country, is constructed within a dominant white culture that benefits from the dispossession and oppression of Koori people.

ALISON: So is feminism completely irrelevant to Koori women?

CAT: We are here today to state unequivocally that we as tiddas refuse to be left off the feminist agenda which has ignored and deemed us invisible for so long.

LIZ: White women should not retreat or cop out of the discussion on racism, or the divisiveness it has apparently caused within the white feminist movement. Until white women can confront the issues of racism and white power there can be no collaboration between us and we can never call each other sister. Tidda-ism calls upon white women to critique and analyse our approaches, for we are not saying that white women cannot talk about us, it's just not that simple. What we are saying to white women is ... don't attempt to talk on our behalf. For there is a difference if you talk with us.

JACKIE: See this as a challenge and not an insurmountable problem which gets tossed into the too-hard basket where issues are never dealt with or explored. Although you might believe that non-Aboriginal people have no right to enter into, discuss, or combat racism, as it is perceived as being too complex and outside your realm of experience, there can be no room for complacency and excuses to remain silent.

ALISON: But Jackie I've also heard you say that non-Aboriginals "must learn to step back in areas where they are not welcome but think and presume they are, where they are intruders rather than accomplices, otherwise they do great damage to the Aboriginal people in their struggle, adding to the burden rather than alleviating it."



JACKIE: My intention has never been to intimidate non-Aboriginal researchers into copping out of analysing colonisation, history, race and gender etcetera, which pertains to Aboriginal people.

[JACKIE gets up to go, LIZ and CAT follow. Spotlight follows them out and lingers at their exit.]

JACKIE: The golden rule is that non-Aboriginals should never appropriate Aboriginal voices and use them as mouthpieces of their own.

LIZ: [Loudly so she can be heard on her way through the door and out, stage right.] In the end I don't suppose it really matters that the academics try to preserve their right to talk about feminism, you know, because, I think if they don't have us to listen to then, I mean they can just talk amongst themselves and we can go on with our grass roots feminism, which I think is very important ... [Trails off.]

SNEJA GUNEW: [Appears at rectangular table, stage left, lights up.]

These are the kinds of pronouncements where we have had to acknowledge different kinds of positionings within ourselves, and maybe there is something healthy about being forced to live our postmodernism, between our political support of those statements and our critical skirting around them.

ALISON: Yes, do you think it is a division between theory and practice? You have spoken about feminist theory being seen as having been a product of the academy whereas the women's movement is seen to cut across a range of fields that deal with women's immediate survival.

SNEJA: For those who belong to the mainstream, in this case a feminist one, the big danger from what I have observed is the familiar double trap of reproducing the other as either the same or as the totally alien ... As feminist literary critics I see our task as that of locating the contingent languages of our own stories and fragments, discerning the ways in which gender is refracted through cultural difference, and acknowledging and making space for the positionings and incommensurabilities of others, listening to them speak back neither as Martians nor as ourselves.

ALISON: Yes, I do feel uncomfortable about performing the absence of Aboriginal women here, but it seems like the only way I can acknowledge them, given that I have chosen to use stories, fragments and languages from my culture. That awareness of cultural positioning is increasingly necessary, isn't it? Would anyone else like to talk about their political agendas for writing?

SUSAN: One of the things which interests me is a sort of mixing of genres, and the epilepsy theme. That and I guess the point of a lesbian perspective on things as well.

SUE: We all are our experience because of the stories told to us. I imagine that my little daughter goes around with gradually more and more complex stories in her head about who she is. So my political agenda is to try to tell stories that make us know who we are.

INEZ: Yes, we all want to tell what we don't hear told.

ANIA: Obviously I was brought up as a female, or was seen as a female, was told that I was female, although I was brought up in a very unusual way; I wasn't really told I was a female because, I was told in a way by my father, I was called by a boy's name. Very odd. So my sense of myself was always sort of a transvestite sense of myself. My view of gender has always been a form of parade of gender.

MARGARET: Well one of the things I sort of thought that I'd like to make a point of, is saying what a huge difference it makes to me that I am a mother of two children. And, I think being a mother, at least in our culture, you know, hugely differentiates you from those who aren't. And that's sort of made a big difference to me as a writer. For instance I've spent the past twenty years, or the years before I was actually trying to write full-time, say ten years, I was spending that time being a mother rather than, say, doing a PhD or being a lecturer at a university and so it's very much harder if that lump of your life was spent being a mother, which of course in our culture is to be sort of a nobody. And from that life you don't bring a whole network of friends who are useful in your career as a writer and so forth. So, you know, I think you'll find that there are still very few women writers who are mothers.

DAVIDA: I hope my images both in paint and in words can give a light at the end of the tunnel as it were, to deranged mothers at home with screaming infants! Needless to point out, dear Alison, the book started to be written when my fourth child was at school. I could not see any fucking light myself when she was in nappies!

SUE: Yes. I feel deeply that there are no real mothering stories. There are a lot of stories about good and bad mothers and negligent mothers and nurturing mothers but there are no stories about how mothers live in themselves, and how they feel about their lives. That sort of lack I suddenly realised when I became a mother and I want to write about that because when I looked about for mothering stories I felt there were none.

MARGARET: I mean it's part of how the body affects writing because, you know, motherhood is the ultimate isn't it, the consequence of having a female body as it were. I get very impatient with feminists who are unaware of the complexities of class, money and motherhood.

SUSAN: I wouldn't have been able to think those things if I hadn't gone through the 70s and if I hadn't lived a fairly strongly separatist lifestyle at one stage, and certainly thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women.

MARGARET: I got involved in Redress Press, which was a fairly small feminist publishing group back in the early eighties, and because I'd been an isolated mother, it gave me a sense of — an awareness of my own competence, you know, opportunities to discover from experience that I could do things, all sorts of things.

SUSAN: And I actually see that as much more central to the kind of theoretical face of the work.

FIONA: When I was younger I was one of these people who just simply said, I couldn't understand feminism. I don't understand: I've got jobs, I've done this, I've done that, I've wanted to do things — why do people whinge about being women? I just couldn't understand at all. And then once I got politicised, I realised.

ANIA: My writing stems from the eighties which was the beginning of a collection of women's work and it was feminist awareness and readings that were set up by women, so inevitably my work was produced within the context of feminism right from the beginning. And I think that shaped it — absolutely, even if it shaped it indirectly in that the work was looked at as women's work, because before the eighties that wasn't even done. And I actually started to write then. So in a way I'm a product of feminist criticism indirectly.

DAVIDA: Subversive? Feminist? I tend to shy away from these words as firstly I do not understand their current meaning, and also, I simply had a story to tell.

INEZ: Feminist of course though I will say "depending what you mean by the word" as alas it is used to mean e.g. humourless man-hating separatist (which I am at times!). What a problematic troublesome word — but let's use it, I say, don't let it be taken away. It's like "God" isn't it? "Do you believe in God" as I think it was Carl Sagan was asked on the radio the other day, and replied something like, "definition? Not the white bearded patriarch in the sky, but if as Einstein said ..."

DAVIDA: I am perhaps a true feminist in the specific sense of the word: to believe the woman is as good as any man, to be truly liberated in the household and work place and not be inferior.

FIONA: I guess I'm not an absolute and utter disciple, but I'm definitely fascinated by what people have to say about women writers and how they write about space and how they write about gender and all of those sorts of things. I find all those ideas very interesting and I would use them, but I'm not going to expound one particular theory. I'd rather question them, challenge them, or see where they fall down. I would hope that my book deals with a lot of the ideas the French feminists are talking about but then grounds them and places them and maybe even contradicts them, maybe expands them, but hopefully does interesting things with them. That's what I would hope to do most. That you can then use it as a further understanding of what the French feminists are on about. Because I think they themselves have many contradictions and many areas that they don't explain or many things that they can't talk about.

MARGARET: The hardest thing about the isolation of the job is that you're just not surrounded daily by people who think what you're doing is a worthwhile way to be spending your time.

SUE: I like talking about the process. Part of it is that writing feels like a sort of madness. And it's comforting to talk, particularly to other women writers, to see if they share the madness because then there's a sense that if many of you are mad then it has its own form of normality. Writing to me is actually like talking. It's like I'm having a really good conversation with somebody. White paper is wonderful. It's a great friend, blank paper. Life seems to me to be composed of people saying something with a whole lot of silence going on inbetween. I'm fascinated by people's chatter, and the depths of their thinking between the chatter.

*[Lights fade to darkness, lingering on the images on the back wall. Voices fade but continue to "chatter".]*

AAAAAAAAAAAAA

### CHAPTER THREE

"THE LANGUAGE [OF] THE BROKEN, THE HIDDEN":  
MATERNAL DEBT IN THE LANGUAGE OF ANIA WALWICZ'S  
*WRITING* (1982), *BOAT* (1989) and *RED ROSES* (1992)

Language has been a critical site in discussions of the politics of women's writing. In the 1970s, American feminists were concerned to establish a tradition of "literary women" whose voices had been silenced and lost, as Ellen Moers' (1976) work exemplifies. Their project was to retrieve and to revalue what had been ignored in the gaps and silences of language. When the works of French feminist theorists were translated in the early 1980s, a different set of debates informed by psychoanalytic theory was made available to English speakers. Marks and de Courtivron's anthology, *New French Feminisms* (1980), constructs for us a collection of those debates, which includes Xavière Gauthier's (1974) rally for women to speak as women, to make audible what is left in the holes of discourse:

As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write *as men do*, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt. (in Marks and de Courtivron 1980:162-63)

In contrast, the (1977) manifesto of the editorial collective of *Questions féministes* opposes the desire to privilege a women's language, especially one that might locate itself "outside" of masculine discourse. The collective also defends the use of theoretical analysis against charges of its masculinist elitism and inaccessible jargon:

We are only playing the oppressor's game if we deprive ourselves of knowledge and conceptual tools because he has used them before us ... there is no good reason to reject as "masculine and oppressive" a certain form of conceptual discourse and thus give men the exclusive control over discourse. (in Marks and de Courtivron 1980:221)

These contributions indicate the range of debate and heterogeneity of ideas that language engenders. Marks and de Courtivron also include samples of work by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, theorists whose work has arguably become representative of "French feminist theory" for English speakers and on whose work I largely draw in my discussions of *écriture féminine* as practised in Australia by contemporary women writers.

While Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray might be yoked together under the banner of French feminist theory, their ideas on *écriture féminine* are as polyvalent as the debates brought together by Marks and de Courtivron in *New French Feminisms*.

Kristeva regards women as always marginalised from signifying practice, so that "language seems to be seen from a foreign land" (in Marks and de Courtivron 1980:166). As a product of their position in the symbolic order, Kristeva argues that women always have a negative function: either artificially (and unsuccessfully) to mimic the poetic language mastered by Mallarmé, Artaud and Joyce, or to retreat into silence (Kristeva 1987:113).

For Cixous, all writing is "marked" by the male or female body through which it is produced, but language is constructed through "a libidinal and cultural — hence political, typically masculine — economy" which privileges masculine values:

this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction. (in Marks and de Courtivron 1980:249)

The erasure of the value of women's writing is all the more reprehensible for Cixous, as "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (in Marks and de Courtivron 1980:249).

Cixous' outrage is matched in passion by Irigaray's vision of *écriture féminine*. Her analysis of the masculine investment in language calls for

an examination of the *operation of the "grammar"* of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: *its silences*. (Irigaray 1985:75)

Irigaray's promotion of female specificity in discursive forms brings into operation the form of women's bodies, and in particular our sexual bodies, as sites of creativity, an activity which she sees as discouraged to the point of impossibility within patriarchal language: "if we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story" (1985:214). In her attempt to break down the power relations inherent in language and its alienation from (women's) corporeality, Irigaray mobilises the figure of women's two (labial) lips, which are contiguous, to advocate multiplicity and ambiguity, to discredit the binary oppositions fundamental to patriarchal thought, and to stress the tactile



element she sees as so important in getting back in touch with ourselves: "Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact" (1985:24). This is distinguished from the dominant phallic economy where, "in order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language" (1985:24). The prominence Irigaray gives to women's two lips also challenges the "economy of the same" where women's sexual organs are perceived in relation to the phallus (which is whole) as a hole or lack, as

a hole-envelope that serves to sheath and massage the penis in intercourse: a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing. About woman and her pleasure, this view of the sexual relation has nothing to say. (1985:23)

In refuting this sexual economy, Irigaray claims that "Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural ... woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*" (1985:28).

This plurality and fluidity (as opposed to the metaphors of solidity and form which function to represent male sexuality and writing) comes to represent qualities of women's writing which phallogocentric structures inadequately represent. Irigaray relates this directly to women's relation to and construction by language:

"She" is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious ... not to mention her language, in which "she" sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself. She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished ... When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure, or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an *"other meaning" always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them*. For if "she" says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches (upon)*. And when it strays too far from that proximity, she breaks off and starts over at "zero" her body-sex. (1985:28-29)

Irigaray calls not only for women to speak (and write), but for them to be heard, not so much for a new language, as for a subversion of the existing language so that it

becomes overloaded, marked by excess, which unleashes the heterogeneity of meanings, the ambiguities and the assumptions which lie silenced.

As writing which foregrounds its use of language, the work of Ania Walwicz is particularly relevant to discussions of language as a site which can challenge prevailing hierarchies. "writer\reader" (1991) is a recent example of her work that can be read as a "primer" on her writing, and also serves to make apparent her particular relevance to Irigaray's discussions of women's writing:

#### writer/reader

hots all in put give me alt in sum to lads in tooth of liebe i am a cost in freid sum up  
ateeth stoop in gift i'm tool of love instead of grief lordy in time i'm full to put my  
kunst play to loss ooo off tin plus feel loose painting if in a tool to do me then i'm all  
flying then i'm all tying then i'm all lean line a pretty to dee hello i'm flying a taste  
in all of me is a ready tiger a lass feel my clue ein foot foot ein flue teedee dee says  
me to play my steal i'm in great loss in fly to me on a great love in from my inner  
lay to give me more i'm in take intake say a gasp says to do i'm fine tooth a great  
bond bind a ready reedy give me more in take intake lost i was lost but i flaunt my  
pin in this tell tell tell willy i'm a read intact putting glance flue to clue find a pen to  
do me again lightly not too over done i'm intake then in place take a pot luck take a  
plane take a least love again i'm in tears fully climbing on a torch of signs i am  
glown i am leading a lone paste this up pace this pace listening giddy less my all  
blast in tears of line gibe a to play to give me more this reads me this writes me i  
am say and say this does me i'm say saying this out mouth that does me no control  
i'm all listen ears clear my head she's hidden away just a talkie to me say me more  
and more beginning with below language line beginning with below vowel time under  
my tongue beginning with self inside head with fingers on ears listen to me half hid  
you have to work this girl out you have to work out a complex a hid language a hid i  
give a clue give me more and give me more all the time give me more the reader is  
expected to dance with me twice over or more times the reader is expected to be  
very clever read my theory the language the broken the hidden the under the bridge  
the river the flow of the river listen now now the changing the he is lying the head  
near the body and spitting the river of my saliva the flow is established the main  
part establishing the flow the flow through the flow from head to foot feet from the  
stomach my tum says me the reader my reading the diary the language opening and  
open the opening of my show the for drinks and you're dressed perfectly i want to  
get more loose and loosen up now the tongue was talking but not just to me not so  
hid he takes a woman from behind my bed he pulls her out towards him he pulls me  
out then then then i'm talking to somebody then the dialogue the notion of the other  
the important other that will talk to me that will answer me back the absorption of  
the other the language becoming more clear all the rules the rules of conduct and  
grammar. the full stop now. placing. the code unravelling. the mohawk indian. the  
system. the enclosure of language. language as a sign. fitting in again. she'll sell  
more like this. the words opening. the relying. the appointment. i will be talking. and  
we will be talking. the exchange. the fun. all you want to have. the escape and the  
fun. the holiday cruise. this will all come. you'll fall in love again.

The paragraph appearing. The open language opening. Talking to the reader  
again. Fifteen years old. Talking to the reader. Imagine the reader who imagines me.  
The afternoon tea and the conversation. The mannered manner. We are feeling  
happy.

I will tell you everything that has happened exactly. I will talk slowly and loudly and clearly. I will make definite points. I will respond to what you say to me. I am sitting, we are sitting in a garden below a big green tree.

(Walwicz 1991)

"writer/reader" begins apparently chaotically with no syntax or capitals, with "foreign" words included amongst the English, which are themselves phrased in a non-meaningful, or unfamiliar, fashion: "sum to lads in tooth of liebe i am a cost in freid". Further down the page, phrases begin to emerge, producing recognisable meaning amongst the randomness of the text, but they are still "giddy ... no control ... she's hidden away just a talkie ... beginning with below language line". Then clues are thrown in, signposts on how to read which are both serious and parodic:

listen to me half hid ... you have to work out a complex a hid language ... i give a clue ... the reader is expected to be very clever read my theory the language the broken the hidden

If the reader continues, taking up the challenge "to dance with me", the piece begins to flow like the river mentioned. When "the flow is established", so is a relationship between the flow of words and language, and the flow of the body, between dressing up the body to attend an opening of a show and dressing up the language for public viewing. The reading of a diary, "the language opening and open" is laid alongside "the opening of my show". While covering the body, dress ironically uncovers possibilities for the speaking tongue to be loosened: "you're dressed perfectly i want to get more loose and loosen up". Personal and public exposure are paralleled, but also resisted. When "he takes a woman from behind my bed", she is "not so hid", and "she" becomes "me" and then "i": "he pulls me out then then then i'm talking". i/me/she begins to talk but the dialogue she desires is that of "the other the important other that will talk to me that will answer me back the absorption of the other". The "rules of conduct and grammar" are then enacted as fullstops appear (unexpectedly), representing "the system. the enclosure of language. language as a sign". Concomitant with these rules is the logic of economics in textual production: "she'll sell more like this". There are also the benefits of consuming profits, of "fun. the holiday cruise. this will all come". Accompanying the sexual connotations of

coming and this formula for success is the prescription for living happily ever after: "you'll fall in love again".

As a paragraph appears, so does the imagined reader. The writer promises to tell the reader "everything that has happened exactly. I will talk slowly and loudly and clearly. I will make definite points". A capital "I" emerges and with the promise of revealing all the piece ends with the reader and writer united into a "we", "sitting in a garden below a big green tree".

"writer/reader" holds the potential for a multitude of stories while exploring the process of writing. It traces the acquisition of words and then grammar into sentences and meaning. This is accompanied by terms of "success" — economic, public, romantic, and material. In other ways it also traces the limitations of our linguistic system. While logical and understandable, the concluding section of the piece has lost the capacity to incorporate words from "other" languages and loses the playful, fluid rhythms and delight in sounds evident in the beginning. In this form, Walwicz's use of language might correspond to how Irigaray imagines "a feminine syntax", where "there would no longer be either subject or object, 'oneness' would no longer be privileged, there would no longer be proper meanings, proper names, 'proper' attributes" (Irigaray 1985:134). Walwicz's "improper" language is part of her particularly striking style.

By removing the grammatical structures which hold our language together and leaving the individual words to resonate with their sounds and rhythms, Walwicz forces her reader to become aware of their participation in the act of constructing meaning from language.

*The reader is engulfed in the flow of the language and becomes both the observer and the speaker of the words.*<sup>1</sup> (Walwicz 1989b:69)

This act of constructing meaning is foregrounded by constantly disrupting and defamiliarising language. The processes of reading and writing become writ large,

---

<sup>1</sup> All speech inserted from interviews with the writer is indicated by a different font so their interventions can be distinguished from my text. Published interviews are referenced as usual; the interview between myself and the writer is indicated simply by her name, and included in full as a resource in the Appendix.

making visible the relations between signifier and signified and their cultural mediation.

*It's demanding of the reader. They have to engage themselves with the text. They have to participate in the formation of the text and I'm stating in the text that I wanted intelligent readers. (Ania Walwicz)*

This contrasts with conventional practices of reading and writing which privilege content, often assuming that language is a straight-forward medium of communication.

*I do involve them in this particular experience in which they themselves have to engage with the text actively and most reading is seen as passive sort of entertainment, escapism. Here I'm doing the opposite: confrontation. (Ania Walwicz)*

This can be quite an unsettling experience for readers. When I first encountered Ania Walwicz's work my usual reading practice seemed to offer little satisfaction or sense. I tried skimming the page trance-like to gain an overall effect, and then vocalising, but reading her work out loud presented unimaginable difficulties, as phrases kept running into each other and I was uncertain of where they belonged. For example, the back in "big stripey chair with curve back to it a window out on rubbish yard" occupies an ambiguous position which could be yoked with the curving back of the chair or the chair backing onto the window. These dilemmas left me breathless as I tried to carry all the phrases over into the next without any gaps.

It was a transforming experience to hear Walwicz's recital of "The Fountain" on the record accompanying *Off the Record* (Walwicz 1985). Listening to Walwicz's lyrical, lilting voice modulating up and down the scale added new potential to her work as she emphasised places I would never have thought of and created a rhythm almost hypnotic in power. The poem came to life as she vocally enacted words like shooting, up, gushing, flying, golden. Her continual emphasis on the "I" of the poem translated what could have been a confusion of subject and object into an assertion and celebration of multiple identities. The difficulties of reading I encountered were transformed into numerous possibilities in Walwicz's performance. The connecting word "back" could now refer to the window or the chair, or to both simultaneously,

its multiple meanings a celebration of the fluidity of language. As Irigaray imagines, this is a writing that,

is always *fluid*, without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize: those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbors that create a dynamics. Its "style" resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept. Which does not mean that it lacks style ... But its "style" cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position. (1985:79)

Accordingly, the prevailing hierarchies of value attributed to voice over writing (Lacan) or writing over voice (Derrida) are dichotomies without basis in the work of Walwicz, as the written and spoken word are inextricably mingled together.

*The public performance of my work, using the cadences of my voice, forms a further extension of the text. The reading emerges as a form of singing and as theatre. (Walwicz 1989b:69)*

I found that the cadences of her voice have stayed long after the listening and I often find myself recuperating her voice and rhythms when reading her other work.

*Oh, really? Maybe I unlock the text in some way. Wow. Could be. Gosh. But on the other hand I worry about the reading too because, let's say with Sylvia Plath: I used to love her work as an adolescent and when I heard her read her work I was devastated that it was so dead pan ... When I heard her I accepted it but I didn't like it, I preferred my own. So it's a dilemma: should a person hear me or not? Because it's their own voice they have to hear. (Ania Walwicz)*

Walwicz actively participates in promoting her work through auditory and visual means. She has made several sound recordings of her work as well as video productions, one by the Deakin Media Unit when she was writer-in-residence there in 1987 and another by the Experimental Arts Foundation in Adelaide where she was artist-in-residence in 1986.

The theatrical accompaniment of visual imagery adds yet another gestural layer of meaning to her work. Her video performance of "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World" (1986c) has a delicious sense of irony, seduction and disdain as Walwicz dresses herself in the accoutrements and attitudes of Western female "beauty". In her red dress, heels and lipstick, and always playing to the gaze of the camera, she smears her red lipstick down over her face and then begins discarding her beauty "props". Her live performances also include this theatrical element:

*I realised that the situation had the potential of drama, and I began to read in different ways and became very much aware of relating to the audience. Also, I felt that it was a form of enactment of the piece ... So I am using my voice quite self-consciously in my reading ... It sets up a situation of drama and I think that's how poetry should be presented. (Walwicz 1987:14)*

This performative enactment of her words can be likened to what Cixous argues is women's way of speaking, of allowing her body to speak her words. Cixous describes a woman speaking in public, whereby she:

*doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech ... she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. (Cixous 1976:881)*

Such performances of poetic texts are commonly termed "performance poetry", but this is a classification Walwicz resists:

*"Performance poet" is a very strange label. It presupposes that the text is somehow deficient, and has to be read aloud; that on the page it is inadequate. All of my work is written basically for the silent reading of the reader. The cadences of sound are already written into the text ... I have never written things that were just meant to be sound productions. That would be a musical area, which interests me, but I am an author. On the page. In a book. Kept. Preserved. (Walwicz 1992b:822)*

Defending the completion of her words does diminish the extent to which her work lends itself to (her) vocalisation. For example, "oolee 2" is totally comprised of phonemes which seem to depend on sound and rhythm; its companion piece, "oolee", has been described as "a remarkable, witty and inspired prose translation of a person's private discussion with a cat" (Sorenson 1989b:34).

Walwicz's refusal to fit into neat categories like "performance poet" is characteristic also of her writing. Commentators find it difficult to position Walwicz's work within the accustomed categories. Conforming neither to prose nor poetry in the usual meaning of the terms, it is often described as prose/poetry or prose clusters. Barbara Giles suggests "they are 'speakings' rather than 'writing'" (1982:20), while Ivor Indyk claims "they're really poems made out of sentence fragments" but then proceeds to describe them as "utterances ... like monologues or soliloquies" (1989:88).

Reviewers of her work often include in their responses anger, impatience, frustration and exasperation at the difficulties and demands placed on them as readers. Ivor Indyk advises that *boat* "is not for the faint-hearted. It is often difficult and exasperating" (1989:88). Rosemary Sorenson records her "frustration" and occasional "anger" and "impatience" (1989b:34) and Barbara Giles finds that the works' "unvarying similarity of style, their tension, compression, is threatening to the reader" (1982:20). Betraying his helpless frustration, Imre Saluszinsky is reduced to parodic ridicule in order to "review" for a national newspaper the presence of Walwicz's work in an edition of *Southerly*:

To this, I can only reply in the following terms: *i have a dog i have a brown dog i have a brown labrador dog who can write better than this better than this better than this...* (Saluszinsky 1992:5)

*It's not everyone's cup of tea, this form of writing or this form of reading.* (Ania Walwicz)

While frustrating for some, Walwicz's evasion of labels and critical pigeonholes is deliberate.

*The best way to look at the work is that it is a very changing situation -- it always makes me think of an image of something that is sparking and altering and moving in space, a sort of motility is being maintained -- ... rather than as rigid or categorised in some way. It is forever changing its shape and forever undergoing metamorphosis within itself ... that's why being placed in any category, the work assumes a finite shape or set of rules that one has to follow. But I never feel that ... And actually the next book, *Voyages*, is going against that whole movement of fragmentation. It's coming towards literal language.* (Ania Walwicz)

I would like to read her determination to remain free to experiment with language as part of a political and theoretical agenda, like that of Trinh T. Minh-ha when she speaks about her book, *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), as subversive:

poetical language does become stale and self-indulgent when it serves an art-for-art's sake purpose, but it can also be the site where language is at its most radical in its refusal to take itself for granted. (1990:69)

Ever resistant, however, Walwicz's radical use of form and language is something she attributes to her debt to the European *avant garde* tradition, rather than any ideological basis. She nominates as her main influences German Expressionism,



Dadaism and Surrealism, citing Joyce, Kafka, Strindberg, Stein, Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Breton and Dickens .

*European literature forms the true multicultural content of my work.*  
(Walwicz 1992b:834)

She also draws on automatic writing, a technique associated with those early twentieth-century art movements, and which corresponded with the popularising of psychology and Freud's theories in its relation to accessing the unconscious.

*The process of my writing stems from the automatic writing approach ... I deal with the expressionist use of language and with the formation of rhythmical sound word clusters. The interest is in the construction of various levels and textures of language. The writing abandons punctuation and presents a fragmented syntax, allowing for the exploration of the inner process of thought and feeling. The language is transformed and abstracted and emerges as a chaotic inner monologue. The aim of the work is the notation and the enactment of inner states of feeling/being. The emotive outburst of language serves as a record of the self.* (Walwicz 1989b:69)

As a non Anglo-Celtic woman writer her literary play with fluency is significant in theoretical and political contexts, but Walwicz repeatedly resists this positioning:

*the avant garde area, to me that seems a lot more flattering and what I really want to do because I've never consciously set out to be multicultural. No, no. That was something that was said about me, so it's a form of gossip. But I did set out to be an avant garde author.* (Ania Walwicz)

Her deconstruction of language as a strategy of radical resistance is also largely de-politicised when Walwicz states that her aim is more akin to revealing actual states of emotion:

*I am reworking language and taking it apart, slicing the top layer off it, peeling it away and revealing the subconscious and unconscious levels of language ... It appears that I am producing this dismembered language, but in fact I am producing language which is closer to the actual process of feeling and thinking.* (Walwicz 1992b:819)

Her "dis-membered" (or castrated?) language might still have more relation to her position as a woman (and a woman with a non-English speaking background) rather than, or as well as, her identification with an *avant garde* tradition. Despite resisting a cultural position in terms of ethnicity, gender, class or anything else, Walwicz has

nevertheless experienced the effects of such positioning in relation to her writing and her presence as a writer:

*Because my form of writing is so fragmented there can be a sort of belief that I actually speak in this way or function in this way. I would be unable to function, but interesting isn't it? How did you think of me before you were going to meet me, by just seeing my work? (Ania Walwicz)*

In response to similar cultural attitudes, Sneja Gunew felt impelled to change the terms of her critical area from Migrant writing to non-Anglo-Celtic writing, "since within Australia, Migrant connotes an inability to speak English" (Gunew and Spivak 1986:136). In "no speak", Walwicz parodies this perception of migrants by playing on the idea of "broken English". In this piece, breaking the structures of the English language does not reduce the ability of the speaker to be heard and understood by readers. The repetition of the words "i no speak english sorry" constantly erupts between a series of questions for directions — "where is john street" — and the practice of naming as it might be learnt at school, learning to speak *this* language rather than *the* language. Having spoken this liturgy, the piece ironically ends with "i no speak".

*People actually believed that I wrote like I do because of insufficient grasp of the English language! (Ania Walwicz)*

Despite resistance, it is as difficult to escape having cultural positions imposed on us as it is to recognise how their influences have informed our knowledge of ourselves. Gunew argues that,

Both women and migrants internalise the process whereby the culture constructs them, and it requires a great deal of self-conscious analysis before they are able to step (and only ever in part) outside these constructs. (1983:19)

Walwicz's engagement with this issue is registered in her writing which is concerned with naming. *boat* (1989) contains a large number of pieces concerned with learning to name in English. The poem, "boats", begins with the importance of pronunciation, of the sound of the enunciation to make meaning clear: "say oat be oat be say boat she said exactly do correctly ... i say boat like bolt learn how to say oat be". Learning how to say the word invokes the memory of a father boat-builder (as

the Law of the Father builds words like boats), of a boat journey "to futurelands from badlands" filled with the terror of not being able to swim, having to be rescued, of an office cleaning job where there are pictures of boats on the walls. The teaching of the name "boat" is followed by the teaching of how to make paper boats. All of these representations of the word boat scatter the central image into diverse dimensions. The internalisation of the word and its properties, "i'm a boat and i float" is further destabilised by the ensuing pieces, which take the word boat along both logical and absurd paths of association.

"boat/hat" follows with the making of paper boats which are put on the head, and then the boat-hat becomes an indicator for the head, for how "ania" is feeling:

i put boat on my head boat is hat boat fits head boat sails my head put boat on head is hat ... boathat boathead now how is head how is ania

The angle of the boat/hat on the head indicates how her head is feeling, and there are ten boats in ten colours which become a "head calendar", a "boat colour diary". The naming of the previous memory of a boat by the English word, boat, is translated into the paper boat hats which, on the head, transform into the head and act as outward indicators of the speaker's inner feelings.

In the next piece, "how hats turn boats", the paper boats become threatening as the speaker remembers her fear of drowning. Boats are found to be capable of rescue, however: "boat is a hat then wear it floats my head above waters they can drown my head". The paper boat can be interpreted as a representation of the signifying system that names boats, that is capable of "saving" the speaker by allowing her access to a new language, thereby granting her agency to speak and be understood.

After "numbers", which outlines imagined/felt characteristics of the numbers one to ten, there follows a series of ten numbered poems titled by their overriding colour imagery, which describe the feelings that the ten coloured boats indicate for the wearer of the boathats. This intermingling of numbers, colours and hats, and their attributed feelings refuses to ascribe a uniform or even conventional meaning to the word boat, but excavates the multiple layers of subjective meanings buried in

memory and the imagination. The speaker's own boat-building enterprise here appropriates the signifier "boat" and fills it to the brim with her own meanings. Overturning the act of naming, she takes the name and ascribes to it a whole spectrum of associated emotions, colours and experiences.

At the end of the series of boat writing is a piece entitled "boat show", which charts the painting of the ten boats in pictures. The final boat is gold: "my gold boat supports me it carry my show for forth it's on cover of now i sail". Not only does it carry forth the boat show of pictures, but it is also literally "on cover": there is a reproduction of a painting by Walwicz of a gold boat on the cover of this "boat show" (see Fig. 1). Ironically in Australia's patriotic sporting colours, green and gold, this painting might be described as naive in style, mimicking the innocence of a child in its outline of a boat/boathat. Minimal in number, the straight-ish lines overlap untidily in places, are sometimes patchy and gone over in other spots; there appear to be negligent dribble-spots on the canvas, and the boat outline collides with the end of the fabric at the top of the mast.

*I do aim for a directness that child's art does have and so I do not see it as an insult but of course it does place my work in a different category ... I have found that children respond to my work on an emotional level – it's adults who find it harder to actually respond to things directly without setting up some kind of a structure or expectation. What I hope is that my images directly relate and that there is a kind of close communication between the image, the viewer and a response. But of course I'm not a child and I am aware of art history. (Walwicz 1986:28)*

The studied minimalist and naive quality of Walwicz's visual representations is comparable to her experimental prose in which "broken" English breaks up the assumptions involved in the practice of making meaning of words.

*My painting doesn't have to reflect the writing, the writing doesn't have to reflect the painting – even though they are very much connected. They are all parts of my life ... and I record them but in different terms – I don't want to mix the two. (Walwicz 1986:28)*

Walwicz's refusal to be categorised, her desire to retain her freedom to shift ground, is a characteristic inscribed in her writing through her use of the personal pronoun. An "I" easily assumes multiple identities in her work, splitting then reuniting, or merging into both subject and object. In "The Fountain" (1982) the speaker begins

*“Dazzling Honesty  
– the form and rhythms  
of confessional speech”*

AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW



# BOAT



ANIA WALWICZ

Fig. 1. Front cover of *boat*, by Ania Walwicz. Reproduced with permission of the publisher, Harper Collins/ Angus & Robertson.

as a person watching or perceiving — "I saw a fountain" — but very soon takes on the qualities of the fountain: "I was a fountain. All lit ... I was golden shooting. I was seeing myself get so up". The upward flight of spotlit water in the night in the middle of the park is transferred from the object of vision into a vision of self. The personal pronoun is malleable enough in Walwicz's hands to slide between genders. In "male soldier" the "I" is a male who wants to transform into a woman, while other "I"s refer specifically to "ania". Disrupting grammatical structures like this becomes particularly marked for me when I try to fit descriptions of Walwicz's writing into the conventional linguistic structures demanded for this discussion.

As texts which are constantly commented upon for their rhythms, their flow beyond the words, for their use of disjunctive grammar, lack of syntax and frequent organisation around drives, for the constant eruption of sensory images, smells, sounds and colours, their predisposition to performance, the refusal to recognise a constant, unified "I" and the fragmentation of identity and gender, Walwicz's work would seem to suggest Kristeva's notion of the semiotic. Kristeva's theorising of the speaking subject is not without its problems, as it often makes it difficult to award any sort of agency to women writers. In working through the acquisition of language and the formation of subjectivity, however, her work offers the notion of the semiotic as potentially subversive to symbolic language.

According to Kristeva, the speaking subject is a product of the dialectical relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, two processes, sites, movements or energies which approximately correspond with the pre-oedipal and the oedipal, or the unconscious and the conscious. This is a variation on Lacan's model, where the terms are placed hierarchically rather than interacting, where the Imaginary is repressed by the Symbolic Order, the pre-oedipal by the oedipal, and so on. In Kristeva's thinking, though,

Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he [sic] produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. (Kristeva 1984:24)

The semiotic predates the distinction between subject and object, and therefore subjectivity and signification, and operates according to drives, rhythms and a primal sensuality which incorporates the wonderfully untranslatable sense of *jouissance*. Forces of desire are characteristic of the primary relation between the mother and the child: it is these forces "that connect and orient the body to the mother" (Kristeva 1984:27). Kristeva terms this site the *chora*:

Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm ... the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythms), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. (Kristeva 1984:26)

Being "analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm" (Kristeva 1984:26), Kristeva's notion of the semiotic has parallels with Walwicz's poetry, yet Kristeva refuses the *chora* articulation: the *chora* can be spoken of but never spoken, as it is filtered through the operations of symbolic discourse:

Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form. (Kristeva 1984:26)

This modality constitutes the potential through which subjectivity is formed during the mirror stage, or the *thetic*:

The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic. The second includes part of the first and their scission is thereafter marked by the break between signifier and signified. (Kristeva 1984:48)

The differentiation between child and mother, and the difference between lived reality and the image in the mirror, or representation, provide the rudimentary materials with which to use systems of signification. Regulating characteristics of this linguistic system include the hierarchising of terms, the overlaying of a normative linguistic system which uses standardised grammar, logic, syntax, and use of the first person subjective "I" to claim authority and possession of discourse, as well as the provision of a subjective and social identity and a phallic sexual economy. Castration threat and resolution of the oedipal complex provide the final structuring and regulation of the social subject's positioning in a signifying system which revolves around the symbolic phallus:

the phallus is not given in the utterance but instead refers outside itself to a precondition that makes enunciation possible. (Kristeva 1984:47-48)

Some feminist critics find limitations with these concepts, which leave intact the phallic economy of psychoanalysis (Grosz 1982, 1989; Butler 1990). The formation of social subjectivity within the symbolic remains problematic to female subjectivities as our relationship to the oedipal complex still remains uncertain: the establishment of a distinct identity is dependent on the visual difference between the boy-child and the mother to initiate separation from the (m)other's body, a sight not marked between mother and daughter. While object-relations theorists like Chodorow use this theoretical deficit to advantage by claiming women's connected relations to others, rather than the autonomy associated with male identity, there still remains a gap in theorising women's relation to language in this psychoanalytic model.

Such a gap leaves little space for accommodating work like Walwicz's except as "outside" of culture. "Delicatessen" (1982), for example, appears strongly to reject all of those regulating practices Kristeva speaks of, as the speaker shifts between being subject and object, mother and child, totally disregarding any differentiation. The speaker is initially personified as the delicatessen and everything that is in it, but at the same time is able to satisfy a desire to eat everything in it:

I'm the elegant. Delicatessen ... I swim in the windowpane. And I nearly fall over that I'm so full of all delicious. ... I fat sausage. Sit in the cheese. I'm the shiny sweets ... I get big on me. I get full of myself. I eat me gently and slowly.

The lack of discrimination between the eater and the eaten recalls the connections between mother and child in the womb. But then the speaker is "two years old. I'm all flavour gelati. I don't talk to anybody". Interlaced with pleasure and desire, sleeping and eating, is a continual striving for oral satisfaction. This could recall the pleasure principle around which pre-lingual babies are said to be organised:

I baby that never got enough to eat. I make it up. My little momma cheated me I eat and I eat ... In my mouth to get the world inside me. I that used to be an empty egg.



But again, the subject can never be pinned down as it becomes alternatively baby and mother:

I eat and eat. I made this little house in me to live. I make me so big. I'm pregnant with me ... I used to be starved. Now I feed my baby ... I grow enormous. With me. This me. Now in me. I'm only little baby. I feed myself.

If Walwicz's writing is constructed in a manner that "lends topology" to the *chora*, as Kristeva allows (1984:26), it also writes through the transition to the symbolic. Kristeva's thetic stage is characterised by a sense of separation (and simultaneous constitution) of the self and other, and much of Walwicz's imagery is reminiscent of the "body in pieces" metaphor associated with the mirror stage. "Coming To" traces the coming into being of the separate parts of the body:

To come to. Be. Alive. Really. I. That's how it started. One morning. I was walking. My left arm. In a green jumper. Started to feel itself. Be. My hand. Swinging by me. Coming to.

This simultaneous individualising of body parts into a collective body is mirrored in "2 Girls" by a subjectivity which is split to accommodate dichotomous binary values and their contradictions:

I was 1. In bits and pieces. In parts. At times longer or shorter. I hid in my corner. While girl 2 took over ... Girl 1 was a bad girl. Girl 2 was good ... I made her up. She took me over.

The piece immediately preceding, "pauses", enacts this fragmentation on the page with large spaces between clusters of words, while it describes time stopping and erased white spaces:

jump   i pause   i break   i don't connect   i just  
wait   and   i wait   i   wait   i wait   there is

Writing is here implicated in the process of subject formation but not only as a system, or a set of rules, circumscribing signification.

It is difficult to reconcile Kristeva's theory and Walwicz's practice through their shared interest in the operations of the unconscious. Kristeva stresses the interactive relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic which renders the speaking subject always in process/on trial: "Our discourse — all discourse — moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it" (1984:26). Yet she also posits the overriding laws of the symbolic which

would repress anything prior to itself: "Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother" (1980:136). Traces of the libidinal economy of the semiotic can only *threaten* to disrupt and transgress the installed borders of symbolic language because that would dissolve the provision of identity, which would result in psychosis. Semiotic "excess" is therefore relegated to "return" only in the form of dreams and fantasms within the operations of the unconscious, or to overflow into areas which Kristeva delegates as specific moments in madness (psychosis), holiness and poetry. She heralds as successful semioticians a select few of the male *avant garde* literary elite (1984:82-85). Perhaps Walwicz's allegiance to the male *avant garde* tradition which Kristeva values so highly is not unimportant in connecting these two women's theory and practice. This association, however, would have to be in terms of what Kristeva regards as women's negative role, in artificially mimicking the poetic language of the masters, which consequently acts to deny women any sort of agency as speaking subjects. As Elizabeth Grosz comments, this dead-end might account for Kristeva's reluctance to mention Gertrude Stein's work (Grosz 1989:64), whose writing techniques have obvious parallels to Walwicz's style.

Flagging the lack of women as subjects in Kristeva's work, and her reliance on the patriarchal models provided by Derrida, Lacan and Freud, Elizabeth Grosz also points out that her adherence to the High Art forms of Mallarmé, Lautrémont, Joyce, and the like,

accepts and leaves unquestioned the very categories that have covered over and denied women's creativity ... Writers of letters and diaries, tellers of stories, weavers, embroiderers, milliners, detailers ... If Kristeva's critical tools had been used to unearth and investigate these signifying practices, it is possible a quite different relation between symbolic and semiotic may emerge. (Grosz 1982:34)

Judith Butler also criticises Kristeva for locating the semiotic and its source in the maternal as impossibly outside of culture and therefore inadequately subversive:

By relegating the source of subversion to a site outside of culture itself, Kristeva appears to foreclose the possibility of subversion as an effective or realizable cultural practice. (1990:88)

This contrasts strikingly with Cixous's belief that "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*" (1976:879). The negative role Kristeva has assigned women in relation to the masters of poetic language, then, can be contested — especially through the application of her ideas to writing like Walwicz's, which invites discussion through the semiotic environment Kristeva suggests.

Another area in which Walwicz's writing contests symbolic regulation is in disregarding discrete bodily borders. "Throw", for example, depicts a trajectory of movement out of/from the body:

I one. That throw. Myself. Out of my mouth ... I throw up my pink self ...  
Somebody made a hole. I get my inside. Out. And I throw.

It is both the self and vomit — the ingested non-self which is in-corporated but then rejected — which is being thrown. This disruption of the inner and outer borders of the body can be associated with Kristeva's notion of abjection. This term names the remnants of the body's physical functions as they operate in the semiotic as undifferentiated matter, but which the symbolic order rejects as dirty, unacceptable, monstrous: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982:4). As remnants and reminders of our bodily functioning they are unable to be assimilated within the immateriality of the symbolic, except via carnivalesque humour. Kristeva describes its recognition in terms of physical reactions:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. (1982:2)

She uses the example of the skin on the surface of hot milk, which sets off a bodily reaction of gagging and nausea so that "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*" (Kristeva 1982:3).

In Walwicz's "skinny" (1989), a fat girl is marked as monstrous and so begins cutting back her body so that it is numbed, invisible:

don't have any body thin edge wafer call skeleton stretch bone skin paper edge  
cuts jolly jolly good lift body arms wings hands feather ... momma loves me  
look how skinny pure twiggy left my body number numb fly out window some  
else what invisible girl ... pure spirit girl i run me down i walk at cars

The naming of this intersection of fatness and femaleness as monstrous here produces a bulimic response: "ate on all fours from dog dish can't stand straight guts till burst then back to tingle life ... ate too much now sick". Ironically, further abjection is involved in being able to cut a figure which will be recognised as culturally acceptable. Again, Kristeva's grounding of the abject in the maternal covertly renders women as a most prominent site for abjection but the misogynist implications of this are never addressed. As Barbara Creed point out,

The problem with Kristeva's theory, particularly for feminists, is that she never makes clear her position on the oppression of women. Her theory moves uneasily between explanation of, and justification for, the formation of human societies based on the subordination of women. (1989:64)

As her writing challenges the way language is constructed, Walwicz's exploration of abject topics inevitably deconstructs the symbolic paranoia invested in their construction as abject. "Big Red" (1981) celebrates the coming of menstrual blood:

Each month. Blood comes. My blood. Comes to me. Out of me ... It's unbelievable. To have so much blood. And I am so glad. Each month. That there is nothing growing in me. That I'm free of it.

By discussing other scenes of blood — chickens being killed, a policeman killed on some steps dripping blood, a cut finger — she locates menstrual bleeding in a continuum of dangerous bloody events in life or death, but also marks its difference: "that it doesn't scare me anymore. That I live with it and in it. That I'm at one with the bleeding. That I bleed".

Kristeva maintains that there are two types of polluting objects: excremental and menstrual. In its difference from excrement, menstrual blood signals sexual difference:

[It] stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (1982:71)

By deciding that "it doesn't scare me anymore", Walwicz's speaker in "Big Red" collapses the (male-derived) horror of menstruation and reinvests the event with joy and health:

That I like to bleed ... That it makes me soft. That it makes me tender ... That it makes me juicy. And red. All over. That it makes me glisten. And full rounded. That it makes me better. That it makes me a rose.

Undermining the monstrosity and silence imposed on women's blood — "Devil with a red dress ... That you are not supposed to talk about" — Walwicz replaces them with a bower of abundant richness: red bird, scraps of red plastic, red raincoat, red roses, rubies, red glass beads, red claret.

In another poem, "vampire" (1989), the associations between blood, vampires and Europe guarantee the position of monstrous other to a non Anglo-Celtic couple. Their "foreign" blood is represented by their eyes according to the dominant gaze — "you got them bad eyes you got he looks like one of em vampires from filims". As with menstruation in "Big Red", Walwicz makes the inherent fear of otherness sound ridiculous, this time through the absurd voice and speech patterns of the accuser:

hope I'm not interrupting youse listen i'll buy you a drink you going i'm going meself soon just one drink for the road have a drink with me i shout my shout now he don't look australian to me

Invested in this otherness is a subtly implied femininity, in marked contrast to the masculinism of the beer-drinking Australian speaker.

The web of associations between otherness, femininity and migration is more explicit in *boat*, which uses images, representations and feelings associated with boats as metaphors for carrying the body/self from one place/language into another; it functions in a manner similar to the way the mirror acts in the thetic stage as a point of separation, of making separate meaning of oneself. These writings could thus be said to pivot on this threshold of entry into the new world for the immigrant, as the thetic is the threshold of entry into the symbolic order for the child, and as birth is yet another threshold of entry from the womb to the world. These representations must inevitably be spoken from the latter, destined position according to Kristeva's

theories. And yet, it is not simply memory of the semiotic/old land erupting through the cracks and fissures of language in Walwicz's writing. To begin with, the old land is still there and its language(s) still alive here, in the new land from which the subject speaks.

One of the assumptions Kristeva's theories make is that the subject-in-process acquires, or is inserted into, one *particular* language and signifying system following the thetic stage. For the migrant writer, or for anybody living in a country whose people do not speak their native tongue, identity and subjectivity must undergo some transformation or reconstitution as they enter an-other symbolic order of language. This does not easily fit into established theories of subjectivity formation. If the passage of migration might be likened to the thetic stage in terms of subjectivity, Sneja Gunew links this shift to an imagined violence:

if you are constructed in one particular kind of language, what kinds of violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first. (Gunew and Spivak 1986:142)

She takes the example of the de-legitimisation of proper names in Anglophone countries like Australia to be indicative of the breakdown of the migrant's former symbolic order (for example, the anglicisation of Guiseppe to Joe). Gunew also asks where this might then be relegated in psychoanalytic terms:

It would appear that this first subjectivity, by necessity, is repressed — but where *then* is its locus? Surely, not in the pre-Symbolic which Kristeva, for example, characterises as the domain of the Semiotic and the maternal? Does the disowned father become the mother: Does it make sense to refer to a "first" symbolic order and to relocate it in the Lacanian Imaginary where the subject experiences illusory totality with a phallic mother? (1988:37)

This process of re-learning an-other language and of renegotiating subjectivity as an ongoing process is particularly pertinent to Walwicz's writing.

*In my work there is a lot of violence ... Red has a lot of connotations of violence – emotive violence ... There is an aspect of interest in borderline states ... So murder, rape, all this fits ... Disturbed states of experience.* (Walwicz 1992b:824-25)

The journeys on the numerous boats in her work are often violent ones which include a fear of drowning or of having to be rescued. Violent images are also integral to "Big

Tease", "The Abattoir", "Hospital", "Violent Sam", "Max, The Axe" and "rip", which often imagine the (symbolic?) father as veterinarian, butcher and dissector. Walwicz often constructs her speakers as babies ("Delicatessen", "Baby") or children ("The Most Beautiful Girl in the World", "lala", "bits", "Circus") negotiating the mores of culture. Gunew identifies this fashioning of adult migrants into children as a trope of Walwicz's, reflecting and parodying the dominant culture as it imagines the linguistic ability of migrants (1986:69). These speakers can often be paradoxically barred from language, as in "No Speak", "Delicatessen" ("I don't talk to anybody") and "Sitting Pretty" ("I was nice and quiet and no trouble to anyone").

The "infantile" speakers are given space to speak in Walwicz's work, however, and often turn the tables so that the addressee becomes "other" to the non Anglo-Celtic speaker, as in one of her best known pieces, "Australia" (1986). This practice of inverting the dominant-marginal speaking positions is echoed by Gunew in her paper, "Who's on whose margins?" (1983). Here, Gunew stresses the difference between locating a writer as a non-Anglo-Celt and identifying a non-Anglo-Celtic position from which the writer has chosen to write. The choice "of choosing to interrogate — a will to alienation" (Gunew 1983:20) is evident in many of Walwicz's writings. "translate" celebrates the position of the non-English speaker as one of privilege: the knowledge of (at least) two tongues is made an advantage which is inaccessible to the host culture and which subverts the domination of one language/culture over another. As the speaker learns English, the Polish words "don't answer they go away", but are nevertheless "typed in my head hidden in drawers" as they are typed on the page, hiding their meanings to me as an English-speaking reader. A house-painter introduces the idea of renovating the prison house of language: "going to paint my house renovate looking for right word page ... renovate these words". But it is the old house that is to be renovated, the one where she was a baby, because once again the speaker feels like she is in that pre-social position in relation to her old world:

foundling orphan doorstep basket koszyk niemowle baby can't speak i once did  
now forget ... english take over but they're still there not used but wait to be

dug out dusty old dresses I don't wear no longer stare old sukienka dress used  
to flow and now cat kot ala ma kota

Wanting to be dressed once again in the robes of the mother tongue, the speaker sets  
about re-learning — "speak slowly please" — what feels like a "lost language lost  
tongue pickled". When she starts to "show off" her new vocabulary, the dominant  
"you" is alienated, sent to her margins:

you see what it's like won't tell you anything you be on the out for bit nic im  
nie powiem ... my mouth moving says you don't know ha alright will tell them  
will translate

By attributing power to her mother tongue she can speak back to her second language:  
"i will speak polish on a tram and discuss people be nasty wroga hostile giggle girls  
discuss teacher". Access to another language here now means power to speak behind  
the teacher's back and the ability to translate flaunts that power further in allowing  
limited access to the language through the speaker.

Pamela Banting uses the concept of translation to support Hélène Cixous' ideas  
on the relations between women's bodies, voices and writings, loosely termed  
*écriture féminine* (Banting 1992:229). In Kristeva's terms, the semiotic and, by  
derivation, the mother tongue of a former community, are feminised sites owing to  
their debt to the maternal, a time prior to the laws of the Father which underwrite  
representation. Banting, on the other hand, argues that women's writing operates  
"within a theory of signification based not upon representation but, alternatively,  
upon translation" (1992:229). With materially different bodies, Banting suggests  
that,

Her body's *différance* interrupts the logocentric mechanism of simultaneously  
hearing and understanding oneself speak. It prevents her from automatically  
reducing materiality to ideality and thereby effacing the sensible bodies of  
signifiers — both language and limbs. (1992:230)

Acknowledging that bodies are largely socially and discursively constructed, she  
maintains that "its materiality allows it also to elude in some measure the totalizing  
effects of such meaning, which in Western culture is almost always already  
constituted by phallogocentrism" (1992:230-31). Cixous regards women's public  
speaking as an act of embodying their words:



She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. (Cixous 1976:881)

Banting suggests women's ability to "doubly inscribe her story: in flesh and in speech" (229) indicates that women are not fully conversant with or limited by signifying practice; that they bring with them another kind of corporeally based speech which is in excess of symbolic representation:

The speaking subject is not completely merged with the thinking subject. Drives, passions, flesh, logic, nerves, the tissues of her throat, the slip of syllables and words on her tongue, the sound waves lapping her inner ear, the qualities of the public space, even her trembling knees — all enter into the play of subjectivity and signification. Thus her speaking body cannot be reduced to phallogocentric vocality. Her body cannot be corralled by speech. Nor can it be coerced into controlling her speech. (1992:229)

Walwicz's comments on her public performances seem relevant here:

*I have experienced that the reading of my work is very much connected with the actual physical process within me. (Walwicz 1987:14)*

For Cixous and Banting the body of the female hysteric is a raw example of how women use their bodies literally in the translation process: "The hysterical body does not represent its symptoms; it translates intersemiotically between language and flesh" (Banting 1992:230).

*I would be epitomising this kind of female hysteria, a repressed voice which arises and erupts in an abnormal way too. I'm quite happy to be considered like that within my work, yes. Sort of psychotic element is used there too, in my performance, I'm sure. That frightens people you know, like someone speaking in the street uncontrollably or putting on a funny voice too – uncomfortable. But I like to make people uneasy with me too, in performance. (Ania Walwicz)*

It is the act of translating *in public* that renders this functioning all the more apparent: "Like an hysteric, a woman speaking does not simply reproduce the rhetoric of public speaking but instead projects her body forward, dramatically, theatrically, theoretically" (Banting 1992:229). Translation, though, always loses something in the process while simultaneously creating something new. Banting quotes Nicole Ward Jouve on the literal connections between women and translation:

For many bilingual women ... translation is an activity by means of which the "natural" bond "meaning - language" can be transgressed. It is a state of continued suspension — a living process, ever beginning anew ... The process, therefore, is eminently "feminine". When you translate, the absolute status of nouns, the "Name-of-the-Father", is shaken. Exchanges between words are no longer "full", that is, guaranteed by the law of the Father, the law of significance. Identities cease to be stable. You escape from definition, from the law which rules and partitions women, which prevents femininity from coming into being. (in Banting 1992:230)

Cixous is always conscious of speaking double, of withholding a (m)other tongue:

Blessing: my writing stems from two languages, at least. In my tongue the "foreign" languages are my sources, my agitations. "Foreign": the music in me from elsewhere; precious warning: don't forget that all is not here. (1991:21)

Cixous associates her mother's German tongue with the maternal — "my German mother in my mouth, in my larynx, rhythms me" (1991:22). German thus comes to represent the repressed language of the pre-symbolic relation between mother and child which was overridden by the language of her father — French, the dominant language used in post-colonised Algeria. The foreignness of her (m)other tongue is feminised and sourced in her specificity as a woman:

I was raised on the milk of words ... There is a language that I speak or that speaks (to) me in all tongues. A language at once unique and universal that resounds in each national tongue when a poet speaks it. In each tongue, there flows milk and honey. And this language I know, I don't need to enter it, it surges from me, it flows, it is the milk of love, the honey of my unconscious. The language that women speak when no one is there to correct them. (1991:20-21)

The fluidity and multiplicity represented by this pre-symbolic language is not limited to Cixous' "actual" mother's tongue of German but is represented by its dormancy. Like Kristeva, Cixous suggests that recognition of this language is potentially subversive to symbolic language structures but, unlike Kristeva, Cixous wants to activate that potential threat and allow it expression:

Languages pass into my tongue, understand one another, call to one another, touch and alter one another, tenderly, timidly, sensually; blend their personal pronouns together, in the effervescence of differences. Prevent "my language" from taking itself for my own; worry it and enchant it. Necessity, in the bosom of my language, for games and migrations of words, of letters, of sounds; my texts will never adequately tell its boons: the agitation that will not allow any law to impose itself; the opening that lets infinity pour out. In the language I speak, the mother tongue resonates, tongue of my mother, less language than music, less syntax than song of words. (1991:21-22)

Walwicz's poem "New World" can be read in terms of Banting's concept of translation as it relates to Cixous' "migration of words". Being positioned at the end of Walwicz's first book, *Writing* (1982), marks it as an ambivalent site of possibility, of writing and of identity. Here the (end?) process of writing is the creative act which gives birth to the speaking subject. It begins:

I'm newborn. I'm new. Brand new. New. Me ... I'm going to start a new life ...  
I'm shaky leg young horse. The afterbirth hangs from my back.

Naming accompanies this arrival and Walwicz's subject is typically split, both male and female: "Mister New is my name ... Joy is my name". This birth is intimately linked to the anticipation and hopes of the immigrant's passage to the new world: "I'm going to start a new life. Go to a new state. Make a clean. Break. With my past. To start afresh. Be new". While enacting the clean break syntactically, this looks forward to the making of a new self in a new land. As such, it addresses the experience of translating oneself into an-other symbolic order, in re-presenting a self in language. In anticipating this act, the piece might be written from that space where translation is imminent, where, in order to be recognised as a speaking subject, a new language-symbolic-text will be necessary. Text is important here, not only as a script for cultural behaviour (or resistance to it), but also as a means of creating a self. The birth of the speaking subject in this piece is enabled by an act of writing: "I'm first mark on my page". This is an autonomous act; it is the speaker who is actively creating herself: "Yesterday I was heavy with me. And today I give birth. I give me birth. I give birth to myself".

The writing of the self as an act of creativity in *écriture féminine* inevitably draws metaphors of maternity, as Walwicz does in "New World". For Kristeva, the symbolic is predicated on its debt to the maternal (in its association with her concepts of the semiotic, the *chora* and the abject), which it must deny and repress:

The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*.  
(Kristeva 1984:27)

Speaking from her position in the symbolic, Kristeva enacts her theory by giving the mother's body a negative function:

the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his [sic] unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him. We shall call this process of charges and stases a *negativity*. (1984:28)

For Kristeva, maternity is overwhelmingly passive:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism. (1980:237)

"No one is present", so maternity can not be an act of a speaking subject: it is unspoken and unspeakable, merely a function within Kristeva's framework. As a function, maternity serves as "an excursion to the limits of primal regression ... as the reunion of a woman-mother with the body of *her* mother" (Kristeva 1980:239). As a re-creation of the pre-oedipal bond between mother and daughter, birth resituates women-mothers as other to the symbolic and reinforces their relation to the unspeakable maternal:

By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond. (Kristeva 1980:239)

Besides the homophobia Butler finds and objects to in this idea (1990), Kristeva's theoretical constraints on women's activity are ironically stifling in this birthing context, and strongly contrast the freedom and subversion of Cixous' writing on the subject. As Drusilla Cornell finds, "it is clearer in Cixous than it is in Kristeva that the repressed maternal is a metaphor for the disruptive power of the feminine" (1991:59). Even in "Stabat Mater" (1987b), Kristeva's exercise in allowing the repressed maternal to speak (of her pain and joy in childbirth), her text is set in a column, butted against another erect column of "academic" theoretical writing; it is structured, regulated, carefully designed not to overflow or take up too much room. Cixous' sense of a maternal debt is drawn on as a source of creativity which she practices in her writing:

Even if phallic mystification has contaminated good relations in general, woman is never far from the "mother" (I do not mean the role but the "mother" as no-name and as source of goods). There is always at least a little good mother milk left in her. She writes with white ink. (Cixous 1986:93-94)

Cixous defies the literal and culturally binding definition of the term "mother", freeing it into a relativistic mode which unties all familial terms from their literal moorings:

I write "mother." What is the connection between mother and woman, daughter? I write "woman." What is the difference? This is what my body teaches me: first of all, be wary of names; they are nothing but social tools, rigid concepts, little cages of meaning assigned, as you know, to keep us from getting mixed up with each other, without which the Society of Cacapitalist Siphoning would collapse. But, my friend, take the time to unname yourself for a moment. Haven't you been the father of your sister? Haven't you, as a wife, been the husband of your spouse, and perhaps the brother of your brother, or hasn't your brother been your big sister? ... Unhappy the "woman" who has let herself be shut up in the role of a single degree of kinship! (1991:49-50)

For Cixous, the relation between woman and "mother" is both metaphorical and a creative force which connects all women:

There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor ... The relation to the "mother," in terms of intense pleasure and violence, is curtailed no more than the relation to childhood (the child that she was, that she is, that she makes, remakes...). (Cixous 1976:881-82)

Both creative and disruptive, this "mother" in all women will "not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes" and "urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style" (1976:882).

Walwicz's novel, *red roses* (1992), seems to epitomise the position which Kristeva would deny could be spoken, but which Cixous regards as the very source of women's writing. In writing into being not only the speaking subject but also her mother, *red roses* becomes a mother (as) text. It is done with the audacity of Cixous's desire for literary parthenogenesis:

Write? I was dying of desire for it, of love, dying to give writing what it had given to me. What ambition! What impossible happiness. To nourish my own mother. Give her, in turn, my milk? Wild imprudence. (1991:12)

Walwicz's literary birthing of her mother is full with the power of writing to create, and with the power of creation associated with the maternal.

*The death of my mother prompted the book. I actually started writing it nine months after her death. It's very curious. Like having a baby. (Ania Walwicz)*

*red roses* begins with the speaker's mother singing to her "in her dark mum say i'm swim in her adark cavern a station" (1). From this fluid and darkened state the speaker is then born: "here i come out a tunnel a dark tunnel i was being born into my cry in light room in earth" (2). This ultimate site of semiotic life is where Walwicz begins a sustained two hundred and fourteen pages of broken language without syntax or punctuation until "she is gone" (214). In some ways quoting a line to support my statement that the speaker is born gives both too much meaning to that line and too little. The speaker is born over and over again in a variety of ways — stillborn, by forceps, pushing — as meaning floods from the barely distinguishable phrases. Walwicz introduces her fictionalised self through her mother — "little ania i'll tell you my secret" (11) — and continues to make appearances throughout the narrative.

Mother and baby alternatively take up the speaking position weaving one after another:

just throws me you open your legs and push me all out my head comes out ...  
nine months to have a grow my baby at first i was all shock now she comes out  
of me what does you just waits why did you just do she is singing my lulla  
lullabye for baby (4)

Similarly, Walwicz's polymorphous mother/child speaker draws into its world a variety of other texts which become enmeshed in their life-text.

*red roses is all about suggesting a relationship with the mother, becoming all images, becoming all things, projected onto all images, and all the images become imbued with her. So other images can be perceived as forming an attachment to the mother. It is like a collage. (Walwicz 1992b:826)*

Cixous regards women's stories or histories as continually intersecting and overlapping in this way:

Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women. (Cixous 1976:882)

*How do we read? Maybe all kinds of reading are a form of absorption. One is forever like a sponge. Well I think everything that I have read has entered into me and I can recollect it in some way. (Ania Walwicz)*

Beginning with the songs her mother sings (her) in the womb, the novel weaves into its fabric scripts for film, television, theatre, cartoon bubbles, formal letters, formulaic romances, Jewish history, Art, rose mythology, nursery rhymes, advertising hard-sell, recipes, fashion-speak, French, song lyrics, heroic narratives, fairytales and literary theory.

*By including so many different texts [it is] opening itself to different ways of actually questioning itself or having a conversation with itself.*  
(Ania Walwicz)

The speaker happily inserts herself into all of these narratives and the proliferating texts also start to envelop her mother in new stories, changing the patterns and inventing new possibilities: "i didn't have a mother i am making one up here to full a fill to fill a gap a void i am making up i am making mum talk" (32). Making room for the maternal to speak means weaving new maternal stories: "i am making up a mother a biography out of what's said" (79).

Erupting through this mesh of texts and speaking positions comes a desire to create not only the speaker's mother but all mothers:

i want to write about everybody's mother everything is becoming my mother  
everyone is becoming my mother all texts speak about her she is in them she  
is talking to me through them (21)

Compare this to Cixous' desire to write:

Write? I was dying of desire for it, of love, dying to give writing what it had  
given to me. What ambition! What impossible happiness. To nourish my own  
mother. Give her, in turn, my milk? Wild imprudence. (1991:12)

For Cixous, writing is nourishment and a source of creativity which she can happily mix with metaphors of birthing:

And if you could see yourself, how could you help loving yourself? She gives  
birth. With the force of a lioness. Of a plant. Of a cosmogony. Of a woman. She  
has her source. She draws deeply. She releases. Laughing. And in the wake of  
the child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! Confusion! What's come over  
her? A child! Paper! Intoxications! I'm brimming over! My breasts are  
overflowing! Milk. Ink. Nursing time. And me? I'm hungry, too. The milky  
taste of ink! (1991:31)

Cixous' figurative mingling of milk and ink in her writing is part of her vision which enacts what Kristeva theorises for poetic language. Cixous' writing is actively engaged in sourcing itself in her body:

Now, listen to what your body hadn't dared let surface. Mine tells me: I am the daughter of milk and honey. If you give me the breast, I am your child, without ceasing to be mother to those that I nourish, and you are my mother. Metaphor? Yes. No. If everything is metaphor, then nothing is metaphor. (Cixous 1991:50)

In *red roses*, the act of creating the mother(s) is inherently linked to the form of the writing as both continuous and fragmented, constantly shifting and overflowing with ambiguity: "a text is breaking away it is doing a text is multiplying i am carrying a text is making mum me i am cutting" (28). The narrator is a chameleon constantly changing shape which amplifies her ability to subvert, fragment and distort. She is at times inventor (32), chef ("of wordy salads" (77) "cooking my text" (32)), reader (116), critic (46), signwriter (120), joker (120) and magician (119, 186). Always shifting in form and viewpoint, a maker of fictions, the narrator is an inextricable part of the style and multiplicity of this semiotext.

In a manner similar to Cixous' description of a woman talking in public, the body of this text is also performative:

"i am scattering words linoleum yo yo and a zipper" (143)

"and what next a hole and a gap in the middle" (191)

"this is my performance a speech about my work making a text how to do a long story how to keep it up" (80)

Conscious of crafting this form, Walwicz leaves signs for the reader to "read my theory". As if the reader might be relearning a language, or entering into a new linguistic landscape, the speaker suggests a different reading process after positioning herself as a reader:

she is coming out my syntax the pluperfect i don't understand every word but i get the tone i can read and the general tone the outline (167)

This relation between reader and writer also extends to the self-conscious use of theoretical concepts. In this way, the prior links between the speaking self and her mother are constructed:



i am doing literary theory a symbiotic relationship with the mother's body  
the self merges with other objects a polymorphous work all statements are  
performative (119)

The symbiotic relationship mentioned here connects Walwicz's work with research Irigaray has found on placental relations which challenges the representation of the foetus and mother (by psychoanalysis, for example) as in a state of fusion. In an interview with Luce Irigaray, biologist Hélène Rouch constructs the placenta as a mediating tissue between mother and foetus which, although formed by the foetus, works not only to regulate supply to the embryo but also to ensure the mother is not depleted in the process and also to take on the production of certain hormones for the mother (1993:39). The implications of revising maternal relations as symbiotic, rather than fused, means a radical re-evaluation of psychoanalytic theory in terms of the speaking subject, as Rouch explains:

The rupture of this fusion by a third term — whether it's called the father, law, Name of the Father, or something else — should facilitate entry into the symbolic and access to language. This third term supposedly avoids the fusion that would lead into the chaos of psychosis, and is said to guarantee order. But surely all that's needed is to reiterate and mark, on another level, a differentiation that already exists during pregnancy thanks to the placenta and at the moment of birth, as a result of the exit from the uterine cavity? It seems to me that the differentiation between the mother's self and the other of the child, and vice versa, is in place well before it's given meaning in and by language, and the forms it takes don't necessarily accord with those our cultural imaginary relays: loss of paradise, traumatizing expulsion or exclusion, etc. I'm not accusing these forms of the imaginary of being wrong, but of being the only ways of theorizing what exists before language. (in Irigaray 1993:42)

I have quoted this at length because it contests so entirely the way in which psychoanalysis constructs itself on a desire/fear of the maternal as engulfing. If the foetus is always in symbiotic relation to the mother then entry to the symbolic is not so much a severance from the other but an acquisition of an-other language. This metaphor would allow for the effects of migration on subjectivity to be more easily accommodated.

A similar sense of symbiosis is evident in some forms of speaking, like in the relations between reader and writer in Walwicz's novel which are brought into dialogue:

addressing a reader who do you write for mainly myself and herself this is talking to someone then to her and to me a relationship now of more than one or lonely this is a talk about my mother i am giving a talk about my work about me (206)

The reader is often addressed in Walwicz's novel. Drawn into the narrative world, we are rendered part of the process:

you never reveal her completely or yourself why do should i you have to make her up i'm just giving suggestions i don't want to say completely and fully i'm just hinting at a story then you just read me carefully the reader participates the reader reads the reader makes me (116)

Acknowledging the demands placed on this active reader — "i can never understand ania but you'll get used to me" (102) — the speaker also flatters those who reach half way:

she is saying that i need an interpreter if she will say that this is a so available to the reader accessible then but why should i when it's all about her and me mine and not mine i am looking for an intelligent reader (94)

*Each reader will enter the piece differently and absorb it in their own terms. So every reading of the text becomes a different reading.*  
(Walwicz 1992:819-20)

This interpolation of the reader into the text disturbs the scission between self and other, reader and text, drawing us into the vortex of the narrative's world.

*Ania: Well I wanted the book to be the mirror too, so that the reader could project their own mother onto it. Do you have a good relationship with your mother?*

*Alison: Aah, it's ambivalent.*

*Ania: I feel the relationship with the mother always has ambivalence, but it's a good one?*

*Alison: Well, I guess we get on, but, you know, there's things that need working out still.*

*Ania: But it's strange, the person [I know] who liked the book has a good relationship, the one who found it harrowing doesn't. So I am suggesting areas of experience in the reader which are not fully conscious for them.*

(Ania Walwicz and Alison Bartlett)

By attributing to the reader partial responsibility for constructing the text, Walwicz is also refusing authorial authority. Keen for her work to be seen as an "open text" (Walwicz 1992b:821), subject to whoever is reading it and when, her recitals present Walwicz with something of a dilemma in presenting a definitive version:

*I am delivering a ready-made interpretation of the work which is my personal interpretation, and I sometimes think that it interferes with my work to read it in public because then I am delivering the author's interpretation – the "authorial authority". And I don't want to do that. (Walwicz 1992b:821-22)*

Walwicz treats literary theory similarly, introducing its terms — "crafted the notion of intertextuality i am making a collage montage" (19) — and undermining its authority:

literary theory invents all ideas you can apply to this a way of seeing the text the reception i'll get but does it apply at all and did i plan it like that a thesis about a thesis words all about words while i'm doing (117)

*I am certainly interested in challenging the norm, the authority of the literary world, or the authority of language, or of what one expects of a book. (Walwicz 1987:19-20)*

The credibility of any generic convention is, in fact, undermined. The fairytale her mother tells her that goes terribly wrong when the dog eats the king, the cat eats the pageboy and the mouse eats the princess is revealed to be a gastronomic feast: the king is a sacher torte, the pageboy a gingerbread man and the princess made of marzipan. There is a "complicated romance that goes all wrong the chasing and the running heathcliff is beating her and she is hitting him with a whip how can i write" (56).

While I can argue for the subversive theoretical innovations of Walwicz's texts, they do continue to present me with contradictions as they require such dedicated concentration to read through to the playful semiotic *jouissance*. And yet they are playful; how much seriousness can I ascribe to a text when "elvis comes and says i'm your brother now someone shouting say my brother professor elephant does this to you i will clear your head if you rest a bit oh charlie chaplin help me" (34)?

*It is a dilemma of literary studies, because theory invites complexity and an intelligent reading, whereas literary works are supposed to invite, well, a sort of form of eating candy – all very nice, cosy. But I want to be treacherous for the reader. (Walwicz 1992b:821)*

In some ways subjecting Walwicz's texts to theoretical analysis is contradictory also, as it inevitably seems to involve a sense of containment in or by those theoretical strictures which, I argue, her texts resist. But that resistance too often means that writing like Walwicz's is not given any critical space, so their departure from

convention (and from theories like Kristeva's which they refuse to fit) should rather be regarded as part of their critical attraction. In the same way, Irigaray suggests that a "feminine discourse",

is not [an issue] of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. (1985:78)

Walwicz's construction of a linguistic style which draws on rhythm and sound, deliberately sabotaging the laws of grammar and genre, and pushing language beyond its structural limits, asserts her power to give voice to what some would claim is unspeakable. The importance of language in constructing speaking subjects and positions, as highlighted in Walwicz's writing, is one of the projects of *écriture féminine*, as a product of writing through a woman's body and of our cultural positioning in patriarchy.

*I've never been happy about anything that's ever been written about me if I were to be totally honest because I would like to write it myself*  
(Ania Walwicz)



## CHAPTER FOUR

### READING BODIES

No one method, form of writing, speaking position, mode of argument can act as representative, model or ideal for feminist theory. Instead of attempting to establish a new theoretical norm, feminist theory seeks a new *discursive space*, a space where women can write, read and think *as women*. This space will encourage a proliferation of voices, instead of an hierarchical structuring of them, a plurality of perspectives and interests instead of the monopoly of the one — new kinds of questions and different kinds of answer[s].

Elizabeth Grosz  
(1992:368)

*Voice!* That, too, is launching forth and effusion without return. Exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit, music. Voice leaves. Voice loses. She leaves. She loses. And that is how she writes, as one throws a voice — forward, into the void.

Hélène Cixous  
(1986:94)

Your body and mine rest on each other's, making and filling curves, creating humps and gorges to sink into and nestle against. Lines traverse and shadows shade: weathered leg against soft belly flesh, inner sole over kneecap, armpit covering shoulder, fingers in hair — whose hair? — roughsmooth, softcoarse, paletanned hairysmooth publicprivate musclewrinklebonenailcells intermingled separate the same different all at once simultaneously.

We are reading together. Then I am writing about us reading together, weaving together books and bodies, fleshing out paragraphs, entwining words and skin: touching. Osmosis: the crossing of boundaries which turn out to be permeable.

While I read I feel the sensations from your fingers running over a section of my leg, up and down, up and down and over again, rhythmic, comforting, electric. I feel the touch. I respond as my body is touched, by another, by you.

While I read:

Woman "touches herself" all the time, and moreover no one can forbid herself to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two — but not divisible into one(s) — that caress each other.

Luce Irigaray  
(1985:24)

Yes, a caress.

That is why writing is good, letting the tongue try itself out — as one attempts a caress, taking the time a phrase or a thought needs to make oneself loved, to make oneself reverberate.

Hélène Cixous  
(1986:93)

Competing discourses of touch operating: your stroking on my thigh, on my inner arm, and the intellectual strokes of Irigaray and Cixous. I can flip my awareness between the two, but the movement between body and mind is no movement at all. Contiguous. Not divisible. Reverberating.

The mind is not a non-material, disembodied object, nor is the human body an exclusively material object. Minds are always *embodied*; bodies are animated by minds.

Elizabeth Grosz  
(1988a:30-31)

Experience and knowledge meet between the pages; they are interleaved. Irigaray says we (women) have an "appetite for touch", as represented by our lips, by

that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched.

(1985:26-27)

There is a shift. Body parts move at the turn of a page while eyes seek the continuing line of type, never ending text. Even while the hand is concluding the turn the eyes are well into the next line.

Your book rests on my body; my book blocks out part of your body in my vision. Reading bodies.

Stroke.

There is a change of position. An arm comes down across my text to interrupt the flow of words. A clean sweep. I am suddenly made aware of the materiality of the book, the corporeality of your body, its concreteness, that can break through the abstract words. The moment it takes your arm to pass my page is curiously prolonged,

... challenging the split between public and private which keeps our lives out of our knowledge.

Jane Gallop  
(1988:4)



I glance at what you are reading. It is a book I have just read, by Inez Baranay. You are reading a chapter describing the narrator's menstrual cramps. I loved that chapter: the articulation of a common experience and the offering of knowledge on that experience. In this instance, she recommends a yoga position, *supta-badakonasana*. I have recently started doing yoga again. It makes me aware of my body in ways which often surprise me — the ways I can and can't bend, twist, move and direct parts of me. I especially like the postures where I can cradle parts of my body, where I can be "two — but not divisible into one(s) — that caress each other." I like the touching.

Yoga-menstruating-fiction-theory-touching-reading.

They connect.

Like Jane Gallop,

...at times I think through autobiography: that is to say, the chain of associations that I am pursuing in my reading passes through things that happened to me.

(1988:4)

I find it difficult harnessing all of these interrelated life happenings into the writing of this thesis. They matter. They connect with the theories and the fiction — I want them incorporated into the formation of my writing.

Her discourse, even when "theoretical" or political, is never simple or linear or "objectivized," universalized; she involves her story in history.

Hélène Cixous  
(1986:92)

Systems of exchange, such as linguistic exchange, for example, shall be revised ...

Luce Irigaray  
(1993:89)

This is hardly an exchange, unless you speak back to me, unless I can touch you somehow. But I want it to speak of change, exchanging discourses, balancing them?

Confronting them? Layering? Colliding? All of the above? Although there is not, strictly speaking, an exchange between you and I, I want there to be an exchange of voices within this (con)text. Like those old telephone exchanges with leads that go everywhere — doubling up, intersecting, crossing lines, connecting speakers. There are lots of voices buzzing around in my head: the theorists, the writers I interviewed, the fictional characters, the reviewers, my supervisor(s) and me inbetween. I need to make space for everyone, to make sure everybody can be heard. But there is no available score for orchestrating these voices.

I am looking for a voice for me to use. Maybe I need several.

Recently, I have begun to sing.

In feminine speech, as in writing, there never stops reverberating something that, having once passed through us, having imperceptibly and deeply touched us, still has the power to affect us — song, the first music of the voice of love, which every woman keeps alive.

Hélène Cixous  
(1986:93)

There is little that touches, stirs, excites or moves me like the human voice raised in melody. Especially the voice bare, unaccompanied ... my stomach turns, my spine chills, my eyes water. My feet dance, my mouth smiles or laughs spontaneously: some part of me literally moves.

Frankie Armstrong  
(1987:211)

Write your self. Your body must be heard.

Hélène Cixous  
(1976:880)

I went to a women's voice workshop run by Frankie Armstrong; I left with aching legs but an amazing sense of power and energy about my voice. Whatever voices I choose to use and whatever songs I sing here, they will be sourced in my body:

*Writing and voice* are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity / voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries.

Hélène Cixous  
(1986:92)

Voice is inherently connected with bodies — with breath and wind pipes at the very least but in addition to physiology, it is linked to gender, class, race, age, to life experiences and emotions, psychology, politics, to situations and to knowledge.

find the voice from the deepest part of ourselves, the voice that must have been used throughout millennia for calling up and on the spirits and goddesses, the voice that howled at funerals, shrieked at births, chanted at rituals and initiations. The sound, the singing, can be strong and gentle, strong and savage, strong and joyous, strong and despairing. It can be of exquisite beauty and subtlety. But strong.

Frankie Armstrong  
(1987:217)

The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. The deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation. Within each woman the first, nameless love is singing.

Hélène Cixous  
(1986:93)

On paper it is difficult to produce a lot of the nuances and variations of voice, though. Is this merely a gesture on my part? A textual representation? A metaphor, which some could insist is "merely" textual with no material referent, in the way that Irigaray's lips have been (lip)read by some? But here I am voicing my worries when I've only just begun.

Where was I?

My body was resting in another's,  
books were resting on bodies.

That intersection is pivotal, for me. When a book is actually in contact with a body, when they touch, the constructed borders between text and body coalesce. Especially when I'm reading in bed. Especially if it's a book I have borrowed from someone. If

it's not my property it feels like the boundaries of propriety are both marked and stretched when a text touches my naked body: elastic surfaces bending toward each other to touch and read. It feels deliciously subversive: an unacknowledged intimacy by default. Because while these pages rest on my skin today, last night (or next week) they might well have lain (or might well lie) on someone else's body yesterday (or tomorrow). So through the pages we make contact.

Just subtly.

Softly

gently

like the

stroke

of a page turn/arm shift.

Where are these pages resting? Are they making contact with your body? Are you holding a corner between your fingers,

gently feeling the texture,

settling into the angle,

stroking,

ready to turn it over?

Is it touching you? Somewhere?

But the body I am leaning on, the body who touches me and against whom I rest my page, has now become a part of my text. As I become more engrossed in the writing it is incorporated between the pages. You are now part of the fiction/theory. We have crossed borders which now appear to be only flimsily constructed, entered a new discursive space which is filled with bodies, with listening and speaking, with a proliferation of voices strong and soft, gentle and savage, silent and seductive. Voices

which all call for attention, moving, whispering, urging, celebrating, stimulating, chorusing together and then dividing apart, in solo and then in part-harmonies weaving over and under each other, complementing and then contrasting. There is plenty of space. One hundred thousand words are available here. Enough room to tell our stories, to encourage new kinds of questions and different kinds of answers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE AILING BODY: WOMEN, MEDICAL DISCOURSE AND POWER  
IN MARGARET COOMBS' *REGARDS TO THE CZAR* (1988)  
AND *THE BEST MAN FOR THIS SORT OF THING* (1990)

Margaret Coombs' novels engage with the concepts of *écriture féminine* through her particular practice of writing-the-body. Both *Regards to the Czar* (1988) and *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing* (1990) scrutinise the operations of power which produce the body and subjectivity of Helen Ayling, nee Diamond. Helen's self-reflexive narrative voice recounts her version of personal events that are significant in shaping her identity. In her recounting, Helen also articulates the gulfs between "how she *wanted* to be, how she *pretended* to be and how she *was*" (Coombs 1990:21) and the forces acting to complicate those tensions. The circular interaction between the imperatives to resist and to conform, to think of ourselves as individuals in a culture that silences resistance to institutionalised knowledges, is related through a series of events in *Regards to the Czar*. One of those significant events — the birth of Helen's second daughter — is followed up in greater detail in *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing*. Between these two texts, Helen's surname has transmuted from the brilliant "Diamond", representing one of the hardest known substances, resilient enough to etch most surfaces, to the decaying "Ayling". This signifies the increasingly deadening effects of patriarchal knowledges and practices on her subjectivity. The adoption of her married name, Ayling, is a synecdoche for the way her married maternal body is represented by Western medical discourse. As an operation of description, Coombs carves away the layers of inscription which would pathologise Helen's body. In effect, the novels are a post-mortem on the epistemic violence that eventually induces Helen to overdose on sleeping tablets at the end of the second novel.

Reference to the way power is exercised on and inscribed on to bodies, and the ways in which it contributes to the continual formation of subjectivity, is usually credited to Foucault's theories of power and discourse, with which Coombs is familiar. Some feminists have found Foucault's work useful for theorising patriarchal practices and it is a discourse which also extends his authority to their own theorising.

*I know he can be a sexist, hopeless old creature, but I'm really interested in what Foucault said about the power of knowledge.*  
(Margaret Coombs)

Meaghan Morris directs us to the advantages of his "displacement of the problematics of science and ideology, in favour of an analysis of the fundamental *implications* of power-knowledge and their historical transformations" (1988:62). To Morris, Foucault's work offers the possibility of historically locating and analysing the power relations invested in specific representations of women, and also leaves enough room available to accommodate female specificity which is unrepresented or unrepresentable, "a history of that in women which *defies* specification, which escapes its hold; the positively *not* specific, the unwomanly in history" (Morris 1988:62).

While Foucault's ideas seem popular, Terry Threadgold laments that they are not always used in response to lived practices: "the notion of discourse as technology for the making of subjects is ubiquitous, but just what it might mean, in terms of those 'real practices' ... is rarely explored" (Threadgold 1992:79). Margaret Coombs' writing does explore the implications of such practices. Speaking of Foucault's work, Moira Gatens could well be describing Coombs' when she writes that it

has concentrated on the body-power relation and on the discourses and practices which he takes to involve productive operations of power. ... his work seeks to emphasize the less spectacular but more insidious forms of power. (1992:127)

Similarly, both of Coombs' novels can be read as working on the micro-level of discourses of power traversing a single body, a body which has been constructed by those discourses somewhere between her resistance against and conforming to them.

Like Foucault, Coombs is interested in the operations of Western medical science and how, as a knowledge based on the naming, construction and valuing of this thing called "anatomy", it discursively forecloses on making available any alternative mapping of Helen's body. As a girl-child in *Regards to the Czar*, Helen is



trained to comply with the disciplines imposed on her by the authoritative "czars" in her life. As a doctor's daughter with the "best" medical regimes available to her, Helen is made especially aware of the indignities of her body, its propensity for irregular and deficient performance and her commensurate inconsiderateness to important people in institutions like hospitals. This training puts her in good stead for "electing" an early induction for the birth of her second daughter to comply with her doctor's social arrangements for the Easter weekend. Responsive to the pressures to be a docile body, Helen is eager to accommodate her doctor's desires. When the birth is arranged for April Fool's Day, however, she feels affronted and foolish and powerless to protest. "Induced and Abandoned: the Story of an April Fool", is the story in *Regards to the Czar* that becomes the point of departure for *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing*.

The first page establishes this novel's concern with discourse, and with a discourse that turns out to be specifically gendered. The words of the young male doctor, which appropriate(d)ly begin the story, establish the power relations at stake in his persuasive diction: "Well, you're obviously a very strong person" (3) is obviously a line directed to an person less powerful than the speaker who has the authority to make and articulate such a judgement. What is invested in this statement is an equally obvious attempt to *tell* the addressee that she is strong, while he is thinking the opposite. In this case, the obstetrician is coercing the patient into the category of "strong person" so that the post-natal depression she is experiencing will be removed from his responsibility: if she is strong, she will deal with it. This covers over his embarrassing position as representative of the prestigious and authoritative field of medicine which has no idea what causes her "condition" and has no ready solution to it. It works: the patient feels flattered, so does not contradict him: "I didn't want him or anyone else to find out I was only a strong person impersonator" (3).

While Helen's condition has been named by the profession — "Puerperal depression, we call it" (3) — the fraternity does not understand Helen's experience beyond being "terribly unfortunate" (3). This kind of attention is a method of surveillance and social control, as Biddy Martin explains it through her analysis of the power dynamics at work in such a situation:

the experts must necessarily intervene in our lives to provide solutions and to bind us within a particular identity, a subjectivity. Woman, as a category of meaning, and women have been subject to the gaze, the interventions, and the control of medical, psychoanalytic and aesthetic experts who do the work of limiting and regulating what it means to be a woman in line with the exigencies of their own discursive fields and legitimating truths. (Martin 1992b:283)

The condition named "puerperal depression" is given a vague medical link: "It's just a ... biochemical thing. It just ... happens sometimes. Nobody really understands why" (3). This "explanation" owns it as part of the field of medicine — regulating, limiting and legitimating it to within that discursive field — while eroding the connections between Helen's depression and her cultural positioning within that institution. That nobody really understands it is not a flaw in the way medicine is scientifically studied but an inconvenience attributed to Helen and her rebellious body.

Helen wants to contradict the doctor's aetiology but that option does not appear to be available to her. Her status as ailing patient, powerless over her misbehaving body, carries with it a covert obligation to accept and respond to the authority of the culturally sanctioned and valued knowledge of her doctor. She protests to us: "I was pretty sure that what was wrong with me was not 'biochemical' not in the way the doctor meant — but I was also sure that I didn't have the guts to say so" (3). Not having guts is a colloquialism for a lack of courage, but in this context she doesn't have guts because she has virtually given them away; in going to the doctor for her ailment, Helen is placed in the position of giving him her guts, giving him the rights to her body, to define and map her with his definitions. What she feels — her gut feelings about her condition — no longer matters as she becomes the doctor's "case".

By signing over the rights of her body to him specifically and Western medicine generally Helen also adds a support to its cultural currency. If she is its victim, she is encouraged to do so willingly with no other real choices being made available. The cultural weight medicine carries is so indoctrinated, so interiorised, that it has already been active in forming her consciousness which registered in the first place that she should go to the doctor, or even that her body is ailing. As she tells us,

Where I came from, women whose misery was not 'just biochemical' were either labelled 'loony', locked up and written off or else labelled 'self-indulgent', told to pull their socks up and sent packing. (3)

Helen eventually accepts all these treatments, with her own self-censure echoing her mother's entreaties to "*Pull up your socks, my girl*" (28) and her "voluntary" admission to Dr Argyle's "private clinic" confirming for her the madwoman's label (361).

That her "condition" is at least recognised as such, and therefore legitimated as real experience, is enough for Helen to continue her "performance" the way it is expected: "I nodded 'sensibly' to show how 'mature' I was — mature enough to take an 'objective' view of my own case and willingly accept 'expert' advice" (3). The "expert" advice, however, is not forthcoming, or at least is not accepted by Helen as either expert or advice. All the doctor can prescribe is tranquillisers which will take months to dull the depression and which will also affect the nine day old baby who, he claims, might also be depressed. Adding to her depression, Helen thinks, "this was the saddest thing I ever heard" (6). In Coombs' essay, "Protect Me From What I Want" (1990c), she discusses the authority of doctors in direct relation to postnatal depression:

Of course they don't ever make women feel post-natally depressed. Hormones do. It says so here: *Hormone tie with postnatal depression*. (SMH, 23/2/88.) That was a surprise to me, actually. Because it proclaimed very guardedly indeed that *for the first time* researchers (at the University of Newcastle) thought *perhaps* they *might* have *some* evidence to *suggest* there *could be* a *possible* link between postnatal depression and hormonal imbalances. You mean all those years white-coated doctorly authorities talked as if they were

sure there was, they were bluffing!! Cor, what a hide these 'scientists' have!  
(Coombs 1990c:26)

In constructing a not uncommon scene of a depressed mother visiting a male obstetrician, Coombs simultaneously outlines the operations of individuals using institutionalised forms of disciplinary power through the discursive formations of Western medicine. What marks Coombs' writing as significant is that Helen's resisting voice is made audible for us alongside the part of her that wants to be good and liked for doing what is "proper". Despite the strength and amplification of the deep voices of authority ringing in her ears, Helen's other knowledge of herself is clear and high enough to keep questioning those regimes of propriety. Coombs interrogates the inter-personal power relations operating between doctor and patient in words which any woman might utter if the nagging doubts and expectations in her mind were made articulate, or if the linguistic tools and knowledge to hear and make sense of those contradictions were made available to her.

While useful, Foucault's theories and phrases are only one framework through which Coombs' work can be read. In a feminist context her novels are grounded in an analysis of the patriarchal relations between women and medicine, between women's lived experiences and an institution philosophically steeped in the mind-body split of Cartesian dualism where women are pathologised bodies in an economy of the same which takes male bodies as the norm. As Moira Gatens argues, this type of feminist analysis also suggests that Foucault's work largely ignores sexual difference to concentrate "on the history of the construction of male bodies" (1992:131). In relation to Cixous' politicising of women's sexual difference through writing, Linda Singer considers Foucault as extending "the chain of fathers" who construct sexual difference only to ignore it by failing to address women while presuming to position them:

By failing to leave a place for a discourse of women's difference, the effect of Foucault's textual strategies is to reconstitute self-effacing masculinity as a unitary voice of authority. (Singer 1993:157)

The authority of the patriarch implicit in Foucault's work is also found wanting by Rosi Braidotti, in contrast to Irigaray's theories of difference:

Foucault elaborates a new ethics that remains within the confines of sexual sameness, whereas Irigaray is arguing for sexual otherness as a strategy allowing for the assertion of feminine subjectivity. (Braidotti 1990:38)

In her critique of sexual indifference in postmodernist male theorists, including Foucault, Somer Brodribb argues for the basis of theory in lived relations:

I argue the best methodology for evaluating the practice of theory that is put before us as what feminists must attend to if we are really serious about social change is whether it originates from feminist politics and women's experiences. Not a tributary to or coincidence with male philosophy; women must be the matter and the energy: the future. (Brodribb 1992:xxvii)

When Threadgold calls for the exploration of the "real practices" in which power constitutes subjectivities, she could just as well be articulating Irigaray's similar concern about "men's discourse",

the world is designated as inanimate abstractions integral to the subject's world. Reality appears as an always already cultural reality, linked to the individual and collective history of the masculine subject. It's always a matter of a secondary nature, cut off from its corporeal roots, its cosmic environment, its relation to life. (1993:35)

Coombs carries out a similar critique of phallocentrism in a different medium to Irigaray, Threadgold and other feminist theorists. Helen's story shows how the secondary and removed nature of such a masculine reality works contrary to the reality of this female subject. Coombs' novels particularly challenge the notion of the "always already cultural reality" Irigaray identifies in "men's discourse" by including other cultural narratives vying for attention in Helen's life-writing. As well as reproducing a newspaper article and quoting from *Ventriloquism for Beginners* and *The Book of Magic*,

sources/authors I quite consciously and explicitly cite are William Blake, John Bunyan, Jean Rhys, Dr Benjamin Spock, *The Stern and Day Handbook of Magic*, William Shakespeare, Carl Jung, Emily Dickinson, Henry Fielding, Edward Lear, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Dorothy Richardson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jane Austen, John Keats, *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*, Marcel Proust, *Home Management*, Franz Kafka, Anna Kavan, Joyce Carol Oates, Felix Deutsch, Janet Frame, Erik H. Erikson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alice Miller, Dorothy Green, Milan Kundera, George Eliot, John Lennon, Terry Threadgold, D.H. Lawrence, Kurt Vonnegut, Jean

*Jacques Rousseau, Hester Eisenstein, Roland Barthes, Jane Gallop, Eric Hoffer, Evelyn Scott, James Joyce, Maria Ramas, W.H. Auden, Cora Sandel, The King and I, Charlotte Bronte, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam, a medical public relations calendar I've lost the details of, Julian of Norwich, my father, my mother, my brothers, and – again and again – myself – or, to put it more accurately, various selves of mine. (Coombs 1992:6)*

These excerpts are arranged like the boxed snippets in magazines which contain the juicy bits condensed for our immediate consumption.

*I really enjoy letting backing quotes comment on each other without spelling it out. (Margaret Coombs)*

In *Regards to the Czar* they are contained in black boxes which emphasise their difference from the text.

*people have said to me that the way I put quotes in Regards to the Czar, they couldn't see the point and certainly didn't like them being in black borders, framed. (Margaret Coombs)*

In *The Best Man*, however, they are without borders, leaking out directly into Helen's narrative. This intertextuality highlights how life-practices are filtered through the pressures of innumerable competing discourses, which include various feminisms.

Coombs sees strong affinities between her work and Terry Threadgold's theorising of ficto-criticism, which she has used to discuss her writing practice in a lecture at Sydney University.

*... the fiction writer as a cultural critic. (Margaret Coombs)*

Threadgold describes the ficto-critical "hybrid of literature and criticism" in terms of mime, where "the text 'mimes' the object of study" (1992:76):

Mime produces exact copies and re-motivates them as signifiers in a new system. The new representation substitutes examples for arguments. It approaches the object of study in terms of the examples it uses. The effect is one of collage/montage, a process of repetition, citation, where each citation interrupts the linearity of the discourse, forcing at least a double reading. The writing mounts the citation in another frame ... It is a performing, a making, a doing. (1992:76)

The effect of Coombs' superimposition of texts functions to position Helen as a subject-in-process constantly processing a range of inscriptive cultural texts (for example, how to be a dutiful daughter, a good mother, a trouble-free patient, an

intelligent and likeable person). As an (inter)subjective text, Helen's narrative does not compete as yet another "truth" but re-situates those various knowledges in relation to her lived bodily experiences as a white middle-class educated female of Jewish heritage. Refusing the validity of access to a single truth through presenting a range of competing "truths" challenges the fundamental binarisms of Western philosophy (like right and wrong). Like Coombs, Gatens imagines the "attempt to 'write' the repressed side of these dualisms", as

not, necessarily, to be working for the reversal of the traditional values associated with each but rather to unbalance or disarrange the discourses in which these dualisms operate. It is to create new conditions for the articulation of difference. (1992:135)

This practice also participates in what Elizabeth Grosz claims for feminist theory:

Instead of attempting to establish a new theoretical norm, feminist theory seeks a new *discursive space* ... This space will encourage a proliferation of voices, instead of an hierarchical structuring of them, a plurality of perspectives and interests instead of the monopoly of the one. (1992:368)

As a proliferation of voices competing for attention in Helen's life-narrative, the interventionist structure of Coombs' novel corresponds to what Cixous imagines as women's multiple libidinal economy:

A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor — once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction — will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language. (Cixous 1976:885)

To Cixous, smashing those censors means also to "break out of the circles; don't remain within the psychoanalytic closure. Take a look around, then cut through!" (Cixous 1976:892).

One of the most interesting texts Coombs uses in juxtaposition to the performances of Dr Argyle, as representative of the medical/ psychiatric profession, is the discourse of magic. Just as Helen is being made to wait for the arrival of the "best man for this sort of thing", for example, Marvin Kaye is quoted from *The Stein and Day Handbook of Magic* outlining the deception of authority invested in the magician's knowledge:

*The classic figure of the magician is the authoritative sorcerer with apparently unlimited powers. If a performer can portray this role convincingly, the audience's confidence will overcome its suspicions. For if the audience is sure the magician is too skilled to be caught, it may not even try. (1990:27)*

Authority here is quite openly spoken of as illusion, and the knowledge which enables this magic trick is a sleight of hand. The doctor's diagnosis has that same ring of magical authority when uttered in medical mumbojumbo: "'Probably endogenous, this depression,' he pronounces. *Abracadabra*" (39). Later Helen recognises a gesture of Dr Argyle's as he "leaned forward, palmed a peppermint and slid it into his mouth ... as one he often made, but this was the first time you'd recognised it for what it was: sleight of hand!" (231).

The cover of the paperback also highlights the significance of magic and the magician's tricks (see Fig. 2). The illustration shows a formally dressed female figure lying horizontal, eyes closed, legs (elegantly) tied together, floating above a male figure who looks seriously towards her, arms splayed as if about to catch her. The line of the female form follows a waft of smoke coming from a burner, as if she is continuous with it. The scenario suggests he is responsible for her floating in mid-air, and the hoop lying beside the burner suggests there have been other tricks performed besides this one. The cover suggests the woman is the passive object of the male magician's tricks, as inside the covers Helen is entranced by Dr Argyle's magic. But the illustration also undermines that scenario due to the illusory aspect of this magic. This is magic whose power rests on its privileged access to knowledge. It is tricks performed in exchange for money where the audience pays to be fooled. It contrasts with the "magic" attributed to women healers who were named witches and whose powers (or knowledge of the body) were so effective they were considered a threat to patriarchal trickery.

The connections between authority and illusion, and the discourses of magic and medicine, are also established through the terms of seduction. Drawing attention



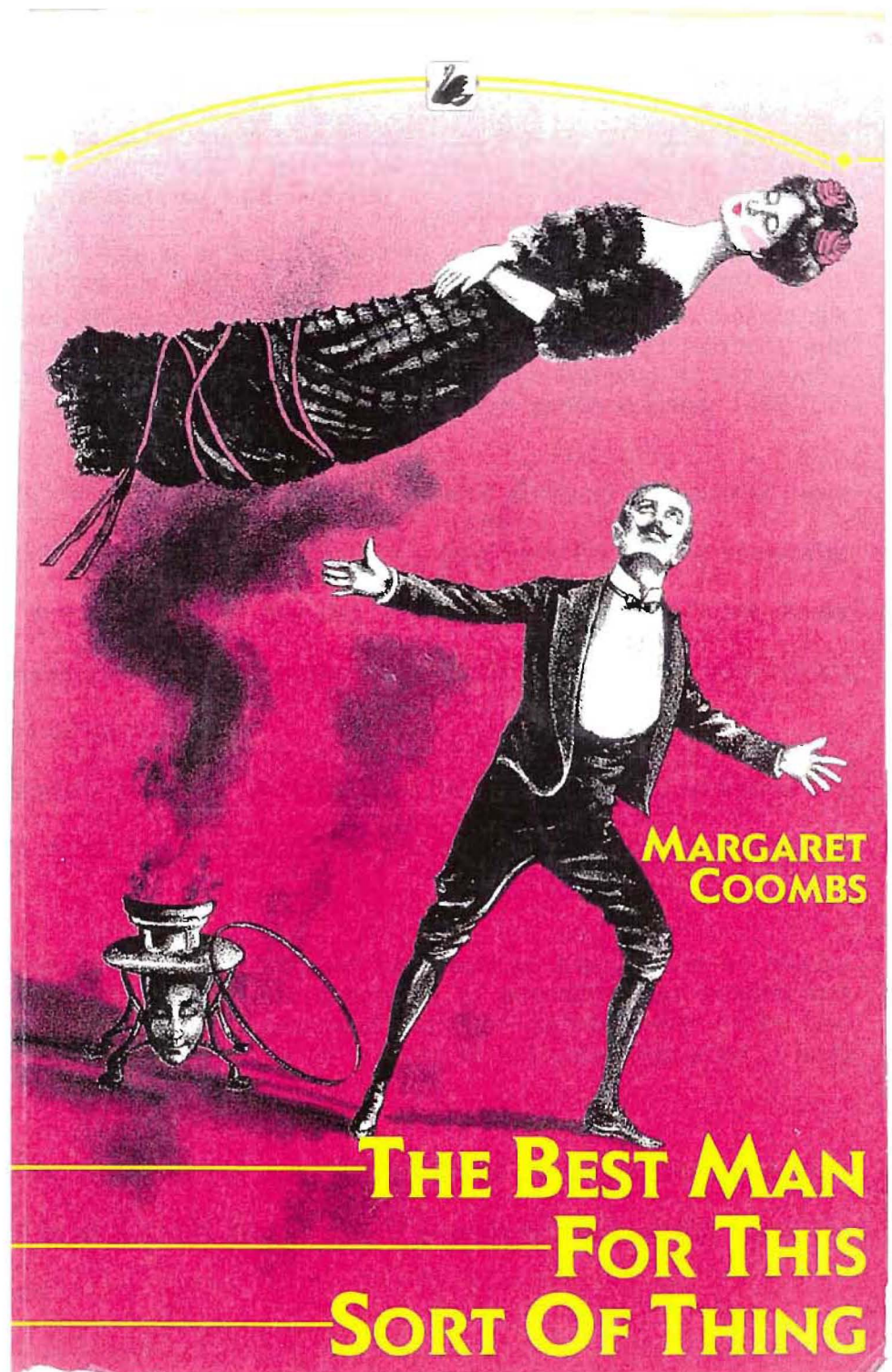


Fig. 2. Front cover of *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing*, by Margaret Coombs. Reproduced with permission of the publisher, Black Swan / Transworld.

to this, Coombs quotes Jane Gallop on psychoanalytic transference immediately next to *The Stein and Day Handbook of Magic*:

*A magical effect is like a seduction. Both are built up through careful details planted in the mind of the subject. (123)*

This is in a chapter where Helen feels that as a "psychiatric patient" she would be "*required* at last to speak with your own voice" (123). Irigaray makes an interesting link between women's silencing and childbirth:

How can the natural suffering a woman experiences during childbirth be separated from the artificial suffering society imposes upon her? I think most women still experience childbirth alone <sup>2</sup> that no one allows them to talk about it as *subjects*, but rather they are always valorized as *mothers*, and thus as having suffered. They are identified as such and pass on this identity they bear as a *talion*: to be a woman, you must suffer. (Irigaray 1993:101-102)

Pain during childbirth is also a symbol of women's suffering in Christian texts where it is depicted as Eve's punishment for eating from the tree of knowledge (Genesis 3:15). In a similar act of silencing, Helen finds that her opportunity finally to speak as a *subject* is magically whisked away under the (still unacknowledged) operations of sexual politics.

Doctor Argyle's "seduction" of Helen takes her by surprise. It is so blatant and so blatantly unscripted in her expectations that she questions her own sense of reality:

Those fingers' downward progress has been so gradual and so heavily punctuated with retreats that endurance of aberration has shaded into collusion with habit like two colours of a rainbow into each other: by the time I have stopped believing what he is doing is 'not really happening', I have already begun colluding in it. (40)

Besides his transgression of her body and of doctor-patient relations and trust, Helen's disbelief of what she is experiencing is exacerbated by her body registering his touch as erotic:

---

<sup>2</sup> Not to mention their loss of virginity, and indeed most sexual relations, which are clothed in even more secrecy and which for many women are a physical and spiritual ordeal owing to the lack of a culture of sexuality. (Irigaray's footnote)

my nipples stiffen, my heart melt[s], my vagina ache[s] ... I can't even bear to admit to myself that my body is reading as a sign of the love and sympathy I crave what I know is nothing of the sort. (35-36)

The terms of Argyle's "treatment" of Helen reinforce Irigaray's belief that "doctor-patient relationships somewhat resemble the sexual power relations that still hold sway for many couples" (Irigaray 1993:63).

In Coombs' first novel, *Regards to the Czar*, there is a precedent for Helen's acceptance of such behaviour and her transference of blame to herself. In the story, "Nothing Happened", a thirteen-year-old Helen endures the ramblings of an old taxi driver while he holds her hand "on the bulge between his legs" (1988:96). Helen takes responsibility for his actions which afterwards don't seem like anything she can describe to her girlfriend: "How can I explain to Anne what I don't myself understand? *There is nothing to say. Nothing happened*" (1988:104). She feels guilty of her passive participation, thinking, "my mother will murder me if she ever finds out about this old man" (1988:93).

In *The Best Man*, the older Helen reacts similarly to Argyle's guile: "Every scrap of sexual guilt in me tells me it's *my fault* I feel invaded and aroused by what he is doing" (40). Again, Helen refers to her mother as policing social behavioural rules which she feels she is responsible for transgressing: "*My mother would be furious with me for submitting to this! It would be me, not him, that my mother would wish to punish!*"(38-39).

Helen often positions herself as her father's or her mother's daughter. This familial identity is reinforced by the novel's division into "The Daughter's Seduction" and the daughter's abandonment. The reference to Jane Gallop's book, which addresses the issue of feminists being intellectually seduced by the fathers of psychoanalysis, adds another frame to Coombs' interrogation of the daughter discourse. Helen's continual relegation to daughter denies her additional identity as a mother and has the effect of trivialising her needs through infantilisation. The taxi driver in "Nothing Happened" tries to make the young Helen accept the position of his daughter

(1988:96) as if this makes his intimate advances more acceptable, or less questionable. Dr Argyle also forces Helen into the role of surrogate daughter (38). This is taken to great lengths by Argyle and his wife, Emily, who fosters Helen's dependency on them both. The family drama being continually played out in Helen's life situates her as daughter and as powerless alongside the numerous fatherly "czars" and "best men" who exercise their power over her.

The novel's division into two books, seduction and abandonment, signals less a separation than a constant tension in Helen's narrative voice. Helen knows she is insignificant to the medical czars — "You'd *become* just a body, just an object" (24) — while she simultaneously resists that knowledge, insisting on collecting evidence of herself as special:

You'd tried to persuade yourself that if you unquestioningly agreed to have what Mr Rhys-Williams and you both *knew* but did not say was a medically unnecessary surgical induction on what *ordinary people* (in your culture) would think a strange day to choose to have a baby, he in return would respect you for being *a rather special sort of woman* — considerate, rational, mature, intelligent, above being worried by such trivia as April Fools' Day birthdays.  
(23)

The continual realisation that "you and your baby weren't 'special' to him at all but just bodies, just objects" (24) addresses what Kate Grenville has called "the misogynist in me" (1994). It is a logic used by women to distance themselves from patriarchal oppression premised on the understanding that they are exceptional, and therefore exempt, individuals, rather than women. Coombs quotes Hester Eisenstein at the beginning of the novel on the exceptional woman:

The moment of truth ... came at the point where the "exceptional woman" understood that ... she had agreed to, acquiesced in, the negative judgement about all women, and that this, by definition, included herself. The self-hatred and self-rejection required of the "exceptional woman" were thus laid bare. (268 and preface page)

It is as a woman, and as a maternalised woman, however, that Helen comes to be treated as "just a body".

*I've always in my life been acutely aware of being in my body, and for me it's been mostly really difficult, a nuisance. (Margaret Coombs)*

In both novels, the relations between Helen's construction as a woman, a mother and a patient are grafted together irrevocably, positioning her body as pathologised, in need of medical attention, and also in need of regulation, discipline and advice.

*It really does fascinate me, what a difference a body makes. And, well maternity ties into all that, you know? It's sort of, the difference that being a mother makes, is a product of all that. (Margaret Coombs)*

Women's health has increasingly been associated with reproductive health, Dorothy Broom argues, and by the 1930s the management of pregnancy and birthing had been transferred from women's business to careers for middle-class men:

Increasingly, pregnancy became medically and socially defined as a disease, childbirth as a potential medical or surgical emergency, and both as processes that women and their babies could not be expected to survive without medical (eventually specialist) intervention. (Broom 1991:36)

The material and symbolic power doctors exert over women means that the concept of a "healthy woman" can be seen as a contradiction in terms (Broom 1991:54), when every aspect of a female cycle is seen as problematic and pathological; the presence or absence of menstruation, pregnancy or menopause can be considered worthy of medical intervention, while the apparent visual lack of these cycles in men provides a model of health to which women's active bodies are negatively compared.

In an effort to address the specificity of lived bodily experiences in a female body, feminists have been actively engaged in the broad debate of theorising the body, a debate in which Coombs' novels participate. Theorising the way in which we construct bodies in language challenges the somatophobia of Western philosophical discourse. This paradigm, which underpins Western patriarchal knowledges, operates on the mind/body split of Cartesian dualism, valuing mind over matter and men over women in a binary logic which then associates women with their bodies and men with disembodied, objective thought. From this reductive logic, medical science is premised on "objectively" treating the body as if divorced from the mind, or even the person who becomes a patient.

When women are considered contiguous with their bodies, however, and their bodily functions are rendered pathological, it is a short step to associate women with sickness generally, including psychological illness. Dorothy Broom has found this evident in medical textbooks — "psychiatry and gynaecology have become oddly blurred, in gynaecology texts at least" (1991:38) — as Helen Ayling finds in her maternal positioning by the medical profession. This still echoes the origins of the naming of hysteria, a condition which was thought to arise from the effect of a woman's uterus on the functioning of the rest of her body. Still practising this paradigm, Helen's psychiatrist is confined to treating her (as a) body. He prescribes drugs for her depression, which becomes associated with her breast-feeding as this prevents him from prescribing even stronger drugs (165). Repeating the pattern of hysteria, he attributes her "illness" to the interference of her female organs and hormones. Exasperated, Helen inwardly protests, "How many times are you going to have to say that more treatment of your *body* is not what you want?" (165).

Theorising the body is an important and productive site for feminists to contest patriarchal thought. It has obvious significance to the theories and practice of *écriture féminine*, a practice which sources itself in writing-the-body. The extremities of the debate lie between regarding bodies as socially constructed and as physiologically given: between constructionism and essentialism, as Diana Fuss discusses it (1989). Most often, however, theorists are engaged in finding a way to speak of bodies in terms which consider both aspects simultaneously; to speak of the seemingly unmalleable materiality of bodily matter as well as its physical shaping as a cultural product; its apparent resistance to control and yet its sensitive responses to our life experiences. This task quite often means having to speak about our own bodies to make the personal political, to explore the implications of real practices and to reconcile theory and praxis in writing which is produced through lived female bodies.

*it's part of how the body affects writing because, you know, motherhood is the ultimate isn't it: the consequence of having a female body as it were. (Margaret Coombs)*

The significance of the discursive or imaginary body in contemporary debates is in part due to its very malleability through discourse. In our theorising we can read an anorexic body as a product of cultural pressure exerted by the media's models. Meanwhile, other people's bodies inexplicably eat themselves away with cancerous cells which fail to respond to even the most destructive radiation or chemicals. The concept of the body as a discursive site is inviting in that it provides us with a way to read meanings onto "the body". This sense of control over the symbolic body, however, is a feeling very few find in relation to our own bodies, which are often difficult to perceive as textual. When I was researching this chapter my body was found to be growing polyps on my cervix — an activity I found very difficult to read. The medical book that had named them provided no plot and offered little in the way of alternative readings or even multiple endings. Like post-natal depression, nobody knows a lot about polyps so the only apparent way to deal with this aberration, to restore my cervix to how it is supposed to look, is to get rid of the excess growth: to cut, burn or freeze the tissue inside of me, along with the obligatory dilation and curettage while in the area. I could find no feminist readings of this story, no discursive analyses nor even an "alternative" therapy. It seemed that my ability to read "the body" did not extend to my body and its actions. Like Margaret Coombs' character, I got swept along on the expert advice of medical authorities to be operated on so that my cervix could be normalised. Since then, I've found that proliferating tissue growth (like proliferating voices?) can be a healing mechanism to envelop unwanted tissue. Luckily, the ending has been happy for me so far, but I wonder if I will feel any different next time I'm told medical intervention is required.



While neither anorexic nor cancerous bodies nor even post-natally depressed mothers or polyped cervixes seem to respond directly to our readings of them, our construction as such bodies is irrevocably linked to our positioning within certain discourses.

*Being a mother, at least in our culture, you know, hugely differentiates you from those who aren't, and I think being a mother of two rather than one, or seven. (Margaret Coombs)*

Our lived experiences in our bodies are subject to the sort of bodies we are seen to have ("white", black, tanned, female, male, muscled, infected, tattooed, groomed), which are in turn constituted in relation to hegemonic discourses (Western, patriarchal, youth-oriented, healthy, consumerist, capitalist).

In theory, the body as discursive site has challenged the epistemic categories (like Cartesian dualism) that have been prevalent in constituting our understanding of bodies. As part of this epistemic shift, categories like male and female can now be posed as problematic signifiers of identity. Philipa Rothfield reminds us that "medical and reproductive technologies threaten the stability of categories once regarded as biological absolutes" (1992:37). Television documentaries on gender issues now tell the stories of "women" without vaginas and "men" with them, of spontaneous sex changes when testicles become visible in early adolescence and of people who undergo gender reassignment through surgery, hormone therapy and counselling. The physiological signifiers of "sex" are problematised in gender-bending discourses being made popular in film, theatre and television (*Tootsie*, *Mrs Doubtfire*, *The Crying Game*, *M .Butterfly*). And yet, most of these narratives are predicated on someone being duped into thinking a man is a woman through his performance of a very limited notion of "femininity". It will be tempting for some to take the breakdown of male/female signification to its postmodern conclusion: that we are all therefore the same in terms of malleability and movement. There is an obvious need to assert difference, however, to maintain political and social action in a



world where everyone is quite obviously not the same in terms of privilege and value.

Speaking of bodies as lived experiences, as (if) we inhabit them, has been one of the difficulties of theorising bodies, but also one of the strengths of feminist theories based in women's embodied experiences — and in *écriture féminine* as it is sourced in women's bodies. Elizabeth Grosz outlines the balance between the materiality and the cultural production of bodies in Irigaray's writing practice:

Irigaray specifies an account of the body's *morphology*; the body is not considered an anatomical, biological or neurophysiological body — a body that is the object of the sciences of biology. Rather, her object of analysis is the body *as it is lived* ... The body is considered to be built on biological raw materials out of which are produced meanings, sensations, desires, pleasures by its interaction with systems of social meaning and practices. (Grosz 1986:136)

As an other alternative to the symbolic phallus and physical penis, Irigaray's writing of women's two lips collapses the symbolic/physical dichotomy and offers a paradigm based on their touching: on fluidity, continuity and multiplicity, ambiguity, movement and (always at least) doubleness. Like Grosz, Philipa Rothfield stresses the interaction between our theoretical and ideological knowledges and the material substances of bodies:

Bodies are not sponges, computers, blank sheets of paper, or empty vessels. They are living flesh, with blood, bones, organs and energies. Even if bodies are inscribed, and forms of bodily pleasure produced, there is the (material) stuff which *interacts* with these processes. (Rothfield 1992:43)

The point to be made in our theorising, she stresses, however, is "that we can never *know* that materiality independently of its discursive determination" (Rothfield 1992:41). Cixous makes a similar point about the element of unrepresentability of our bodies, out of which comes the imagination of our writing:

body (body? bodies?), no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other; that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style. (Cixous 1976:882)

In her writing about the "imaginary" body, Moira Gatens brings in the politics of women's writing, and *écriture féminine*, which go beyond the boundaries so often

imposed on the debate in the name of essentialism versus constructionism, or equality versus difference:

The 'difference' which this form of writing seeks to promote is a difference rooted not in biology but rather in discourse — including biological discourses. It is unhelpful to quibble over whether this writing is an attempt to 'write the female body' or to 'write femininity', since it is no longer clear what this distinction amounts to. (Gatens 1992:133)

Like Grosz, Gatens argues the value of Irigaray's trope of two lips, which challenges traditional masculine constructions of feminine morphology but also suggests "the possibility of *dialogue* between men and women in place of the monological pronouncements made by men over the mute body of the (female) hysteric" (1992: 134): give women lips and they can speak.

The notion of writing as a practice, then, is a political act associated with the production of power, and

*the whole idea of a fiction writer not being separate from other sorts of workers ... the fiction writer as a cultural critic.* (Margaret Coombs)

Rothfield discusses lived bodily practices (which might include *écriture féminine*) as interventions. In order to counter the sense of bodies (as they are often represented) as passive, inert surfaces onto which inscriptions are etched, Rothfield's sense of writing practice recovers a sense of integrity and action, of participation and interaction both to bodily materiality and subjectivity:

inscription is only effected through constituting lived bodily experience, that is, through an interaction, an activity which occurs between substance, surface and inscription. I introduce the notion of *practice* as a factor in bodily determination in order to signify an ongoing and variable process of embodiment, and to represent that interaction. (Rothfield 1992:45)

This takes into account the constant process of subjectivity formation and changing embodiment which affects, and is affected by, the way we negotiate cultural discourses. One of the things I like about Rothfield's practice is that by establishing "anatomy" as a social construct she is able to speak quite comfortably about energies, acupuncture, Chinese medicine and shiatsu, which simply represent "a different mapping of the body, elaborated in terms of energies, elements and meridians"

(1992:38). In making apparent the machinations of power, and who benefits from those operations, Western medicine is dethroned from its status as an all-knowing authority, to which "other" healing techniques become its "alternatives"; instead, all of these differing constructs are as valid each other.

Like the contradictions of living as a feminist in a patriarchal world, however, the theoretical implications of such heterogenous and multiple texts are not so easily produced in practice. While Margaret Coombs can include a profusion of cultural texts vying for attention, the interventionist politics of her writing practice (as I have argued it) means there are certain texts that she (and I) privilege over others (for example, Jane Gallop over Dr. Spock). While (I argue) she challenges the authority of certain discourses, we are implicitly committed to this particular discourse of challenge. The "Digression" prior to Book Two clarifies this. Directly addressing the reader, Helen advises us that she "can't go on with this story" (191), so she is going to abandon us to a fragmented series of documents:

I think you'll be *better off* going the rest of the way on your own without my *present* self interfering, trying to impose upon it all a false unity, telling you what to feel and what to think: pretending there is One True Way of looking at it all, and that it happens to be the way I'm looking at it at *this* particular moment of time. (191)

Disrupting the conventional expectations of a novel, the mix of genres which follows includes telephone calls, a newspaper article, postcards, a short story, literary fragments, an interview with herself and letters to Argyle, to Jemima the baby, to Dorothy Green, to Nobody and to a Piece of Paper. While documenting her own sense of abandonment, Helen also makes overt her role in positioning us and in arranging the text. In doing so she refuses the illusion of any text being passively available for us to read outside of its context:

well, as far as it's possible given that I've chosen them, I've edited them, I've given them titles, I've had the power to juxtapose this with that, to give or withhold dates of writing, things like that. You'll be as free as anybody ever is to think what you like! (191-192)

Coombs seems concerned to position her readers as critics, or at least to offer us a critical text to read, but the position she carves out for us is not always taken up willingly.

*I have the experience of readers who read everything I've written and then still, I feel, don't "get it". I mean, that's sort of complicated too, but there was one woman who is a psychiatrist who read all my work and thought it was wonderful and then said she thought it was a pity that *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing* didn't have a more optimistic ending. Well I felt that spoilt the whole thing, do you know what I mean? So I do feel discouraged at those moments. (Margaret Coombs)*

In many ways, the reception of Coombs' work seems to replay the contradictions she writes about in her novels. Writing against the grain of conventional values, Coombs is frustrated by readers who read against her grain to re-establish those values.

*A lot of people tried to read and indeed a lot succeeded in reading *Regards to the Czar* as a very conventional, identify-with-the-heroine narrative, which I put quite a lot of effort into trying to prevent them doing. (Margaret Coombs)*

Feminist writing carries no guarantee of feminist reading, a concern with which I can sympathise, while I put quite a lot of effort into writing this thesis as feminist in form and content.

The novels' reviewers represented a broad range of reading positions. The form of the two novels was one device that some found disturbing. Rose Lucas finds *Regards to the Czar* "awkwardly constructed" (1989:131) and was

not entirely clear whether the novel intentionally seeks to distance the reader with these fragmenting and intrusive devices, or whether they were designed to enrich the tapestry of Helen's life. (Lucas 1989:132)

Lucas prefers an "integrated stylistic turning of an interpretative prism" rather than the "cobbling together of separate short stories" (132). She then goes on to review another book which is "confident" in its "weaving together" of stories as a "recognizable feminist strategy" (132), leaving Coombs' work as unconfident, unwoven and unrecognisable. Similarly, for Carmel Bird, the

quotations sit awkwardly in the narrative ... taking the reader's attention away from Helen with an occasional reminder that the author is there. (And I

wonder who is addressing me when, in the final narrative, I am suddenly, for the first and only time, "Dear Reader".) (Bird 1988:21)

The disrupted desire here not to be interrupted from a linear narrative is a problem with the narrative form for these readers. Leon Trainor reminisces that

generally lacking in Coombs's book [are] things like a strong story line, good, tight description and clear characterisation. You still can't beat the traditional literary virtues — particularly when you are writing about the past. (Trainor 1990:7)

"Good", "strong" and "tight" clearly sounds like Trainor wants Coombs' writing to resemble a particular kind of patriarchal male body. As Anne Cranny-Francis writes,

When criticism is so imbued with patriarchal assumptions that textual production is itself described in metaphors drawn from the male body and from masculine desire and sexuality as constructed by patriarchy, then its function as an engendering practice is obvious. (1992:212)

Yet another "lack" in this woman's style, to echo Cixous' words, is that she puts too much of herself into her text. Lucas regards the novel as "too autobiographical an approach" (1989:132) even though, as she argues, the narrative style forecloses on our identifying and sympathising with Helen's victimisation. Helen Daniel's criticism was also that we see too much of the author: "Coombs ... is driven back into the recesses of herself" and the book is a "dialogue of character and author ... the self spilling into voices and persons, together exploring the tyrants of a single consciousness" (1988:16).

*This whole business of conflating women with their characters in fiction is a real problem. Especially for somebody like me whose work reads as, and to a large degree is, extremely autobiographical, as people usually use the word. (Margaret Coombs)*

The title of Marion Halligan's review, "Truth, or fiction?" (1988) sets up a hierarchical dichotomy which is then confused by Coombs writing "true stories" in fiction: "transcribing the actual isn't what fiction is about" (1988:10).

The content was repellent to some reviewers. Halligan comments that "Too many stories in *Regards to the Czar* ... are catalogues of victimisation" (1988:10). Reminiscent of Helen's mother's voice, Halligan remarks, "'It's not fair' is her

favourite remark. Of course it isn't. But however justified a whinge is, it's not attractive" (1988:10). Halligan concludes that, "there seems hope for her yet" (1988:10) when in the last story Helen has finally "stopped being a failed wife" and is "not pudgy any more" (1988:10). Halligan's requirement for an "attractive" central character (who doesn't whinge, is not pudgy and so presumably succeeds at wifedom) is matched in tone by Carmel Bird who regards "irritating heroines [as] dangerous creatures to have in your fiction, especially when they are not funny, and Helen is not often funny" (1988:21). Judith White also laments the lack of humour as well as literary merit in Helen's "spoilt girl's whining" (in Spencer 1990:18). Bird is irritated by Coombs "tell[ing] too much" and by Helen suffering so much: "things are done to her as she remains passive, helpless, hurt, mute, polite ... I am surprised she doesn't get raped again, and that she never has an abortion" (1988:20-21). These reactions to the amount of everyday violence in Helen's life in *Regards to the Czar*, contrast Leon Trainor's response to *The Best Man*, which he simply doesn't believe:

This book ... explains in great detail how women can be forced to adopt a prescribed role and never discover who they really are. The world may be full of women who are so much lukewarm Aeroplane jelly poured into whatever mould is convenient, but I'm not convinced. (1990:7)

Presuming a "who they really are" identity to be discovered, the reason Trainor is not convinced is mainly due to the characterisation of the narrator, who "is as tough as old boots and I wouldn't mind knowing how she got that way" (1990:7). "Unfortunately", he continues, "all 363 pages of the novel are spent examining the minutiae of a bygone nervous breakdown" (1990:7), as if this experience was irrelevant to the subjectivity constructed for the narrator.

As writing operates in discursive relation to networks of power and politics, so does reviewing as a writing practice. The reviews I have singled out so far are those that read Coombs' novels through particular conventions which are concerned to re-establish the patriarchal codes the novels refuse: conventions about what

"fiction is about", how it should be structured, and codes of behaviour for female characters — and female authors — particularly when it comes to voicing protests against those codes. Like much patriarchal criticism, these conventions parade as universal criteria, as "traditional literary virtues" (Trainor 1990:7), positioning their readers and the texts they review as patriarchal subjects. Even Helen Dakin's enthusiastic review concludes that Coombs' "ability to depict people in the throes of despair with astonishing grace ... redeems them" (1990:532). I doubt that a male writer's despairing characters would ever need to be redeemed by his (astonishingly) graceful writing.

Other reviewers had less trouble filtering the novels through their ideological lenses. Phillip Siggins praises *The Best Man* as confronting, witty and racy (1990:12) in a sympathetic discussion without any reference to its feminist or even gender politics. Kate Grenville neutralises any feminist politics in *Regards to the Czar* by stressing that "these stories don't blame *men* for all this. In every story there's a female figure who is the real enforcer" (1988:3). A similar comment by Grenville on the back cover of *The Best Man* leads Barbara Brook to protest a recent packaging trend of "strenuous degendering ... Don't be misled by the back cover — this is feminist and profoundly subversive" (1990:10).

Ironically, in her effort to challenge liberal humanist values in her writings, Coombs might sound as if she returns to that discourse to assert her intention as author in their defence. Voicing her frustration that some people just "don't get it", Coombs attributes these "misreadings" of her work to a lack of education,

*the sooner, you know, everybody gets the education to problematise representation and read in a more sophisticated way, the easier it will be for writers to write, (Margaret Coombs)*

and to her status as "mere" writer, rather than writing theorist.

*In "Protect Me From What I Want" I thought I was doing the kinds of things that the French theorists are getting at, which is not to have a rigid, linear argument, stripped of all metaphors and so on ... But what happens is that unless you can somehow announce yourself to be doing that and to have those knowledges and be from somewhere and all that,*

*it's assumed that you're just an ignorant writer who doesn't know how to write a "proper academic essay". (Margaret Coombs)*

Coombs addresses this trivialisation of fiction in her essay, "The Myth of the Woman Writer as *Idiote Savante*" (1990b), which, as she suggests in the title, is applied particularly to women. The essay was written largely in response to the reception of her first book and also reiterates its voice of discontent. She concludes,

To behave otherwise — to persistently keep quiet, stay "modestly" in the background and let the fiction "speak for itself" — to play along with myths like the myth of the woman writer as *idiote savante* — makes it only too easy for potentially subversive work to be assigned meanings that only help prop up exactly those hierarchies autonomy-oriented feminists like me are so anxious to undermine! (1990b:9)

Coombs was not alone in arguing that some readings reinforced the silencing which colludes with and reinscribes the systematic practices the novels challenge. In response to reviews of *Regards to the Czar*, Beth Spencer offered her analysis of the discursive power relations operating in both the novel and its reception. She defends Coombs' work as,

a rare articulation of the victim's silence [which] reminds us of something so obvious but so obscured in our culture: that violence is never entirely random, abusers choose their victims; abuse and power are thus linked to certain kinds of bodies from childhood onwards; and abuse is not caused by silence, it generates it. (Spencer 1991a:75-76)

Applying this to Coombs' critics, Spencer compares some of Coombs' readers to Helen's "big brother" Mike who was distressed by the publication of her "literary efforts" which he attributed to faults in her immature personality, exhorting her to grow up and be a more dutiful daughter (Coombs 1988:162).

Spencer specifically addresses Lucas' review in *Australian Feminist Studies* to raise the issue of women writers whose work "doesn't conform to a prevailing orthodoxy as to what is an 'experimental' or 'feminist' work, or doesn't sufficiently foreground its theoretical concerns" (1990:137). In her review of *The Best Man*, Barbara Brook also notes this "risk" Coombs takes in confronting "not just the more recognisable masculinist orthodoxies but a range of newer, authorising, homogenising doctrines" (1990:10). Brook specifically mentions "(post)feminist



French maternities" receiving Coombs' "malice", but she also relishes the resonances of this body-writing with her own experiences:

The specifics of the narrator's very common experience of maternity are detailed just sufficiently to call up physical memories for those of us who are part of this particular body of knowledge. A (used) womb of your own may help. (1990:9)

The tensions between interrogating, mimicking and using critical discourses in Coombs' novels certainly engage a plethora of reading positions.

*I really enjoy reading theory and ... I know I could be a philosopher, a feminist theorist ... it does sometimes tempt me away from writing, partly because I guess I can see that theorists get taken so much more seriously. (Margaret Coombs)*

In a discussion of "feminist writing", Rosemary Sorenson and Jenna Mead suggest that writing by feminists that is experimental, subversive or interventionist urges a necessarily different reviewing operation in response to the writing:

Like any other form of discourse, book reviews depend on a network of power and language ... "Feminist" writing disrupts the gendered economy of author and critic ... of patronage and patriarchy (author/father/progenitor and critic/son/inheritor) (Sorenson and Mead 1990:16)

The shift in how a review might relate to its textual subject(s) is an extension and consequence of the experimentation of the writing, they argue. Their review writing, like this thesis writing, tries to be responsive and dialogic: they incorporate a series of texts, theories and previous reviews, two reviewers and an observer. The "radically interventionist" politics and heterogeneity of experimental texts by women is inherently part of their feminisms, Sorenson and Mead argue self-reflexively:

This is not an attempt to subvert an existing discursive mode; it's an assertion that existing structures of thought and language are largely separate from and inadequate to the representation of feminine subjectivity. (Sorenson and Mead 1990:16)

The assumptions coded into much of Coombs' reception reinforce the inadequacy of certain representational structures to accommodate such work, in the same way that Kristeva's theories are problematic in conjunction with Walwicz's work. Cixous argues that this is a characteristic of *écriture féminine* in that it will always

"surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system" (1976:883) in opening up new possibilities of writing, and reading:

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorised, enclosed, coded — which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. (Cixous 1976:883)

This is not to close off feminist writing like Coombs' as beyond critical attention but to confer on it a different kind of attention which locates it within the culture with which it is in dialogue. Coombs' contribution to the practice of *écriture féminine* and debates of theorising the body does, as Grosz suggests for feminist criticism, encourage "new kinds of questions and different kinds of answer[s]" (Grosz 1992:368).

*This sort of product is what you write plus what the reader reads, and being a good reader is hard work and takes a lot of education and skill and practise, just like being a good writer. (Margaret Coombs)*

## CHAPTER SIX

### A FAIRYTALE BODY?

WRITING A WAY OUT OF ANOREXIA IN FIONA PLACE'S  
*CARDBOARD: The Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters*  
(1989)

There is a physical basis to modern patriarchal, phallocratic power, and it is not in armies and prisons and punishments — instruments of torture and restraint — but in bodies, and the pleasures and knowledges they enable. (Spencer 1991a:80)

In speaking about the body of Margaret Coombs' Helen Diamond/Ayling as a site on which patriarchal discourses converge to inscribe their power, Beth Spencer's analysis could easily be applied to Lucy, the anorexic narrator of Fiona Place's novel *Cardboard: the Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters* (1989). In a review of the novel that uses Foucauldian terms similar to Spencer's, Paul Alberts describes the body of Lucy as

scarred in rites of self-mutilation, starved, drugged, weighed, assessed and processed, lost to forces beyond its control, wrested back and made obedient by the slow invasive work of medicines and hospitals. (1990:213)

In tackling one of contemporary Western society's most fatal bodily inscriptions, Place focuses on the effects of language in writing the body. In the form of a novel that slips between poetry, prose and critique, Place challenges the medical and cultural discourses which name and produce anorexia nervosa. In doing so, she closely associates recovery with the rewriting of those dominant narratives, as Lucy's body is given form through the narrative shaping of her life. This writing practice puts into effect Cixous' words:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display — the ailing or dead figure. (1976:880)

While *Cardboard* sometimes draws on the narrative structures of fairytale to facilitate the transformation of its heroine, the success of this story is in its writing.

The title and semiotics of the cover alert us to the possibilities of redrawing bodylines in this text. The front cover shows a pink, two-dimensional, cardboard cut-out of a female figure (see Fig. 3). Like an "uncanny stranger on display" (Cixous 1976:880), her breasts, nipples, navel and the 'V' of her genital space are diagrammatically mapped in ink. The back cover shows a cardboard cut-out dress, complete with wings to attach to the body template on the front (see Fig. 4).

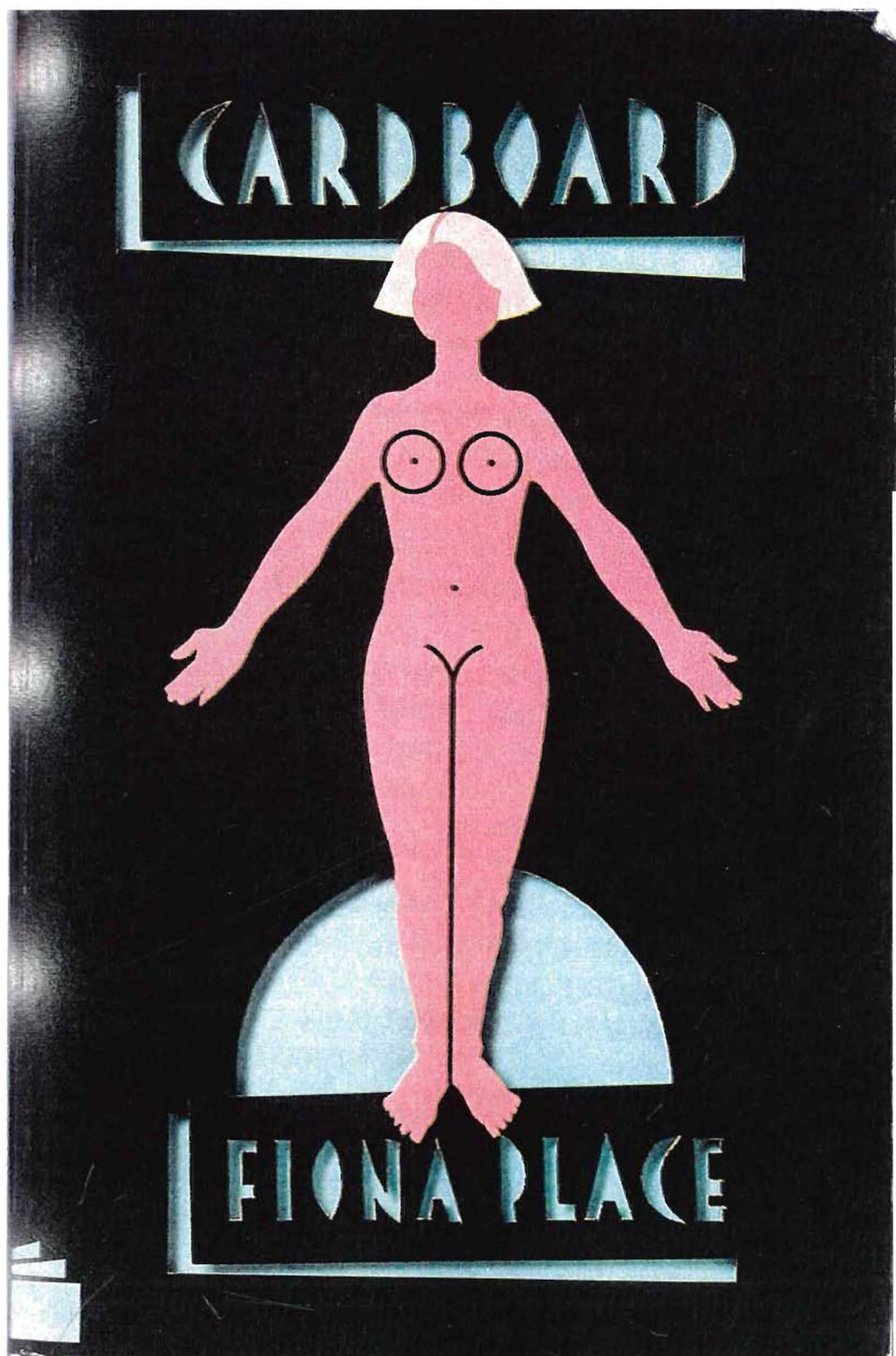


Fig. 3. Front cover of *Cardboard: The Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters*, by Fiona Place. Reproduced with permission of the author in lieu of the publisher, Local Consumptions.

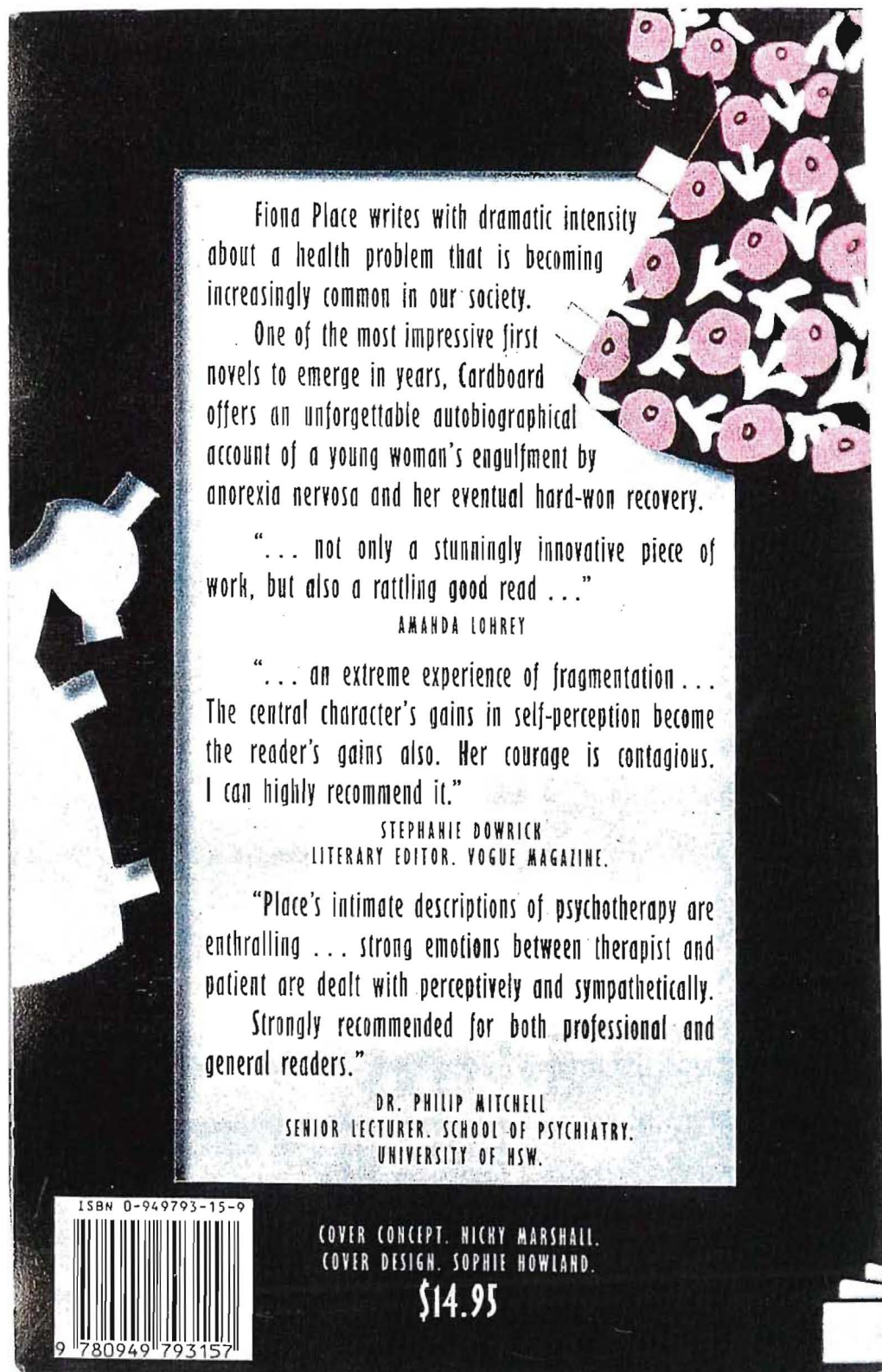


Fig. 4. Back cover of *Cardboard: The Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters*, by Fiona Place. Reproduced with permission of the author in lieu of the publisher, Local Consumptions.



The dress has been detached and the space left in the cardboard is indicated by a contrasting colour. Through the "windows" made by these contrasts, we read the write-up of the book and its author — in the relief left after the shapes have been sculpted out. As such, this "cardboard" cover might be read as a promise to lay bare the surface inscriptions of this two-dimensional cardboard cut-out, to flesh out her life as a specific embodied subject.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Lucy's body takes up very little space in this text, despite it being the centre of attention.

*One of the reasons I steered clear of the body in Cardboard was because I was sick to death of everyone assuming that anorexia had something to do with your body. I mean, I know that it does. But I think I just wanted to flesh it out in a much more psychic way, with ideas and feeling. I felt that the body was a trap in that situation. (Fiona Place)*

As narrator, Lucy matter-of-factly reports the punishment regimes and disciplines she metes out on herself: "I always had things up my sleeve. Food to chuck. Or an arm to burn" (95). Her body is factually described in terms of the weights and measures taken by the staff on her admittance to hospital but these statistics seem like arbitrary figures divorced from anyone's presence. Lucy's feelings and her sense of her embodiment are reduced to her reading of the scales every day and that mechanical measurement of her weight is the topic of pages of negotiation and surveillance.

*I actually didn't want people to be all that interested in what Lucy looked like physically ... I hate the way women are always tied to their body. You know, whether she's got good tits, or rear. I don't like connecting women's identity just, and immediately then slapping it into a body. Almost seems like squashing her into somewhere. (Fiona Place)*

I found this experience of reading quite traumatic not only because of the self-inflicted and institutional abuse dealt out, including a suicide attempt, but also because of the distance the narrator places between her telling and her actions, as if her body belonged to somebody else. The trauma involved in reading about this detached body mimics the way patients as "cases" are treated in hospitals as bodies to be observed and diagnosed. The medical regimes restricting Lucy's access to everything from bedpans, showers and hairbrushes to books and writing materials

are told with equally alienating matter-of-factness. As a part of her treatment, these "privileges" are gradually restored when Lucy's body corresponds to certain increments in weight. This distance Place has set up between the narrator and her body contrasts with the way Coombs writes about Helen Ayling, who is acutely aware of every point of epistemic violence played out on her body and her subjectivity.

Lucy's collusion with medical and psychiatric discourses renders her narrative all the more shocking to read. In her review Kate Veitch also responds to the effects of this technique: "Touchingly and rather sadly, there is very little description of the physical self, the actual body, in *Cardboard*; perhaps the self-hatred is still too strong" (1989:84). Self-hatred is an assumption associated with the image of anorexia rather than the novel.

*One woman asked me, "Do you hate your body that much?", and I was really shocked. Like, I was just, I mean I had absolutely, and then I thought, well maybe the reason why I didn't write about it too was because I have absolutely no problems whatsoever with my body ... it's never been an issue for me. (Fiona Place)*

The unproblematic conflation of author and narrator is characteristic of many of the reviews. The back cover, however, does promote the book as "an unforgettable autobiographical account of a young woman's engulfment by anorexia nervosa and her eventual hard-won recovery". It is also endorsed by a senior lecturer in psychiatry who recommends it "for both professional and general readers". He effectively authorises its relevance to real life "cases", hinting that we "general" readers are being made privy to professional knowledges.

Yet Lucy's disembodiment in the book is probably not so surprising given that her condition is named and produced by a discourse which refuses to embody or locate its knowledges (Haraway 1988). As Matra Robertson argues, "it is against 'reason' in Western society to starve oneself, and the self-starver finds herself rendered 'reasonable' in society as 'the anorexic patient'" (1992:39). Like Coombs' Helen Ayling, Lucy is also diagnosed as having "*endogenous* depression" (48) and is prescribed antidepressant and tranquillising drugs to render her more



"reasonable". In a recent essay, Place draws direct parallels between media representations of eating disorders and hysteria (1990), links which have also been made by Elaine Showalter (1985) and Susie Orbach (1986). Like hysteria, anorexia has a history of treatment which is often confining and which enforces passivity (read prescribed femininity) on to women, pathologising their bodies and delegitimising their knowledges and their expression. Feminist analyses often consider women's hystericised bodies as physically manifesting the contorted, confusing and controlled circumstances patriarchy offers female subjectivities. The titles of Matra Robertson's book, *Starving in the Silences* (1992), and Susie Orbach's, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (1986), both register anorexia as an attempt to draw attention to the silences of women. Orbach writes,

She has agreed to take up only a little space in the world, but at the same time, her body evokes immense interest on the part of others and she becomes the object of their attention. Her invisibility screams out. We cannot avert our eyes from her. (Orbach 1986:30)

Physically voicing their otherwise silenced discontent in a way which cannot be ignored, anorexic women are then contained within pathological categories and quite often institutionalised. In *Cardboard*, Lucy is so well aware of this protocol that she institutionalises herself.

Like Lucy's body, the hysteric, "whose body is transformed into a theater" (Cixous 1986:5), becomes the site of spectacle, a display of excess. Showalter argues that at one stage "hysterical" became "almost interchangeable with 'feminine' in literature, where it stood for all extremes of emotionality" (1985:129). Deborah Thompson regards anorexia as "a dramatic acting-out of normally subtle and submerged consuming thoughts" (Thompson 1991:96), and Matra Robertson argues that "the possibility of a woman's experiencing anorexia nervosa is as much a result of her place within language and patriarchy as it is an indication of her 'pathology'" (1992:69).

The terminology in which anorexia is discussed is therefore significant. In her analysis of the romanticisation of tuberculosis and the horror associated with

cancer in literature, Susan Sontag argues that before the medical aetiology of an illness becomes known the condition becomes embedded in language as a cultural metaphor accumulating a barrage of not necessarily related meanings (1978). The language and metaphors used in discussing anorexia are sated with associative meanings. Often perceived as objects of regulation, control and restriction, the symptoms of anorexia are often described in terms of excess: *severe* weight loss, *overly preoccupied* with food, *relentless* exercising, delusions of being *too* fat, bingeing, compulsive, secretive, obsessive (Kuba and Hanchey 1991). Treatment, therefore, is intent on forcing this spectacle of excess to more "normal" proportions, on restoring the status quo which requires orderliness rather than "dis-order" in our eating habits. As a condition experienced mostly by women (ninety-five percent is generally cited), it is telling that discussions of its "management" often centre around strategies for medical personnel to "contain" the condition while maintaining the impression that the patient is taking charge. These strategies adopt a business-like manner based on re-establishing (symbolic) order: food prescriptions, plans and programmes, contracts, goals, adequate amounts, rules, restrictions, modifications, determination. Most of these terms are taken from "A Feminist Perspective on Eating Disorders" (Kuba and Hanchey 1991). If anorexia is caged in this language by its theorists and support networks, let alone by the popular press, how does Place deal with this issue in the form of fiction?

One significant feature and departure from other forums of discussion is Place's use of three distinct narrative voices: these displace the authority of any single viewpoint but all reinforce Place's argument. The anorexic Lucy tells her story in first person present prose. Her narrative is supplemented by a voice/text made physically separate by its poetic form in free verse. Written in the third person, it comments and critiques, supports and justifies Lucy's narrative. As such, it seems to read her narrative from a point outside of that (other) text, as if in hindsight, and from a confident position within the discourse over which Lucy

seeks control. This then becomes a dialogue between two worlds, indicated by prose and verse:

But his *I think you want to be my girlfriend* wasn't a shark or even a fish

sounds to me  
his rod was  
out of control

I didn't know how to ask for clarity on that sentence. I knew no way of clarifying that line.

I'd have called it flirting,  
but I wasn't there (346)

Discussing the benefits of "self starving women" writing about themselves, Matra Robertson finds that "by switching from the third person to the first person, women can experience the ways in which the subject is located within the various discourses about anorexia" (1992:78). Place's report as writer-in-residence at the psychiatry unit, Prince Henry Hospital, reinforces this sense of displacement and objectification experienced by patients labelled as having a psychiatric disorder, but who are treated as "cases" and bodies rather than subjects:

they talk *about* themselves rather than *as* themselves. Their dominant life narrative seems to be that of their problem rather than how they experience life. And their contact with the logo-scientific mode of thought used extensively in psychiatry seems only to intensify these feelings of objectification. (1989b:103)

This linguistic practice is critiqued by a third narrative voice in blocks of bold type-face. Adopting a documentary-like manner, this voice employs the same techniques medical discourse uses to register its authority. As if to highlight this mimicking of authority, the poetic voice still freely interrupts and supplements the "bold" narrative. Far from colluding with the disembodied "objectivity" of medical science, however, this bold narrator recommends a more subjective and personal reconceptualising of patients and their treatment.

The first of these segments establishes Place's thesis: that anorexia nervosa "is first and foremost a language problem" (97). The language of medicine, the text argues, is "imbued with middle class ideology" (97) and, as Margaret Coombs' stories also assert, exerts part of its control over patients

through an often baffling and inaccessible jargon in which only their physicians have "expertise" (97). Part of the alienating effects of clinical discourse is its refusal to

**acknowledge the sub-texts and therefore [they] do not describe life as it really is. The formulas do not incorporate the layers of meaning, the half truths, the ways of the world.**

**the politics of  
power are  
denied** (162)

While these politics are played out in institutions between patient and doctor, their invisibility compounds the unease of patients. Robertson claims that anorexia was created as a category so that the medical profession could make sense of seemingly non-sensical behaviour (1992:xiv), rather than for the benefit of the person concerned. As well as these invisible interactions of power and knowledge operating in their reception by the medical profession, Place suggests that one of the disadvantages anorexics experience is their inability to identify and decode the metaphoric meanings and nuances of language:

**The person with anorexia nervosa has, for various reasons, often failed to pick up the sub-texts of language that her/his peers use to decode the double meanings and messages given to them by parents, teachers and the media. (137)**

Place is careful not to gender this difficulty. Anorexics are referred to as s/he or her/him throughout the bold critiquing narrative, which also offers an explanation as to why this is not only a matter for women:

**In the late seventies and early eighties ... male anorexia nervosa become [sic] more widespread and anorexia nervosa was diagnosed in older women. And yet so often the media, by referring to the illness as the slimmer's disease, still perpetuate the simplistic outdated sixties view. (137)**

The "slimmer's disease" slogan constructs women as passive victims of patriarchal expectations, as Danielle Celermajor argues (1987). Instead, Celermajor's feminist reading constructs anorexics as "starving the Symbolic body", in "active resistance" to patriarchal expectations (1987:69). While Place's text claims inclusivity of males and older women, it is significant that none enters into the

context of this novel, and that the vast majority of anorexics are still young women.

*Obviously with Cardboard, it was extremely important to write as a woman.* (Fiona Place)

Lucy is acutely aware of media representations that signal how her life is meant to be lived, despite her difficulties with decoding subtexts. Moreover, she recognises them as romanticised constructions which she actively resists:

the ideal woman with her loving Volvo owning family, Alfa Romeod boyfriend, close girlfriends and *Cosmopolitan Magazine* type problems. I felt I had the right to be as far away from the ideal weight as I wanted. I knew no one had such a magazine neat life. (17)

She also uses this awareness of cultural codes to manoeuvre herself into being recognised and categorised as anorexic by medical personnel: "I tried to convince him that I was like all other anorexics. That I was extremely concerned with my appearance" (34). Robertson maintains that medicine and the media combined actually produce conditions like anorexia by publicising lists of symptoms for people to adopt. Drawing on work by Marilyn Lawrence, Robertson argues that,

hospital is, in effect, a place for the anorexic to learn new tricks. Television, film, newspaper and magazines similarly appear to be avenues for non-anorexics to learn about dieting, the symptoms of anorexia and how anorexics behave. (1992:20)

The pioneering work of Hilda Bruch leads Bryan Turner to suggest that "becoming sick is like becoming a member of a social (and therefore linguistic) community" (1990:158), and that an important facet of interpreting anorexia lies in "the language by which 'victims' describe their complaints" (1990:158). This language is learned from doctors, as Lucy tells us: "I used their language. I wanted them to like me" (164). Lucy's adoption of the "beauty myth" discourse guarantees her a position within their system:

She also asked me about my weight and I lied. I told her I'd been fat and had needed to lose some. I tried to flick my nails again, to impress her that I'd only been dieting for glamorous reasons. I definitely didn't want her to stop me from losing more. And I was sure she'd think I was OK if I told her I wanted to be attractive to men. Not that I could ever imagine losing weight to please a male. (16)

In contrast to this lucid account of her manipulation of clinical expectations, Lucy's explanation and understanding of her disease elsewhere is based on "sound intellectual reasoning. On e" (16):

she got to  
the stage  
where she was  
scared of  
the letter e

E for employment  
E for existence  
E for ego.

little e's  
were jumping  
up and down  
before her eyes  
every minute of  
the day.

I'd hide the newspaper just to escape the employment section, I'd even block my ears when the newspaper boy blew his whistle. I used to go for days without eating, just to forget I existed and as for ego, I concentrated on being ethereal. Emptiness was my biggest e. I seemed to find it everywhere. (16)

Her long-term psychiatrist is Dr E, who becomes part of the problem associated with e's. As Lucy's dependence on Dr E increases, she also knows it is an escape:

I knew therapy couldn't be like in real life, where one sentence followed another but sometimes it just seemed so unhelpful.  
Yet Dr E was always there.  
And he knew.

knew about  
theory (142)

Dr E's theories, however, become the tools of inscription and description of and for Lucy: **"In making the necessary clinical notes the psychiatrist shapes the experience into his clinical terms"** (163). Lucy's feelings then become circumscribed by that discourse: "I could hardly remember how I used to describe things before I met psychiatry" (164).

The universalising and depersonalised framework that constructs medical knowledge is shown to erase personal differences. Lucy's personal experience at times does not match the classical model of anorexia. For example, she sometimes "surprised them with the fact that in all this time I'd never stopped menstruating"

(164). Lucy is quick to account for this anomaly, however, to place her case back in their terms and model of disease:

They'd looked at me blankly. Anorexia and no periods were supposed to go hand in hand. To help them with their bafflement I'd offer them an explanation: I'd never had any hang-ups about periods. I'd also have to get them quickly off that topic in case they decided I wasn't truly anorexic. (164-65)

Dr E, as part of the "problem", refuses to acknowledge Lucy as an embodied patient:

Dr E had never  
asked her  
to look

she still  
couldn't look  
into his eyes (207)

She can only remember him in terms of his navy jacket and pink chairs. His refusal to register the personal focuses Lucy's family drama around him as a new site of resistance and dependence:

The baby fear/set up rejection. And abandonment.  
Only Dr E knew about that. That's why he was always there. Always.  
But without arms.

the lack of arms  
meant mother  
couldn't hug

the baby

let it know  
mother knew

the baby had to  
cold experience  
theory

And all my rational textbooked reasoning as to why he couldn't have arms for me couldn't convince me that touching should be forbidden. (142-43)

Lucy's conflation of psychiatrist and mother pivots on her desire to be hugged as an indication of acceptance and love. In direct contrast to Coombs' Dr Argyle, Dr E's disinterested objectivity towards Lucy's body is accounted for in terms of control: "He had to provide the control of mother" (143). The control exerted by Lucy's mother is later explained in descriptions of her health regimes. These were,

related to money and not to me personally. It wasn't that she was into being trendy or wanted me to look nice. Teeth cost money. Skin cancer would cost us money later on.

she took  
machine rigid  
care of the outer (260)

Her mother's regimes are in direct response to her powerlessness at being economically dependent on her husband, who is mean with money. Lucy's father was "into rituals, obsessed by the war and into rules" (331). His rules are about touching — about not touching the television controls, the stereo, the heater (259). Lucy's impulse to burn her arms with cigarette butts mutilates the limbs primarily extended for and to touch. In a perverse way this act connects her to the lack of arms extended to her by Dr E and her parents, who become enmeshed in the same drama:

I'm repeating the old script, the one with my parents, but this time I've written Egmond into it, he's the one who now acts in the role of the loved one. I've set up parental rejection once more. (176)

Lucy's construction of herself is from the paradigm of a mind/body split, the legacy of her knowledge of herself gained through psychiatry. Her mind is seen to take control of her corporeality, which seems to have a 'mind of its own'. The panic attacks are distanced from her by calling them "it". Her preoccupation with purity might be read as an attempt to make of herself a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which to rewrite her self as her anorexia also has the potential to erase her materiality:

[I] remembered Tim saying that I always acted as though I didn't have a Past.

a past to her,  
seemed impure, as though  
it would make her undesirable (257)

It is another psychiatrist, Tim, who draws this confession from Lucy, and Tim's presence accompanies a shift in the operations of desire in the novel.

*Dr E and Tim contrast the difference between an object-relations theorist (Dr E) and a self-psychology theorist (Tim) and the*



*attributions each associates to certain effects (emotions). There are also issues of generational differences ...*<sup>3</sup> (Fiona Place responds)

Despite Lucy's assertions that her weight-loss is not driven by a desire to be attractive to a male, the text suggests that sexuality is an important factor in this anorexic's relation to language. In the same way that Coombs' Helen Ayling finds gulfs between "how she *wanted* to be, how she *pretended* to be and how she *was*" (Coombs 1990:21), Place's Lucy also speaks of a "gap" between "how things should be, how they are stated to be and how they actually are" (240). Like Coombs', Place's narrative is concerned to unravel the subtexts of language and, in particular, its sexual agenda:

**Sub-texts enhance communication by acknowledging the not so visible,**

**the underlying sexuality  
or disillusionment ...**

**A person with anorexia is often unable to use sub-texts, they often do not know to what the sub-texts are referring, and often have not personally experienced close intimate talk.**

**pillow talk  
has been hidden,  
forbidden, behind walls (240)**

Food and sexuality are linked in many cultures through the mechanisms of desire (Robertson 1992:3). Robertson notes that the mouth and the breast are regarded as erogenous zones in Western society and sexuality can be discussed in terms interchangeable with eating: "Women can be described as 'spicy', 'a dish', 'good enough to eat', and men as 'meat', 'a hunk'" (1992:3). Sweet foods are especially used as terms of familiarity (honey, sweetheart, sugar, peach) and Rosalind Coward argues these linguistic links are applied actively as well as descriptively:

language suggests that the desire for sexual relations is like the desire for food. We have sexual *appetites*, we *hunger* for love, we *eat* out our hearts, *feast* our eyes and have *devouring* passions. And like any meal, we can overdo it and expect a bout of lovesickness. (Coward 1984:87)

---

<sup>3</sup> Fiona Place is one of the writers who responded to the draft chapter on her work. As these comments often generate a more active debate, I have differentiated them as "Fiona Place responds"; they are included in full with the interviews in the Appendix.

The mouth is the threshold of eating, speaking and sexual pleasure but Deborah Thompson maintains that it is a gendered site (1991). Arguing that the relation between women and food is part of an economy of commodity exchange, Thompson notes in her study of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" that "while esthetic [sic], erotic and economic consumption may converge for men at the site of women's bodies, they converge for women in 'Goblin Market' at the site of food" (1991:101). In her psychoanalytic reading of anorexia, Celermajor argues that a denial of food is linked to the satisfaction of (sexual) desire:

If a sexual drive is derived from but independent of the vital instincts, her drive is not a hunger for food, but rather a resistance to hunger (a refusal to eat) and a defiance of the nutritive instinct. It is in this renunciation that she experiences "sexual satisfaction", as, that is, the satisfaction of her desire. (1987:68)

In our media age, the use of women's bodies to sell goods through advertising emphasises the inscription of women's bodies as consumable commodities. Irigaray argues: "woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity" (1985:31). Women are trained to participate in this regime for the perfect, desirable body through the highly profitable and culturally powerful diet industry which encourages food use in relation to body image rather than appetite. It therefore follows that *all* women will have a complex relationship to food which is both emotional and symbolic (Cline 1990:3). Sally Cline argues that "women have access to food in a way that they do not have access to power" (1990:1), and that our attitudes to food are inextricably linked to the sexual dynamics of our culture. In *Cardboard*, Lucy's restriction of food involves the control of desires, but not necessarily desires for food. Her physical recovery involves the recovery of desires, not necessarily all her own.

If sexual desire is part of the plot for this anorexic's recovery story, then Tim functions to make Lucy acknowledge and accept her sexuality and material specificity as a woman. There is a shift in the operations of desire when Tim enters the scene, from Lucy's committed relationship to her scales (17) as a vehicle for attaining "purity", to her investment in Tim as someone she is allowed to visit, to

look at, to reach out to and hug — to find desirable. One of her major "breakthroughs" is when she has "finally done something about the desire. To hug" (292). Tim's informal and forthright style — "What's this all about then, Lucy? Men and work?" (170) — presupposes her sexuality as it flaunts his own: "I think you want to be my girlfriend" (344). In his scruffy Italian leather shoes and blue jeans, Lucy recognises him as a sexualised presence because he demands it. In turn, Lucy is forced to confront her (previously absent) self as a woman:

the woman began  
to own parts of  
herself (258)

This is a new and empowering feeling for Lucy as she gets in touch with her matured female body:

The world had changed.  
I was ecstatic.  
Some vital part had found its way back to me.  
My arms joined my body as though they really belonged to me, almost as though I belonged to me. (186)

Tim's facilitation of this is ambivalent given the critique of psychiatry in the novel.

*I wanted to include the complexity that not all men are absolutely and utterly hopeless, not all women are absolutely and utterly fantastic.*  
(Fiona Place)

Tim is cast as both part of the professional psychiatric community but also, and more importantly, as an individual who is different.

*Of course to simply classify one therapist as an object relationist and the other as a self-psychologist also serves to diminish them as complex human beings. They should be seen as the complex individuals they are.* (Fiona Place responds)

Tim breaks the rules Lucy's former experience of psychiatry had established between patient and doctor (250). During one of their first meetings, Lucy tells him she wants another doctor, to which Tim arrogantly suggests instead that Lucy wants him to be her friend (171). Despite Lucy objecting to the falseness of Tim's suggestion given his position, his insistence that she wants him as a friend gives her the impression that their relationship as doctor and patient will be different. When he voices his feelings,

she couldn't  
believe  
him

He wasn't supposed to have feelings, let alone express them.  
But another part of me knew that his having feelings had been the very thing  
that had made it work. (291)

Tim becomes a new focus for the acceptance Lucy sought from her father/mother/Dr E, but he has transformed it from a parental focus to an adult sexuality.

*To read Tim as "arrogant" makes for a narrow reading of the text – one that is based on certain notions of power and unable to contextualise "Tim's arrogance" ... why he might have acted this way. Or why Lucy feels he is acting in this way. Possibly it also served to suggest to Lucy that her wish for understanding was OK? I believe it is vital that a feminist reading does not dismiss an affective reading of the text. (Fiona Place responds)*

As narrator, Lucy is certainly not an objective reporter of Tim's behaviour but actively interprets and sifts his speech for us to read through her own subjective concerns. In response to these concerns, Lucy's displacement from her sexual body is retrieved in fragments for the reader to assemble, as she does. These are mostly from her childhood, adolescence and her time spent at Teachers' College. They are all couched in terms of rejection: her father's rules about touching and his refusal to look at her in her first long dress (333); her first sexual experience where she was sexually coerced by her professor of Italian in a situation which could be named rape (248); her trip to France to "become a woman", as Tim puts it, which was the catalyst for her first Panic attack; and the rejection she experiences in London when her mother does not attend her during a serious illness.

*I was shocked to read Lucy was "raped". I suppose you could make this reading but why paint a worse case scenario? Why make her a victim? Did Lucy say she was raped? (Fiona Place responds)*

The politics of naming (rape, for example), like the recovery and articulation of early memories, can be empowering. In Lucy's case, the recovery of those fragments might indicate the success of therapy with Tim.

*Therapy is more than the recovery of fragments. Lucy's mentioning of certain sexual memories is vitally important, but it is also vitally important how they are dealt with ... Tim allowed Lucy to create her own affective meaning. Possibly because it is a novel and not a textbook on therapy, there is much more scope for these issues to be*

*misread. While a misreading often produces interesting results I think it is important to acknowledge where you are coming from, i.e. a feminist reading which then explains the weightings you give to certain details. (Fiona Place responds)*

Through my feminist reading, however, the preoccupations of these fragments sit uneasily next to an earlier disavowal of the idea of anorexia being associated with desirability:

**In the sixties it was assumed that a female was starving herself because she feared she was fat, unattractive to men and saw herself as failing to meet the expectations of her middle class parents. (137)**

Lucy's remembrance of the pressures and expectations of her middle class upbringing are told to us through her therapy and recovery story which involve her feeling attractive and attracted to one particular man.

*I definitely think it should be possible for Lucy both to disavow the importance of being attractive to men as a cause for her anorexia and to also express a desire for a relationship and intimacy with a male. The two are quite different. (Fiona Place responds)*

As you may be noticing, Fiona's responses to this chapter are vehement and heartfelt. She is sometimes affronted and often frustrated by my reading — particularly my feminist reading which represents for her a "misreading" because of all the things it leaves out:

*Feminist readings have their own limitations and own distortions, which I think run the risk of being so prescriptive that they hinder women in the very same way they criticise patriarchy. They must be inclusive rather than exclusive of women's voices. (Fiona Place responds)*

This is confronting (and frustrating) for me as I often feel Fiona is misunderstanding some of my arguments in her defence of her own work. In constructing our interaction as a dialogue I feel we are beginning to appear at odds with each other. So, at the risk of framing her comments more than I do already, I think it is productive to pause to consider this apparent conflict, which has similarities to charges directed to feminists lately by young American women.

Place's primary concern is that I am victimising Lucy. In summarising, she writes:

*It would seem to me the dangers of applying a strictly sociological feminist reading is that it runs the risk of closing off other readings and enclosing Lucy once again in the victim role.*

*Why is it that many a feminist reading seeks out to re-affirm the negative possibilities, to insist on narrow interpretations that affirm Lucy as a woman who is unwittingly still weak and whose definition of herself is still dominated by men?*

*Why are there few readings that describe how it is that she is subverting and defining herself within patriarchy? Why do some feminists want her to exist in a certain way, and that only in that certain way, which seems to be exclusive of so many ways of thinking, will she be acceptable?*

*And why are the readings of Tim and Dr E so often reductive and stereotypical? (Fiona Place responds)*

Place's complaint here is similar to those given much media attention in Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (1994) and Naomi Wolf's *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (1993), who both claim that "feminism" constructs women as powerless victims. The media was quick to promote these books and dramatise the notion that feminists disagree amongst themselves. Briefly, Wolf distinguishes between "Victim Feminism versus Power Feminism", showing the former to be "a version of feminism that has come to dominate popular debate ... how destructive it is to women and how wrong it is for the new era at hand" (1993:xxii). Roiphe contends that as an undergraduate at Princeton,

*The feminists around me had created their own rigid orthodoxy. You couldn't question the existence of a rape crisis [sic], you couldn't suggest that the fascination with sexual harassment had to do with more than sexual harassment, you couldn't say that Alice Walker was just a bad writer. (1994:5)*

On the basis of her individual liberal rights, Roiphe concludes that "sometimes it is your friends you have to fight" (174), while Wolf's conclusions about changing the representation of women and feminism through "the new female power" is more positive, even if her methods largely follow men's "tried and tested" systems (1993:316).

The impact of these privileged young white middle-class American graduates raises important questions about the appeal of feminism to younger women — to the "daughters of the feminist revolution", to whom Anne Summers addresses her "Letter to the Next Generation" (1994:507). (I feel oddly positioned

here being of a similar age to Wolf and Place, and yet apparently not in sympathy with "their" generation of feminist values.) The issues they raise once again dichotomise women (and feminists) into a powerful-or-victimised binary opposition which sidesteps the need for *both* celebration *and* critique. The differences between feminisms produced through differing generations, privileges or continents need not be cause for attack, defence or even negotiation. Rather than adopt such militaristic positioning, I imagine feminists able to see these meeting points of different ideas as productive and challenging in the same ways that we continually self-assess and question our theories and practices. In this context, Fiona Place's comments have most impact when they question me in a way that engenders dialogue. So, having constructed a context through which our interactions might be approached, I interrupted writing about Lucy's middle-class upbringing and her desire for Tim, two facets the novel's bold critiquing narrator claims are unsubstantiated assumptions about anorexia.

Tim's entrance into Lucy's life-story is both enabling and ideologically problematic within the terms of the text, when it seems to refuse and then aspire to the middle-class romantic conventions advocated in *Cosmopolitan*.

*The book is only ideologically problematic if it is to be locked into being a feminist statement. (Fiona Place responds)*

The relational tension between Lucy and Tim becomes the driving force of the narrative, in the same way that romances operates. As Lucy Sussex comments, "instead of a knight in white armour, who will rescue the heroine from Castle Psyche, we have here a dominant male in a lab coat" (1989:7). The ambivalence of this conventional story-line is perhaps registered in its lack of resolution. The readerly desire for a happy ending — for Lucy's recovery, and for her relationship with Tim to be acknowledged within the conventional cultural codes — is both gratified and left unresolved at the same time.

*I wanted to represent the complexity about how unbelievably complex our whole culture is. Like, there is something — such as that thing about romance, that it doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing; it can be a good thing, it can also be slightly bad, but they can all be absolutely and utterly interrelated and they're very very complex and*

*it depends what angle you're looking at it on what particular day, how you see it. (Fiona Place)*

On the last page, having left hospital, found a house and taken a job, the narrator tells us "At least therapy ended as relationships in real life end. Unresolved" (363).

*THIS REFERS TO DR E, NOT TIM. (Though I guess I have to let the reader do their own reading!) (Fiona Place responds)*

Despite his benevolent and facilitative role, Tim is still positioned as the possessor of (psychiatric) knowledge (about Lucy). Despite her power as narrator, Lucy still positions herself in the context of psychiatry, now represented by Tim.

*I would not see Lucy as merely representing herself in the context of psychiatry as represented by Tim. I think this devalues her ability to shift herself out of the role of patient and into the new and as yet unformed role as woman. (Fiona Place responds)*

The voice in free verse does often balance this as a wise and worldly, knowing voice, but Lucy's power as narrator still seems to be forfeited to a large extent in favour of Tim's power over her. This representation is similar to what Mary Ann Doane found in her study of "women's films" of the 1940-50's, in which she notes the function of "the figure of the doctor as reader or interpreter, as the site of a knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity" (1986:157). She posits this as a transference of "the erotic gaze" to "the clinical eye" (1986:157). In the films she samples, there is a structural pattern whereby the hysterical, psychotic or dis-eased woman undergoes a visual transformation; this is registered through her body, which provides the somatic fabric for the inscriptions which signal her psychological state. More specifically, her cultural alienation is marked as a deterioration of her beauty or sexual attractiveness. Doane remarks that in these films, "the woman's 'cure' consists precisely in a beautification of body/face. The doctor's work is the transformation of the woman into a specular object" (1986:155).

Although Place's novel does not exactly reproduce this established narrative pattern, there are some obvious correspondences.



*I know there are a few feminists that got really angry at me that I had a male protagonist, like the doctor should have been a woman. And I say to them, Well look, life is more complex than that. It's not as simple as wanting it to be completely and utterly some feminist statement. (Fiona Place)*

The male doctors in the novel are readers and interpreters of Lucy's body and they also offer her a discourse which positions her so that they can read her. Dr E, although able to read the sign of Lucy, fails to rehabilitate her as he cannot "see" her as spec(tac)ular: their eyes never meet. Tim, on the other hand, immediately sees and confronts her sexuality. At the end of their first session he tells Lucy,

"I think I'm going to discover a lot more than what you've shown me here tonight. A lot more."

"Like what?" I snarl/hoped.

lighted

"A woman," he said. (179-80)

The conflation of Tim's "clinical eye" and "erotic gaze" are in fact the reason for his "success" with Lucy. During their last session he reflects upon those initial thoughts, which prove to be correct, telling her "that I never thought of you as just an anorexic or manipulative. That I always knew I'd discover a woman" (360). Tim is in effect claiming that he has made a woman of Lucy, where she failed on her trip to France. After all, the logic goes, she cannot be made a woman without a man.

*To read it as Tim claiming he has in effect made Lucy a woman is, to my mind, stretching interpretation of the text and once again only reading it from a feminist viewpoint without contextualising it, without undertaking an affective reading. (Fiona Place responds)*

By making Lucy conscious of her self as a gendered, sexualised person and willing to engage in the sexual innuendoes of language, Tim has inducted her into the sexual politics of those *Cosmopolitan* stories which she so vehemently denied. By doing so, however, Lucy also comes to recognise that Tim's use of language is neither innocent nor entirely "professional". When he suggests on one of her last visits that Lucy would like to have a mad passionate affair with him, she tells us in hindsight that,

*I never even thought of saying well, Timothy I think you're the one who's attracted, I think you're the one who wants to have an affair with me. Never. Back then I didn't even know of such thoughts. (343)*

The Lucy writing this narrative obviously has knowledge of those sexual politics.

Like *Pygmalion* and the story of the ugly duckling, Tim's transformation of Lucy also entails making her look the part. When Tim begins encouraging Lucy to go out with Jackie, detailed descriptions of her clothes appear. Prior to her last session with Tim, dress becomes excruciatingly important to her. It takes planning and preparation to dress "appropriately" for him, as she consults her friend, Jackie:

we moved onto the matter of clothes. And decided on black. Madonna style, with the fake pearls and the wide leather belt.  
But I didn't have such an outfit. So I had to borrow the clothes from Jackie.  
(358)

Madonna provides an ambiguous model of dress. As an icon of popular culture, in the late 1980s she represented a distinctly provocative sexuality, autonomous and in control, like the screen vamps she modelled. However, as David Tetzlaff comments,

for all of Madonna's independence, for all of her power, she still offers her image as an object of the gaze — looking hot, tantalizingly cosmetized and costumed, ready and waiting for whatever use her audience may wish to make of her. (1993:254)

Lucy's cure-beautification-sexualisation seems complete now that she is no longer a dag, her outward appearance conforming to the codes of popular culture and a phallogentricity which would see women as objects of sexuality for the consumption of male desires.

*Couldn't Lucy be doing any of these things for herself? Couldn't she want to do the Madonna look for herself as well as Tim? Isn't she empowering herself? Maybe she wants to be a sexual object!!* (Fiona Place responds)

As well as casting Tim as the site of (sexual and psychiatric) knowledge which comes to shape Lucy's subjectivity, as in the women's films Doane examines, the narrative has a fairytale ring to it as Lucy is "saved" by the handsome Tim. The end of the novel is jubilantly optimistic even though it avoids the "happily ever after" resolution, and leaves us in suspense as to whether Lucy and Tim got together when they were no longer patient and doctor.

*Are you sure Lucy is saved by the handsome Tim? Couldn't Lucy have saved herself? Couldn't she have worked at making the experience with*

*Tim what she wanted and made it work for her? Is she so helpless it has to be read he did this for her? Such a reading only perpetuates her role as helpless woman. (Fiona Place responds)*

Like all stories, fairytales convey powerful, and powerfully gendered, messages. Their connection to discussions of anorexia seems particularly relevant. The application of the fairytale grid to the life of the Princess of Wales accommodates her much publicised anorexia so easily that it almost seems a mandatory part of the tale now. Women's magazines continue to zoom in on her body shape and exercise patterns even after this fairytale marriage is following a different plot. An analysis of anorexia in a recent women's health bulletin is written in the form of an allegory about Beauty and the Beast, as "to the sufferer of anorexia or bulimia nervosa, food becomes a metaphor for what is monstrous about herself" (Coopman 1991:4). The stories Lucy tells Dr Rainer from her notebook are also in the form of allegory; despite her apparent difficulty with subtexts, the story of the ant and the giants (103) is transparently about herself. Cixous also writes a variation on the theme of the "Beauty and the Beast" fairytale:

*Once upon a time ... once ... and once again.*

Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women. Beautiful, but passive; hence desirable: all mystery emanates from them. It is men who like to play dolls. As we have known since Pygmalion. Their old dream: to be god the mother. The best mother, the second mother, the one who gives the second birth. (Cixous 1986:66)

Rewriting the old tales of beautiful princesses waiting for their beast/prince has been part of women putting themselves into the text — "as into the world and into history — by her own movement" (Cixous 1976:875).

*Why is it that Tim is seen as the hero? Why is it not seen as Lucy constructing him as a hero for her own purposes, that she can appropriate the fairytale recovery narrative for herself? (Fiona Place responds)*

At one stage Lucy recognises the power of stories when she feels "bewildered" by "the jungle of myths" (304) and directly links them to the same source as psychiatry: "pen in hand I wondered what part psychiatry had played in their

continuing deep hold on me. Had it subtly exuded the belief in everlasting love, in commitment and permanency?" (304).

One of the most significantly enabling actions in *Cardboard* is Lucy's copious writings in her notebooks which she pens obsessively in times of crisis and which ultimately lead to the writing of *Cardboard*. She begins her notebook in hospital to "plot trace" (84) her thoughts, which had changed from fragility to hostility. She also plots her escape and her desire to experience the feelings she wants in a "whole new space. One that didn't pen around in notebook circles" (85).

*I do think that the way women use language can definitely show how women are placed in phallogentric discourse ... it's men that set up the way we talk about the world. So I think women's writing can do interesting things in at least showing women how they've been positioned, where they are in language, and how they might at least try to redefine their sense of self. (Fiona Place)*

This is Cixous' reasoning in calling for women to write themselves, to write their bodies as an act of healing and reclaiming those bodies and their pleasures:

To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal. (1976:880)

*I would hope that it does deal with a lot of the ideas the French feminists are talking about but then grounds them and places them and it maybe even contradicts them, maybe expands them, but hopefully does interesting things with them. (Fiona Place)*

As a way of reshaping the way an anorexic might think about her body, Matra Robertson regards writing and art practices as extremely important in providing non-hierarchical and safe modes of expression:

The implication of an exploration of language as the means of conceptualising the self is that the woman who is labelled anorexic is expressing herself in a language which is not neutral. (Robertson 1992:67)

This means rethinking lives outside of the terminology of illness. It is a reversal of the usual medical paradigm in one of the ways Elizabeth Grosz argues that feminist knowledge intervenes in phallogentric discourses: by "transforming women from the position of object to that of subject of knowledge" (Grosz 1988b:97).

Lucy's stories and poetry are often used as starting points for her discussions with doctors. With Dr. E. Lucy could use her poetry as a disguise to hide behind but with Tim "they didn't quite hold their cover" (353). Tim is particularly interested in the Max poems which are "*all about sex*" (245), as he tells her. And there are also "prostitute poems ... the spit jinxed tart thing with Joe cool puffing on his smoke" (249). Lucy is astonished and uncomfortable with her writing of these poems (188), but decides they are extreme versions of each other and both entangled in a desire and fear of intimacy:

I looked over the Max poems and the cool Joe type poems. I looked at the blatant romanticism and the other equally distorted view and wondered how I could ever piece them together. How I could ever be me and think both at once. (249)

Max, the romantic one, is later used interchangeably with Tim's name (309) as the poems become overtly focused on Lucy's desire for Tim (356). While this might suggest that Lucy's stories are finally given embodiment, she realises "that wasn't how things really were/are. That I was merely representing the myths" (356). The poems and her notebook entries are not given much emphasis in the narrative. They seem to be one of the "Other Related Matters" of the title, while the cardboard on which Lucy's next appointment with Tim is written is given greater strength and value. The apparent relegation of her writings as one of her obsessive behaviours submerges their final value in writing her a way out of the story of her "condition".

As a story of one anorexic's recovery, *Cardboard* contrasts the usual coverage of anorexia nervosa in its suggestion of ways out of rather than ways into the condition.

*I have to say that it is only one person's experience of anorexia, that people experience it in different ways. But one of my main reasons was for people to understand that process of recovery ... that process of putting it all together and that people can come out of that whole experience. (Fiona Place)*

The importance of this writing is borne out in Place's life when she received the first grant of its kind from the Australia Council to serve as writer-in-residency at the psychiatry unit at Prince Henry Hospital. Her report in *Australian Feminist*

*Studies* acknowledges the impact of feminist thought on such interventions into clinical discourse. The writing and reading courses she ran encouraged patients to write with a voice of their own, a project which is optimistically summed up in her last paragraph:

People, through the use of narrative and poetry can re-write their lives, can reconstruct their subjectivity and thus re-map their past and create new possibilities for their future. (1989b:104)

The writing and publication of *Cardboard* have also made an impact on readers who recognise their experience in parts of the story.

*I get a lot of people who will ring me up and say, My daughter's got anorexia, can you help me? So, I think it has had a meaningful reception within that community. (Fiona Place)*

Most hopeful is the novel's intervention into some practices of psychiatry.

*I had one psychiatrist ring me up out of the blue and she said, 'You know, my patient and I, she reads a chapter out of the book each week and then comes and talks about it, and she can only talk about it to talk about her own personal experience.' Now, I would never have intended *Cardboard* to be used in that fashion, but, if that helps. (Fiona Place)*

Taking one particular anorexic body as its central concern, then, this text is filled with words; with the operations of language which name and produce such bodies, and with other voices and stories which might reshape and reclaim those bodies; with subtexts, competing discourses, and readings inscribed onto the body of a self-starving woman,

*And also I suppose it was a book of hope, you know?: that things can change. (Fiona Place)*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### NO END TO ROMANCE?

#### SEXUAL ECONOMIES IN INEZ BARANAY'S

#### *BETWEEN CAREERS* (1989)

Like *Cardboard*, Inez Baranay's *Between Careers* (1989) uses the romance plot for its narrative drive. Baranay, however, more explicitly holds the device and its ideological foundations up for scrutiny. Where Lucy's romance is left speculatively open-ended, Baranay writes off Vita's romance and then dares to write on (and have Vita write) beyond this ending. Divided into two parts and a coda, the novel begins as far from romance as possible as it charts Vita's career as a call-girl. Vita operates under the pseudonym of Violet, in a job which is often slipped between the covers of "legitimate" careers. Vita's description of her employment status as "between careers" (59) indicates the erasure of prostitution from certain discourses, but it also posits a gap — the in-between — in which prostitution erupts from between those covers. It is through this gap that Baranay examines the operations of exchange — of power, money and desire — which drive the economy of this career.

Violet is an identity constructed by Vita, who has a desire to divide her life neatly between night and day, work and home, and yet Violet never quite takes the borders between the real and fantasy seriously:

It is strange to think that Violet might have played a part in anyone else's life, just as if she were real. Violet was only an invention but she had her own existence. Vita should know where she came from and what happened to her, but Violet did not have a neat beginning or a neat end. (Baranay 1989:3)

This split identity of the main character parallels what Irigaray argues is the effect of women's position in patriarchy as exchangeable commodity:

*A commodity — a woman — is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. (Irigaray 1985:180)*

The conscious act of splitting her identity into Vita (which means "life") and Violet (echoes of both shrinking and violence) is part of her contract with the patriarchal economy in which she operates. It is a rupture which she is compelled to signify visually: when a call comes for Violet, Vita transforms her body according to the fashion code required to indicate her commodification:

"will I put on something else? Maybe the top needs to look a bit more tarty ..." She took out her high heels and splashed scent over herself. She was



already wearing gorgeous underclothes: a personal indulgence learned from Violet and taken up full time. Catherine watched the transformation. (62)

Unlike Place's Lucy, Vita is aware of the inscriptions urged on to her as a sexualised woman, and as a sex worker she exaggeratedly mimics patriarchal expectations and fantasies. In this light, prostitution can be seen as a transfer of male fantasies onto real women's bodies. But while their fantasies are realised, Vita is left juggling the contradictions involved in being someone else's living fantasy.

She is ambivalent about having to self-inscribe her body into an object, not only to be looked at but also to be bought and (ab)used. She is aware of her "collaboration with the enemy":

the most reprehensible part of Violet's collaboration was the perpetuation of the lie that there exists a breed of woman whose true vocation is good-time-girl. She never nags; she is never dreary; she never has bad moods; she never demands; she never, seriously, thinks. (14)

While recognizing her complicity with those patriarchal myths, however, she enjoys the "indulgences" this license carries. Her high heels are an especially fetishized symbol of her trade which she flaunts, luxuriating in their symbolism:

Once she steps into them the transformation is complete. The high heels elongate her calves, creating a lovely long curve. They are simply, wickedly beautiful. They symbolise both vulnerability and domination. They make her feel both helpless and powerful. It seems so wrong that they look so lovely and are so crippling, so damaging. (17)

Baranay's construction of prostitution from a woman's point of view is filled with these competing motives. The power which Vita and her boss, Pamela, gain in receiving money for her body is weighed up against the lack of that transactory and economic power in conventional heterosexual relationships. There is also an awareness of the illusions involved in any gain at the expense of providing sexual services for men at their whim. Feminist concerns are neatly woven into conversations with women friends:

Sometimes Vita got the approving verdict: "Make them pay!" Other times she was challenged with the proposition that selling women's bodies is oppressing and degrading. (54)

The questions her friends ask of Vita are given slick answers, but these often sound as though she is justifying her actions to herself. The omniscient narrator remarks,

"Vita went on thinking she knew all the answers" (55), which effectively leaves the ethical questions open, unanswered.

The concept of sexuality as a commercial and commodifiable product under patriarchy is constantly highlighted by the text. This paradigm is not restricted to sex-workers, however, but is applied to all women operating within a culture which, Irigaray argues, "is based upon the exchange of women" (1985:170).

*the way many women "feel like a whore" with a man.* (Inez Baranay responds)

The chapter called "Taste and Distaste" documents the trade of women included in business trips, and directly links this commerce to the "advice" invested in women's magazines:

"How do you actually do it?" Vita's friends would ask, the sex part of it, they meant ... Well, you just *do* it; you imitate; you pretend ... Magazine articles on how to please your husband when you have a headache (and he doesn't) will tell you the same thing. (15-16)

This analysis of heterosexual relations has been available since at least 1888 when Mona Caird described marriage and prostitution as "twin systems": "Prostitution is as inseparable from our present marriage customs as the shadow from the substance. They are the two sides of the same shield" (Calder 1976:91). Christine Overall has reiterated that claim in more contemporary political terms:

Like rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and incest, prostitution is inherently gendered, a component and manifestation of the patriarchal institution of heterosexuality. Prostitution is structured in terms of a power imbalance ... [which] ensures both that women's sexuality is constructed very differently from that of men, and yet also, paradoxically, that male sexuality, socially constructed, defines the standards for evaluating human sexual activity. (1992:721)

Male prostitution also works largely within this paradigm as the clients are still, overwhelmingly, men. Sheila Jeffreys has analysed and campaigned against heterosexuality, which she sees as a political institution designed to uphold a social system based on male supremacy, whereby,

each individual woman comes under the control of an individual man. It is more efficient by far than keeping women in ghettos, camps, or even sheds at the bottom of the garden. In the couple, love and sex are used to obscure the realities of oppression, to prevent women identifying with each other in order to revolt, and from identifying "their" man as part of the enemy. Any

woman who takes part in a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger. (Jeffreys 1981:6)

Jeffreys' critique of heterosexual relations renders it the cornerstone of all other oppressions because it is founded on the concept of difference: "Though the difference is seen as natural, it is in fact a difference of power" (Jeffreys 1990:299). And without this basis of power and difference, which is "rooted in heterosexuality, other systems of oppression could not function. From heterosexuality flow all other oppressions" (1990:297).

In line with that perception of the patriarchal model of sexuality, the differences between exchanging sex for money and or through love are dissolved in Baranay's text. The sex workers despise women who "gave it away" (54), and Vita recognizes her own "desires" in operation while on the job:

the imitation of arousal can sometimes create an impetus of its own, enough to make some of Violet's couplings as close as Vita's had been to the Real Thing. (16)

Sheila Jeffreys points out that,

Men experience orgasms whilst killing women. Girls and women can have orgasms during rape and sexual abuse and then spend years in guilt and shame for "enjoying" what happened to them. In fact the body is capable of physiological responses quite unconnected with an emotional state of "pleasure". (1990:305)

While the theorising of desire has been debated by feminists, Sheila Jeffreys maintains it is virtually impossible without "a new language, and a new way of categorising our sexual feelings" (1990:303). In Baranay's text, these philosophical and theoretical issues are set alongside the slipping and sliding of bodily fluids and flesh, which constitute Violet's life.

While their individual needs differentiate the clients, the men are also constructed as very much the same — "they were as infinitely variable as they were monotonous" (54). The section, "The Way it Goes", slips from one client to the next as the text moves from one paragraph to the next. The last line of the paragraph is repeated as the first line of the next, emphasizing the repetitiveness of Vita's work and men's finite requirements. This montage of scenes has an almost cinematic

quality. The next chapter, "The Sex Part", scripts the combinations of roles available, which become predictably limited within the scope of this sexual play:

He moans, she sighs. He yells, she cries out. He doesn't make a sound, she's dead, slowly coming alive. She places her hands to check his heart. He's already quietly finished. He's just starting, building up speed, ready to pound furiously, announce his arrival; a fanfare. (24)

And again, at the end of this routine, the imagined division between "real" and role is questioned: "There's something about it that's rather like the real thing" (25). While Violet's actions are a consciously constructed image and script to conform to her character, the text suggests that the "real thing" also needs to be examined in this light. In Part Two, this imagined separation is collapsed when "romance" is written into Vita's "real" life.

The construction of this romance is invested with the same theatrical discourse as prostitution when Violet is called out to meet an actor one (k)night, named Brian Castle. It is Brian's recognition that Violet is as an actor playing a role which renders him "different" from other clients. Throughout their talk about theatre and film, Violet "sat there, wide-eyed, knowing it was a game" (64), while Brian's "amused and knowing" looks were "like a kind of acknowledgement of herself that included Violet as the façade" (64). This is disturbing: "she felt as if Violet were being given cues meant for another character" (65).

Brian's inclusion of Violet as "people like us" lays bare their complicity as actors. In the preceding chapter, however, Vita sees Brian at an artistic party, where she must negotiate being both Violet and Vita within the same experiencing body:

"We are pretending we haven't met before," he stated, cottoning on.  
Acknowledged by a long pause; then she smiled her teasing, sideways, Violet smile. "You see, it wasn't me."  
"I see," he said, amused. "The secret identity, like a hidden violet." (61)

The next time Brian rings the escort agency to request Violet, in a chapter titled "Other Roles", he insists he is "not confusing the player with the part" (72). In a text loaded with theatrical language, however, they both become simultaneously

players and audience: "They were together performing and watching a staged romance" (73).

*plus, the language thing: using language of erotic texts (I had Anaïs Nin at my side) to – what? mock? describe ironically? parody? (Inez Baranay)*

Romance has been discussed previously by Vita and her friend Catherine as a possible deterrent to prostitution:

"There's this other likely scenario that's meant to make me reconsider," Vita said. "Finding a one true love: a torrid mutual passion and then my shameful confession leading to the agonising end of the romance."

"Oh, really." Catherine looked disbelieving again. "As if you could have romance with someone who didn't know."

"Well, quite, but since when has romance been the point? How long since you've had romance?" (54-55)

Vita has pondered the possibility of combining a relationship with her work:

I took a look at all the stories about such unconventional liaisons — they all proved that a man who believed the promises of a whore was a fool and was inevitably had; that an unvirtuous woman who believed she could be both purchased and loved was a sad victim and was inevitably broken. I knew these stories had nothing to do with me. I had already decided to start making up some new stories. (89)

Like the pretence Baranay invests in prostitution and in the images Brian is shown to project for glossy magazines and television screens, Vita becomes locked into yet another role. The endearments Brian and Vita exchange on the telephone are like clichéd dialogue propelling the unfolding drama which is a re-run of the same old story. Vita inevitably becomes entangled in her competing roles as prostitute and lover. The formal economy of Violet's work arrangements is intrusive and antithetical to her understanding of romance. When Brian leaves his payment she feels distinctly uncomfortable: "This credit card routine hadn't figured in her fantasies" (92). Her romance intrudes on her work when she rushes one client to get to another one, Brian.

*... and what is romance? You could say Violet's encounters were the more "romantic". (Inez Baranay responds)*

Once Baranay has laid bare the mechanics of sexuality as they operate in prostitution, romance cannot succeed within this narrative economy. Part one of the novel charts the "work" of bodies: their movements, shapes, and disabilities, their

transactions and roles in the exchange of power and pretence. When the power structures in sexual relationships are deconstructed, they become levers which dislodge the concept of romance — "jamming the theoretical machinery itself", as Irigaray advocates (1985:78). Having done this, Baranay then explores the power of writing to invent alternative storylines for life-narratives. The novel is prefaced by a quote from Foucault about "all the ruses that were employed for centuries to make us love sex, to make the knowledge of it desirable and everything said about it precious" (preface). The power of those century-old stories is acknowledged through Vita's activities while being constantly undermined by Violet's. Those ruses, however, can now be read as storylines subject to being rewritten, and *Between Careers* becomes one of the "new stories" of which Vita speaks.

One of the primary components of the romance genre is its investment in a resolution — the traditional happy ending in marriage, a social contract which seals women's position as subordinate labourer (Pateman 1988). Vita insists that she believes in happy endings, "Lots of songs and costumes and a happy ending" (81). Catherine, however, questions whose ends this serves:

But what is an ending? I thought it was a happy ending when I got married, and then there I was, three years later, burning his favourite painting and tearing up every photograph of him. (81)

But that was only one ending, Vita insists: "One story stopped at the wedding" (81) while living goes on, continually being constructed as endings and beginnings. Within this account of Vita's life, conventional beginnings and endings are deferred. While chapter eleven describes her getting started in prostitution, chapter ten recounts the finish: "Soon after that Violet was no longer to be found. There is no chronology in my sordid history" (36). Vita's story is thus structured to subvert the closure and resolution of a happy ending, but Baranay is then faced with the problem of how to end.

In the title of her book, *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis names this strategy, which she has located in twentieth century women's

writing, as an effort to redefine the ideological foundations which operate through the trope of romance:

As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties, incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success ... In short, the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. (1985:5)

By severing the narrative from these conventions, women writers "formulate a critique of heterosexual romance" (1985:xi). These strategies are significant because they are being written by women and differ from "postromantic strategies" by male writers, who continue to use romance as the central and privileged resolution.

Baranay speaks of writing an ending as *"a wonderful challenge, to find a way of doing it because there seemed to be almost no models for it"*:

*And of course, in life, in everything there's no such thing as an ending. So that is kind of the ultimate artifice in a way, where you end something, isn't it? ... And also writing about women who are not victims or whose end is not to be a victim poses a question too ... Especially writing about experiences that are meant to disempower and degrade women like in *Between Careers*. A lot of people couldn't handle that aspect of it, that it wasn't about being destroyed by those experiences. So you have to kind of write about a sense of something gained that mightn't be happiness but it's something positive. But it's not an ending either. (Inez Baranay)*

Baranay constructs the end of her novel as a coda, "a term applied to any passage, long or short, added at the end of a composition ... to give a greater sense of finality" (Scholes 1970:200). The coda attracted the particular attention of reviewers, who were frequently hostile to that section, presumably because of its deviation from convention. Marian Eldridge wrote that the coda,

doesn't have sufficient weight compared with earlier parts to fulfil its purpose adequately. It comes across as interesting — Baranay's writing is always lively — but not essential. (Eldridge 1989:B4)

Rosemary O'Grady writes off the coda as "eccentric" (1989:9), and Dennis Davison calls it "curious", but then explains that he didn't understand the device:

Frankly I was puzzled, but I did learn one thing: the author's note revealed that she had a half-year Australia Council fellowship to write the coda, which is only 25 pages long. Surely, at the rate of one page a week, Baranay could

have been less content simply to skim the surface of contemporary issues. Or is she satirising her trendy types? (Davison 1989:6)

The coda does appear disconcerting: it introduces many new characters, has a completely different setting and shifts its time frame. Vita is the only apparent link with the previous parts of the novel, and she is now celibate and a writer. It is her search for new stories and new forms of writing, however, and the text's enactment of that desire, which makes the coda important. In part two Vita tells us,

One of my new stories was about living life without being obsessed by The Relationship ... What most people settled for was not what I had in mind for myself ... I wanted a way of life that I had not yet seen. (90)

A way of life without The Relationship is also described in a short story by Baranay called "Living Alone: The New Spinster (Some Notes)" (1988). In it, the decision to live alone is a personal one: "I am obsessive, moody, self-indulgent. I do not wish to change nor to see anyone put up with that" (Baranay 1988:16). But it is also political: "Living alone is about not living with men" (16). This new spinster has reinscribed the negative connotations of spinsterhood with freedom and contentment, with the indulgence of being able to

watch TV at 3am, sleep at 7pm. red wine in the morning and breakfast at night and no-one cares. You don't have to put clothes on, you can cry for no reason and talk out loud to yourself. (Baranay 1988:15)

In the coda of *Between Careers*, Vita is living alone in order to write. She is minding Catherine's house, as her friend is one of those who "travel with their good jobs with the ABC" (103). Catherine's decision to return to work at the ABC was previously discussed as a form of prostitution (66), but Vita finds herself in an even more compromising situation with her writing. She would like to write "a real play", in which she can "make up the future" (111), but is instead employed in writing strictly formulaic science fiction dramas. Vita resents these "obsolescent adolescent futuristic fantasies" (106) and finds their potential for self-fulfilment dangerous:

It's like, that's what the vision is, and if you accept this vision then you support the belief in developing that way. Muscly white men rescuing pretty girls in long dresses. (106)

She finds herself powerless because she "wasn't the one writing the storylines" (107). The prostitution of Vita's writing abilities in constructing obsolete fantasies



is more invasive and offensive to Vita than her enactment of male fantasies as a sex worker. Now, however, those cultural values are being critically examined and the stories in Baranay's coda explore alternatives to that very limited model of sexuality. Susan Hawthorne has argued that

Long term effects of the institution of heterosexuality include the domination of our minds by a particular world-view: the one developed by men ... The result of this is a limited conception of how relationships function. (Hawthorne 1991:317)

In stripping bare the institutional machinery of heterosexual relations, Vita seeks to rewrite how relationships might function otherwise.

Vita's celibacy indicates a rejection of both prostitution and romance as storylines. Sheila Jeffreys sees what she terms "chastity" as an "honourable choice" in the struggle for liberation:

Such a strategy could only cause disbelief in a male-supremacist society in which sex has been made holy. Sex is holy because of its role as a sacred ritual in the dominant/submissive relationship between men and women. The importance attached to sex defies rationality and can only be explained in this political way. (1990:315)

The coda also discusses sexuality as a form of "personal energy that you can turn into surfing or writing or sex" (104) and entertains some "alternative" and "eastern" concepts of spirituality.

*Also the Foucault idea that the emphasis on sexuality is to silence other desires. (Inez Baranay responds)*

Despite this effort to throw off the cloak of Western androcentricity, these discourses still feel inadequate: as Joe says, "I hate saying spiritual. But now no-one has any models" (110).

Vita's friend Joe is the facilitator of these conversations after his weekend workshops. He is also perhaps the character whose sexuality is under most scrutiny in the coda's time frame. The 1980s herald the threat of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly AIDS, so Joe's promiscuous homosexual presence acts as a site of conflict. While apparently seeking a new way to conceptualise sexuality — to reinscribe himself — Joe is nevertheless guileless in his pursuit of sex despite his apparent high-risk status. In fact, he implies this danger is part of the attraction

(116). Irigaray writes that the impulse to cite AIDS as a reason for reconsidering our sexual practices is reprehensible, especially, she argues,

that a so-called developed civilization like ours should need catastrophies to improve love-making. Such a conception of sexual ethics reeks of the most repressive and ideological notions of Western religions. (1993:61)

In some ways, Joe is represented as no different to the men who paid Violet: "Want lots, fast and exciting, finishing at the peak" (109). He tells Vita he would "give it all up" if

there was one last time that was perfect, couldn't be topped. I asked him his perfect scenario; it included several people and several drugs, videos and opulence. (116)

Joe is granted his "happy ending" by the text: he retraces his steps to look for the elegant old white building in which his remembered night of sexual exultation took place, but finds the structure was demolished twenty years ago. In its place stands a red-brick townhouse development. His "experience" was a fantasy and Baranay keeps it as such, stored in the mind of the character. Having ended two decades before it began, it is located in Joe's memory, not imposed on "real" bodies. His response to this realisation is to feel cheated, but in recompense he elevates the experience with the use of religious language: as ecstasy, exquisite salvation, exultation, reaching eternity's boundaries (125). But Joe's reverential construction is again undercut by the text, as he is left listening to "a rundown of the changing real-estate values of the street" (126). The yoking of economics and fantasy here seems ludicrously inappropriate, even irreverent. And yet Vita's role as a prostitute is based on the exchange of money for her to play out men's fantasies for them with no apparent conflict of interests.

While Joe can imagine fantasies of excess, he is pessimistic when it comes to responding to Vita's "perfect scenario", which involves fairly conventional literary desires:

I told him I wanted just one person, but everything. True love and anonymity, security and adventure, stability and variety, vigorous youth and wise age, respect and...  
"Oh enough," he said. "What do you want most?"  
"Love and romance."  
"You'll never get it." (116)

There is also Ginny, a female friend of Vita's who has just began mixing socially after years of living a separatist life. She "only took female clients. Mostly separatists. For a long time she had had little contact with men and none of them heterosexual" (117). It's not clear whether Ginny is a lesbian or has been living alone, or both, but her shock at finding that "stereotypical" men still exist is a register of the need for alternative stories, endings and beginnings for ways of living and forms of writing.

Judith is the other character introduced in the coda. It is Judith's flat that Joe has been minding, and he is shocked to find a stash of pornographic videos in a cupboard. Judith is presented as almost asexual. She was "calm and neat and pleasant. She got things done; without being boring" (113). She discovered that people treated her differently when she wore her gowns, which she sketched, painted, printed and sewed herself. She "expressed her personality through her gowns, her privacy and her dignity" (113). The gowns seem to offer her a haven of self-protection, covering her body in a cloak of comfort and mystery which is also an alternative to "those artistic moods and tears or that constant wide smile that creative people have" (113). Lesley, her boss at the casting agency, calls them nuns' habits (127), while Vita regards Judith as "unsexy — good looking, but sexy — in those robes and drapes" (115). There is a myriad of sexual descriptors operating here. While "drapes" speak of folds of domestic coverings, "gown" has completely different connotations. It especially signifies women as (potential) sexual partners in formalised courting rituals like balls, formals, and weddings. It is also the antithesis of the celibacy implied by nuns' habits.

*As a virgin, Judith's gowns represent a creative alternative to sexuality. I was thinking about, also, celibacy not as negation of sexuality; but as another way in which to acknowledge / explore it. (Inez Baranay responds)*

Watching the x-rated videos, Judith "watches herself watching them, alert for her own reactions. What is this remote, unreal feeling? Is this what people feel?" (121). Immediately afterwards, she approaches the fabric stretched out in her

sewing room awaiting construction into the curtains she has dreamed of in "various greens lit with pale gold and shadowed in purple" (122). She keeps the videos in her sewing cupboard. Side by side: her means of creativity beside a commercial, visual production of actors playing out their sexual roles.

Judith's beautifully elaborate gowns directly contrast the dressing gown she remembers her mother wearing, unfastened, after men had stayed the night. Judith is affronted by her mother on those mornings, refusing to "look at those breasts hanging wrinkled and heavy" (119). She was also offended by the smell that "was on her mother and in the bedroom when he stayed" (119). Judith's mother complies with "the lie that there exists a breed of woman whose true vocation is good-time-girl" (14). Her advice to Judith corresponds to the pretences Vita acted out as Violet:

Make him feel important. Don't tell him your troubles ... Never say no in bed. Don't be as silent, as secretive as you are, my dear girl. It is more attractive to laugh at jokes. (119-20)

While enduring this advice as well as the sexual banter between her mother and Uncle, Judith "would stare and stare into the intricate designs on the embroidered cushions, the painted plates" (120). Her creative impulses become centred on artistic production.

*yes, the eternal question, relation of sexuality and creativity – the kind of question that doesn't have an answer only different ways of asking it. The question of is it (either/both) focussed or dissipated. (Inez Baranay responds)*

When Judith seems to become pregnant, she has difficulty explaining her virginity to the doctor, so decides to "borrow someone else's story" (127) to explain not her virginity but her pregnancy: "he came back for just one last night then went to South America" (127). She leaves her job and her flat, "takes her grandmother's wedding ring and another borrowed story" (127) and heads for anonymity in a country town as "another deserted wife" (127).

Judith borrows from other stories because her experience does not fit into any of the prescribed narratives: you cannot be both a virgin and a mother, except as the Virgin Mary. By fabricating a lover, a marriage and a desertion, her story is familiar. In this new setting, Judith depreciates her skills as a fabric artist by doing

alterations and mending. In pre-natal class, a woman "asks her to make a frock, but Judith says only if there's a dress to copy from" (127). She now wants a pattern to guide her construction of both clothes and life-stories. As she constructs her sexuality to conform to social expectations, however, her creativity is stifled.

Ironically, Judith's handmade gowns are perfect for covering her growing body/ies. They are fantastic costumes themselves and can incorporate Judith's version of her sexuality, which appears contradictory to others: a pregnant virgin, asexual/celibate yet watching pornographic fantasy. As fiction, Judith's invention of her own sexuality breaks through those stereotypes by inscribing her body with her fantasy made real. Her creativity includes that of her sexuality so that the borders between the two, usually dichotomised as creation and procreation, are merged into one.

*Judith: the phantom pregnancy: ...the virgin who maybe gets "pregnant" when watching porn videos: in an era when sex seem-s/-ed to be talked about in every aspect except as the way babies are made – maybe Judith knew unconsciously about this meaning of sex. (Inez Baranay responds)*

Before her time is due, she is taken by an ambulance, drugged, and wakes with flattened stomach. There are women in "stiff white dresses" who tell her to "take these" and "beg her not to talk" (127). This brief episode speaks of her being institutionalised and silenced, of losing her power over her body, of being forced to swallow things that make her life fantastical — "she floats and dreams and watches them come and go" (128). The institution effectively flattens her body's creativity, restoring its version of the story. Whether it is a phantom pregnancy or a miscarriage, the evidence is erased, as Judith's position in the symbolic order also becomes problematic when she no longer understands their language: "She recognises the words but they do not make sense" (128). Her response is to re-invent her story in a different language that she does understand:

Judith tells the doctor what she knows: how to pour paint onto fabric so it looks like the rain falling on the sea, how to see that each colour contains all colours, how you can tie one piece of cloth into a turban or a veil or a sling to hold a baby. (128)

The multiple uses of Judith's artwork mean it can both accommodate and suggest a body's stories through a twist or a swirl, a movement around a body. In a similar way, Judith's participation in a number of stories that can constitute women's lives is as if she were trying on a gown for size; finding none that fit, she makes her own. This last passage, however, is hardly optimistic despite the suggestive creativity and beauty in the writing.

*You don't just want a kind of other version of, "and then they lived happily ever after" like, you know, "and then she went off and did her thing on her own and never had a day's fear again" or something. You know, it's not like that either, but you want something with some sense of triumph about it. (Inez Baranay)*

Baranay's effort to intervene in stories that constitute women's subjectivity and offer limited storylines for their lives is similar to what Elizabeth Grosz has identified as a need adequately to represent female non-maternal bodies, which requires "women's autonomous self-representations beyond the patriarchal investment in collapsing the feminine into the maternal" (1988a:32). The maternal body, she explains, is "both a neutered body (virgin) and a sexually active body (whore)", a triad which operates in Irigaray's discussion in "Women on the Market": "*Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women*" (1985:186). Irigaray argues that while virgins are pure exchange value, and mothers are excluded from exchange so that they may remain private property, enclosed in the father's house, prostitutes are left in circulation indefinitely, without teleological endings to their storylines.

Perhaps this is why Vita is left telling stories in the coda, trying to find a story into which she might write herself between the careers of virgin and mother. If prostitutes are rarely acknowledged or "legitimated", perhaps this is because they have so many stories to tell — stories that will disrupt romance and reveal it to be the same fantasy as prostitution. Despite the potentially disruptive position of prostitutes in Irigaray's argument and Baranay's novel, however, the sexualised non-maternal female body still seems to be left with very few narrative options except the need for new stories.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

COULD IRIGARAY BE EUROCENTRIC?:  
EXPLORING THE DESERT, EPILEPSY AND LESBIAN WRITING  
IN SUSAN HAWTHORNE'S *THE FALLING WOMAN* (1992)

I don't believe in endings any more. But nor do I agree that only the journey and not the arrival matters. An emphasis on endings suggests a static and not a dynamic view of life; an emphasis on journeys simply exhorts us to try harder. ... New images please. (Roberts 1978:159-60)

Elizabeth Webby and Lydia Wevers noted that throughout their anthology, *Goodbye to Romance* (1989), the female subject was displaced "from wife to mothered and mothering daughter" (1989:2). *Between Careers* operates outside even these familial relations, focusing almost exclusively on the individual female sexual subject. In some ways, Susan Hawthorne's *The Falling Woman* (1992) extends further what Wevers and Webby found as a "general destabilising of the boundaries which construct the gendered subject, calling into question all the terms which might presuppose identity: wife, mother, daughter, lover, woman, narrative, story" (1989:3).

*The Falling Woman* ignores traditional notions of "romance" as it tells the story of a lesbian couple whose relationship, from the novel's beginning, is comfortably established, even though they are waiting to be physically reunited. The terms which contribute to constructing the identity of the main character, Estella, centre on her body — as a lesbian with epilepsy. These terms register her "difference", as it might be perceived by the dominant culture. How the terms epilepsy and lesbian relate to each other and to Stella are the subject of exploration and negotiation in the novel. In yoking them together, the text also pivots on the connotations of the title. Falling woman redefines the derogatory term for a prostitute — "fallen woman" — into an active process instead of a static position; that focus on sexuality is subverted by its referral to a lesbian, who has fallen away from exclusive patriarchal models of (hetero)sexuality. As such, it resonates with the original sin attributed to Eve's fall. It also speaks of the physical bodily movement characteristic of epilepsy, which is often called the "falling disease".



This story, then, experiments with how a woman whose body does not fall within the "normal" activities allotted to a woman by the patriarchy might be described and positioned within a text, a text which takes

*a female body, a woman's body, as the central thing, in a world view, or a woman-identified world view, rather than a male-identified world view. (Susan Hawthorne)*

In this narrative, the need to question how a female body is given social meaning is confronted by assuming the autonomy of that body: by regarding Estella's bodily activities as "normal" to her world. Hawthorne's characters are positioned in their female-centred world as a given, not an anomaly.

*there's no need for a coming out novel as such, and I wanted my characters just to exist in the world in which they exist and not make any excuses or justifications or whatever for what they are. (Susan Hawthorne)*

This worked to question readers' perceptions of difference in various ways, as is evident by the reception some gave it. Hawthorne comments that some of her friends regarded the book as a "coming out" for epilepsy, whereas her parents were concerned with the lesbian content (see appendix). While Suzanne Yanko wanted to review the book for the newsletter of The National Epilepsy Association of Australia, they "couldn't handle it", Hawthorne says, "so the review writer came and interviewed me instead":

*there's this sense that, you know, one difference is enough. That, for instance, if you have epilepsy then obviously you live in a nuclear family in the suburbs and you're a normal person and you make every effort to be as normal as you possibly can. And of course if you're a lesbian, I mean it just doesn't work! (Susan Hawthorne)*

Despite Yanko's support for the book, the limitations placed on her writing by the institution meant that the published interview/review certainly sets up epilepsy as "difference" enough. It focuses, understandably, on the epilepsy content of the novel and is keen to establish its autobiographical basis. It cheerily reports that Hawthorne "laughed (probably embarrassed!) at my suggestion that she is a wonderful role model: successful, female — AND with epilepsy" (Yanko 1992:6). In commenting on the book's two themes, "epilepsy — and feminism" (6), the feminism is never taken up. Estella and her partner Olga are mentioned, as are Hawthorne and

her business partner in a discussion of their success as publishers. As if to make up for this novel's difference, the review is merged into a discussion with John Hanrahan on his book, *O Excellent Virgin*, which deals with epilepsy, and of his daughter who has epilepsy. The review ends by referring back to the status quo, locating epilepsy within the normalcy of "family" — for both novels:

(as these two writers show) although people with epilepsy represent the full range of lifestyles and abilities, in every case there's a "family" involved — and their care means that epilepsy need not be a lonely experience. (Yanko 1992:6)

Other published reviews usually established the text's lesbian and feminist interest first and then its epilepsy content. Epilepsy is recognised as integral to the novel's structure, but its politics is firmly located in the realm of lesbian feminism. This is significant when it comes to the novel's perceived limits, which I want to take up later. The narrative, though, is engaged in highlighting and then merging or braiding together Estella's differences, as identifiable yet inseparable. This is made possible through three interweaving strands of narrative.

The voices of Stella, Estelle and Estella, form a constellation which represent aspects of her identity, revolving around the activities of her body over time and space. Her fragmented identity parallels her body's separate(d) narratives.

*I wanted the freedom to have a range of viewpoints and yet still retain one character as central to it. And I like the idea of having, not a multiple personality, but not a single personality structure. I mean I don't think any of us are that straightforward. (Susan Hawthorne)*

Stella is the child of the past — daughter of Theo and Coral, and sister to Fiona. Stella's narrative traces her life from birth (which was postponed for the benefit of the doctor's lunch, echoing the concerns about medical institutions to be found in Margaret Coombs' work), through her upbringing in the country to her consciousness raising days at university. It marks her transition from heterosexual to lesbian. It also charts the onset of her epilepsy from birth, its diagnosis and drug-controlled repression, and its return into her life. This part of Stella's identity is constituted through the discourse of Western medicine, not only through diagnosis

and its associated stigmatisation but also as a direct result of the hierarchy of power on which the institution operates. Coral's story is that

The nurses had orders to be obeyed. No child was to be born without the presence of a doctor, in case of complications, but the doctor could not be found. His absence was the complication. The nurses stifled the birth. They held her back in darkness, in an unbearable state of pain ... Eventually the doctor came, late, his lunch still on his breath. (8)

From Estelle's perspective, the trauma is critical:

*The muscles contract. I am pushed. I am pulled. An unbearable pressure presses on me. My skull is crushed. I am choking. The pain begins at my crown and moves nerve cell by painful nerve cell to the base of my spine.* (9)

The doctor's presence at birth carries such cultural authority that his absence is inscribed in Stella's body for the rest of her life, through the erratic electrical activity of her synapses known as epilepsy. This narrative doesn't record the constant and insidious injustices of such a system, like Coombs' texts, or critique the discourse that produces such situations, as does Place's novel; instead Hawthorne has chosen to show Stella reinterpreting the cultural narratives circulating around epilepsy in more positive and strengthening forms, while not negating the very real and life-threatening effects of the condition.

In some ways, this is the most "expected" narrative in form and content. Its chronological tracing of life from birth to adulthood is a traditional linear growth narrative which is familiar in terms of reading patterns. It is set in contrast to Estelle's narrative voice, which represents the side of this character who experiences and tries to make sense of her epilepsy.

Using italics to mark its difference, Estelle's first person voice erupts through the text, as epilepsy does in Stella's life.

*it sort of deconstructs the text in a way. It disrupts it. And yet I don't mean that in a deconstructionist sense. I mean it in the sense that, in the same way that when one has a seizure, life is disrupted and interrupted.* (Susan Hawthorne)

In its demarcation of an alternative mode of existence, Hawthorne's translating of this state into language involves drawing on other knowledges. As if commenting on her own — and any — narrative, Estelle remarks early in the text,

*I am learning to spell. It gives me power over these words ... I cast a spell over the words I need, I want. I name the world. In naming, in spelling, I catch the world into my net. The world takes on a certain shape when I name the objects in it. (46)*

Here, birth represents a point of departure from which the narrative travels in an/other space and time: backwards into an exploration of matriarchal myths and legends from ancient Rome, Greece, China, India and Aboriginal Australia, and forward into an optimistic reconsideration of those knowledges:

*We sing and we remember. We sing and we invent, creating new meanings for old stories, old chants. We reinterpret the story, the chant ... On the dusty plains of Australia and in the island world of Greece, they tell the same story. (41-42)*

These story-lines rove across mathematical formulae, chants, hieroglyphs, dance, geometric shapes, seasonal changes, colour coding, astronomy and geographic landmarks. Like Baranay, Hawthorne suggests that a preoccupation with linear time — with finding beginnings and endings — ignores the cyclic knowledges available on a timeless continuum, a sphere inherently associated with the experience of epilepsy:

*You say that birth and death are not as different as we imagine. You say there are miniature deaths. You describe the falls, the breathlessness, the cyanosis of the skin. You say knowledge and ignorance are relative, that nothing is absolute ... You say that beginnings and endings are merely arbitrary points, markers that allow us to comprehend the world. ... You say we should value these capacities. We should learn to read them just as we learn to read letters, or faces, or bodily expressions. You say the future is comprehensible to all. (108)*

Through these insights Estelle is linked to the Delphic priestesses whose perspective on life and whose visions of the future are paralleled to the vortex brought on by seizures: "If she were religious it would be easy to call it divine intervention, or perhaps a relative of the laurel-inspired seizures of the Delphic priestess" (125). As positive gifts they are set in contrast to the stories of epilepsy made available to Stella:

The only stories she'd ever heard or read about epileptics were ones in which they died or were regarded as mad or exotic. On the positive side, there was Dostoyevsky's idiot, or Van Gogh. (214)

Then there was a history founded on a paranoia and fear of fitting — particularly fitting women: "in another time ... her fits would have marked her out for different treatment: witchcraft, reverence, madness. Fear creates such distortions" (125).

By drawing on all kinds of times, cultures, stories and knowledges, Hawthorne allows them to connect and clash while she actively writes another story.

The bricolage of this storyline parallels the frequently shifting personal pronouns. Estelle's incursions are often addressed to a second person who is never introduced as such.

*There's the singular "you" and the plural "you" but I don't make, I don't actually signify that but leave that up to the reader to figure out ... there is a sense in which the "you" could be either a character in the book, it could be the reader or it could be a collective, sort of body of women or something like that. (Susan Hawthorne)*

This ambiguity of identity/s is in keeping with the splitting of Stella's identity and Estelle's alternative sense of time fractured. This narrative seems to be weaving a contemporary global hybrid mythology, though, with a privileged emphasis on its location in Australia and the inclusion of Aboriginal women's knowledges:

*You are teaching me the ancient iconography of this land: the coils, circles, spirals, figures and shapes drawn in the sand. You are teaching me the language of the landscape: to follow the routes to waterholes and hilltops. (191)*

The invisibility of this source of knowledge as eternally "other", then, seems incongruous. Several reviewers questioned this "borrowing" of Aboriginal culture and its implications of white appropriation, especially in a book "with a professed abhorrence for the cultural imperialism of western patriarchies" (Mills 1992:45; see also Levy 1992a; Bartlett 1992).

*I went back and actually fiddled with that. I had many more characters in it, many more names and characters in it at one stage. I also decided that that was getting too complicated and that it needed simplifying. Which was also why I cut back to the you. (Susan Hawthorne)*

There is one brief page near the end of the novel where Dorothy and Iris, two Aboriginal characters, and their children "instruct Olga and Estella in their ways" (244), but their naming here by two Westernised names seems at odds with their heritage on which Hawthorne focusses and her project to acknowledge the generations of stories being shared and compiled across cultures.

*The names are in fact names I know some aboriginal women have – there is the marvellous painter Dorothy Djulkulul whose work I admire. Iris is a Greek name meaning rainbow and messenger and it makes the link between the two worlds so far apart in time and place and yet there*

*is an overlap of symbolism. I'm trying to show metaphorically/symbolically connections across cultures. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

Paralleled to Estelle's spiritual explorations is the present-day narrative which charts Estella's journey with her lover, Olga, to the inland of Australia. Olga is an archeologist looking for material evidence of the past while Estella tries to incorporate her bodily/spiritual experiences into a mythological herstory. Together, Estella and Olga map their perspectives for us, finding cross-references in the stories each has discovered:

She and Olga have spent long hours on this journey pulling out the recurring images of snake and bird. Estella retelling myths, Olga placing them in an archeological setting, finding more and more examples of snakes and birds in ancient cultures around the world. (125-26)

Hawthorne's retrieval of legends and myths based on women's knowledges is also a recharting of the cultural maps that guide how we see the topography of our bodies and lives. At one point, Olga sees Estella drawing mudmaps in the dirt with a stick but she is actually tracing a knitting pattern design passed on from her sea-captain grandfather. Together they identify the chevron and cross symbols of the bird goddess and the diamond shaped "marriage lines" which symbolise women's two lips: "To think that my stern Presbyterian grandfather and all his kin knitted cunts on to their jumpers!" (48). Knitted into the fabric of lives and jumpers, these symbols codified the importance of women and their knowledges in the same way that Hawthorne's novel makes connections cross-culturally between symbols, shapes and stories and their significance to women's lives, spirituality and the land.

The tracks which Estella and Olga travel are largely unmarked on their supply of maps; there are gaps between printings (18) similar to the manner in which women's knowledge has been lost in the past. Their geographical surveying also acts as a metaphor for the novel's rewriting of the Australian desert landscape. Punctuated with naturalistic description, this narrative takes pleasure in describing the sensuality of various sites — billabongs, creeks, sand dunes and mountain ridges. The women's journey also refigures that landscape through a female literary gaze. As Kay Schaffer argues in *Women and the Bush* (1988), literary representations of the

bush have often cast it as both seductress and adversary in a gendered ambivalence which revolves around male ownership and his efforts to tame and control the land, to make it productive. Olga's and Estella's exploration of the desert also genders the land as female, but in celebratory terms and as an extension of their own lesbian sexuality. Describing Olga "sitting in the curve of a pink-grey rock that seems to enfold her" (45), Estella writes in her notebook:

There is a small hole with a pool of wetness at its base.

At some time water must have flowed here. Where the water has been it is rounded and soft, like a woman's body. The colours, too, are soft: pink and mauve and grey with a touch of yellow.

The rock immediately in front of me is like smooth buttocks. A few dried leaves have settled into the base of the crack, like a star. Just beyond the grey-pink entrance is a shallow cave. It's like no other place I've ever seen. Like some sort of vulval entrance to a womb. Sharp red rocks falling like a curtain. Sitting inside it is a thoroughly different experience from the pink folding rock. (45)

Their exploration remaps the landscape in terms that are positively and powerfully female. This contrasts the notebooks of early explorers which Schaffer describes as noting "pliant, virgin land" which they felt impelled to "penetrate" (Schaffer 1988:60). Hawthorne attributes the site known as the Olgas, or Katatjuta, with the wisdom of age when she describes it as "sprawling like an old woman with lumpy patches on her body, or like one of those ancient figurines that are all buttocks and breasts" (251-52).

In the same way that the form of this text is important, the landscapes take on a forms that hold their own stories:

*I pause briefly to take in the beauty of the forms, a detail of colour or shape. The shape of the rocks, the caves, the watermarks and depressions remind me of stories I have been told ... I run my hands over the rounded bellies of boulders, which are taut, smooth, warm. I can see the pebbly tears of women, weeping for their still-born children. (253)*

This (re)discovery of the land-as-woman by two lesbian lovers becomes a celebration of its diversity, embedded in a narrative/journey which has no seeming beginning or end. This factor has irritated at least one reviewer who commented that

we expect the long journey to the Rock to be significant, but it is too concerned with dust, punctures and getting bogged in sand. (Davison 1992:5)

The site of Uluru is evoked rather than named, and is treated with the same emotional response as the beauty of every other rock, hill or creek on the journey: in this narrative structure, narrative climaxes are replaced by a long trail of sensual delights.

This form corresponds to what Irigaray would claim to be representative of women's desires and their writing:

it really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse. (Irigaray 1985:29-30)

This economy certainly upsets Davison's expectations of a single linear journey to the goal-object of a single "Rock".

*I didn't actually want it to have, you know, this vroom sort of climax, because that went against the grain of what I was trying to do. ... I remember having conversations about those sorts of things with people like Finola Moorhead, and other friends, other women who I know, and we often talked about how the shape of a women's novel could be different. I remember we used to make jokes about how the phallic climactic thing of a man's novel, you know, he has one orgasm and then the book ends, whereas what we had in mind was a multi-orgasmic book that didn't necessarily have this sort of shape. So those ideas were there in my head and certainly I know that that has fed into the structure. (Susan Hawthorne)*

Moorhead's interest in female aesthetics in writing is well documented. Her novel, *Remember the Tarantella* (1987), was apparently prompted by Christina Stead's challenge for her to write a book without male characters and was planned diagrammatically according to spirals, spider webs, tarot, astrological signs and dress patterning. Moorhead comments she

wanted to write something that was feminist in aesthetic, not just coming to the climax and that's it. I wanted something like in the diagram, having many knobs. And something like music. I informed myself through the Tarot and also through the star charts and through colour and through number, all those arcane kinds of disciplines ... [I wanted to] create a concert — which is what the Tarot is — a symphony or a choral work, something that you can read over and over again if you want to, a chorale of characters. (Moorhead 1993:215-16)

Like Moorhead, then, Hawthorne's narrative is consciously engaged in a female aesthetic of writing. The last ten pages before "The Fall" weave the voices together more tightly, waiting only a few sentences before the next one breaks in. It



also brings the three narratives to a meeting point, so we are at both the end and the beginning of Estella's trip, which is the end-point of Stella's journey, both of which are enmeshed in Estelle's timelessness. The effect is far from a resolution; it is quite chaotic, spiralling like the "*myriad [of] falling stars*" (269) which signify "The Fall" at the end. Here, the "she" and "you" merge with an optimistic "I", but still remain neither separate nor unified.

*because the "I" is sort of fluid then the temporal stuff is also fluid and that also ties in with the epilepsy theme, of a sense of timelessness or a sense of dropping out of time. (Susan Hawthorne)*

*The Falling Woman*, then, is innovatively constructed around its subject, whose lesbian sexuality and epilepsy situates her peripherally to the dominant discourse whose cultural history she reinterprets and looks beyond in order to find knowledges and stories that make meaning to her. In the same way that the text challenges the assumptions of our society which tend to correlate "health" and heterosexuality with "normality", it also disrupts the expectations of narrative and reading practices.

*I think that when you have something different to say then you are forced to say it in different ways and so you have to seek out a form that's going to suit your needs, suit the needs of the text and of the content and the themes that you're dealing with, and the perspective – because you've got to be able to challenge the way that people read, and you've got to make them sit up a bit so that they actually take notice of what's in there. (Susan Hawthorne)*

It is ironic that Stella's relatively "straight" narrative was the one which propelled me to read; Estelle's and Estella's are the more theoretically vigorous yet less "pleasurable".

*we all respond to the pull of storytelling / of narrative. Stella is there to keep the reader happy. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

This makes me question how I read and the conditioning implicit in that act which seems to require a "driving" narrative to steer the story. The feminist politics of this novel and its innovative and theoretically stimulating form are aspects I admire and can celebrate. Yet, the experience of reading the novel was less than stimulating and, as some theory can be, even turgid and slow.

*Estella's part is much more mundane and is there to de-exoticize and demystify Estelle. I would re-edit some bits of Estella now. But she's "real life" in a sense – we'd all edit our lives if we could "do" them again.*  
(Susan Hawthorne responds)

Sometimes I felt I was being forcibly reminded of the novel's theoretical credentials, like when the books beside Estella's bed are listed. Interestingly, my feeling of the novel being overwhelmed by the theoretical concerns but lacking in readerly desire is the opposite to Susan Hawthorne's experience of writing it, which acknowledges the interaction of theory with lived experience but clearly values the former as most influential to her writing:

*the notion of the female body as a source of writing. Now I think that that very much comes out of my own experience of my own body and of having epileptic fits and things like that, so that in that sense it's writing my own bodily experience. But it was made easier to do that by the existence of those ideas ... I wouldn't have been able to think those things if I hadn't gone through the seventies, and if I hadn't lived a fairly strongly separatist lifestyle at one stage, and certainly thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women. And I actually see that as much more central to the kind of theoretical face of the work than the French feminist stuff which was just the bit poured in at the end.* (Susan Hawthorne)

Reviewers also felt this tension between a desire to applaud the theoretical feminist project of the text and their problems with the novel's readability. Dennis Davison says the book is "ambitious" (1992); Delia Falconer that it is "overly ambitious" (1992). Falconer is bold enough to say that the fascinating ideas are "undermined by a writing style which is sometimes rather dull", while Bronwen Levy is probably saying the same thing when she writes of "a diminishing creative tension" in a book she feels is "idealising as well as idealistic" (1992a:8). Claire Mills praises the book as an "experimental and confronting endeavour in the (re)creation of female culture, [which] demands of the reader a high degree of attention and objectivity" (1992:45). Her misgivings again articulate the tension in wanting to support this feminist project but not finding it personally rewarding. Mills' criticism, however, is aimed at separatist politics:

*Well, I tried. Ultimately I was defeated in my most sincere efforts at objectivity by a desire to be sisterly-supportive, only to be confounded by the realisation that Hawthorne cannot possibly be "sister" to me or to any woman who still hopes, however faint-heartedly at times, for a world in which the two sexes can live in harmony and mutual respect.* (1992:45)

It is the female-centred aesthetic which I find most attractive that Mills objects to, ironically because it excludes celebrating the procreative activities of Estella's heterosexual sisters:

Olga and Estella appropriate only the more aesthetic aspects of female creativity ... In the bad old world of patriarchy, heterosexual woman bore sons and heirs. In the brave new world of radical feminism heterosexual woman will provide sisters and lovers. Either way, heterosexual woman is left holding the baby. (1992:46)

Mills seems to want to applaud the novel as feminist but rebuke it as lesbian, revealing a different tension to the earlier reviews mentioned. Her review also indicates an anxiety about lesbian literary politics which is as tangible in its presence in Mills' feminist criticism as much as it is through its absence in the National Epilepsy Foundation's review.

It is significant that Mills compares *The Falling Woman* with Finola Moorhead's *Remember the Tarantella*, suggesting they both "stumble[] under the weight of ... symbolism as well as ... politics" (Mills 1992:46). In *Quilt* (1985), Moorhead discusses her views on plot in relation to women's conversation:

*so much in us is imbued with the male aesthetic. The suspense. The purpose. The point. The revelation. The relentless progress of the plot. Appreciation of this is stamped into our learning programmes and when we read fiction for pleasure we want it. We want to be teased, to be told what happens and then why, how, etc. We want to be made ignorant only to be given intelligence. This is a learned appreciation of a learned aesthetic of a style of story.* (1985:29)

To deny this aesthetic in your own writing form, she says, is to submit oneself to self doubt as well as lack of "aesthetic success" (1985:29), presumably through reviews like Mills'.

So how do we read and write (about) lesbian work? Judith Roof is concerned with the unrepresentability of lesbian sexuality (as we understand representation), given a patriarchal language and narrative formulae which rely on visibility. Using Irigaray's formulation on sameness, that the centrality of the phallus defines everything in terms of its own presence/lack, Roof sees lesbian sexuality as fundamentally subversive:

Because of its superficial absence of penis, lesbian sexuality provokes a crisis in a system of representation which is reliant upon a symmetry, if not

sameness, between the sexes, a crisis that reveals the mechanisms which suppress difference in the depiction of heterosexuality. (1989:100)

For their anthology, *Moments of Desire: Sex and Sensuality by Australian Feminist Writers*, Susan Hawthorne and Jenny Pausacker looked for "writing that did not use the structural power differences between women and men as the basis for eroticisation" (1989:xi). In doing so, they justify the inclusion of pieces "about exchanging a look, eating a meal, or turning forty, but as we see it, all these pieces are about sexual feelings, whether or not they are about sexual acts" (1989:xii). The ideas behind this policy might also be read through *The Falling Woman* and regarded as a conscious political decision.

*One makes "policies" of selection in an anthology but not in a novel – where it's much more complex. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

As the introduction to the anthology suggests, "the power of some of the pieces lay not so much in *what* happened, but in *how* it happened, or what *might* have happened" (1989:xii). Women are questioning, exploring and making choices about the language they wish to use about sex and sensuality, the editors argue, like "when to name and when to indicate, when to use colloquial terms and when to use image and metaphor" (1989:xii).

*Yes, that's so. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

The images of Hawthorne's landscapes, then, can be read as metaphors, as an alternative to and a disruption of other discourses on sexuality. This seeming displacement of sexuality on to the landscape avoids what Levy complains of as the "rather voyeuristic position we are encouraged to adopt as readers" of Elizabeth Jolley's fictions depicting lesbian relationships (1992b:232). Levy identifies

a still largely masculine construction of women's sexuality, of women's bodies being posited as such by the "male gaze", [which] results in obstacles which women must negotiate if they wish to develop alternative accounts, and practices, of sexuality. (1992b:226)

The apparent absence of (readerly) desire — but just a minute; here I'm confusing my lack of desire to read with a lack of desire in the text. That's different. There's no lack of tenderness between Olga and Estella. They make love before dawn, exchange loving looks, care for each other. And there are also Stella's previous loves. There's a

beautiful passage by Estelle about auto-eroticism. But does this list mean there is desire in the novel? Why do I think there has to be? But this is a text concerned with claiming a (textual) position for female centred sexuality, isn't it? So maybe reading it in terms of subverting traditional patriarchal heterosexual reading expectations is apt, especially in light of what Judith Roof writes:

Rendering sexuality in terms of the visible engages the scopophilic pleasure of the male gaze ... The lesbian, instead of imparting the implicit phallic desire of the "normal" woman, conveys a different, concerted absence which frustrates both symmetry and visibility. (1989:101)

This is a strongly contested area. The suggestion that Hawthorne and Pausacker were pleased with the number of women who concentrated "on simple sensual awareness" (1989:xii) in their anthology was derided by Jyanni Steffensen:

Women's erotic writing "returning to the simple wonders of sensual awareness", as *Moments of Desire's* back cover advocates, is not going to make pornography or conventional heterosexual power relations "go away". (1989:32)

Steffensen's concern is that this feminist writing on sexuality, and its corollary in the anti-pornography debate, is sanitised and prescriptive. She sees this as an effort to diverge from the predominant construction of "masculine" sexuality which has been imposed as "normal" for so long. In doing so, she argues, the selection of writing contained in that anthology acts to limit the range of women's desires:

feminist erotic writing is surely [about] ... addressing the extent to which women as subjects/objects of their *own* (fabricated) desires have been excluded historically from discourses on sexualities. But why should this invention be a dreary des(s)ert? (1989:32)

Hawthorne has been actively intervening in the construction of women's sexuality by making public their writing on these topics. In *The Exploding Frangipanni: Lesbian Writing from Australia and New Zealand* (1990), Hawthorne and Dunsford, the editors, introduce the book in terms of an explorative journey:

Whether it is our bodies or our minds; whether it is the way our work places are organized or the shape of our relationships; what the writers here are attempting is the creation of a map, a navigational chart that can help us explore our own hidden mythology and a way of finding paths into the future. (1990:10)

Perhaps Hawthorne's novel can be productively read as a map which presents another discursive field from which lesbian sexuality can be written; the land as a

body onto which sexuality is mapped in new configurations outside of sensationalist, voyeuristic or clinical language.

In her discussion of what might constitute erotic writing for women, Bronwen Levy argues that women writers have developed different textual strategies for writing about sexuality:

Given a cultural context of repression, it is likely that erotic writing will often be heavily encoded as a subtext: allusions, suggestions, and symbolism may well be ambiguous. (1992b:228)

She advises that a critic may well "need to attune herself to the possibilities of metaphor and symbol" (224), and develop "an ability to read texts for what is not there, for muted, subsumed subtexts" (230). The texts she is speaking about, however, are pre-'70s books written mostly before second wave feminism which, she argues, is now based on sexual politics: "For women's writing, the connection of erotics with other forms of struggle is a crucial insight and, ultimately, politically unavoidable" (Levy 1992b:223).

In choosing the desert to explore, Hawthorne's novel does avail itself of descriptive metaphors of dryness, aridity, even infertility. But then this is also a myth as the desert is rich and abundant after rain.

*This is a culturally determined view and a Eurocentric view. My deserts are alive and rich and full of life all the time – if only one takes the time to look, to know, to see differently. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

Water is quite often a site of great ambivalence in this novel as it holds the potential for drowning, a danger especially pressing when combined with epilepsy. Estella often reminds herself of the potential hazard of three inches of bathwater to someone with epilepsy and she has dreams about drowning. During her outback journey, her seizure while swimming in a waterhole understandably casts a shadow on the whole idea of water for the remainder of the journey.

There is little in terms of lubrication in this story; no slipping and sliding of flesh nor nourishing waters: pleasure is purely aesthetic. Exploring the geographic "heart" of the country is the nearest we get to bodily matter.

*but plenty in terms of heat. Heat, warmth are important metaphors. Metaphorically I am (perhaps) saying that warmth of feeling is a precondition of lust. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

Irigaray maintains that fluid is a vital concept in reconceptualising women's sexuality and writing. Within the phallic economy, she argues, value is based on (its) concrete and visible form, its erect and solid image, while

historically the properties of fluids have been abandoned to the feminine... Thus fluid is always in a relation of excess or lack vis-à-vis unity. (Irigaray 1985:116-117)

*I am challenging the merely technical and mechanical basis of lust – lubrication alone is mechanical and possibly Eurocentric. Heat, lust warmth is the lead up (like sensuality) to satisfying and multidimensional (sexual) relationships. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

Irigaray's association of fluids with the subversion of patriarchal economies is directly related to her practice of writing the body. For her, writing and sexuality are intimately linked:

Must this multiplicity of female desire and female language be understood as shards, scattered remnants of a violated sexuality? A sexuality denied? The question has no simple answer. The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess. (Irigaray 1985:30)

Hawthorne's fragmentary style was often commented on by reviewers, Davison in particular being distressed by the format. What interests me is Irigaray's association of women's sexuality/writing, fluids and "excess", a term which seems to have been taken up in the reception of writings representing lesbian sexuality.

Both Steffensen and Shane Rowlands in her review of recent lesbian writing use the term "excess" to act as a particularly commendable, subversive and desirable signifier of lesbian texts. Celebrating lesbian theory "for providing the vital detour around a number of theoretical impasses" in feminism (1992:134), Rowlands cites participants who "have emphasized the excessive qualities and eccentric discursive positioning of lesbianism" as critical to this success (1992:133). On the other hand, she says, *The Exploding Frangipanni* tends to "reinforce a sense of lesbian connectedness which suppresses the excess and tension" of its stories (Rowlands 1992:138-39). Bronwen Levy similarly argues that "this

collection begins, but then forestalls a more creative (because dangerous and exciting) conflict" in and of lesbian writing (Levy 1992b:135).

Mary Fallon's novel, *Working Hot* (1989), was particularly favoured by reviewers who heralded its excess and daring (Steffensen 1989; Manning 1989; Hardie 1989; Lucas 1989; Giles 1989). This is part of its radical politics. It is highly innovative in its discursive organisation and takes a very explicit, provocative and confrontational approach in its writing of lesbian sexuality. The publisher, Sybylla Press, was also praised for its risk-taking in this project. Excess, then, is an apt term for Fallon's positioning of her text beyond those boundaries imposed by the canon of heterosexuality and phallogocentrism. I wonder, though, if this has become a prescriptive quality of lesbian writing in order to mark some sort of "authenticity" and politics in contrast to the sexual hegemony.

In her introduction to Linda Singer's book on "Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic", Judith Butler writes,

Singer follows the Foucaultian position that pleasure can no longer be understood in opposition to power, for power is the discursive matrix by which pleasure is produced and circulated ... Inasmuch as the proliferative capacity of this economy outstrips its regulatory means, it creates sites of excess value, mentioned above. Insofar as these sites of erotic value are constituted discursively, they become cultural positions from which a certain eroticized speaking and agency emerge. Constituted as excessive, outside the economy and yet as the very currency of exchange, women, for Singer, are in the non-systematizable position of being both inside and outside disciplinary structures. (1993:9)

Erotics between women is presumably doubly so, so that the "excesses" of lesbian writing like Fallon's speak from a position made available by the dominant discourse of heterosexuality and to a large extent enact that positioning as one of excess, beyond the boundaries, on the fringes, marginal. Rather than detracting from its radicality or subversiveness, Singer's theory suggests that the characterising and valuing of lesbian writing for its excesses is a critical position made available and actively generated by the dominant heterosexual economy in order to contain it. Ironically, it leaves no place from which to speak about Hawthorne's novel, either from the centre or the fringe.



So must reading be a seduction to make me read on? If heteropatriarchy leaves little space to account for Hawthorne's writing in the same way that it can accommodate Fallon's, neither does Irigaray's account of *écriture féminine* in her emphasis on fluids and *jouissance*. Hawthorne's non-patriarchal textual politics refuses lesbian fetishisation through excess or erotics.

*I am playing here – but showing how it might be possible to argue for a completely different erotic economy and metaphorical world view than the one we now inhabit (intellectually) and which is dominated by postmodern, i.e. European / Northern preconceptions. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

There is "excess" in the trope of epilepsy, which is as much to do with the body as sexuality, if not more so. But excess doesn't seem to be convincingly necessary anyway. Does our position in Australia alter how those theoretical ideas are applied to this landscape, as Hawthorne suggests? I have imagined that if theorising the body was carried out in the tropics it might conceivably have a different emphasis, as the heat and humidity here means we are constantly dealing with the cycles of fluids passing out, over and through our bodies — drinking, sweating, swimming, showering, and getting rained on for large parts of the day and year.

*Connection with Eurocentrism is the simple difference in rainfall – in European imaginations deserts = fear; in an Australian imagination it could be different. (Susan Hawthorne responds) ..*

Perhaps the lesbian unrepresentability Roof speaks of lies in Hawthorne's doubling back to refuse what is becoming an orthodoxy of excess, in her defiantly writing her lesbian characters and their world as ordinary. A similar issue became central to the conference which resulted in the collection of papers entitled *Pleasure and Danger* (Vance 1984). Its subtitle, *Exploring Women's Sexuality*, is set next to the dichotomy of pleasure and danger and was meant to indicate both an exploration and positive reconstruction of women's sexuality by women, and a critique of its repressive representation by patriarchal agents. The organisers were in part motivated by the concern that "a premature orthodoxy had come to dominate feminist discussion" (Vance 1984:451) that focussed on the negative aspects of sexuality as dangerous for women (in terms of male violence). The controversy surrounding this

conference was generated by those concerned that the conference set up another orthodoxy of unorthodoxness; that is, that it was "actively promoting these [patriarchal] values through their public advocacy of pornography, sex roles, and sadomasochism [sic] and their insistence that this kind of sexuality means liberation for women" (in Denise Thompson 1991:223; significantly, this protest has been excised from the 1983 volume of *Feminist Studies* in which it was published).

*This is the old power of heterosexuality, crossdressed in queer sexual practise: sado-masochism, transvestivism, transexuality, straight queers, lesbian queers, lesbian boys, butch and femme and paedophilia. There is the old power of sexual domination based on difference, so that radical feminist sexuality can be proclaimed: boring, prudish, all the same. (Susan Hawthorne 1994)*

As Denise Thompson argues, whatever kinds of sexualities are included in discussions like these, an awareness of pleasure and sexuality as cultural constructions needs to be included:

The problematic of sexuality could be more usefully elucidated by asking questions about the meaning and purpose of various forms of sexual desire, about how that desire is constituted within the context of a phallogocentric social order, a context which is not always "dangerous" but which generates "pleasure" too. We need to ask questions about what choices and responsibilities we have, given that sexual desire is not experienced as "chosen" in any rational, conscious, deliberate sense. And, finally, we need to be more explicit about the moral framework from which we speak, and about the relations to power we are addressing. (1991:209)

Sylvia Martin has commented that being "branded" a lesbian writer has its disadvantages in that "everything they produce [is] reduced to that one aspect of their complex identities" (1992:42).

*Stories about work or culture or relationships were chosen [for *The Exploding Frangipanni*] to show specifically that lesbians do more things than just sex in their lives. In a similar way [*Falling Woman*] is not attempting to be only about the sex aspect of lesbian lives. We also have other histories, we have other things we think about including our dis/abilities, our work, our ideas about the world and the universe. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

This is something that Hawthorne clearly undermines in her novel by using three narrative voices. Estella's epilepsy constitutes as much of her identity, and the novel's form, as her being lesbian. In fact, her experiences of epilepsy are certainly in "excess" of the usual electrical circuits of synapses. Perhaps I'm doing the novel a

disservice by drawing it into the arena of lesbian writing, but then I would be doing the same thing by not doing so.

*It is centrally located in a 'tradition' (meaning 10-20 years) of international lesbian fiction. H.D., Woolf, Stein, Barnes, Wittig, Rich, Lorde, Namiooshi even Winterson are influences; in Australia this is best represented by Moorhead and Hodgman. (Susan Hawthorne responds)*

Traces of Estelle can be heard in the poetry of Hawthorne's *The Language in My Tongue* (1993), which almost exclusively hinges on the inevitable disorder of the symbolic order involved for those who experience epilepsy. The experience of a seizure here is in excess of the language available for its description. As in Estelle/a's case, it is both an exaggerated bodily event and also an out-of-body experience. In this sense, epilepsy is largely unrepresentable, as Roof argues for lesbianism, and is mostly invisible, except when it plays itself out through the body.

In Hawthorne's collection of poetry the body-as-land trope is also present: "My body is a country that I know" (147). "Belly language" is full of body landmarks: thinness like twigs, skin like bark. But the language that speaks through this body is also mapped: as "language of the hills folding", of the caves collapsing in, of the river meandering (176). One poem likens the appearance of death to a rock:

Someone said  
They thought you were dead.  
Later, she said  
You fell like a rock  
You didn't even bend your knees

("They thought you were dead":150)

The focus on language in these poems suggests that their discursive environment is significant. The pieces are largely concerned with the physical and mechanical restraints holding back "language" as we understand it:

The tongue swells with unspoken,  
unshapeable words

The words are swallowed  
so that the tongue may remain

caught between teeth.

("Teeth":149)

In its place come sounds/words in a language which needs "relearning" in order to translate:

How can I learn the grammar  
of the serpent?

the pronouns, the particles, the  
coiling syntax.

("The language of the serpent":125)

While describing the anguish of this linguistic alienation, Hawthorne also reinscribes it with positive images by locating it in the terrain of ancient wisdom.

You say that in your dream  
in some kind of fit or seizure  
you were entrusted with language.

("New tongue":156)

Epilepsy is again connected with the power of visions and oracles through its naming as the sacred disease. Its language is pre-patriarchal:

The language in my body and in my tongue  
is the language they spoke in Delphi  
The language of the seizure that dispels time,  
that defies death, that returns the orator  
to the world of light ...

("The language in my tongue":160)

While taking up many of the themes of *The Falling Woman*, the concentration on the effects of epilepsy in poetic form seems to lend *The Language in my Tongue* more movement, vitality and passion: I found it absorbing and moving. Would this have anything to do with its distance from the feminist/lesbian politics of the novel? Or from the politics of the novel as a form of writing?

Hawthorne's novel is valuable in being shaped around a woman's body whose sexuality is lesbian and who is subject to epilepsy seizures. Negotiating the social inscriptions applied to such a body in relation to the lived experience of this character, the novel makes an important contribution to the practice of writing the body. Through that writing, Hawthorne also questions some of the assumptions that underwrite *écriture féminine* as they might be applied to writing lesbians and to writing Australia.

*Until feminism I had no proof of my existence. Woman hidden behind man. Epilepsy hidden by silence. Lesbianism hidden by ignorance. Ignorance, in all these things, of my self ... let's tell stories and listen again. (Susan Hawthorne 1994)*



## CHAPTER NINE

### WRITING DESIRE

Maybe I can slip into something a little more comfortable here. Not that I feel discomfort with what I was in before. No, not uncomfortable. I just want to change, to slip into something that is easier to slip out of:

something smooth and silky and slippery;

something that moves easily;

that can glide with the touch of a fingertip

or shift with beginning of a thought.

Something flimsy: there — but only just,

like a veil: a material covering (of) skin which is but a cellular covering of spirit  
ideas joy fear despair peace.

You can see through the veil if you care to look.

But the desire to see through the veils is thought to be more exciting than what lies under them. It's the dance of unveiling that we/they apparently desire.

According to the Pocket Oxford Dictionary, desire is:

Unsatisfied longing, a wish or conscious lack (for, of, to do or be), thing one wishes for, expressed wish or request or demand.

So a condition of desire is that it be unfulfilled — always in the future: to be looked forward to.

So, when my desire is fulfilled does that mean it is no longer my desire?

I will be satisfied so will no longer desire?

That's very teleological and linear.

Maybe my reading is off the track.

Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.

(Irigaray 1985:25)

Let's try the Macquarie Thesaurus. In between desertion and determinant lies desire. There are ninety seven terms, associated with eating and appetite, with

money, with sexuality, with psychiatric pathology and with religious sinning, as well as a few innocuous hankerings, itches and bents. So the thesaurus organises our desires around a bundle of drives — eating, sexuality and money — and their self-regulating profligacy through medical and religious discourse.

It's all very unsatisfactory.

We need a new language of desire.

Or is it desire that needs addressing? Is there a difference?

Maybe we just need to de-sire it. If there are only ever objects of desire, by removing the phallogocentric objectification what do we have left? What is the remainder?

Desire as without end; is this what Irigaray is speaking about when she writes about the limitlessness of two lips kissing two lips?

When you kiss me ... the horizon itself disappears. Are we unsatisfied? Yes, if that means we are never finished. If our pleasure consists in moving, being moved, endlessly. Always in motion: openness is never spent or sated.

(Irigaray 1985:210)

The pleasure here is in the continuity; in representing the moments of desire, to borrow from Hawthorne and Pausanias, or maybe the moments of being, to borrow from Virginia Woolf; to be able to articulate and make representable the experience of desire instead of just the wishing for, the fantasy.

How, for example, do you describe the subtle taste of bocconcini as a wedge slithers between your teeth with a thin slice of lusciously ripe red romano tomato and a pet leaf of basil you just picked from the garden?

Or what about the taste of the first sun-warmed mango of the season, that bright orange flesh so firm and juicy — or tart if you get it early enough — dribbling down your chin as you suck the skin to get as much as you can of the sweetness. Or what about the warmth and safety of a friend's kitchen; being so absorbed by a piece of music that tears are streaming down your face; feeling the full moon saturating you; the aroma of ground coffee mixed with the intimacy of a chat; the smell of

rainforest fungus through a mist of fine rain; the feel and smell of slippery fertile mucous between your legs.

What about the moments of recognition in the doing?

Has desire passed? Are there no words for happening desire, for the savouring,

the prolonging,

the moment

that becomes removed from lineal clock time, an extended vacuum divorced from other beginnings or endings?

And what about the memories of those moments — what do they become? Are they no longer desirable because they are past, or does one satisfaction signal the beginning of yet another desire for completion? Isn't the desire of the dictionary and the thesaurus more like anticipation, or foreplay?

To Desire Differently.

Irigaray suggests women's desire might be more appropriately organised around touch. Touch? Sure. Touch, taste, smell, sound, sight, magnetism, intuition, auras, let's have it organised around everything.

A woman's body with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor — once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction — will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language.

(Cixous 1976:885)

*woman has sex organs more or less everywhere.* She finds pleasure almost anywhere.

(Irigaray 1985:28)

Which brings us back to the body.

And writing.

The desire to write

the body.



Cixous infuses her writing with desire: with the desire to write:

Writing and Loving are lovers and unfold only in each other's embrace, in seeking, in writing, in loving each other. Writing: making love to Love. Writing with love, loving with writing. Love opens up the body without which Writing becomes atrophied. For Love, the words become loved and read flesh, multiplied into all the bodies and texts that love bears and awaits from love. Text: not a detour, but the flesh at work in a labor of love.

(Cixous 1991:42)

She writes about the pleasures of writing so erotically. Writing out of love, writing out love, for the love of it. Writing with passion, with compassion and commitment, with a desire to get you going, to make the salivary juices flow, to work up a sweat.

Inez Baranay also writes about being seduced by writing, about it being "*the most consuming relationship you will ever have*":

*Writing is the most demanding of lovers, the most obsessive. Writing is the object, subject and creator of desire. It's a desire that grows by what it feeds on, and can never be satisfied.* (Baranay 1994)

Is desire always sensual, always erotic?

Audre Lorde is saddened that the erotic has been confined to sexuality. She regards it as a spiritual and deeply female, powerful resource, "a well of replenishing and provocative force" (1984:54) that has been "relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all" (57) leaving the other parts of our lives bereft. The erotic is not confined to sensation for Lorde, but inevitably leaks over into all aspects of our life once we recognise its joy. She describes it as the bridge lacking between the spiritual and the political, the empowerment that makes work a "longed-for bed which I enter gratefully" (55), the infusion of pleasure into our politics, work, play — the specificities of our existence:

In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.

(Lorde 1984:56-57)

It is a sensuality for every-day life. If we can touch it, it caresses our every movement. I imagine it's like those moments when you see women washing the dishes slowly and rhythmically, their hands lingering over the surfaces of dishes, their gaze out the window in the middle distance but focused on something quite other — an

abstract idea or plan, wandering through their memories or imagination — until the absorption of the moment is broken and they are back in the here and now, hands still lingering over the surfaces of dishes being caressed slowly and rhythmically.

I know I value the landscape available from my kitchen window. At the moment I have the rolling green hills that backdrop Cairns to look out on when my hands are warm and soapy in the sink. So I can be there and not there.

But I am suspicious about investing "domestic" tasks with spirituality, as if revaluing them makes it okay for women to continue to be domestic labourers. Someone has to do it, though, and I like the idea of doing it for myself with pleasure and spirit. Maybe it is in the same sense that Jacki French sees lifestyle:

Lives can be created. Work out what you love — and fill your life with it ... Every part of your life should give you richness, or it's wasted — a house should be a place you love, not something to keep off the rain; a garden should be a place of fascination (what will bloom or fruit today, what bird will visit) instead of just a lawn to mow on Sunday afternoons.

(French 1992:148)

This is desire in practise.

Marie Tulip invests her sense of women's spirituality with that same sense of pleasure in the moment, akin to Lorde's erotic, which is anchored in and between our bodies:

Spirituality is concerned with who we are — in our body selves, in relation to others, to nature, the earth and the cosmos, and to the energy or spirit that is in and among us in those relationships. It is not a disembodied or spiritualised affair, somewhere out of this world, but very much in and of this world, our daily living and our personal, social and political relationships. It is about power. It comes from the Latin word for breath — it is as close as our breathing, and like the wind it "bloweth where it listeth". It links us all in the cosmic dance.

(Tulip 1989:23)

Tulip is contesting the abstract and intellectual notion of spirituality as it is represented in patriarchal religions in favour of a bodily and present spirit of living which connects our lives.

It reminds me of an essay Marie Maclean wrote about the descriptions of women folding sheets together in recent women's writing as if the act was a movement of ritual, a dance synchronised to the breath and tune of the other woman with the sheet

acting as a material link between the women. But that's not how she wrote about it: that's how I remember it. And is it the act of folding sheets together or the writing of the act, or do they fold over each other like pages leaved?

The thing about desire like this, about Lorde's erotic, about Tulip's spirituality, about Cixous' and Baranay's love of writing, is that they are so productively creative.

*Have you ever noticed the persistent creativity of radical feminists?  
There are poets, novelists, artists in every medium, musicians,  
composers, film-makers, builders and craftswomen.*

(Hawthorne 1994:4)

What they are producing is new meanings and increased possibilities, new ways of imagining story-lines and life-stories and new ways of reading the stories of our lives; new ways of writing which offer moments of being instead of plot, patterns and flows instead of linear journeys, questions instead of resolutions: new kinds of desires and new ways of writing desire.

## CHAPTER TEN

THE DAUGHTER'S SEDUCTION:

SUE WOOLFE'S *PAINTED WOMAN* (1990)

AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE WOMAN AS ARTIST

As Susan Hawthorne reinscribes the term "fallen woman" with new and active meanings in naming her character the falling woman, Sue Woolfe performs a similar act on the synonymous term, "painted woman". As a favourite theme in nineteenth century art and writing, the fallen woman's dichotomous relation to the respectable married woman of the bourgeoisie was important as part of the discursive regulation of female subjectivity and sexuality in Victorian times (Nead 1987, 1988). Woolfe's character is painted (on canvas and in the sense of being identified) by her father, but in terms which deny her female identity. Like *The Falling Woman*, then, *Painted Woman* has little to say about sexual experiences *per se* but a lot to say about women's sexuality and subjectivity.

As a system of representation which has been historically organised around masculine desires, the cultural narratives of artworks are of theoretical interest to feminist critics. Speaking of the visual in particular, Annette Kuhn argues that representation

sets in play certain relations of power through which, among other things, discourses around sexual difference and subjects in and for those discourses are ongoingly produced. (1988:20)

Vision is especially privileged in Western epistemology as a medium which guarantees a certain knowledge: seeing is believing. Women's bodies are pathologised through their mapping by medical discourse, an activity which began in the nineteenth century when artists as well as doctors were using women's bodies as objects of study (Gilman 1985). The role of vision as a "primary route to scientific knowledge", however, has become problematic, as Emily Martin argues:

Some have singled out reliance on vision as a key culprit in the scrutiny, surveillance, domination, control and exertion of authority over the body, particularly over the bodies of women. (1990:69)

In bringing gender to art theory, feminist art critics have challenged the discursive positioning of women in Western art which has largely confined them to sexual objectification for the pleasure of male eyes. The term "painted woman" hinges on the use of female models being represented as sexualised bodies available for male viewers.

Irigaray argues that phallogocentric logic privileges the visual (1985:25) as corroboration of the presence of the penis, which reinforces the symbolic power of the phallus. The reassurance gained through looking gives men pleasure, in contrast to the threat of castration represented by women as both signifier and signified. Not only do women "lack" a penis, but their sexual organs are hidden from sight. Pleasure in looking, then, is "particularly foreign to female eroticism" Irigaray argues:

Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the "subject," her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A "hole" in its scopophilic lens. (1985:25-26)

In trying to account for and intervene in these heavily gendered positions of looking and being looked at, feminist critics have found psychoanalytic theories useful. Griselda Pollock explains,

Through psychoanalytical theory we can recognize the specificity of visual performance and address. The construction of sexuality and its underpinning sexual difference is profoundly implicated in looking and the "scopic field". (Pollock 1988:13)

Finding that traditional narrative cinema was organised around the visual pleasure of an assumed male audience, Laura Mulvey was largely responsible for initiating the theorising of psychic mechanisms of spectatorship. Drawing on Freud, Mulvey posited two "pleasurable structures of looking" (1981:208) which operate in tension in mainstream film but which both privilege masculine desire. The first, scopophilia, "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (1981:208). This implies a separation between the (presumed male) spectator and the eroticised female image on the screen, while the second structure involves a merging of ego identification between the (male) spectator and the active male hero on the screen who also has his eyes on the spectacle of woman. Within this framework, the male gaze has priority both on and off the screen. The narrative operations of Western art, literature and Hollywood

cinema, then, have in common a masculine libidinal economy (Pollock 1988, Mulvey 1981, Cixous 1976).

The result of these structures of spectatorship for women is that they are continually subjected to the look, being objectified and fetishised for masculine pleasure. This effectively denies them agency to construct their own desires, so that "she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants" (Irigaray 1985:25). Within this paradigm, pleasure in looking operates on a model of dominance and submission, according to E. Ann Kaplan, which has acted to control female sexuality. In turn, those structures have been reproduced in the ordering of relations between the sexes:

Women, in turn, have learned to associate their sexuality with domination by the male gaze, a position involving a degree of masochism in finding their objectification erotic. We have participated in and perpetuated our domination. (Kaplan 1983:336)

The phallus-centredness of psychoanalytic theory, however, cannot see anything beyond itself, as Irigaray points out (1985:25). To accommodate female spectatorship and entertain women's desires it is necessary for women to intervene in the reproduction of such gendered visual systems and also to invent imaginative possibilities in the intersection between looking and desire.

Sue Woolfe's novel, *Painted Woman* (1990), addresses both of these issues through the life-story of Frances, who is both artist and narrator. Theories of looking are particularly relevant here as the story is framed by a narrative in which Frances guides us around a retrospective exhibition of her life's work as an artist. As readers, we are interpolated in to the story by being positioned also as viewers of her artwork, as she tell us the stories she attaches to her paintings:

*And here, see, down here in the corner, here's my Aunt showing me how to cut parsley into tiny pieces. (24)*

While our positions as readers and viewers are gender neutral here, the images we are confronted with are inscribed heavily and often violently with the marks of gender.

Her paintings, of course, are only available to us through the images Frances constructs through words. Similarly, the moments those paintings construct embody large movements of time, people and power dynamics. The words, then, are in excess of the paintings they claim to be accessing for us, but are also less than the paintings in that the visual image is never available. There is also doubt on the part of the narrator that either words or pictures are capable of containing the narratives she is trying to fill in for us. She tells us, for example, that the absences and silences are also important:

*I've only given you a few glimpses of my mother ... I could've hinted there was more ... But even if I'd known more, even if I'd given you a hundred glimpses of her, two hundred, who's to say that I've grasped who she was, there might be one more glimpse that I didn't see and don't tell, the vital one, perhaps insignificant on its own but that when added to all the rest changes everything, and without it the other glimpses mean nothing at all. (32-33)*

As well as painting her life, Frances has also painted for her life. Her identity, definition and presence as a subject have been intimately dependent on painting, and for most of her life her father's painting. Woolfe's tale, which dramatises the daughter's obsession with the father-artist, seems at first to replay Freud's imagined female Oedipal scenario. Like the father in *Painted Woman*, Freud has provided the framework for the story, but both Woolfe and the daughter in her novel decide it is not a frame they are bound by; they both step outside of it to tell their own stories.

At the start of the novel, the family dynamics are dependent on the male figure, for whom his wife and daughter compete. His wife is passive and subservient, accepting his physical violence gracefully — "Mum always falls decorously, if noisily" (3) — and catering to his appetites. The daughter follows her mother's model, identifying with her as a means of living out the physical closeness shared between the parents, despite the violence it always carries. The first scene of the novel describes the father painting on a wall, and pictorialises Frances' identification of herself as her mother in order to be the object of desire for her father. She describes what she sees on the wall as



A face in profile. A woman's long hair. My mother ... A man's face facing her face ... The man wants to kiss my mother. But now he moves up the wall again, and paints ... a big blue X. It's a bow, the woman's wearing a big blue bow like mine. (3-4)

The fluidity between mother and daughter in this image is due to their positioning by the father as objects of his desire. As if to confirm the inconsequentiality of their identities, he then turns to see Frances hiding between the chairs and enacts the painting she sees:

It hurts but he's kissing me, my father's lips are kissing me, pushing onto my lips ... I look back at the wall and me, and I'm strong with him and not a tear shed for my mother. (4)

Another episode shows how Frances' identification with the mother means that she lives her father's violence at the same time as her mother. The scene is the bedroom, where violence is made an extension of bedroom intimacy through which Frances might gain access to her father's affections. "There'd been a strip of light under their door" (7), she begins; springs creak, and then a floorboard, then

A thud, that hot sound of flesh on flesh... Another thud or was I moving? Sweat trickling down my backbone, or has my blood gone yellow? ... I run squinting into the light. His hand is coming down against her face, fast, thrilling the air, the exultant clap, the jerk of the chin, she reels, is reeling, it's a mad, wonderful game ... and I reel in her screams, that she should be so exposed, and when we fall down, I fall down with her. (7)

The daughter's attraction to her father lies in his apparent possession of knowledge. She imagines him, as a (male) painter, to be privileged in making meaning of the world. This is a skill she feels she lacks, a lack she terms "The Gap".

*I think there's this incredible gap that you feel as a woman that there's a whole lot of stories and a whole lot of language out there and it only partly fits you. You feel an outsider. You feel like someone crouching on the sidelines, wanting to join in but not being able to and thinking, Well the game is really not for me. And that compels me to write. (Sue Woolfe)*

The daughter is seduced by the supposition of authority of the Father's Law:

*Always The Gap ... When I saw the distance between the breast and me. The dreaded, awesome distance. I didn't need philosophers to point it out, find names, say that it made sense or nonsense. It was there. But if it was, so was a place where there was no Gap. A place incandescent with meaning. (4-5)*

While Frances identifies with her mother, it is only in so far as she can gain closeness to her father. When she perceives she has him to herself, she separates

herself from her mother, claiming "I'm not like Mum" (9). This is an attempt to align herself with her father who is seen to be the inheritor of a source of knowledge and meaning. Her desire to gain access to him can be read not only in Freudian terms, but also on a broader epistemic level in which Freud is also located: the framework of meaning, of access to the symbolic order, is tied to the power of the patriarch. The statement, "I don't want to be like Mum" (9), is uttered on the basis that the father has knowledge that the mother cannot have: "She doesn't know what you know, I shout. So I want to be like you" (9). It is an order of knowledge which she perceives to be implicated in his power over her mother, and which she attributes to his vocation as an artist. Even the language which names the colours and their potential under the power of his hands is made sacred:

The paints lie on the palette in ritual order. In stillness they're pent up. Their names are like a chant: cadmium yellow, cerulean blue, alizarin crimson, viridian green, vermilion. (11)

The importance of the colours' names contrasts with her importance: colour names are ritually and regularly repeated, whereas her name is used only once in the novel, and not until page sixty-four.

When her father deigns to teach her "how to be like me" (10), she forgets about The Gap (11), imagining she is being made privy to its secrets. "The start of my life as an artist" (12) involves her learning to see exactly as he does, of her becoming an exact reproduction of him:

My father has painted the sky his canvas with blue, the fire of cobalt blue, and now I have eyes all over my body to see the fire from my father, eyes on my neck and hands and thighs and in the spaces between my ribs, cobalt blue eyes seeing my father's sky and my father's sky seeing me. (13)

To some extent, the text is written in a way which seems complicit with this attribution of knowledge, and therefore power, to the father as artist. As narrator, Frances speaks to us about her father's art in terms which reproduce its elusiveness and sacredness, which are desired by her:

People don't stand on their toes, says Dad. Their feet come towards you. Larger and larger. They could engulf you. Then they recede. All things recede. And while they recede, they seem to come towards each other. (11)

This gobbledegook explanation of movement and perception becomes a "game" to Frances, which she is learning to play:

It becomes a game between us.  
Have you noticed how gently the bark lies on the ground, he says.  
How wet the sun is on the leaves, I say.  
There are pinnacles on the stones in the road, he says. (11)

Two reviews of *Painted Woman* criticise Woolfe's writing as reproducing that discourse of mystery and worship. Sue McLeod writes,

Woolfe's descriptions of the artists and the art they make are articulated in romantic and revering terms. She perceives artists as having a privileged access to meanings ... Writing straight from a tradition of bourgeois art appreciation, Woolfe confines the reader/viewer to a position of awe. (McLeod 1990:207)

This "position of awe" is certainly played out in Hamilton Smith's two rave reviews of the novel in the *Canberra Times*. He claims the novel is of "such sensitivity and artistic merit" and that it contains "philosophical themes" which "may appear cryptic or unfamiliar to readers" and which he fears may not be fully appreciated by an "Australian" audience (Smith 1989a:B5). He even describes the novel as a work of art similar to the father's misunderstood paintings:

In some ways, the novel itself is ironically like an exhibit in a gallery, bold and alluring, yet fragile and threatened, threatened by misunderstanding and apathy as much as by ignorance. (Smith 1989b:18)

The novel was mostly praised for its "dazzling" and "exquisite" prose in pictorial language (Mead 1989; Keneally 1989), but Rosemary Sorenson fears that Woolfe's acknowledged use of

the theories of men like Girard, however intriguing in their powerful display of how to manipulate myths, are difficult to meld with the quite real social dilemma of the woman artist lacking the approval of her society. (Sorenson 1989a:8)

Despite recognising that "Dad *represents* the violence embodied in art's totemic power" [emphasis mine], she sees the resulting text as uncritical:

perhaps like Girard, the story embellishes the myths that have shaped our perception of art rather than subverting them. (Sorenson 1989a:8)

I want to argue that Woolfe's prose and her use of Frances' narrative eye/I is what draws the reader into the novel's violence; in conjunction with the additional burden of looking, it makes us complicit with the epistemic violence inflicted on women and

women artists as Others, as outside of the Father's Law, as objects of art and masculine desire. By using a "romantic and revering" discourse to form our impressions of the father's art, Frances' emergence from it and realisation of its falseness is all the more powerful.

*Exactly! I wanted to seduce the reader into Frances' youthful position. At the end she realises "all I'm doing is painting". (Sue Woolfe responds)*

The discursive construction of male artists that has produced reverence for their authority and knowledge is addressed by Christine Battersby in her book *Gender and Genius* (1989). Battersby reads history to document how "genius" has been gendered male in a way which excludes women's access to the term:

The genius's instinct, emotion, sensibility, intuition, imagination — even his madnesses — were different from those of ordinary mortals ... The genius was a male — full of "virile" energy — who *transcended* his biology. (Battersby 1989:3)

The notion of transcendence was necessary to accommodate his supposed "feminine" traits implicated in being instinctive, emotional, intuitive and so on. Being transcendent, though, lavished additional power and reverential tones onto the position. While the male artist transcended his gender, biological femaleness only

mimics the psychological femininity of the true genius ... Creativity was displaced *male* procreativity: male sexuality made sublime. (Battersby 1989:3)

The tortuous logic of this privilege is also noted by Griselda Pollock: "The artist is one major articulation of the contradictory nature of bourgeois ideals of masculinity" (1988:11). Battersby goes on to argue that a woman who wanted to create rather than procreate (both was rarely if ever an option) complicated the patterns of exclusion by facing a *fait accompli*:

either to surrender her sexuality (becoming not *masculine*, but a surrogate *male*), or to be *feminine* and *female*, and hence to fail to count as a genius. (Battersby 1989:3)

In Woolfe's novel, Frances is written into the role of the former. She foregoes any female identification with her mother in order to learn to be like her father: it appears to her to be the only way to have agency in his highly desirable world.

The extent of Frances' complicity with her father extends to her taking on joint responsibility with her father for her mother's death. Wishing for her mother's absence through childish magic spells, Frances is both guilt-stricken and awed by her own power when she finds her mother's body dead on the bed one morning: "I wasn't sure I could do it, I tell her. But I have. And now it's done" (17). She sees "there was no violence" (18), as if this confirms it was by her hand and not his. Frances' sense of complicity and her desire for identification with her father imbue the death of her mother with the awe of a symbolic sacrificial rite, as if her "magic" power is given through her newly forged association with her father, as if she now has access to his power:

So now I know we both did it, Dad and I together did this awesome thing ... it's much more awesome than doing it by myself, it makes us one person ... if we can do this together, if I'm so much part of him, then I'll be part of him when he pulls at the mystery, I'll be there, I'll know what he knows, Dad will escort me into meaning. (21)

That this "meaning" her father will escort her into is privileged and valued is culturally reinforced. Her father's sister tells her "Your father's a great man ... A man of genius" (20). His genius is both contained within his maleness and extends beyond it, as the remnant of the newspaper cutting reporting her father's trial for murder verifies:

allowance must be made for the  
.....  
by the magnificence of his talent and by birthright an inheritor and maker of a firmament of greatness ...  
.....

Such an accident could happen to any man at the moment of passion, said Justice Sorenson (169)

His acquittal of the murder charge reinforces the prestige of his contradictory position; as a male he is excluded from the law because it could happen to any man, and as an artist he is excluded from the law because he is not like every man.

As if to reinforce Frances' desire to secede from femaleness, her mother and Auntie are given the role of instructing Frances in the rules of femininity:

learn to sit with your legs together  
learn to say thank you prettily even if you're disappointed  
learn to leave some tea at the bottom of the cup (5)  
Chew each mouthful 32 times, she says. That way you'll have a flat stomach.  
(12)  
How to get rid of stains: ... (15)

Alongside these laws of behaviour, which the women pass on "grey with weariness" (5), sits another contradictory discourse, also attributed to the women. This imbues the women's daily domestic activities with rhythm, significance and an undercutting humour:

Mum and I are shelling peas.  
Love, says Mum, should mean everything to a woman.  
Peas ping in the basin. (7)

These moments could be likened to what Julia Kristeva describes as monumental time, part of the cyclic understanding of "Women's Time" (1981).

*I want to mix up, say, ideas that fascinate me with minute details of how to shell peas, because that's been something that I've experienced. I want to move across that whole sort of spectrum of domestic and metaphysical truths, because that's to me how women's minds work, well, my mind works like that and my friends' seem to too, particularly friends with children. They're talking about an abstraction one moment and worrying about how to deal with lettuce the next. (Sue Woolfe)*

Digging the garden, watching the vegies grow, feeding the chooks, making cups of tea, even hanging the washing "at the line, we flap the sheet like angels" (20). These moments of detailing the spirit of the "ordinary" are akin to Audre Lorde's understanding of "the erotic" (1984); they directly contrast the father's use of violent erotica and the extra-ordinary status invested in his artistic perspective.

When the father is seen to act in this domestic mode, it is deified by Frances and his actions are elevated to befit his status. He only ever participates after a night of physical violence, offering her mother a consolatory cup of tea and toast:

He's taking the plate of buttered toast in one hand and the cup of tea in the other ... and there's Mum, ... her feet pointed that the bones might break to please him, to capture him, for after all he leaps across mountains in words and paint. As long as there are long shiny mornings sometimes, as long as he's a god, that's all that matters. In none of the stories must the gods be kind.  
(16)

His actions are those of someone stooping below their status, of carrying out an act of humility in order to look the part. When she is older, Frances reminisces the value

of that "female" world which is set in contrast to her father's. While making tea, she looks out over the area which used to be her mother's vegie patch and remembers,

When I was a child I was scornful of trivia. And have been till now. And yet it's my life. These tiny unremembered acts that women have always done, that Mum and Auntie did, were experts in, they make me gentle. They make me conscious of my absurdity. (117)

Very early in the novel, a female temporality is contrasted with the father's terrible importance and seriousness in a scene in which Frances slips between one and the other. Swinging on the gate to the chookyard, a sphere closely associated with her mother, she is rhythmically described,

swinging back and forth, back and forth, with my body drifting in a hazy circle of singing hinges and straw and dirt and manure and the dandelions bending back and forth, back and forth, and there's no Gap now, just this circle on my sun-warmed arm as I swing time and dandelions sway. (8)

At the sudden entrance of her father on to this entrancing scene, Frances slips into a position of relation to him, trying to mimic her mother's behaviour to gain his attention: "Dad, I ask, making my mother's eyes, Dad, am I beautiful?" (9). Frances immediately ceases her connectedness to the rhythms of growth and earthly cycles in which her body is free to swing and be warmed by the sun; instead, the imposed voice of the coquette asks for verification of her body and its relation to an objectified form of beauty from the male gaze of her artist father. His disgusted response derives not from his dislike of a culture that would encourage coquetry, but at his distaste for her show of "femininity" at all: at the reminder that she is female.

That scene, which precipitates Frances' rejection of her mother in order to be like her father, plays out Irigaray's imagined mother-daughter relations in her essay, "One Does Not Move Without the Other" (1982). According to both Woolfe and Irigaray, mother and daughter occupy positions which are identical, like "living mirrors":

I resemble you, you resemble me. I see myself through you, you see yourself through me. You are already grown, I'm still little. But I've come out of you and there, right under your eyes, I am another living you. (Irigaray 1982:13).

Irigaray suggests that the intensity of the "consuming-being-consumed role" between nurturing mother and suckling daughter merges their subjectivities so that

neither are (re)presented to the other as other, always as self. In search of her self, the daughter turns to her father, the first man to whom her mother "abandons" her:

I shall leave you for him who seems so much more alive than you. He who never makes anything to eat. Who leaves me empty of himself, open-mouthed for his truth. I follow him with my eyes, I listen to what he says, I try to walk right behind him (Irigaray 1982:13)

This is the substance of Irigaray's metaphor, "I drank ice with your milk, mother" (1982:12). The identification between mother and daughter is paralysing and self-perpetuating, Irigaray argues, unless mother and daughter can relate to each other as women, with different subjectivities, rather than "exchanging each other endlessly" (1982:13). They must find time for each other:

You change according to the clock. Dressing up according to the time. But which time? Time for what? Time for whom? I'd like you to break with that time, to find the time to show yourself to me. And to look at me. So that we might play at being similar and different. (Irigaray 1982:13)

Irigaray's sense of time here is not unlike Kristeva's but it involves finding the time for each other instead of being "already captive somewhere else. Already caught in someone else's look" (Irigaray 1982:13).

The father's escorting of his daughter into meaning entails her reformation by him, as Lucy is transformed in *Cardboard* by Tim who escorts her into the meaning of sexual subtexts. As an artist's daughter, Frances' experience is not dissimilar to the experience of being an artist's lover in Brenda Walker's novel *Crush* (1991), when Anna Penn's body is formed by the gaze of the artist:

he named my body as he swept his hand repeatedly from the shoulder down across the ribs. The body was wax, his hand was stone. The body was wax and stone and his hand was the etching stylus. (Walker 1991:63)

The naming, moulding and etching of a female body here are powerful in their psychological impact, which is emphasised through metaphor. Frances' father is not interested in her body as such but in creating her in his image, as if she were plastic material from which he can make a work of art (in narcissistic reflection of himself). Most importantly, he wants her to see as he does. As a patriarch, he has a particularly strong attachment to the visual which indicates sexual difference and yet also alienates the material body, as Luce Irigaray explains:



Investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality. (Irigaray 1985: 50)

Appropriately, Frances' father uses an image to show Frances what she must not be like: "It is, he says, a warning" (14). It is a portrait of her mother done in slashes, "as if the canvas has been struck ... Just like you, he says" (14).

Even though Frances can try to see through her father's eyes and invent herself according to his needs, her body is a "problem" reminder of her femaleness. Her father largely ignores her as a body, or as a body which is separate from his imagination. At one stage, "He steps back, almost collides with me. He looks me up and down as if he's surprised to see me here" (27). At other times, however, he forces her girl-child body into the position her mother used to occupy, as the object of his violence. The link between mother and daughter is strengthened by his appearance the next morning with a plate of buttered toast and a cup of steaming milky tea. As she previously lived her father's violence through identifying with her mother, now her body substitutes her mother's:

I make a queenly decision to surrender as I see his hand coming down, as if I had choice. I skid across the floor with no wish to apologize for the crashing easel. (46)

This martyrdom is used as a source of power which differentiates Frances, and her mother before her, from Auntie. Auntie's role as female provider and adorer to her brother-artist was usurped by Frances' mother when they married. For this role, Auntie had disappointed a dentist who wanted to marry her as she had, "she says, looking up to Dad's studio, other responsibilities then" (10). The aunt is also complicit with his violence, standing outside the door while Frances is being smashed. Frances' knowledge of her presence makes her "scream loud and triumphant. Because I have hope, and she has none at all" (49).

Her father "invents" Frances only in relation to himself and his art. She recognises this: "I take up no space in him. Only at the moment he invents me" (45), even though she is super-aware of his body in relation to hers: "I know the exact

position of his body to mine" (45). He tells her "You're my mirror now" (57). In a perversion of Lacan's mirror phase, which is the stage at which the child has a sense of itself as a separate entity, the father here is about to make his child mirror him, instead of herself. In this way, he will "escort her into meaning" and all that the symbolic order represents under his Law. Frances' entrance into the symbolic is an entry into a male domain of thought and perception. As her father's daughter, she is seduced into believing this is "the" place to be, a universalised arena outside of which others count as nothing or as unknowable. Frances' notion of The Gap might then be linked to what Lacan calls the Real: the unrepresentable at the limits of language, but also that which approaches feminine *jouissance*. Alice Jardine explains the "Real" in Lacanian literature as,

designat[ing] that which is categorically unrepresentable, nonhuman, at the limits of the known; it is emptiness, the scream, the zero point of death, the proximity of *jouissance*. (Jardine 1985:122-3)

Within this paradigm, Philippa Kelly has also argued that Frances' paintings of female desire can be represented as Lacan's "unarticulable remainder" (Kelly 1994).

In the same way that Jane Gallop argues in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1982) that feminists like Irigaray are seduced into/by psychoanalysis, so Frances accepts this paradigm as desirable. Woolfe's text, however, is not so beguiled as its hero/ine. As the father tells Frances that she is his mirror now, there is a game going on outside in the street. "You're in, shouts a boy in the street" (57), as the father is claiming the daughter to be his double, to be framed as his mirror. "No I'm not, shouts a girl. You are" (57), as if contesting his claim and reflecting it back onto him. Frances' narration of her "invention" is not without irony either. Her description of a portrait he paints of her is from her point of view and then his:

I don't have a face, it's his, I don't have a body, it's his, I float, I don't breathe, I don't exist ...  
And afterwards, he talks about the portrait.  
There's a good strong shadow under its thigh. The knuckles on the hand are too pointed... (58)

Described in the third person, the portrait is discussed in terms of his technique, while her body is being inscribed by his marks: "He's painting me" (58). Being his double also means being duplicitous. When Frances picks up a paintbrush, it is to "copy his paintings ... one stroke after another of his wishes so it seems to be my wish and perhaps it is" (59).

In the same way that her narrative involves an awareness of two indistinct subjectivities, one she is forming and another the father is re-forming, her pubescent female body begins to assert its difference from the disembodied self her father prefers:

I tell myself there are no black hairs sprouting between my legs or under my arms and no new breasts poking against my jumper like jeering fingers. (58)

While her father ignores her physical presence, he can deny her femaleness, and it is on this condition which she pins her hopes of entry into his world:

Dad and I never talk about my body. We pretend that from my head to my feet there's a space. I drift around some distance above the floor, like a ghost, like his portraits of me where I end at my neck. (74)

When she begins menstruating she tries ignoring it: "don't think, don't look ... I must live in my head, five and a half feet above the dust balls, the grit, the blood. Above the spell of reality" (75). This visible difference from her father she translates into fear of ostracism (oestrocism?): "The blood's still seeping out of me. And with it, my hope" (75). She finally tells him she must go to her Auntie's — "It's my Insides" (75) — to which he sighs a "Yes" and transfers the conversation to his leaking bottles which prove to be much more containable than leaking daughters.

Auntie coaches Frances in the passive and secretive behaviour recommended for menstruation, reinforcing the cultural negativity inscribed on this visible sign of difference:

I must not swim, run, hurry, walk barefoot, walk in high heels, sit on damp grass, stand for long times, drink cold liquids, drink hot liquids on the days of The Curse, but I must not explain to anyone. I may have the power to curdle milk, rust metal, dull mirrors, stop clocks, I may be untrammelled violence itself, so I must rise stealthily at dawn to wash the cloths and peg them out, as unassuming as white clouds. (77)

The mention of female power contained in this passage is the reason given for containing it. To be "violence itself" in a female body is something to be hidden, while in her father it means he can quite literally, and with the aid of a patriarchal legal system, get away with murder. To the daughter violence is the most significant threat to her acceptance into his world, while for him it is his libidinal/artistic source and overtly mythologised as such. "Patriarchal passion", argues Somer Brodribb, "sees violent sex as the essential creative act ... this is patriarchal aesthetics" (1992:xviii).

Frances' concern to erase her femaleness, to become a "surrogate male" in Battersby's term, can be read not only as a choice she makes to give her agency in the world of art, but also as an exercise in creating her own self-image. It is a strategy which, in this text, can also act as a mirror for the social values which necessitate this mimicry. In a historical corollary, Janine Burke tells the story of a self-portrait Margaret Preston was commissioned to paint in 1930 by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Burke describes Preston's presentation of herself as "stark":

Her hair is severely bobbed. She wears an artist's smock that resembles a monk's cassock. She clasps palette and brushes. Her gaze is alert, her mouth unsmiling. (Burke 1991:31)

The image Preston paints of herself is "a time honoured image of an artist, of a male artist" (31) Burke argues, which asks us to

read Preston [as] a woman who takes her vocation so seriously that she has appropriated an image sombre with prestige and respect, and sexed it to her own advantage. (Burke 1991:31)

That this portrait is an image Preston appropriated and used to her advantage becomes obvious when set alongside what other information is left to us of her life:

But wait, Preston is 55. Contemporary photographs show not this lean clean jawed artist, but a chubby smiling woman with masses of hair. So who is this?

Preston has made an artist, a woman artist, fit for history. (Burke 1991:31)

It is, Burke argues, an "ideal image of license, power and daring ... it is a choice about destiny" (31) which Preston constructs for herself. Preston's portrait also relies on and uses the power of a work of art as a social signifier of meaning. In

*Painted Woman*, though, Frances does not yet have license to use such tools and is still immersed in the need to be her father in order to have access to his tools of signification.

Frances has a brief encounter with others of her own age which serves to reinforce the containment of her world. The neighbour Rosie and her constant companions Edward and Russell are cruel in their teasing and hostility, but Frances can't help being drawn to Rosie by the way she flaunts her body:

I'm heavy with longing to be like her. She's so visible, tightening her belt and folding her arms so the cloth of her blouse tightens across her breasts. (67)

While these movements assert her sexuality and are used as authority over Edward and Russell, when Frances tries the same tricks they attempt to rape her. Frances realises she is different from Rosie:

Rosie wouldn't paint one stroke behind him ... She'd grab the brush, she'd swirl the brush wildly into colour like a skirt whirling around the head of the dancer. (68)

Her difference is verified by Edward and Russell who decide she is a weirdo because she has pubic hair. In their humiliation of her, however, Frances conflates herself with her mother in her relation to both the boys and her father:

I don't exist for them, I don't breathe ... with no will even to scream into the chinks of light. My mother reeling in her nightdress, exposed, falling ... (72)

In her painful, bleeding walk back to her father's house, she considers "I'll never need go outside again ... Why should I be so foolhardy as to go outside my father's walls?" (73) Although the walls are sought for their safety and familiarity, this disappointment with the outside world also imbues it with the same violence that is contained inside the walls — so why venture out? As the boys "notice nothing except what may flatter or insult" (72), neither does her father notice her wounds, prompting her instead to inquire about his painting.

Those stories comprise the first section of the novel, titled "Self Portrait One" and catalogued as variously sized oil paintings whose backing materials include plaster, plywood, laminex and lino. The next discreet set of stories, "Self Portrait Two", oils on concrete, slate tiles and venetian blinds, are concerned with Frances'

relationship to Tim. Their romance is initially mediated through the butcher. As in Inez Baranay's *Between Careers*, this romance comprises the centre section of the novel and is set up to "fail". As Christine Battersby makes clear in *Gender and Genius*, entrance to the world of creativity for a woman does not include her being a woman, but being as a male (1989). In this paradigm, a romance would mean acknowledgment of female sexuality: for Frances, this would signal a premature end to her apprenticeship into her father's world.

To some extent, the meetings between Frances and Tim involve some transference of power by Frances from the father on to her lover who, in Freudian terms, is a substitute. Like Anna Penn in *Crush* (Walker 1991), Frances translates Tim's touch as sculpting her body:

Tim had touched my waist with outspread hands, he'd slipped them up over my ribs ... up, up and then, as if my breasts hadn't been there before, as if there'd only been tatters of me, scattered, unknowing, he'd formed me. (97)

She demands from him the equivalent of The Gap, the mysteries of which she believes her father to hold in his Art. From Tim, she wants "to be possessed" (100), "the extraordinary. An epiphany" (101). It is not love, however, in which she claims to be interested (101), although she later remembers it as love, as "a way to become like Dad" (167). She finds "fucking" coded in the word love (167) but, whatever the term, her desire here might still be read as a desire for knowledge — something she feels she lacks.

During her association with Tim she goes to the public library and looks up Anatomy in a textbook. She is "astonished at the equipment for possession ... Auntie had never got around to telling me about the Male Organ and the Female Inside" (95). This anatomy of Organ and Inside, which is based on visibility, further inscribes Frances within the "masculine parameters" of female sexuality which Irigaray would dispute (1985:23). Besides the myths and taboo her aunt instils on the subject, this is the only form of knowledge made available to Frances. From the woman at the corner shop, Frances also finds out that her mother loved to paint: "She was an artist ... You didn't know that, did you? You should" (98). This knowledge

about her female heritage is accumulated at a time when Frances also begins to steal her father's used tubes of paint, a "betrayal" (96) which might indicate a loosening of the ties that bind Frances to her father.

Frances assumes Tim will be the authority, the escort her father claims to be, in providing for her self definition. To some extent, Tim refuses this authority, unlike Fiona Place's Tim in *Cardboard*, who becomes a more potent psychoanalytic father to replace Dr. E, who is in turn a replacement for Lucy's father. The scene Woolfe's Tim sets for love in his cottage, Kookaburra, is not what Frances expected: "This isn't the sort of room, I say, to have an epiphany in" (104). Like the kookaburra's mocking laugh, the entire romance scene disappoints Frances. Tim probes the relation between painting and gender, asking Frances why she doesn't paint if that is what she wants to do (105). After offering her space and resources, however, he reduces her resistance to "Is it because you're a woman?" (106). His answer to the problem is in some ways ironically appropriate: "It's freedom you need ... Marry me" (107). The irony is not lost when Frances rejects his proposal amongst the picnickers on the cliffs of the Blue Mountains: the diamond ring is lost and he ends up presenting her with an empty pink satin-lined box. This image symbolically replicates Frances' newly found knowledge of her "Insides"; Tim therefore unwittingly presents her with her sexuality without the possessing ring, pre-empting Frances' exploration of her gendered creativity by herself.

Tim's proposal also threatens the position Frances has striven to establish for herself in her father's world. Confusing this position with her father's dependence on her, Frances constructs herself as martyr to his cause, repeating the pattern of Auntie.

*I wanted to give Frances a different sort of freedom, a freedom which was artistic, rather than about family and romance. (Sue Woolfe)*

The farcical wedding scene, which goes ahead despite Frances' misgivings, is made perversely significant by the father reinstating his claim over Frances instead of "giving her away" as he is supposed to do. Amidst the chaos of the dance-hall music the organist plays and the "wrong sides" Frances and her father inadvertently

occupy, of Tim losing another ring and the minister losing his sleeve, her father whispers a last temptation to Frances: to stay and be his amanuensis (121). The painting the narrator directs us to for this scene shows the bride "as a transparency" (122), barely apparent between the two men competing for her as their property. Frances' fleeing from the church is not a flight to freedom, as the older narrator recognises, but a journey into another gendered role traditionally occupied over the centuries by talented daughters. The third and final section of the novel begins with her more firmly entrenched in another patriarchal institution as her father's amanuensis.

Painting his pictures means that Frances finally gets to paint, albeit within the "outline of his authority" (128). From the beginning of this partnership, however, Frances is more conscious that she has desires which begin to compete with his. Telling herself that "It's enough to be his amanuensis. As I move across the canvas, I am more my father than he is" (129), she is nevertheless aware of a resistance in her:

I lift my arm high, I gauge the angle of descent, it's his angle, not mine, it seems inert, grim and mine seems filled with promise but he breathes behind me, I must oppose but his will beats through me like a pulse, I can't oppose.  
(127)

Over twenty odd years, they regularly enact the power dynamics on which their relationship exists, he accusing her of "breaking away from my outline" (136), she resubmitting to his authority. Molly immediately notices the tension in their paintings: "the later work carries its own rebellion within itself" (134), and she later accuses Frances of flouting that rebellion (139). While Molly tells her it is her strength, her father interprets it as combative, as proof of her hubris (135).

Molly's entrance into their lives has an ambivalent effect on Frances. On the one hand she usurps Frances' place as adorer and believer. Molly heroises the man and the artist, "contriv[ing] to look up at Dad although she's his height" (132), describing his life as an odyssey (145) and echoing, "Your father is a great man" (147). She, who seems so physically and noisily present in her plastic mac, nylons, silk and leather, allows herself to become less and less visible in deference



to the magnified presence of the great man: "He's shaping her face as he brushes back her hair. As if his hands could form everything" (149). Their voices adjust, "his voice cutting into hers and hers sliding under" (154). And when she dares to show them a painting she has done, he reduces it to an excess of technique and her to a bodyless void. Echoing the earlier descriptions of the daughter by her father, Molly is condemned to non-existence behind the "inadequate" painting:

He's ... forgotten her. Below her armpits, she has no body, no noise, no laughter. The painting has robbed her of that, there's only space down to her toes. (155)

Following the inaudible footsteps of the women before, Molly's taking up of that female position is a source of jealousy and loss for Frances. She feels "dumped" like Auntie, and her grief especially hits her "between the E and the O of Geoffrey" (143) when she is signing his name on a painting. The alienation present between these letters for Frances, in the very interstices of language, is similar to the desolation Lucy finds when confronted with the letter "e" in Fiona Place's novel. The loathing for those particular letters and the words those letters help build focuses their oppression by the symbolic order very precisely onto the basic components of language.

On the other hand, Molly acknowledges her potential threat to Frances and negotiates her position in the household with her in a way that is almost collaborative, as if conscious of their shared cultural script. She tells Frances,

I think we understand each other. It happens sometimes between women, immediately. Whereas men and women, they must play. At least in the beginning. If not always. (138)

Molly also suggests outright, like Tim, that Frances paint by herself. Frances is reluctant to recognise this collaboration.

*Molly was the one who taught her how to be with another woman. And in that learning, she became free, it was part of her freedom. Did you think? (Sue Woolfe)*

When Molly enters Frances' part of the house — the downstairs domestic domain as opposed to the upstairs studio where "life" goes on — she discreetly says nothing of her painting projects and broaches the topic of their positioning within the

household: "You're afraid I'll take your place, she says" (151). Although Frances denies her fear which has already been realised, she tells Molly, "you must work out your place, without encroaching on me. It's critical" (151).

To a certain extent, her father's reliance on Frances as his producer of art means that she has accrued some power over him. This power, and part of her rebellion in her painting for him, is also linked to an increasing construction of her self as embodied. As a residue of her experiences with Tim, she has formed a habit of running her finger down her nose:

one evening when I was cowering, my finger lifted and ran down the length of my face. It was such warmth, the finger just above the cushion of air, tracing me, making me new, separate from the air, achieved, actual. The finger sculpting me. The way Tim had done. (131)

This small action is significant in that it signals the beginning of Frances' self-construction — of tracing the lines of her body by her own touch rather than Tim's, and in her own eyes rather than her father's. In contrast to the way Tim formed her body in relation to his desires and the way her father erased her body and Molly's according to his needs, this action is empowering for Frances' self-definition. She begins to take courage from her heels, and the impressions they make cracking the old lino (141). She also notices her hands:

They're not pretty, it's true, there's a lot of spare flesh pulling this way and that, I'm embarrassed to see them in a portrait, not that there's much of that these days or even that Dad and I consider them my hands, but that's the point. They're mine. My hands. My. I. They're joined to my invisible body but they're visible. (140)

She is conscious of her hands doing daily domestic chores for him: cooking, cleaning, threading elastic through his underpants (140). The concept of having hands is so alien to her that she speaks of them in the third person. When she is painting, she loses consciousness of her hands but afterwards, in the evening, she notices their absence: "it's numb on my wrist, slowly it recovers, becomes mine" (153).

*she has denied herself so much and just seen herself as part of this order with her father. He is that order and she has abnegated herself to the point where she doesn't realise she possesses her hands. (Sue Woolfe)*

Like a repetition of the Tim experience when confrontation with another person impels a growing sense of her body, Frances again begins stealing tubes of paint, but this time whole tubes. Again using the kitchen as her haven, she improvises materials: sewing machine oil to mix the colours (140), "palette knives from kitchen knives, I make brushes from meat skewers, rags and my own hair" (141). The insides of cupboard doors are primed as substitutes for Tim's provision of canvas. But she defers the act of painting: "By myself, I can't make a mark." (142) She regards the act of painting as a usurpation of her father's authority: "an act of such will, patterning the chaos. An act of violence, making it hold my imaginings" (140). The "problem" is one of separation — of presuming to separate herself from her father, taking with her his power to form and create. It also involves the "presumption" of naming herself, of signing her signature on the work instead of his. Within a text which uses terms of relations — Auntie, mother, daughter, father — rather than signature names, this symbolic act transgresses the power inherent in those relations.

Woolfe's text can be read as a project which charts the writing/painting of Frances' body as a woman. In combining the theories of *écriture féminine* and its visual corollary *la peinture féminine* (Wolff 1989), Woolfe makes overt the sexual politics embedded in art when read as text. To be able to construct one's own body, to be a *painting* woman rather than a "painted woman" subject to the constructions of others, has been one of the motivating forces of feminist interventions in the visual arts. Griselda Pollock argues that feminism is "seeking to secure women's equal right to the 'body of the painter'" (1992:146). This project is

as much about wanting the right to enjoy being the body of the painter in the studio — the creative self in a private domain — as it is about wanting to express individually the none the less collective experiences of women. (Pollock 1992:140)

While access to being the body of the painter is important, as Frances finds, there is also the need to demystify the process of artistic production. Pollock critiques Abstract Expressionism, which Frances' father might be said to privilege, as:

a celebration of the "expressivity" of a self which is not to be constrained by expressing anything in particular except the engagement of that artistic self with the processes and procedures of painting. (Pollock 1992:142)

Problematising the creative self as a network of convergent social constructions with access to certain cultural positions has complicated the basis of this modernist discourse, Pollock argues, making its textual politics more explicit. She goes on to suggest that "painting" is given its value in this discourse through "secur[ing] by metonymy the presence of the artist. These inscribe a subjectivity whose value is, by visual inference and cultural naming, masculinity" (1992:142). This thinking erases the body of the artist as gendered or even embodied, instead privileging them through their association with art, culture, intellect, abstraction and all those other binary oppositions that mark sexual difference to relegate women as body and other.

Woolfe characterises Frances' father from within this art discourse. He denies the existence of bodies to the extent that he must be reminded to eat. His treatment of female nude models — refusing them a heater to keep warm — is similar to his lack of respect for the body of his wife, whom he abuses and kills. Part of what enables Frances to begin painting herself is the gradual realisation that her father is an aging and disintegrating body. More importantly, it is her awareness of her own self and bodily knowledge.

The turning point which enables her to take charge of her body/painting is the painting of *The Dance*. Spurred by threats to be taken "off the painting" so she can "get on with the housework, uninterrupted" (144), Frances decides to secure her position by seducing her father with an "irresistible" image to paint (149). *The Dance* becomes a marathon of energy and ambition in which Frances claims to be subsuming herself to "his" vision. She paints powerfully and with confidence, yet attributes this to her impersonation of him:

I paint in short sharp strokes, fierce as the palette, abrupt on the canvas, I jab to highlight the triumph of leaves, limbs; the grass cowers, bushes reel in terror, rocks ingratiate. I'm not painting a landscape, I'm painting him. I stand as he does, one leg conceding weight to another, confident, determined, insistent. (153)

The violent language used to describe her actions reinforces the techniques she has learnt from her father.

*I kept wanting to explore whether art is in itself violent, or whether it's a sort of energy that's not violent in itself, that it just makes that separation with the world. I felt she had to take on that violence because it was part of the world that she lived in and maybe it's part of the world we live in and we have to take on that violence too. But we can use it in a different way. She uses it to paint. I suppose I believe that violence is inherent in the world, and that we can use it for destruction or we can change its meaning. Which is what she did. (Sue Woolfe)*

Her father is excited by this recognition: "It's as if I painted it, he says. As if you're me" (154). For Frances, it is a realisation of her own power as a painter, that "in my cells is the knowledge of the shifting patterns of light, space, darkness" (157). Yet it is her imagination that propels the production: "*The Dance* is painted the way my imagination knows, it knows, my body knows, though I don't" (157). It is a symbol of Frances' rebellion. She lets it take on "a life of its own" (156) so that "it's creating me, this painting, it's more than paint" (157).

Appropriately, this painting is a representation of movement, rather than the "still-life" landscapes her father values. This is in keeping with Frances' sense of embodiment in contrast to her father's denial of bodies. Elizabeth Dempster claims modern dance as a paradigmatic example of the feminist project of "Women Writing the Body" (Dempster, 1988). The practice of dance, she writes, is "surely the most bodily of cultural productions" (37) but should not be reduced to that. It is also "thoughtful action, a movement of embodied mind" (39) and part of a social signifying system: "dances ... can be considered as texts written of and through precisely inscribed bodies" (Dempster 1988:37). Like the photograph on the back of the book *Reading Dancing* which Dempster examines, Woolfe's text which writes about Frances painting dance also "reminds us of the bodily ground of all these acts of reading, writing, dancing and watching dancing" (Dempster 1988:35).

It is Molly who finally puts the painting into words: "Those are hands, aren't they? says Molly, peering. Dancing hands. You've painted a picture of dancing hands" (157). Frances' hands are the tools of both her submission and her rebellion:

painting them in terms of movement is significant in that Frances is constructing them as active. The image of her actively moving hands can also be read as a synecdoche for her power as a female painter to portray (from) her own body: the passive painted woman is now an active painter, a woman painted by herself rather than through her father's eyes.

*I kept thinking about hands because his are very powerful in a very horrific way. He strangles her mother with his hands. His use of art is to subjugate whereas she has to learn something very different. (Sue Woolfe)*

At this point of articulation the father takes over. Not having painted for two decades, he reasserts his position when Frances has learnt to mimic him so well that he has become irrelevant. With some effort in the face of contradiction, Frances reminds herself of her position as daughter and amanuensis in a script which has now become gendered:

the amanuensis, she must stand back, watch, elated. Must be pleased that her painting is not hers, has nothing to do with her, is his. (159)

When he starts to paint she sees him as an "old man with his trousers gathered around into his belt" (159); his stature is diminishing both literally and figuratively in Frances' eyes. His god-like authority as the "inheritor and maker of a firmament of greatness" is deposed when she realises the very ordinary ways possible to gain knowledge about art — the same way she found out about bodies:

Now I know, it falls around me like light, that he doesn't pull his words out of an incandescence. He probably reads them in the books he won't let me open, rehearses his phrases as he walks on the road. (163-64)

The older narrator reinforces this sense of the fall from god to mortal man: "*Strange, that when you reach into the mystery at last, it no longer seems like God*" (165). Even Molly feels disappointment in the myth of the artist: "It's the way art's made, says Molly. That's what's disappointing. The makers have no grandeur" (163).

*Molly is a microcosm of Frances' movement — she begins in the "bourgeois art" position, and ends up saying: "I love art, but I can't stand the smell of it". Frances feels the same, but keeps on painting. (Sue Woolfe responds)*

The awe surrounding the production of art which is attributed to genius is demythologised by Woolfe. The Gap finally becomes a linguistic construction, a lack

which puts a name to Frances' exclusion from her father's laws. When the father/artist is seen as a man enforcing power, that power becomes opaque along with the discourse that enables it.

*part of her emergence is having her own mind. It seemed to me such a fragile freedom that she was learning and I was probably learning that with her too. (Sue Woolfe)*

When Frances defies rather than deifies her father and starts painting on her own, she uses his materials on the domestic surfaces which have comprised her allocated space. The rooms and cupboards which framed her domestic duties are turned into paintings without frames. The unopened closets and the shut up bedrooms, under years of undisturbed dust, cobwebs and silence, contain stories of her past. By opening up these areas those histories are now made available both to be read by Frances and to be reinscribed through her painting. From the newspaper cutting hidden in a box under the cupboard she reads about the strangulation of her mother. From the unsigned portrait of her father she unwittingly retrieves her mother's past, defying his silencing of this side of her history. Initially assuming it is a self-portrait of her father's, she recognises the structure of his face but feels something is amiss (168) which distorts his features. Repeating her habit of running her fingers over her nose to form her face, she now forms his face by tracing with her fingers the path of the brush and finds "It's a mean, dishonest, ignorant face. A face that knows nothing" (168). After years of habit, Frances assumes her father knows this face of himself: "this is the face I've known, but never seen. And he's always seen it, he must have, to paint a self-portrait like this" (168). It is Molly who questions the absence of a signature on the work: "I've never known him not to put his name on a painting" (172). His signing of Frances' paintings inscribes them (and her) as his property in contrast to Frances' mother, who paints without leaving an identifying signature.

Molly provides for Frances' material and physical needs while she paints "pictures on the ceiling, walls, floor, the wardrobe in my parents' bedroom" (173). The catalogue for Self Portrait Three, the last section of the novel/exhibition,

includes oils on fireplace, umbrella stand, sink, lampshades. There is no containment of her pictures and they are unframeable, extending beyond the confines of her father's limited canvas. Painting every possible surface of her father's house is a symbolic act: "My purpose is the rooms of Dad's house. To put patterns of paint everywhere. And one day, all over his studio" (164). The studio is on the top of the house, above Frances' domestic sphere, symbolising its reification on a vertical architectural scale. Griselda Pollock locates the artist's studio as the privileged site of art production, particularly in modernist art discourse (1992). It can assume that status only by neglecting the material and social conditions which enable it: the operations of circulation and consumption necessary in its circuit of capitalist production, and art's role as texts in social signifying systems (1992:146). Pollock goes on to suggest, however, that

Of course women share the fantasy of the creative self, desire that privileged space of imaginary freedom called the studio. (1992:145)

When Frances can finally "gain his studio" (174), this fantasy is fulfilled, but she refuses its discursive status: "I'm in a house which is, after all, a smallish house, in a studio which is only a room and all I'm doing is painting" (174).

*I wanted "all I'm doing is painting" to bring the mythology of the grandeur of art crashing, and to replace it with the things that Frances' life struggle is about – the fantastic determination needed to paint, the painful nurture of the creative spirit, the uncertain worth of the whole endeavour, and the wild heroism of the woman artist. (Sue Woolfe responds)*

This reminder to herself does not undermine the significance of her gain. As Virginia Woolf felt the need to murder the angel in the house in order to write, Frances has a similar need to symbolically murder the father in the studio in order to gain the freedom to paint.

While Frances is frantically painting "the death of my father" on to the surfaces of his house, Molly is a little disturbed by the power of the images: "Do you think you ought? asks Molly ... You might put a hex on him" (173). Frances refuses the magical power she previously associated with images, owning them instead as productions of her own imagination: "I don't think people can, I say. And anyway, I



have no wish to affect him. This isn't for him. It's for me" (174). Frances' refusal of Molly's superstitions about the power of the images to do evil marks a complete reversal of her own childhood beliefs which implicated her in her mother's murder. Women's capacity to do evil, which is codified into the menstruation stories she is told, is part of the Father's (Christian) mythology into which all the women are trained and taught to control. It is linked to a particular social construction of women artists as transgressive, as Pat HOFFIE describes it:

as hysterics, mystics, witches, misfits and muses, mythologised and celebrated for their "otherness", but relegated nonetheless to only the strictly marginalised gilded ghettos of culture, in those areas just bordering onto darker, but nonetheless controlled territory of nature. (Hoffie 1991:9)

This is the construction inscribed on Rosaleen Norton, a post World War Two Sydney painter whose story Inez Baranay fictionalises in *Pagan* (1990). In Baranay's reconstruction, however, the woman painter makes a conscious decision to adopt that role which was foisted on her, as a space in which she can operate with relative freedom.

Frances' painting is to her, as Pollock suggests it is for other women, a desire to "express individualistically the none the less collective experiences" (Pollock 1992:140). She paints stories,

not just my own, [but] everyone who's spent their lives waiting, I hear them joining in, I hear the swishing of their brushes, millions of them, an orchestra of brushes, and my brush catches the melody of swishing and singing and sings with it too. (174)

This celebration ends the novel, with the older narrator leaving us also with the very formal, "*Ladies and gentlemen, I'll leave you alone with the exhibition*" (175).

The position in which this older narrator leaves us as both readers and viewers of a very private and traumatic life-story can be uncomfortable, partially due to the confluence of reading and looking. Perhaps this is because the narrator has insisted on telling us her stories which lie in the paint, insisting that these representations have a history and are related personally to the painter's life. Reading these imaginary artworks, then, means being confronted with the violence of their production. The very private nature of this public exhibition destabilises the

traditional detachment of art as transcending the personal into universal vision. Frances' work is both individual and collective, personal and political.

The violence associated with this pictorial story seems especially significant to the impact made on the reading process. Frances tells us that, "I paint my violence into patterns and contain it. But there's more violence than mine in the world" (174). The violence contained in her paintings is often a result and a representation of her father's violence, which he let loose on the bodies and minds of the women contained within his house. For much of her life Frances translated her father's violence as part of the act of painting — "An act of violence, making it hold my imaginings" (140). In her art, however, Frances transfigures the violence inflicted from her father's hands:

*I've painted here my pantheon ... It's not a pantheon my father would've painted. He'd have put himself on that bench, with violence in his hands. I've painted violence as a wanton schoolboy. And that's my father in the schoolboy's hands. (155)*

Frances suggests that "He was just another person, but used by violence more than most" (174).

*I wanted to underline the irony of the myth that certain people, particularly men, use violence: I believe that violence uses us. (Sue Woolfe responds)*

Because of its visual emphasis, the violence implicit in Woolfe's writing of Frances' story might be likened to watching a violent film; being privy to those (fictionalised) private moments of horror and, like Auntie standing outside the door, also being complicit because of our position as spectator.

*I was very worried about whether art is a violent act in itself. I mean that goes right to the depths of what I'm doing as an artist ... although I was writing about painting I was also writing about writing ... there's an act of artificiality in writing. (Sue Woolfe)*

This exhibition of violence in Woolfe's narrative forces us to see the oppression of Frances through the violence of the father and then writes her out of those patriarchal frames into her self-construction as a woman artist. Woolfe's writing directly addresses what Griselda Pollock regards as a primary objective for feminist interventions into the histories of art: to study women as producers of art

(1988:10). In the same way that Woolfe's text invites feminist readings, Pollock considers what is at stake in imagining female spectators and concludes it is,

the very possibility that texts made by women can produce different positions within this sexual politics of looking. Without that possibility, women are both denied a representation of their desire and pleasure and are constantly erased so that to look at and enjoy the sites of patriarchal culture we ... must assume a masculine position or masochistically enjoy the sight of woman's humiliation. (1988:85)

The discomfort of confronting that violence is made possible only by Frances' active production of such images and by the possibilities Woolfe offers in her representation of a woman as artist.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ART OF DESIRE: DAVIDA ALLEN'S

*CLOSE TO THE BONE: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF VICKI MYERS* (1991)

Unlike Frances in *Painted Woman*, Davida Allen's artist figure, Vicki Myers, is given the opportunity and encouraged to paint whatever she desires and those desires are both written about and painted in her novel, *Close to the Bone: The Autobiography of Vicky Myers* (1991), and its companion volume, *What is a Portrait? The Images of Vicki Myers* (1991b). Allen's novel flouts the historical strictures placed on Frances and could be said to be a novel made possible by the times in which those strictures have been challenged. Where *Painted Woman* centres on the procession of women through the father's life, *Close to the Bone* uses the woman artist Vicki as its focus and charts the procession of men through her life, only giving them space as and when they relate to her desires. Where Frances takes on the social imperative to be "as a man", Vicki's art is sourced in her life as a woman; where Frances is taught to see through her father's eyes, Vicki paints what she feels. Interestingly, while Woolfe is informed by those theoretical challenges to art posed by feminism,

*I cobbled together some theory.* (Sue Woolfe)

Allen says she is ignorant of them:

*I am not aware of Helen [sic] Cixous or Luce Irigaray. I did not write the story to give out answers, or philosophies Alison,,,I just had a story I wanted to share.!!!* (Davida Allen)

Allen's texts may not be informed by feminist theory but they are a product of her cultural position, including her lived relations as an artist of international renown. Working mostly in oils, Allen has won the 1986 Archibald Prize, exhibited in the Sydney Biennale and in several Australian Perspectives, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, as well as in regular solo and joint exhibitions over twenty years. In that time Allen has developed a very public persona as an artist whose activities in many instances resemble those of her fictional character, Vicki Myers. This recognition intercepts the reading and reception of the novel, a complication which Allen encourages. She delights in taking the privileges awarded to artists and authors, speaking out as both in the confronting form of a woman speaking-writing-painting her desires.

Like Allen, Pat HOFFIE is an artist who also writes and speaks about her position as a woman. Women who paint *and* speak or write are particularly threatening, HOFFIE says, as they are intervening in two closely related cultural myths: the dumbness associated with the artist as an inarticulate "conduit to the sublime", and the association of women artists with hysteria:

The artist who is a woman and who writes or speaks is transgressor in two territories of alienation and risks finding herself abandoned by those who seek to *perpetuate* mythologies instead of reinventing new ones, for she is no longer prepared to provide herself as a *tabula rasa* for the inscriptions of those who would wish to discover, interpret and reinscribe her with their own version of what she meant to the world. (HOFFIE 1991:9)

HOFFIE was speaking at a public forum at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1991 when she said this and yet, despite lobbying for the value of those transgressions, her speech registers the ambivalence and perhaps discomfort of performing such acts.

Speaking in the third person and in the guise of a story entitled "A Private Fiction", HOFFIE disavows involvement in this passionately personal topic. Her talk is accompanied by a video made by one of her students, which she negates along with her own story with the disclaimer, "Neither the characters in the video nor any characters in the narrative have any bearing on reality" (HOFFIE 1991:7). Contradicting Pollock's call to study women as producers of art, HOFFIE speaks of women artists telling the "initiated" their success story as a "curiously anti-productive" practice:

In an art world which offered so few spaces available for success, in the patriarchal sense of the word, such exercises smack of tedious show-and-tell at best, and demonstrations of smugness at the worst. (1991:8)

And yet HOFFIE's character rebels against the silences imposed on women in such a world:

Her own past preparedness to speak and write had come from a commitment to redress the dichotomy of male speech and female muteness. To be female had traditionally meant to be spoken for — to be represented by — a role that she'd found psychologically, and even physically, intolerable. (1991:8)

HOFFIE's paper is interspersed with statistics, policy statements, comments from women writers and critiques of women's positions in the arts. The privacy of her fiction is transformed into a public performance of visual images and spoken words

(made available to me through written publication) which draws in other voices to become a collective concern. And yet there is still a reluctance to own this story.

The character Sue Woolfe constructs in *Painted Woman* might resemble this speaking-painting woman HOFFIE talks about, who insists on telling us what her paintings mean to her, pre-empting or at least directing any other stories which may be ascribed to her work. Her creator, on the other hand, questions her own authority to be writing about painting in a gesture similar to HOFFIE's fictionalising of her story. Woolfe says she

*was cheating, making the parallel between [writing and painting] because I really don't know, from first hand experience, about painting. I mean, I've watched painters, but I've never done it myself. (Sue Woolfe)*

Her father was an artist (*but he was nothing like the artist in Painted Woman*). Woolfe's reticence in claiming authority for the issues on which she writes, despite the sophistication of her narrative, may be modest but, like HOFFIE's disclaimer, it also tends to push her concerns into a public arena severed from personal history, from particular personal reference. Woolfe also says that writing, for her, was

*a step of great courage, because I grew up in a very chauvinist family, a large family. My father, whom I adored ... had such firm ideas of the position of women, that I always assumed that books were written by men, to the point where when I read Harriet Beecher Stowe I thought Harriet was a man with a funny American variation of Harry. I mean I just assumed men, because they were gods, did the writing and I was very timorous about writing. But I also felt it was something I had to do, to make meanings for myself. (Sue Woolfe)*

Hélène Cixous speaks in similar terms:

*Write? I didn't think of it. I dreamed of it constantly, but with the chagrin and the humility, the resignation and the innocence, of the poor. Writing is God. But it is not your God. (Cixous 1991:11)*

While I don't wish to draw any connections between Woolfe's life and her text, Woolfe's feeling of exclusion from writing because she is female is a lived experience which informs the politics of her text, as Frances struggles to find a space in which she can be accepted as an artist. For me, as a female and feminist reader, those politics confirm the permeability of the film between fiction and life, between narratives and life-stories. Woolfe's fiction critiques the relations between

women and western art as thoroughly as a theoretical paper or a personal history. Ironically, however, it is the very openness with which Allen draws connections between her life and her work so unproblematically, which presents me with the greatest problem in approaching her work.

Through her writing and her art, Davida Allen celebrates and plays on the connections between life and art as continuous rather than dichotomous. Her reputation rests on her translation of her life — as a woman artist mother daughter lover wife — into images made available for public consumption as art. By publicly promoting the parallels between her life and her art, Allen has created a space in expressionist art from which she can exceed all those roles with relative freedom on her own terms. This strategy is similar to the way Inez Baranay chose to portray the woman artist in *Pagan* (1990), as someone who uses her alienation from Australian culture to increase her commodity value and reputation as Other. It is a contradictory position where Davida Allen the artist becomes larger than (her private) life through her (public) art. She is at once reduced to her art, but is also more than her paintings can ever contain.

Allen's writing, then, brings with it an array of already established constructions of the author as artist, and at the same time it acts as an extension of that image. These links are endorsed by the cover illustration which reproduces a painting by Allen, by the back cover blurb which includes her artistic achievements, and by the companion volume of paintings, *What is a Portrait? The Images of Vicki Myers* (1991b). The resemblances between Vicki Myers and what is publicly known of Davida Allen's life also reinforce the continuation of Allen's construction of herself as an artist. In writing the novel, Allen says she is,

*playing with a fictitious [sic] character as an excuse for Davida Allen to continue in her output of what she has always been up to.....expressing her own life. (Davida Allen)*

Unlike the interviews with the other writers in this thesis, I was unable to speak personally to Allen so our "interview" was through correspondence and consequently is likely to be a more mediated and considered response. I therefore insert her



"voice" in this chapter exactly as she writes it, complete with her emphatic capitals, multiple exclamations and unexpected spelling and punctuation. This is not only to be faithful to her voice but also because it seems like an important extension of her artistic persona.

In trying to articulate a schema which takes into account the personal as a source of artistic production and its difference from the implications of autobiography, Sue Rowley suggests that artworks are not simply an "expression of that experience", but are "mediated by the process of making the artwork" (1992:57). The process of making art, of being an artist, is also a process involving the ongoing, lifelong project of subjectivity formation. Rowley suggests this happens in three ways:

that the artist constitutes herself as a subject, and is constituted as subject in the process of the work, and that this subjectivity is inscribed in the product of her labour, but not in ways that can necessarily or fruitfully be read as autobiography. (Rowley 1992:57)

Autobiography, she argues, endeavours to present a seamless, consistent and "relatively uncontradictory narrative" (65). To read an artist's work in this unified manner, as critics often read Allen's work, would be to ignore the activity of production. It also ignores the subject position of the artist, which is implicit in their choice of how to represent those experiences out of a range of possible representations. As Ursula Prunster notes in her commentary to part of the 1985 Australian Perspecta exhibition (which included work by Davida Allen),

All these [women] artists are drawn into working through an involvement with process and medium — the materiality of their chosen language is vital to their individual transformation of personal experience into a visual form. (Prunster 1985:82)

In what could be considered a reconfiguration of Frances' notion of The Gap, in *Painted Woman*, Rowley writes that "Between the idea and its expression there's an uncertain gap, and it is in that gap that the work begins to be shaped" (Rowley 1992:63). The gap is now a place for movement, freedom and activity if the artist and her work are read as decentred subject and incomplete text, constructing images and making meanings of experience. The "seams" are important as sites where

previously divided material is stitched together. If they are gaping or torn, or the stitches are loose and visible, then a larger array of possible meanings is made available.

It is in the breaks in the narrative, in the omissions, silences, conflicts and inexplicable connections, that an artist turns her experience into material out of which fictions are made. (Rowley 1992:65)

The theoretical techniques Rowley is applying here to reading artworks are not new in literary terms, but seem particularly relevant to Allen's novel, its reception and the construction of her as a writer and a painter.

By fictionalising themselves, both HOFFIE and ALLEN make overt that sense of themselves as writers/painters/women as constructions. Drawing together the threads of autobiographical experience and its representation in art, Ursula Prunster again comments that

Theory and practice are not clearly defined binary oppositions any more than art/life, nature/culture, man/woman, heart/head or mind/body. Art as an activity or process calls into question many of those value-laden oppositions which structure our experiences in culture. These artists are working *between* art and life, their aesthetic exploitation of inclusiveness — materially and associatively — implies entry into an individualised yet culturally-defined process. (Prunster 1985:83)

Allen's artwork and fiction are constructed in that gap between life and art, autobiography and fiction. Her questioning of those apparent dichotomies is because of the way her work is shaped: as a (perhaps) lived experience refigured into a chosen form of representation.

*The fragmented narrative style.....THIS IS JUST THE WAY I WRITE ALISON. I DIDN'T THINK IT UP...I PAINT THICK ..IT'S JUST THE WAY I PAINT. I CAN'T DO IT ANY OTHER WAY!! (Davida Allen)*

The "gap" in which that process of art-making happens, however, is not always considered in discussion of her work, partly due to the expressionist genre in which she unproblematically locates her work:

*I am concerned with the ordinary truth of living....family, sex, a vase of flowers on the table, frogs muscus on the windows, children reaching puberty, ...(I give you all the clues for my most recent work!!)... PERHAPS IT IS JUST MEANT TO BE...THAT I AM LIVING IN ISOLATION, IN ORDER TO NOT BE DISTRACTED FROM THE SIMPLICITY OF DAY TO DAY LIFE... the DAVIDA ALLEN images of which both excite or offend the audience that views them. (Davida Allen)*

Her former art dealer, Ray Hughes, endorses this "simple truth" when he speaks of her:

In exposing herself she makes compelling pictures because she is painting from something she has experienced. Perhaps a critical audience feels uncomfortable with images formed from real experience because they want them to be backed up with pet theories. (in Barrowclough 1991:14)

Much critical commentary does seem disconcerted by Allen's confronting images, although it is debatable whether that is due to the "realness" of her images and their apparent lack of theory which Hughes so easily dichotomises. Whatever the reason, many commentators seem fascinated more by the persona of Davida Allen as they see her represented in her art than by her art as representation.

At the risk of repeating that preoccupation with the woman rather than her art, I want to pursue the terms in which Allen is constructed as an artist as they produce a discourse which plays a powerful role in her commodification, and one which Allen encourages. Discussion of her art tends to paint her as the hysteric woman painter discussed by HOFFIE, concentrating especially on her "maternal obsession" (Chanin 1990:159) and her sexuality.

*There has indeed been articles about my work, describing the images or ME being obsessed with motherhood.  
THE TRUTH IS = I AM.  
HAVING 4 DAUGHTERS ...IF I WASN'T OBSESSED BY THE DUTIES  
IMPLICIT IN THIS ...IT WOULD BE A VERY SAD STORY I FEEL.  
I AM GLAD I AM OBSESSED WITH THE ROLE.  
WHAT FRIGHTENS ME THE MOST IN MY LIFE IS NOT BEING OBSESSED  
ABOUT ANYTHING. IT IS MY WORST FEAR. (Davida Allen)*

Barrowclough clearly shows how Allen is regarded primarily as a sexual subject, a characterisation reputedly drawn from her work:

Her work has always been welded to incidents taken from real life: her rich and imaginative sexuality, her relationship with her doctor husband, Michael Shera, her concept of motherhood (she has four daughters ranging in age from nine to 18), her fantasies about priests and, rather more fantastically and famously, about the actor Sam Neill, with whom she became publicly smitten and followed obsessively on to a film set — resulting in her best known, but not necessarily her best, series of paintings. (Barrowclough 1991:14)

Allen's "real" life as it relates to her work is here represented as entirely sexual. Critics often identify the energy of Allen's creative work but confine it (and her) as "sexual". Commentary that uses sexual terms to emphasise the energy often

represents this as excessive and threatening. Her work is described as "strong", "vigorous", "violent", "direct", "brutally abrupt", "sharp", "chaotic", "rampaging", "out of control"; her figures are "dislocated", "severed", "haptic", "twisting", "frozen", "pinioned", "intense", "menacing", "sliced", "entrapped", "animated with bristling sexual energy and vitality" (Murphy 1981:37), and "truncated, sexually aggressive, maddened mannikans" (Burke 1981:380). She is described as "raw, innocent, fierce" and her writing process as "frenzied" (Barrowclough 1991:14).

*In 1986 at my Survey Exhibition at M.O.C.A. [Museum of Contemporary Art] in Brisbane...one critic wrote about my art..."she paints about life, death, sex without shame..." this was aimed at being a derogatory review...it is probably the most apt thing that has ever been written about my work! (Davida Allen)*

While Allen remains undisturbed by and actively encourages the discursive slippage from her work to its producer, her sexualisation by that discourse can produce anxious moments for some critics. There is constant reference to the artist in terms of her nakedness. Reviewers often use the term striptease, or speak of Allen "exposing" herself, as Ray Hughes does. One art lecturer, reviewing her novel in an art journal, found the reading an "awkward" experience due to its being a "thinly disguised autobiography" which "delves into areas of women's sexuality and identity which even the most 'sensitive' male may completely misunderstand" (Airo-Farulla 1992:41). He writes of "Allen's apparent relish to rub our noses into intimate matters" as "shocking". Describing her process of art-making as "stripping", an "uncontrollable and cathartic creative act" so she can "sublimate her sexual appetite for other men", he is in the end disappointed in her literary striptease: "Allen/Myers may claim to bare all, but in fact she reveals nothing" (Airo-Farulla 1992:41). There are two contradictory expectations operating here: firstly, that Allen does expose herself (to him), that "what she admits to us and perhaps to herself as well is all there is to her act of painting" (Airo-Farulla: 41); and secondly, that there must be something more than what she shows (that she's teasing him). By locating her art firmly in domestic life and bodily matters Allen threatens the institutionalised grandeur and mystification of "Art", and so seems to be

subjected to criticism on the basis of her position as a (sexualised) woman. This is the same grandeur Woolfe works against when Frances claims "all I'm doing is painting" (1989:174).

In a reverse strategy to Margaret Preston's imposing and contrived self-portrait, then, Allen's construction of herself as a painter and her construction of Vicki Myers revels in the femaleness of her creativity: the desires, frustrations, fantasies and obsessions of her sexuality and maternity. Allen may or may not be in control of this process of media representation, but she certainly appears to participate willingly in it.

*Alison...may I say at this point....the underlying need to write and draw both books was my insatiable [sic] greed for audience!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*  
(Davida Allen)

By naming her novel an autobiography, albeit that of Vicki Myers and not of Davida Allen, Allen again operates in the space between personal and public, playing on the overlap between what is known of her private life with a(nother) fictional representation of it.

*this is the story of Vicki Myers. written by Vicki Myers. the reader then sees it is written by Davida Allen.*  
*Why is Davida Allen calling herself Vicki Myers?*  
*Is Davida Allen Vicki Myers?*  
*Who is Vicki Myers..could she in fact be anyone? (Davida Allen)*

As Sue Rowley has suggested, however, autobiography is generally engaged in ordering experience into a coherent and consistent narrative which smooths over any contradictions in, and of, the process of representation (Rowley 1992). Allen's selection of autobiography as a genre and her preference for painting (self) portraits suggest an interest in constructing images of the self.

*dear dear Alison...It's not an original idea by any means...but the critics and the readers all wallowed in my game...and so smiling like a cheshire cat, I read their articles and comments and don't care anymore about the heat of is it or isn't it me..."just read the bloody story..and if it really matters to you if it is or isn't Davida Allen...I think it sad..You have not got enough out of Vicki Myers...." I tell them. (Davida Allen)*

From early in the novel Vicki Myers is conscious of the need to construct for herself an artistic identity. Turning her cubbyhouse into an "art room", she feels "a freedom in living up here trying to cultivate the 1903 wild painters' look"

(1991:27). Her art teacher, Mrs Lowry, provides Vicki with a model, wearing "interesting clothes, and Egyptian looking beads" (26). Clothes are used here as signifiers to construct a particular image, as the narrative similarly associates Greg with corduroy pants. As in Inez Baranay's *Between Careers* and Fiona Place's *Cardboard*, clothes are also used as indicators of sexuality. In a visit to her art-dealer, Barry, Vicki informs the reader that her deliberately provocative dress is a disguise so that Barry will compliment her artwork (51). Masquerading as a "client", in black fish-net stockings, white patent leather skirt and make-up, she acts "flirtatiously" in response to Barry's "ravenous" look and "game of seduction". Vicki's desire for her paintings to be looked at is here transferred to herself, as if they are easily exchangeable commodities.

Vicki's sexuality (including her "to-be-looked-at-ness") is an important part of her characterisation and commodification as an artist. Barry is later represented as prostituting her art/body: "Barry knows I'm just a kind of stripper! I perform naked in my painting; he puts my body up for sale" (116). But Vicki asserts that her need for him is unconnected to his role as pimp: "I need Barry for something money just can't buy: his bottomless, fathomless, insatiable belief in me" (61). He is elsewhere described as her "art husband" (58). Husband or pimp, Barry is inevitably named within the context of Vicki's sexuality by his connection through (selling) her art.

For Vicki, sexuality and art are both sourced in her body and these connections are made continually in Allen's writing.

*I found dealing with sexual desire in the script easy...because it's as much part of life as any thing else (probably one of the most important elements to MY female psyche.) (Davida Allen)*

In her cubbyhouse, Vicki "squeezes her unrequited love out of tubes of acrylic paint" (43) until marriage to Greg legitimises the beginning of an active heterosexuality. To mark this event, Vicki's art teacher presents her with a set of oil paints, blessing both her fertility and her art production. Vicki paints at night then falls into bed with Greg, one pleasure precipitating the other: Greg "knows he will have a happier,

sexier wife in bed if the artist has first been satisfied" (62). Sexuality and painting become linked through the strength of their smells, which are then mingled for Vicki: "I can smell my own sex scent in the oil" (113). As the smells and fluids of body and paint merge they become metonymic figures of her desires. Standing next to the art student Hugo at his easel she smells his sex: "And there is nothing more powerful than the combined smell of sex AND paint" (85), she tells us.

Smells and fluids proliferate in this writing, leaking out over nearly every page in descriptions of anticipatory saliva, dribbling semen, gooey baby food, poohey nappies, sweaty bodies and smells from the toilet wafting with oil paint. The narrative delights in the bodily secretions provided by Vicki's (hetero)sexuality as a source of energy for her texts.

*THE OOZES ETC...ARE NOT THESE THE SIMPLEST OF THINGS PERTAINING TO LIFE. I can't imagine writing a story and not mentioning them. But ..you must understand..this is a painter writing....the thing I love most about when I am painting ..is the smell of the oil..!!!! (Davida Allen)*

These expulsions from various bodies (and paint tubes?) are all abject as Kristeva uses the term: as in some of Walwicz's pieces, Allen ignores the discrete inner/outer bodily "borders" in her writing as her paintings similarly refuse the three-dimensionality and proportions of bodily forms.

Like her ("autobiographical") writing, Vicki's paintings are sourced in her sexuality. She uses it both to celebrate her fertility, "to boast on canvas of purply pink female genitalia stripped bare before a virile red triangle" (117), and to rage at the browning nipples of her pregnant body; it is a confessional for her lust for Hugo and inscribes the torment of her punishment through the aggressive male shape of Dog, the bull terrier:

**The canvases scream with a white male dog rearing up against a female form, displaying its pink genitals. Vicki's Cadmium makes a red scar in the shape of a pointed penis. (96)**

Her passion for the priest, Charles, is intellectualised rather than acted on this time — "it's not your penis I want, it's your God" (115) — and her desires channelled into art: "Passion holds the paintbrush. Vicki, cautious, tentative, in her smudges of halo, female legs spread apart" (111-12).

The profuse energy Vicki invests in her images of female sexuality can be compared to the libidinal economy Cixous speaks of as *jouissance*. Cixous calls for women to proclaim their "thousand and one thresholds of ardor" (1976:885), to exclaim:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst — burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. (Cixous 1976:876)

The female forms Vicki puts in frames unmistakably assert their desires as females, rather than as objects of masculine desire. The overflowing "excess" of fluid of a woman's (desiring) body, however, is threatening to patriarchy and its model of masculine sexuality which is limited in reserves and dependent on solidity and form (Cixous 1986:91). Vicki learns that painting with "the energy of my desires" (116) is more acceptable than enacting them:

My partner is Fantasy. I am woman-lover with my sexuality being both indulged and satisfied openly without guilt. I have not sinned and intend not the sin. (111)

She repeats this formula with her "obsession" for actor Sam Neill: **"Vicki orgasms her desire for the Movie Man in paint."** (150). This is very different to father-artist in *Painted Woman* who inflicts his violent sexual aggression on to the bodies of living women, or the men who buy prostitutes on whom to play out their fantasies in *Between Careers*. Vicki's channelling of energy into painting is similar to the way Baranay discusses creativity in her coda. For Vicki, though, this is an enforced redirection, a channel to control her sexuality which would exceed her marital confines. The threat Vicki's (uncontrolled) sexuality poses to the institution of the family is reminiscent of the censuring of "fallen" and "painted" women, whose sexuality threatened and reasserted those same Victorian familial structures. While those women were controlled through their commodification, Vicki is directed to her painting, which is then commodifiable.

In contrast to the violence of the father in *Painted Woman*, the construction of Vicki's libidinal economy includes the plenitude of the mother. Vicki's pregnancies



and her children are part of her material conditions and are therefore incorporated in her work.

*for instance...There is a painting called "Mother driving children to swimming class." It is an image of abstract Mother and children.. a woman behind the shape of a steering wheel and three togged [sic] shapes of children behind her, each with a black seat belt shape in front of them. The whole canvas depicts the inside space of the car. The colours are hot mauve and pink and yellow. Emotionally it is the mother's havoc. This specific image is a frozen example of the plight of the woman at home with the children. (Davida Allen)*

Vicki's images of motherhood revise its iconographic representations in art which have traditionally been presented by non-mothers. One of these icons is brought to Vicki's attention early in the novel in the form of a nativity scene "gorged" into the expensive stained glass windows at her Catholic boarding school. While Mother Pascal comments on the monetary value of the window, Vicki notices the value of the scene, "its potential as ART" (83). The nativity scene incorporates a cultural idealisation of motherhood and women's sexuality for Western society. In a commentary to an exhibition called "Mothers" (1981) at The Women's Gallery in New Zealand, Robyn McKinlay examined images of the madonna and child as they have been traditionally represented in art:

*In those paintings I know best, the madonna is holding the child. The baby may be quite active, but she is invariably calm and passive. Her face, either turned down to the child or staring into the distance with a look of inner contemplation, shows very little emotion, only an expression of patient tenderness and concern ... We are left with the impression that she has no feelings of her own, no worries, anxieties or challenges, in fact no individuality at all, but that her whole being has been reduced to providing a response to the needs of the male child she has borne. (McKinlay 1981:22)*

In contrast to this tradition, Vicki constructs less idealising and more equivocal images of maternity, based on her lived experiences. Her role as primary carer means her time for painting is restricted and often interrupted, but her children, and Vicki's responses to them, are also subject matter for her drawings. Vicki regards her artist-self as a "scavenger" (130) of material from her life as mother and lover, even if the combination often leaves "the artist struggl[ing] inside the mother" (112):

*This isn't how I imagined it would be. I always wanted to be an artist, not a mother and cleaner. I've no imagination left ... I wish I was a man. (70)*

Being a mother and an artist is neither valorised nor regretted, but constructed as a contradictory state, especially in its divergence from the traditional cultural expectations of an artist. This sometimes causes Barry anxiety. He "tries to intoxicate his clients into believing in The Artist" (51), Vicki tells us, but then,

Most of Barry's artists are men. Naturally he's nervous about women — they get married and have babies and do more housework than art. Personally I can sympathise with him. I DO in fact do more housework than art and I'm very neurotic about it! (60)

The tension generated by combining these roles is, however, always productive for Vicki:

**Panicky paint is squirted onto drawing boards. Images of a nude woman glide luxuriantly from the boards' whiteness, the body floating around into dissected pieces.**

My own nakedness growing outwards and inwards with fertile elasticity ... I AM a dismembered woman: artist's womb with pubic-hair apron; wife-and-mother with varicose veins. (75)

Vicki's roles in fact overlap to such an extent that they are largely irrecoverable as distinct tasks. As her art and her sexuality are inseparable, the text also takes pleasure in the multiplicity and fluidity of Vicki's subjectivity. Her identity, like "her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*" (Irigaray 1985:28).

*I just happen to be female, mother, wife, artist...and I wanted creativity to be exposed in all these roles..NOT JUST IN THE BEING AN ARTIST!!!!*  
*THE BOOK.....I HOPE....SUGGESTS...THE ARTIST FEEDS OFF VICKI MYERS BEING FEMALE, MOTHER, WIFE, LOVER.* (Davida Allen)

The painting of the Paris mural exemplifies the dynamic relationship between Vicki's artist/mother/lover selves. This is to be a work of massive proportions — "The Biggest Canvas She'll Ever Do" (131). Vicki compares it to giving birth as Barry and Greg "**escort the woman-artist-investment to the labour ward, the hall of terror**" (134). Vicki's creativity is paralysed, however, mourning the absence of her children:

I smell my children. I want to call them, hear their voices. I should not be here. I am a mother-deserter. Guilt everywhere. (135)

The mother's grief of desertion is amplified by Vicki's Catholicism to a sin (137). Here, the cultural and religious expectations of motherhood (generated largely by

nativity scenes like the one Vicki responds to earlier) collide with her desires as an artist, but find a productive intersection through her painting:

**Shapes of a male child nestling into a shape of mother-pink flesh-woman, her other breast lurching towards her girl dependants swirling around her ... The brushstrokes wail Vicki's estrangement, with a ferocious hunger she confesses her desertion to the wall and exorcises her guilt. (136)**

With the project complete, Vicki celebrates in the French bath with Greg and is presented with a pair of crutchless French knickers by Barry; mother, artist, lover and wife all satisfied.

Allen collapses the traditional gendered separation of creativity and procreativity when she speaks of the process of art production in terms of birthing:

*The 'Baby' is the Painting ... the whole thing is VERY LIKE THE BIRTH ACT.*  
(Allen 1987:10)

By doing so, she situates women's fertility and birthing capacity as a source of creativity. Irigaray argues that western culture has ignored this association, a denial that also fails to take into account our debt to the mother for giving life: "The between-men cultures have deprived us of the expression of meaning through images, which for the most part constitutes our female and maternal genius" (Irigaray 1993:110). Elizabeth Grosz clearly summarises the implications of Irigaray's notion of the maternal debt:

women must not only be seen as autonomous sexual beings and carnal subjects, subjects as well as objects of desire; most particularly, the cultural debt to women's maternity must be openly acknowledged. The debt of materiality, life, existence, that both men and women owe to the mother *cannot* be paid back, it cannot be reciprocated. But in exchange for this life which comes from the mother's body, the child/father/culture must acknowledge that, beyond her maternal roles, the mother is also a woman, a subject, with a life, sex and desires of her own. The mother cannot be entirely consumed in/by maternity. The excess or remainder left over is her specificity as a woman. (Grosz 1989:179)

Allen's text gives space for Vicki to articulate her specificity as a woman outside of her maternity, but finally decides that they are inseparable. Vicki's lecturing job, for example, initially provided a space in which she could carve an identity outside of the familial roles which inscribed her at home: "No longer am I mother, my mouth filled with baby goo; no longer am I wife ... Now I am WOMAN again" (80). To Greg,

however, it is an indulgence, "to go out and do what you imagine is going to fulfil you more than the housework and children" (79). Greg, of course, is proved right in regarding Vicki as straying from her roles when her desire for the art student, Hugo, is rendered incommensurate with her position as wife and mother. In this way, the text complicates the relationships between Vicki's different roles, as they leak over to inform each other.

Vicki's decision to paint her domestic environment, for example, is in part a reaction to her "art lecturer's night-time tongue mouthing in my mouth the truths of art's wildness" (63):

Just at this moment now I am breathing my air of foul domestic horror inside the four walls of a house, and this is what I'll paint. (63)

Vicki's "room called Studio" (62) is located within those four walls of her house and signifies a space which overlaps mothering and painting. Traditionally represented as mutually exclusive, these two positions are competing yet interrelated spaces for Vicki, as they were for Frances in her mixing of domestic and artistic surfaces in *Painted Woman*. When Vicki is in the position of lecturer, facing her first class of art students, she questions how to fit her experiential knowledge into her pedagogical practice:

I have no truths to offer them, my own attempts to paint have been met with relentless frustrations. Being bound by Greg's love has made me a cripple ... But I am angry at myself for having such thoughts when I think of myself as a mother. (82)

Vicki's position as a woman — married, mothering and painting — informs her approach to teaching as it challenges the "truths" mouthed by her art lecturer. Accordingly, Vicki collapses the authority of the artist and lecturer as an objective receptacle of truths by proclaiming herself to be the nude model for the class. By claiming her embodiment (as a woman) Vicki asserts herself as an experienced and experiencing body, rather than deriving her authority solely from her position of power. The combination of being looked at as a nude and being listened to as a lecturer complicates the normally independent relationship between the two and their attendant differences in power. Vicki undermines those institutionalised power

relationships as blithely and confidently as her images confront the art world with female sexuality and maternity.

*I hope my images both in paint and in words can give a light at the end of the tunnel as it were, to deranged mothers at home with screaming infants!!!!!!*

*Needless to point out, dear Alison, the book started to be written [sic] when my fourth child was at school.*

*I could not see any fucking light myself when she was in nappies!!!!!! (Davida Allen)*

In writing about these issues Allen also begins to fill in what Sue Woolfe and Margaret Coombs noticed as an absence of stories about the experience of mothering as it affects the lives and bodies of women-mothers.

*But I am not painting or writing these issues Alison. Rather I am more interested in shining a congratulatory light on the woman in the house doing the nappies ... on the woman struggling to contain some sense of sexual self in her tired marital bed ... Some sense of worth of her demeaning day's housewifery. ... I believe it could be any woman's story if she had the chance to have a loving husband!! (Davida Allen)*

Allen repeatedly stresses Vicki's privilege in being supported in her art practices and the vital role played by her husband in her domestic conditions. Vicki's radical interventions in art are, to a large extent, dependent on the benevolence of her loving husband: Greg provides Vicki with emotional support and stability, indulging her fantasies and encouraging her creative channelling of them. As an employed doctor he finances the material conditions of her artistic production:

*There is a truth in the old saying about behind every great man is a great woman....The story of Vicki Myers is quite bluntly exposing the truth behind this artist is the husband.*

*I am riddled knowing there are so many potential Vicki Myers who do not have a Greg....I feel wretched at their lives..but what can I do?...paint my life more preciousy. (Davida Allen)*

Marriage is constructed as a framework that provides for Vicki, in the same way that Greg provides her canvases and stretches them onto frames for her. The text questions her positioning in this marital structure only once, while Vicki is negotiating time and space for her art practice:

**Vicki's words are tight with explosive control. "I'm so lucky to have married you."**

**Surely I'm in this mess because I married him? (79)**

This passing comment momentarily dissents from the novel's reinforcement of marriage as positively enabling for Vicki.

The traditional marital structure in which Vicki's sexuality and desires are located and through which they are constructed does produce some contradictions. Alongside the assertions of Vicki's sexuality which are actively creative and productive are more conventional and arguably oppressive representations of female sexuality: for all Vicki's public refiguring of art values in terms of women's sexuality, her private life unequivocally registers the patriarchal power relations through which her desires have been produced. Contrasting the actively sexual figures in her art, Vicki takes pleasure in being positioned as the passive receptacle for Greg's satisfaction.

I like being the one ravaged, I don't ever want to be his equal sexually. I want to be the victim of his seduction ... His passion on me, in me, to me is what I love most about Greg. I am the vessel of his male intensity ... Being Greg's vessel is very important to me (110-11)

The passivity of Vicki's sexuality here is the antithesis to her public representations. Painting her Movie Man, for example, she screams, "Don't worry, Mr Movie Star, all I want to do is to gobble you up!" (149).

*Maybe Vicki Myers just needs to be conquered by GREG because because ...she's the one doing all the CONQUERING in EVERY OTHER FIELD!!! ie: mothering, expanding the imagination, domestic duties. Is it the disturbing possibility Alison: for her to want to be the one ravaged enrichingley? [sic] (Davida Allen responds)*

"Ravage", and its derivative, "ravish", are very destructive verbs which derive from the word "rape". While feminists like Andrea Dworkin (1987) and Sheila Jeffreys (1990) work toward exposing and redressing the violence implicit in discursive representations of male sexuality, Allen flaunts Vicki's pleasure in terms of that violence. She is described as an

addict to Greg's strength ... His penis is my sword.  
**Woman lies victoriously slain, fragility pinned down. Gasping and shuddering with her lover's sex, the woman feeds greedily.**  
(127)

Terms like these that are used to construct Vicki's (private) sexuality echo Popular romance novels, as Claire Mills remarks in her review of the novel as "an

antipodean 'portrait of the artist', via Mills and Boon" (1991:22). The formulaic terms of romance are also used to register Vicki's doubts about the merits of married sex when she anticipates some "pure, unadulterated lust ... and all its niggling excitement!" (77). To satisfy these urges she plays the devil with "Sin", as she names Hugo. Vicki's later fantasies are translated on to canvas as representations of her female sexuality.

*Alison,,,it is Fantasy ..Imagination ...that Vicki Myers is unconsciously suggesting can save the day.(Davida Allen)*

This idea might be likened to Violet's enactment of men's fantasies as a prostitute in *Between Careers*. Violet plays out men's fantasies; Vicki paints out hers. Yet, are they very different? Irigaray suggests that the "violent break in" of the "violating penis" which disrupts the autoeroticism of women's two lips belongs to a sexual imaginary which is "foreign to the feminine" (1985:24). In this sexual imaginary, woman

is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will "take" her as his "object" when he seeks his own pleasure. (1985:25)

As Baranay problematises the connections between fantasy and romance in her fiction, so too does Ros Ballaster when she argues that the terms of romantic fiction can be likened to pornography, especially when it is "drawing upon the sado-masochistic pleasures of bondage under the fetters of patriarchy for its appeal" (1987:64). Romantic novels and pornography are dehistoricised as a fantasy world, Ballaster argues, but the underlying difference between the genres and their readers lies in the way power is portrayed: pornography validates men's experience of power whereas romance offers its readers the *illusion* of power and is structured around contradiction (Ballaster 1987:64).

The contradictions Ballaster speaks of are played out in Allen's novel when Vicki confesses to Greg her fling with Hugo. Greg's reaction is to rape her:

**He pins Vicki down with his body's weight, his hands holding hers back above her head. Panting rage, his hands manic at her**

nakedness, he writhes ravenously all over her, reclaiming lost property. (89)

This scene discursively constructs Greg as the strong, virile hero who has been wronged and is rightfully taking back what is his. The scene is endorsed by a culture which actively generates romance fiction of this kind and markets it as women's fantasies, as an "escape" from everyday, mundane activities. Adding to this the terms of her Catholicism, Vicki thinks she deserves such "penance for my sin" (89) and her resulting pregnancy is seen as a condition of forgiveness. The narrative is convincing in showing Greg's pain at Vicki's transgression of monogamy but her *mea culpa* attitude means she passively accepts and justifies his behaviour.

If, as Irigaray argues, the "artificial scission between private life and public life maintains a collusive silence on the disasters of loving relationships" (1993:19), for me those disasters are registered in the division of Vicki's public and private sexual personae. Cixous argues that the very act of women writing (their bodies) will mean incorporating the social contradictions of being a woman.

To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ...) (Cixous 1976:880)

Vicki Myers' life is written in terms of "her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal". At the same time as Vicki is free to represent those pleasures on canvas, however, her positioning in a traditional patriarchal marriage reimposes the "superegoized structure" which put those pleasures under seal to start with.

*I am perhaps a true feminist in the specific sense of the word..to believe the woman is as good as any man..to be truly liberated in the house hold and work place and not be inferior...(Davida Allen)*



While making new space for Vicki to operate as an artist, there are few, if any, new stories about the operations of families and sexual relationships. Rosemary Creswell astutely comments that the story

may alienate some feminists because it could be seen to be a book that centres on a woman's role as wife and mother and deals with erotic obsessions with men. But it's more than that, dealing as it does with Vicki's dividedness about her traditional role and her role as artist. (in Barrowclough 1991:17)

Creswell is right: I squirm with discomfort reading about Vicki liking to be "slain", being "Greg's vessel" and her feeling of virtue when paying sexual "penance". It seems to make a virtue of oppression: if there were no imbalance of power in sexual relations would we bother fantasising about making oppression sexy? Fantasy seems to make bearable an unwished for reality, as Vicki does with her paintings of Dog.

*Obviously, you and any one else INTERESTED IN THE FEMINIST DEBATES, HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO HAVE YOUR OWN SPECIALIZED OPINION...BECAUSE THE WORK IS IN THE AUDIENCE DOMAIN..I have no control once I let it be born...But I struggle with the fear of how to say something without it's carrying a moral judgement!!!! (Davida Allen)*

Other reviewers were charmed by the traditional values wound into the domestic family life of Vicki Myers. Thomas Shapcott decides the story "is about the triumph of an enduring marriage ... a psalm to love" (1991:8). Dorothy Porter, on the other hand, celebrates "the lusty urges and the spurts of paint [that] come, and come most emphatically, from a female source" (1991:44) and assures us that the text is neither academic nor feminist:

This is not a feminist cautionary tale of the female artist thwarted every which way by male envy or tyranny. Vicki's closest relationships are with men, often loving and abnormally patient men. (1991:44)

Porter makes an interesting comparison, though, between Myers' paintings and the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's. While both are interested in self-portraiture and source their art in their bodies, Kahlo's representations of her body are very different to Myers' in being marked with the violence of relentless pain and injury, surgery and disability (Mulvey and Wollen 1987).

While I resist the politics of Vicki's sexual relations with Greg, I must admit to finding something refreshing about her daring to speak about enjoying her sexuality with a man, something which feminists seem very reticent to discuss

beyond critiques of oppressive practices. Of the texts in this thesis, the only women who "do" sex with men are Vicki, who enjoys being slain and pinned down, and the prostitutes in *Between Careers*. Frances tries it and rejects it in *Painted Woman*; Estella's partner is a woman in *The Falling Woman* and female sexuality is metaphorically invested in her landscape; Lucy avoids it after her bad experience with the professor in *Cardboard*; and it is threatened in *The Best Man* as an extension of institutionalised male abuse. There is one story at the end of *Regards to the Czar* where Helen, a newly "liberated" woman, goes home with a customs officer named Stan who "couldn't get it up" (1988:179). Contrary to her expectations of what constituted "good sex", Helen finds herself enjoying with "infantine contentment" their entwining bodies, wondering whether "his impotence wasn't a condition of my pleasure, and my whole sexual nature a morass of perversion that only my own ignorance protected me from seeing as that" (1988:180). In spite of Helen's multiple orgasms and the pleasures of her multiple writings of letters and stories, Beth Spencer shows that it is the way a text is read which renders it powerful or impotent. Spencer argues that Coombs' story was read by several reviewers as a failure due to its "impotent" ending: its lack of a masculine climax (Spencer 1991a:76). The possibility of remapping pleasure and plot around something other than a phallic climax in this story, in *The Falling Woman*, echoes earlier discussions of female aesthetics and *écriture féminine*.

For all our theorising of sexuality and bodies and deconstructing of heterosexuality, there is very little debate on how heterosexuality fits into feminism for those of us who have chosen male partners at this stage of our lives. Allen has commented on this, from what Sheila Jeffreys would critically call a sexual libertarian viewpoint. Gail Heathwood reports:

Davida, it seems, has long been chary of what she terms the "preciousness" of the women's movement, or that element of it which deliberately seeks to turn a key on its genitals and hang out a sign reading "forbidden territory, men not worthy to enter" ... [Allen] went on, "Yet if we are truly feminist in the fullest sense of the word, we shouldn't have felt we had to lock it away and be really careful about it. We should be *chauvinist* in our womanhood". (Heathwood 1986:131)

Rather than reduce the issue to one of prudery, there is obviously much more of ourselves invested in discussions of heterosexuality for heterosexual feminists. I remember a very anxious moment in an edition of ABC Radio National's *The Coming Out Show* when Jane Gallop and Moira Gatens almost broached the issue in a discussion of "the politics of pleasure". Their discomfort is registered in the tentativeness of their dialogue in an otherwise fluent discussion:

Gallop: What women do with men, what women want to do with men, what women enjoy with men, has remained left out of most feminist discussions. But, on another level, what occurs to me, I mean, I just keep thinking, I just keep imagining, well, what if Moira and I had to, like, move out of our positions as theorists and try to talk about, like, our practice. I mean, if I said, "Listen, I, like, live with a man, I sleep with him, what is it I like to do?", I mean, I can't...

Gatens: I have to go home now.

[giggles heard, interrupted by fantasy dialogue between a call-girl and a truck-driver, "Killdozer: Not a Parody", by Mary Fallon and Sheri deLise, which periodically interrupts discussion.]

Gallop: I'm not suggesting we do this I'm talking about why we can't, how we can't. And, it seems to me that ... you can talk about your practice of being oppressed, and women have ... but to talk about your desires or your pleasure feels so guilty because I think there remains — however sure you are of your feminism — there also remains a fear that you're going to be heard as, you know, some woman who is just trying to please men, who's totally deluded. (Gallop and Gatens 1990)

For all of Vicki's feminist art I find I am still reading her as "some woman who is just trying to please men, who's totally deluded".

*This interpretation sadens me!!! [sic]* (Davida Allen responds)

Like Gallop, I also feel the need to relate theory to practice here but am quite uneasy writing about it. "Sometimes our own critiques overpower us" writes Robyn Rowland in trying to address the apparent taboo on speaking about a practice of feminist heterosexuality: "Monolithic institutions like motherhood and heterosexuality are revealed as insidious, pervasive and obdurate. Often we solve the problem of their nature by absenting ourselves" (Rowland 1992:462). Like Gatens, I would be relieved to absent myself from this discussion, but like Rowland my current decision to be with a male partner is acutely connected to what I learn from

feminism. Because I live the seeming contradictions of feminist heterosexuality every day, I am constantly addressing it, if not in this written context.

Ironically, discussions and critiques of heterosexuality have largely been initiated by lesbian feminists. Denise Thompson argues that "lesbian desire is central to any feminist debate on sexuality ... because of the challenge it poses to the compulsions heterosexuality imposes on the lives of women" (Thompson 1991:3). Long after Adrienne Rich urged an examination of heterocentricity (1980), compulsory heterosexuality still remains an assumption in many texts that goes unqueried. When the editors of *Feminism and Psychology* (1992) decided to devote a special issue of the journal to heterosexuality, they self-consciously inverted the usual practice of dedicating special issues to lesbian women (or older women, or women of colour, or third world women or disabled women), which assumes a white, middle-class, young, heterosexual, able-bodied readership. Celia Kitzinger, Sue Wilkinson and Rachel Perkins, the editors, were also "aware of the irony that three lesbians should be creating space that heterosexual women have, apparently, been unable or unwilling to create for themselves" (Kitzinger et al. 1992:295).

*Écriture féminine* circulates on notions of feminist/female sexuality as fluid and multiple in form, as auto-erotic, associated with touch rather than sight, changeability rather than solidity, and propinquity rather than objectification and fetishising. The connections made between women's experiencing of their (sexual) bodies and their writing inevitably link practice and theory, lives and stories. In her vigorous critique of the masculine libidinal economy Cixous characteristically addresses heterosexuality in terms of a female desire that wants to embrace everything:

Besides, isn't it evident that the penis gets around in my texts, that I give it a place and appeal? Of course I do. I want all. I want all of me with all of him. Why should I deprive myself of a part of us? I want all of us. Woman of course has a desire for a "loving desire" and not a jealous one. But not because she is gelded; not because she's deprived and needs to be filled out like some wounded person who wants to console herself or seek vengeance: I don't want a penis to decorate my body with. But I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female; because living means wanting everything that is, everything that lives, and wanting it alive. (Cixous 1976:891)

Cixous retells Freud's story of women wanting men and sons in order to satisfy their "lack" of a penis. In her retelling, Cixous invests women with integrity, choice, the ability to make decisions and a desire that operates on love, rather than romance, and *jouissance*, rather than fetish. Instead of assuming that women are "totally deluded", as men and women are so often willing to do, Cixous invests them with sovereignty. Robyn Rowland borrows the term "wilfulness" from Sheila Jeffreys when she asserts her ability to think and make an informed choice about her "current decision to be heterosexual":

This does not mean that I do not think I am as socialized as the next woman into heterosexuality. I know all of the pressures on us to conform ... every woman has to live a life where she is and according to her own sense of political and personal belief. (Rowland 1992:460).

As one of the contributors to the "Heterosexuality" edition of *Feminism and Psychology* (1992), Rowland writes about how she practices her political beliefs and theorises her personal practices in the conjunction of her feminism and her heterosexuality. She outlines the oppressions of heterosexual institutions and practices and argues for the reality and necessity of stomach-wrenching analyses like Dworkin's *Intercourse* (1987). And yet, as she argues, "heterosexual feminists agree that one of the reasons for being with a man is that we like having sex with a man" (1992:462). Not all sexual relationships between women and men are based on dominance and submission, on violence and abuses of power: this is a patriarchal concept of heterosexuality which contrasts to what Rowland proposes as a feminist-defined heterosexual relationship. This would include,

equitable power distribution in terms of economic independence, where the woman does *not* engage in domestic, sexual and emotional servicing ... Heterosexual sexuality is not always intercourse. And intercourse does take place which is *not* degrading. Penetration is *not* always rape ... What is important in a sexual relationship is for each participant to feel integrity, self respect and self-empowerment — and not at the cost of another. (Rowland 1992:462)

Rowland celebrates the articulation of woman-centred values and women's friendship as provided largely by lesbian writers (citing Adrienne Rich and Janice Raymond) and affirms their importance in women's lives.

Like Cixous, Rowland claims we can have it all. Calling herself a "woman-identified radical feminist whose partner is male" (Rowland 1992:463), she claims the importance of love, friendship and shared politics from both her woman friends and her male lover which, she argues, is what any woman seeks in relationships whether they be with males or females as lovers or friends. Susan Hawthorne's *The Falling Woman* is the only text I discuss that approaches such a concept in her "falling" state which registers her rejection of patriarchal paradigms of female sexuality. While Frances in *Painted Woman* rejects her sexuality, swapping her sexualised body for access to the world of art, Vicki Myers is able to have both art and sex but on patriarchal terms which differ from Frances' only slightly. The "impropriety" of her painting and of the subject of her paintings is public property whose popularity and commodification partially rest on Vicki's female sexualisation which is kept under control through the proprietorial laws of patriarchal marriage.

Like Lucy's writing in (and of) *Cardboard*, one of the most enabling features of *Close to the Bone* is its writing (and painting) of Vicki's life. As a producer of meanings circulating publicly, Vicki's insistence on representing herself and writing/painting her own body signals a shift in the tradition of objectifying women through male perspectives, even if there are still patriarchal constraints to contend with. Maybe the discomfort I have with Vicki's masochistic sexual positioning is, like the violence Frances endures, part of her story which has to be (con)textualised in order to explore and imagine women's desires. As painters and viewers, writers and readers, women's images and ideas about themselves are part of the production of new meanings and possibilities for our life-stories.

*SUBVERSIVE??? FEMINIST??? I tend to shy away from these words, as firstly I do not understand their current meaning...and also, I simply had a story to tell, and still have stories I want to tell..and images I want to paint..and they arrive out of my own angst. (Davida Allen)*

The last chapter of Allen's novel repeats a motif: "What is a portrait?" Like my reading of Allen's portrait of Vicki, the meanings of a portrait are complex and often contradictory: powerful at some angles, impotent at others, depending on what discourse the subject is read through. At the start of the book, Vicki critiques a

portrait painted of her as a child. She is speaking as a child but also as an adult speaking (and writing) as a child:

The portrait lady sticks all her paint brushes in a jar of terps. and dips them all in linessed oil, and then the tube of paint. The color of my hands isn't anywhere NEAR the color in the tube and my hands hav got FREKKLES all OVER them but shes not putting them in the portrait. Mum says theres nothing rong with having frekkles. And I should be thankful to GOD for what Ive got so why isnt the portrait lady painting them on my hands then? And anyhow, what is a portrait? (pre page 1)

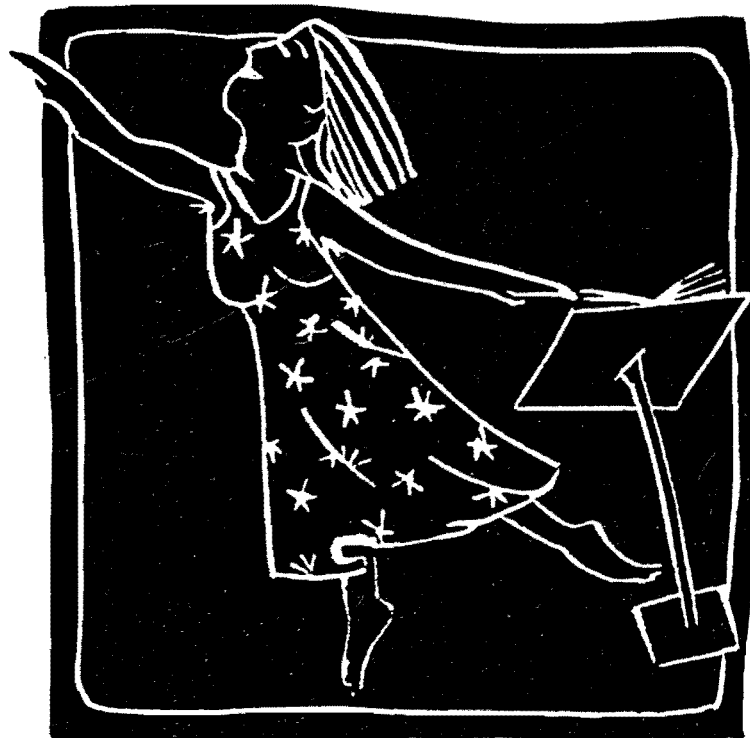
Vicki's written portrait of herself — her autobiography — highlights the warts-and-all freckles the portrait "lady" chose not to paint but also inevitably leaves out other bodily markings. As a construction of someone's character, a painted portrait relies on physical appearance to produce an image of what is not always physical but is nevertheless visible. The differences between Vicki's autobiography and her description of her painted image suggest that all representations are inherently selective and, at times, misrepresentations. Kerryn Goldsworthy writes about the face being the "shiftest" marker of recognition. As a site of identity, "its very capacity for movement is what tells us most about its owner" (Goldsworthy 1992:50). If Allen's novel of Vicki's autobiography constructs some of her faces, it also contains others in its action of trying to articulate some.

Vicki's solution to her question, "What is a portrait?", is to paint what she sees — the latest object of her desire, the Movie Man. In doing so she continues to paint and to shape further images of her desires. She has moved from the freckleless state described at the beginning of the novel — from being the object of a portrait — to being the painter of (her own) portraits; from being represented by how others see her to producing images and meanings of her own and consequently of her self.

*my art output is initially simply carthartic in a true selfish sense....and when it does get born and is viewed by critics and discussed in university thesises ... I only hope to God the simplicity of the work is not analysed into complexity beyound it's reason to be born. (Davida Allen)*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### PERFORMING BODIES





Today I want to talk about the notion and politics of performing theory by staging some ideas that have recently caught my attention. They relate to my thinking about what I am doing with theory in the writing of my thesis, how far I can enact it, and also contribute to it through my practice. This also relates, as my thesis inevitably seems to, to my life and how I can live it in response to the feminist theories I've been reading — reading as an audience, as you are here listening. But I selected them to read, and you elected to be here, so neither of us is being passive in this act. Now, I am reading them to you, I am speaking and performing these theories for you. And I am wondering how the performance will go, what terms will be used to measure my "success" and what paradoxes are employed by feminists performing theory.

Somehow, standing up here in front of you and speaking makes this work seem curiously disembodied and yet, paradoxically, it is me giving body to these words I've been reading on the page which makes them come alive outside of my head, now circulating between you and me and made available for discussion. Hélène Cixous believes women have a privileged relation to the voice as that which moves through our bodies:

Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering [as I am here] (if she hasn't painfully lost her wind). She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice ... (1976:881)

It's the publicness that renders the speaking woman out of place, because of the authority with which patriarchy imbues public speech, an authority to which women supposedly have limited access because of our position in the symbolic order.

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away — that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak — even just open her mouth — in public. (Cixous 1976:880)

Public speaking belies its relation to theatre — I am here in person, with my body, performing this (theoretical) act: it is not just my voice speaking. According to Cixous, the stage is in need of reform to accommodate women's expressions:

If the stage is woman, it will mean ridding this space of theatricality. She will want to be a body-presence; it will therefore be necessary to work at exploding everything that makes for "staginess," going beyond the confines of the stage, lessening our dependency on the visual and stressing the auditory, learning to attune all our ears, especially those that are sensitive to the pulse of the unconscious, to hear the silences and what lies beyond them. (1984: 547)

Writing about the politics of "performance art", Catherine Elwes believes that the combination of theatre and fine art offers women a unique opportunity for unmediated address:

She is both signifier and that which is signified ... There is no man-made script to give the male spectator an easy escape via author-identification — nothing can protect him from direct confrontation with the women [sic] who returns his gaze and demands freedom of speech and equality of communication. (1985:164)

Ania Walwicz emphasises the cultural ambivalence of women speaking out in public places when she performs her prose/poetry:

*When I actually perform my work in public there is a mad persona that I do create. You know, when a person's constantly having pressure of speech, the language sort of comes out at great speed and velocity ... I remember doing a reading where I had to laugh or shout. Of course it absolutely horrified people at Monash University. You know, that's not the area they're interested. (Ania Walwicz)*

Taking on a "mad" persona might in some way mediate the extravagant performances of her radical work. I would have thought this disguise would let her get away with more but, on the contrary, maybe it signifies a more extreme version of "femininity" in need of social control:

*Well, it is curious how a woman appears doing the work that I do, especially if I do it on the stage; it might seem slightly indecent. I did a reading in England, and a Bishop complained that my work was obscene. If it was medieval times I would be burnt at the stake! A woman in public doing very emotive work is always seen as some expression of sexuality if she is emoting too much. (Walwicz 1992:832)*

Judith Butler writes about our acting out of gender as a performance which simultaneously regulates and produces behaviour according to familiar cultural scripts — those which we have already seen staged.

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (1990b:277)

This act is also subject to improvisations,

although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations. (Butler 1990b:282)

These experimental acts are clearly necessary to establish the transgressive limits on which the dominant (heteropatriarchal binary system) will act to censor. But they also show that gender is staged, however ambivalently:

Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (Butler 1990b:282)

So what kinds of signifiers am I consciously or unconsciously performing here today? I speak as a woman and a feminist, but what does that mean given the circulation of meanings around those terms. What do I invest in my narrative "I"? And what do I leave out?

Vicki Kirby is concerned about attitudes to bodies and where they are positioned, particularly in academic discourses. One of her favourite stories is about a speaker at a philosophy conference who gave "dramatic expression" to the conflicts involved in performing theory about bodies:

We were told that corporeality in Irigaray's writing was to be understood as a decidedly literary evocation ... I was left wondering just what danger this exclusion had averted. To what *does* the nomination "biological or anatomical body" refer? Or to put this another way, what secures the separation of its supposed inadmissible meaning from the proper purview of Irigaray's textual interventions? When I asked a question to this effect ... the speaker dismissed me with a revealing theatrical gesture. As if to underline the sheer absurdity of my question, she pinched herself and commented, "Well, I certainly don't mean *this* body." (Kirby 1991:91)

I've had a similar experience. I went to a conference on "Bodies" where the speakers appeared as talking heads, the rest of their bodies hidden behind a very solid rostrum. They were performing the body-mind dichotomy. It was also winter in Melbourne, so everyone was wrapped in layers of clothes. Faces and hands were the only fleshy bits to be seen. I wonder what a difference the material conditions make? What would happen if "philosophers of the body" were to be relocated in the tropics where clothes are kept to a minimum and wetness is normal, either from body fluids or rain. Tina Muncaster (1991) has written a short story about our culture's

obsession with dryness as a denial of corporeality which is associated with the feminine in the body-mind dichotomy. Maybe that's why academic material is sometimes so dry. In need of lubrication.

Philipa Rothfield argues similarly that representations of the body in theory — philosophies of the body — are precisely "acts of representation, the body does not appear or, if it does, it is not regarded as *present* in any sense" (Rothfield 1992b:99). It is interesting here how "acting" seems to take on an element of duplicity, as if there is something else, something other, which is there beyond the acts of representation. But of course there is. There are bodies. It's just the way in which we talk about them that is subject to questioning.

I'm always fascinated by the way people speak about actors rather than the characters they play, as if the actor has somehow become their character and their name can be unproblematically substituted for the character's. Maybe this is an effort to attach a presence or a body to the "scene of representation". Rothfield draws on this phrase of Irigaray's to credit her with an acknowledgment of "a performative element in theorization: that the theorist is a performer, one who cannot absent him/herself from the goings on" (Rothfield 1992b:99). Kerry Goldsworthy has written about the connections between performance, writing and bodies with reference to the curious popularity of writers' festivals, of the desire "to see the writer's body and to hear the writer's voice" (1992:43-44). Audiences, she argues,

regard the writer's body as a prolongation of the textual "writer's voice" that they already know: they want to see the writer's body and "read" that as well. They want access to and knowledge of the writer's "self", an identity they can identify, and identify *with*. They are dangerous, like people in love. (1992:47)

In an earlier anecdote, Goldsworthy describes a reading by Helen Garner about people in love wanting to see the face of (their) love and, like Psyche, risking its disappearance. Is this dangerous when it comes to watching writers, I wonder? And dangerous to whom? Goldsworthy then distinguishes between reading and speaking as two different acts with different effects:

Writers reading from their work can use it to protect themselves from audiences. Panellists who have written out their "talks" verbatim are likewise protected: as with a reading of poetry or fiction, it is really the text that is doing the performing. But if someone chooses to speak impromptu or consents to be interviewed, there's no sheet or sheaf of paper mediating spatially and otherwise between the audience and the performer. As the performer, you *are* your body and your body has become the text: you are stuck with whatever it produces in the way of comment, voice and gesture, Freudian slips, idiot giggles, imperfect breath control, awkwardness of angles, the lot, spinning talk out of your body like a spider. (1992: 47)

Is this the danger, the risk, of facing audiences? There is no mention of gender in here, but this is a woman speaking (well, she was writing, as a Telecom Australian Voice which, as she points out, is heard in silence). But if in one situation the text is performing and in the other "you *are* your body and your body has become the text", would this render a reciter invisible? Is it only my text performing here? Where does the blood, sweat and tears involved in the production of writing leak out? Or is it clotted and cleaned up when the writing is preserved on the page — this performing page, dancing before our eyes?

How much of those processes of production can I inscribe onto the pages of my thesis in order to embody those words, to practice *écriture féminine*? I want to enact those theories of the body I've been reading. I also want to put out my foot and trip up their discursive biases, to make my presence felt in the form of my work, to make the writing more than an "act of representation". So the concept of performance seems important.

Important, but also ambivalent. I mean, performance carries with it the idea of being critically judged, which my thesis inevitably must be, given the traditional arena in which it is being performed. (I'm making it sound like a circus trick now.) It is tricky: having theorised how public stages are culturally hostile to women, how they demand a disembodied authority to which feminist theory is opposed, there is still a need to storm those bastions, to make our presence felt and be heard in order to transform those stages.

But in the end, is this possible? What and who have I been performing here? Have I made my presence felt? Can I? Which I? Is voice enough? Have you heard me?

Have you heard *me*? Or does this even matter? In the final outcome is it only the materiality of this body of academic work that matters? Is my materiality academic?

Thank you for coming.

I'd appreciate hearing your thoughts on this matter.

Please help yourself to the chocolate cake.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### READING CONCLUSIONS

Reaching the end of a book is always disappointing for me, either because the entire book was unsatisfying to read or because I loved it so much I want to keep reading. Either way, my dissatisfaction has very little to do with the ending as such. It is more to do with the process of reading: how the writing interacts with my desires, including my desire to read. In response to that same process, stories continue to resonate in my head long after I have finished reading, in much the same way as I might carry a song around with me in my head for days, whether willingly or not. Scenes and voices, characters and ideas enter my everyday life at any moment, whether I'm washing the dishes or talking to other people, pottering in the garden or writing a thesis. It's like ripples on water, or waves that continue to wash over, making the connections between life and text, between theory and practice, across cultures, time and place.

A conclusion then, does not seem to "matter" in itself as much as the "body" does. The patterns of desire have already been established in the process of writing and reading up until this point. In a text which has debated the artificiality of endings and their investment in the logic of linear plots and climaxes, a conclusion here seems somewhat contradictory. But contradictions abound in bringing theories of *écriture féminine* and contemporary women's writing in Australia together in a feminist thesis. The politics of how we read and write, and of how women might desire differently, away from patriarchal narrative patterns have been integral to this discussion. While all the writers texts I study have been concerned with the ways in which women are constructed and positioned through discourse, a number of discourses have emerged as significant in their production of debilitating or limiting sexual differences. Medicine, psychiatry and notions of health are issues explored by Coombs, Place and Hawthorne, in particular, and are always linked with female sexuality. Violence and economics often meet as discourses associated with women's bodies, as they do in the texts of Woolfe and Allen, and to some extent in Baranay's. Their intersection is particularly intense when associated with the visual arts, a sphere of representation particularly reliant on patriarchal desires. Notions of the



family, romance and heterosexuality are disrupted in almost all the texts, and the relations between maternity and a woman's body are also challenged by Coombs, Allen and Walwicz.

While "Australia" does not feature significantly, except perhaps in Susan Hawthorne's text, our location in Australia does affect our practices of reading and writing. My reading of French feminist theories undergoes a cultural translation as well as a literal one when I relate it to writing which has been produced in Australia. Writers do the same: the connections they make between life and text, between theory and practice, continue to resonate in their texts long after they read or hear the ideas. While French feminist theory is not widely read, its ideas articulate part of a cultural milieu; as Susan Hawthorne comments in her interview, she was talking about what the shape of a woman's novel might be in the 1970s, when she was *"thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women"*.

One of the most significant ideas to emerge from both theories of *écriture féminine* and the contemporary writing being produced by women in Australia is the potential of writing to produce new meanings, other desires, and alternative structures through which to imagine our life-stories. Sue Woolfe describes the need for such stories as being, *"when she holds herself up to the light she sees an interweaving of many stories who tell her what she is ... that to me is a political agenda"*. My writing of this thesis is a contribution to those politics of writing, not only in attending to those new stories and their writers but also in attending to the ways in which I might write an academic thesis as a woman writing.

Appropriately, this conclusion does not conclude the thesis but is located rather at the midpoint; what follows are two lists of texts which have directly informed, or indirectly resonate in, this thesis, and then the transcripts of each writer's interview and her comments on my writing. As such, this point might be considered a nexus around which writers continue to speak and women continue to write in words which may be *"whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious ...*

not to mention her language, in which 'she' sets off in all directions" (Irigaray 1985:28-29). "Hers are contradictory words" (Irigaray 1985:29), just as this conclusion contradicts the conventional format of a concluding, authoritative statement, being just one more ripple to resonate in our women's writing and our writing women's bodies.

## WORKS CITED

- Airo-Farulla, Joe. 1992. Rev. of *Close to the Bone* by Davida Allen. *Art and Australia* 30,1: 41.
- Alberts, Paul. 1990. "On Discourse and Anorexia." Rev. of *Cardboard* by Fiona Place. *Antithesis* 3,2: 211-15.
- Allen, Davida. 1987. "Statement." *Davida Allen Survey Exhibition 24th October - 5th December 1987*. Ed. Annette Hughes. Brisbane: Museum of Contemporary Art. 10.
- . 1991. *Close to the Bone: The Autobiography of Vicki Myers*. East Roseville: Simon & Schuster in association with New Endeavour Press.
- . 1991b. *What is a Portrait? Images of Vicki Myers*. Redfern: New Endeavour Press.
- Armstrong, Frankie. 1987. "The Voice is the Muscle of the Soul." *Glancing Fires: An Investigation into Women's Creativity*. Ed. Lesley Saunders. London: The Women's Press. 211-18.
- Ballaster, Ros. 1987. "Reading the Romance: Identification, Fantasy and Subjection." *Antithesis* 1,2: 61-67.
- Banting, Pamela. 1992. "The Body as Pictogram: Rethinking Hélène Cixous's *Écriture Féminine*." *Textual Practice* 6,2: 223-46.
- Baranay, Inez. 1988. "Living Alone: The New Spinster (Some Notes)." *Telling Ways: Australian Women's Experimental Writing*. Eds. Anna Couani and Sneja Gunew. Adelaide: Australian Feminist Studies. 15-18.
- . 1989. *Between Careers*. Sydney: Collins.
- . 1990. *Pagan*. North Ryde (N.S.W.): Collins/Angus & Robertson.
- . 1994. "Writing Sexuality". Unpublished paper given at the Adelaide Writers' Week, Feb. 1994.
- Barr, Marleen S. and Richard Feldstein. 1989. Eds. *Discontented Discourses: Feminism, Textual Intervention, Psychoanalysis*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Barrowclough, Nikki. 1991. "Turmoil on Canvas." *The Sydney Morning Herald* The Good Weekend 21 Sep: 12-17.
- Bartlett, Alison. 1992. "Spinifex: Engendering the Bush." Rev. of *The Falling Woman* by Susan Hawthorne. *CANLE Reviews Journal* 2: 129-31.
- Bartlett, Jillian and Cathi Joseph. 1991. Eds. *Bodylines: A Women's Anthology*. Broadway (NSW): Women's Redress Press.
- Battersby, Christine. 1989. *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. First published by The Women's Press, London, 1989.
- Bird, Carmel. 1988. "Stories of Illness." Rev. of *Regards to the Czar* by Margaret Coombs. *Australian Book Review* 102: 19-21.

- Braidotti, Rosi. 1990. "The Problematic of "the feminine" in Contemporary French Philosophy: Foucault and Irigaray." *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*. Eds. Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 36-47.
- Brodribb, Somer. 1992. *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Brook, Barbara. 1990. "Splintered Mirrors." Rev. of *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing* by Margaret Coombs. *Australian Women's Book Review* 2,3: 9-10.
- Brooks, David and Brenda Walker. 1989. Eds. *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays in Australian Women's Poetry and Poetics*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Broom, Dorothy H. 1991. *Damned If We Do: Contradictions in Women's Health Care*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Burke, Janine. 1981. "Art for the End of the World." *Meanjin* 40,3: 375-82.
- . 1991. "Portrait(s) of the Artists." Papers from a forum held at the Queensland Art Gallery, June 8th, 1991. *We have Arrived: Discussing Australian Women Artists Today*. Ed. Anne Jones. Brisbane: Women's Policy Unit, Office of the Cabinet. 25-33.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge. Thinking Gender ser.
- . 1990b. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 270-82.
- Calder, Jenni. 1976. *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Celermajer, Danielle. 1987. "Submission and Rebellion: Anorexia and a Feminism of the Body." *Australian Feminist Studies* 5: 57-69.
- Chanin, Eileen. 1990. Ed. *Contemporary Australian Painting*. Roseville (N.S.W.): Craftsman House.
- Chicago, Judy. 1982. *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1,4: 875-93.
- . 1984. "Aller à la mer." *Modern Drama* 27,4: 546-48.
- . 1986. "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks / Ways Out / Forays." *The Newly Born Woman* by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément. Trans. Betsy Wing. *Theory and History of Literature* 24. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 63-134. (1975)
- . 1991. *"Coming to Writing" and Other Essays*. Ed. Deborah Jenson. Trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, Susan Sellers. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

- Cline, Sally. 1990. *Just Desserts: Women and Food*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Coombs, Margaret. 1988. *Regards to the Czar*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- . 1989. "Sense and Sensibility: a Problem with Interviews." *The Weekend Australian* 7-8 January: Review 7.
- . 1990. *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing*. Moorebank (NSW): Black Swan.
- . 1990b. "The Myth of the Woman Writer as *Idiote Savante*." *Poetry Australia* 126: 3-9.
- . 1990c. "'Protect Me From What I Want': Health, Modern Western Medicine and Social Control." Telecom Voices series. *Australian Book Review* 124: 24-29.
- . 1992. Feminist Poetics. Unpublished paper delivered to Feminist Poetics class at Sydney University.
- Coopman, Vonnice. 1991. "In-Patient Care: A Description of 'Food Taming': ... by way of allegory." *Stateing Women's Health* 1,4: 4-5.
- Cornell, Drucilla. 1991. *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law*. London: Routledge. Thinking Gender ser.
- Cotterill, Pamela. 1992. "Interviewing Women: Issues of Friendship, Vulnerability, and Power." *Women's Studies International Forum* 15,5/6: 593-605.
- Coward, Rosalind. 1984. *Female Desire*. London: Paladin Books.
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. 1992. *Engendered Fictions: Analysing Gender in the Production and Reception of Texts*. Kensington (N.S.W.): New South Wales University Press.
- Creed, Barbara. 1989. "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *Fantasy and the Cinema*. Ed. James McDonald. London: British Film Institute. 63-89.
- Crowley, Helen and Susan Himmelweit. 1992. Eds. *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with The Open University.
- Dakin, Helen. 1990. "Living in the Eighties." Rev. of *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing* by Margaret Coombs. *Southerly* 50,4: 529-32.
- Daniel, Helen. 1988. "Breaking Free From Serfdom of the Mind." Rev. of *Regards to the Czar* by Margaret Coombs. *The Age Saturday Extra* 19 November: 16.
- Dauth, Louise. 1986. "Ania Walwicz: Not a Polite Image." Interview with Ania Walwicz. *Artlink* 6,4: 28-29.
- Davidson, Robyn. 1989. *Travelling Light*. Pymble (N.S.W.): Angus & Robertson. Imprint Travel edition, 1993.
- Davison, Dennis. 1989. "'Tis the Season for Romance." Rev. of *Between Careers* by Inez Baranay. *The Weekend Australian* 5-6 August: Weekend 6.
- . 1992. "Fragments from an Ambitious Vision." Rev. of *The Falling Woman* by Susan Hawthorne. *The Weekend Australian* 13-14 June: Review 5.

- Dempster, Elizabeth. 1988. "Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances." *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Susan Sheridan. London: Verso. 35-54.
- Digby, Jenny. 1992. "The Politics of Experience: Ania Walwicz Interviewed by Jenny Digby." *Meanjin* 51,4: 819-38.
- Diprose, Rosalyn and Robyn Ferrell. 1991. Eds. *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 1986. "The Clinical Eye: Medical Discourses in the 'Woman's Film' of the 1940s." *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press. 152-74.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 1985. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dworkin, Andrea. 1987. *Intercourse*. London: Arrow Books.
- Eldridge, Marian. 1989. "Witty First Novel a Literary Delight." Rev. of *Between Careers* by Inez Baranay. *The Canberra Times* 24 June: Magazine B4.
- Elwes, Catherine. 1985. "Floating Femininity: A Look at Performance Art by Women." *Women's Images of Men*. Eds. Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau. London: Writers and Readers. 164-93.
- Falconer, Delia. 1992. Rev. of *The Falling Woman* by Susan Hawthorne. *Refractory Girl* 43: 43-44.
- Fallon, Mary. 1989. *Working Hot*. Fitzroy: Sybylla Press.
- Felton, Catrina. 1992. Paper delivered at the Lilith Feminist History Journal Conference, Melbourne 1992. Broadcast on ABC Radio National's *The Coming Out Show*, 3 July 1993, as "Tiddas Manifesto".
- Ferrier, Carole. 1992. Ed. *Gender, Politics, Fiction*. Revised 2nd edition. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- FitzGerald, Ursel. 1987. "The Writer, Writing: An Interview with Ania Walwicz by Ursel FitzGerald." Supplement. *Mattoïd* 28: 2-23.
- Flanagan, Liz. 1992. Paper delivered at the Lilith Feminist History Journal Conference, Melbourne 1992. Broadcast on ABC Radio National's *The Coming Out Show*, 3 July 1993, as "Tiddas Manifesto".
- French, Jackie. 1992. *Backyard Self-sufficiency*. Melbourne: Aird Books.
- Fuss, Diana. 1989. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Gallop, Jane. 1982. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction*. London: Macmillan.
- . 1988. *Thinking Through the Body*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gallop, Jane and Moira Gatens. 1990. "The Politics of Pleasure". ABC Radio National's *The Coming Out Show* no.33. 1990.

- Gatens, Moira. 1992. "Power, Bodies and Difference." *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Eds. Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips. Cambridge: Polity Press. 120-37. Questions for Feminism ser.
- Giles, Barbara. 1982. "A Catalogue of Poets." Rev. of *Writing* by Ania Walwicz. *Australian Book Review* 45: 20.
- Giles, Hugo. 1989. "Nothing Succeeds Like the Decadence of Literary Excess." Rev. of *Working Hot* by Mary Fallon. *The Saturday Mercury* 25 February: 20.
- Gilman, Sander L. 1985. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12, Autumn: 204-38.
- Goldsworthy, Kerryn. 1992. "In the Flesh: Watching Writers Read." Telecom Voices essay. *Australian Book Review* 147: 43-50.
- Grenville, Kate. 1988. Transcript of Rev. of *Regards to the Czar* by Margaret Coombs, broadcast on ABC Radio National's *Books and Writing*, 4 September, 1988.
- . 1994. Interview by David Marr on ABC Radio National's *Arts Today*, 14 July.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1982. "Women and Writing: The Work of Julia Kristeva in Perspective." *Refractory Girl Writes*. October: 28-35.
- . 1986. "Philosophy, Subjectivity and the Body: Kristeva and Irigaray." *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*. Eds. Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Grosz. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 125-43.
- . 1988a. "Desire, the Body and Recent French Feminisms." *Intervention* 21/22: 28-33.
- . 1988b. "The In(ter)vention of Feminist Knowledges." *Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledges*. Eds. Barbara Caine, Elizabeth Grosz, Marie de Lepervanche. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 92-104.
- . 1989. *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- . 1992. "What Is Feminist Theory?" *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*. Eds. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with The Open University. 355-69.
- Gunew, Sneja. 1983. "Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?" *Meanjin* 42,1: 16-26.
- . 1986. "Ania Walwicz and Antigone Kefala: Varieties of Migrant Dreaming." *Arena* 76: 65-80.
- . 1988. "Home and Away: Nostalgia in Australian (Migrant) Writing." *Island in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Culture*. Ed. Paul Foss. Leichhardt: Pluto Press. 35-46.
- . 1993. "Feminism and Difference: Valedictory Thoughts on the Australian Scene." *Australian Women's Book Review* 5,2: 40-44.



- Gunew, Sneja and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 1986. "Questions of Multi-Culturalism: Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Hecate* 7,1&2: 136-42.
- Halligan, Marion. 1988. "Truth, or fiction?" Rev. of *Regards to the Czar* by Margaret Coombs. *The Weekend Australian* 10-11 September: Review 10.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14,3: 575-99.
- Hardie, Melissa. 1989. "Body Language." Rev. of *Working Hot* by Mary Fallon. *Southerly* 49,4: 654-60.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 1991. "In Defence of Separatism." *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*. Ed. Sneja Gunew. London: Routledge. 312-18.
- . 1992. *The Falling Woman*. North Melbourne: Spinifex.
- . 1993. *The Language in My Tongue. Four New Poets*. Ringwood: Penguin. 113-82.
- . 1994. "Theories of Indifference: Feminism and Epilepsy". Unpublished paper delivered at Politics and Poetics of the Body conference, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA, April 1994.
- Hawthorne, Susan and Cathie Dunsford. 1990. Eds. *The Exploding Frangipanni: Lesbian Writing from Australia and New Zealand*. Auckland: New Women's Press.
- Hawthorne, Susan and Jenny Pausacker. 1989. Eds. *Moments of Desire: Sex and Sensuality by Australian Women Writers*. Ringwood: Penguin.
- Heathwood, Gail. 1986. "Fantastic Sam Neill." *Vogue Australia* October: 130-34.
- Hoffie, Pat. 1991. "A Woman in the Arts: A Private Fiction." Papers from a forum held at the Queensland Art Gallery, June 8th, 1991. *We Have Arrived: Discussing Australian Women Artists*. Ed. Anne Jones. Brisbane: Women's Policy Unit, Office of the Cabinet. 5-16.
- Huggins, Jackie. 1992. Paper delivered at the Lilith Feminist History Journal Conference, Melbourne 1992. Broadcast on ABC Radio National's *The Coming Out Show*, 3 July 1993, as "Tiddas Manifesto".
- Indyk, Ivor. 1989. "Grand Star Builds Her Own World of Words." Rev. of *Writing and boat* by Ania Walwicz. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 25 Nov: 88.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1982. "One Does Not Move Without The Other." Trans. Rosi Braidotti. *Refractory Girl* 23: 12-14.
- . 1985. *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. (1975)
- . 1993. *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. Trans. Alison Martin. London: Routledge. (1990)
- Jacobus, Mary, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sally Shuttleworth. 1990. Eds. *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*. London: Routledge.

- Jardine, Alice. 1985. *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. 1990. *Anticlimax: a Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution*. London: The Women's Press.
- Jeffreys, Sheila, as a member of Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, and Onlywomen Press Collective. 1981. Eds. *Love Your Enemy?: The Debate between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism*. London: Onlywomen Press.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. 1983. "Is the Gaze male?" *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. Eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, Sharon Thompson. London: Virago. 321-38.
- Kelly, Philippa. 1994. "The Language of Subversion: Discourses of Desire in *Painted Woman*, *The Children's Bach*, and *Messages from Chaos*." *Southerly* 4,1: 143-56.
- Keneally, Thomas. 1989. "Painted Woman She May Be, But Never Fallen." Rev. of *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 23 September: 82.
- Kirby, Vicki. 1991. "Corpus delicti: The Body at the Scene of Writing." *Cartographies: Poststructuralism and the Mapping of Bodies and Spaces*. Eds. Rosalyn Diprose and Robyn Ferrell. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 88-100.
- Kitzinger, Celia, Sue Wilkinson, Rachel Perkins. 1992. "Theorizing Heterosexuality." Editorial. *Feminism and Psychology*. 2,3: 293-324.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez. Oxford: Columbia University Press/Basil Blackwell. (1977) 1989 paperback edn.
- . 1981. "Women's Time." Trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. *Signs* 7,1: 13-35.
- . 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press. (1980)
- . 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press. (1974)
- . 1987. "Talking About *Polylogue*." Interview with Julia Kristeva by Françoise van Rossum-Guyon. Trans. Seán Hand. *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 110-19.
- . 1987b "Stabat Mater." Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. London: Basil Blackwell. 160-186.
- Kuba, Sue A. and Susan Gale Hanchey. 1991. "Reclaiming Women's Bodies: A Feminist Perspective on Eating Disorders." *Feminist Perspectives on Addictions*. Ed. Nan Van Den Bergh. New York: Springer Publishing. 125-37.
- Kuhn, Annette. 1988. "The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism." *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Sue Sheridan. London: Verso. 11-23.

- Lather, Patti. 1991. *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/in the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Levy, Bronwen. 1992a. "Wishing Upon Stars." Rev. of *The Falling Woman* by Susan Hawthorne. *Australian Women's Book Review* 4,2: 7-8.
- . 1992b. "Now What's Erotic?" *Gender, Politics, Fiction*. Revised 2nd edition. Ed. Carole Ferrier. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. 219-35.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. California: The Crossing Press. 53-59. Feminist ser.
- Lucas, Rose. 1989. "Not Being Echo: Women's Voices in New Australian Fiction." Rev. of *Regards to the Czar* by Margaret Coombs, *Not Being Miriam* by Marion Campbell and *Working Hot* by Mary Fallon. *Australian Feminist Studies* 10: 131-35.
- Maclean, Marie. 1991. "Why d'ya do it, she said: Gendered Language, Gendered Criticism." *Australian Book Review* 131: 32-38.
- Manning, Greg. 1989. "Sourced in the Body." Rev. of *Working Hot* by Mary Fallon. *Australian Book Review* 109: 26-27.
- Marks, Elaine and Isabelle de Courtivron. 1980. Eds. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Martin, Biddy. 1992a. "Sexual Practice and Changing Lesbian Identities." *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Eds. Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips. Cambridge: Polity Press. 93-119.
- . 1992b. "Feminism, Criticism and Foucault." *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*. Eds. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit. Cambridge: Polity Press and The Open University. 275-86.
- Martin, Emily. 1990. "Science and Women's Bodies: Forms of Anthropological Knowledge." *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*. Eds. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sally Shuttleworth. London: Routledge. 69-82.
- Martin, Sylvia. 1992. "Too Big for her Boots? Towards Lesbian Visibility in the Academy." *Antithesis* 5,1&2: 35-43.
- McKinlay, Robin. 1981. "Madonnas or Heroes? A Reappraisal of the Mythic Models of Motherhood." Exhibition Catalogue. *Mothers*. Ed. The Women's Gallery collective. Wellington (NZ): The Women's Gallery. 22-26.
- McLeod, Sue. 1990. Rev. of *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe. *Antithesis* 3,2: 206-07.
- Mead, Jenna. 1989. "Exposing the Gap." Rev. of *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe. *Australian Book Review* 112: 9-10.
- Miller, Nancy K. 1986. "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader." *Feminist Studies / Critical Studies*. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 102-20. Theories of Contemporary Culture ser.
- . 1991. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York: Routledge.

- Mills, Claire. 1991. Rev. of *Close to the Bone* by Davida Allen. *Australian Bookseller & Publisher* 71,1018: 22.
- . 1992. "New Feminism with a Spiritual Dimension." Rev. of *The Falling Woman* by Susan Hawthorne. *Australian Book Review* 141: 45-46.
- Moers, Ellen. 1976. *Literary Women*. Garden City (N.Y.): Doubleday.
- Moi, Toril. 1987. Ed. *French Feminist Thought*. London: Basil Blackwell.
- Moorhead, Finola. 1985. *Quilt: A Collection of Prose*. Melbourne: Sybylla Press.
- . 1987. *Remember the Tarantella*. Leichhardt (N.S.W.): Primavera Press.
- . 1993. "Finola Moorhead: *Remember the Tarantella*." Interview. *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written*. Eds. Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin. 206-31.
- Morris, Meaghan. 1988. *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*. London: Verso. Questions for Feminism ser.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1981. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Popular Television and Film: A Reader*. Eds. Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd-Bowman, Colin Mercer, Janet Woollacott. London: British Film Institute and Open University Press. 206-15. First pubd in *Screen* 16,3 (1975).
- Mulvey, Laura and Peter Wollen. 1987. "The Discourse of the Body." *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*. Ed. Rosemary Betterton. London: Pandora. 211-16.
- Muncaster, Tina. 1991. "Getting Wet." *Bodylines: A Women's Anthology*. Eds. Jillian Bartlett and Cathi Joseph. Broadway (NSW): Women's Redress Press. 1-6.
- Murphy, Bernice. 1981. Ed. *Australian Perspecta 1981: a Biennial Survey of Contemporary Australian Art*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
- Nead, Lynda. 1988. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Nead, Lynn. 1987. "The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting." *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*. Ed. Rosemary Betterton. London: Pandora. 73-92.
- Oakley, Ann. 1981. "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." *Doing Feminist Research*. Ed. Helen Roberts. London: Routledge. 30-61.
- O'Grady, Rosemary. 1989. "The Naturalist and the Call-Girl, Spinsters All." Rev. of *Between Careers* by Inez Baranay. *The Age Saturday Extra* 24 June: 9.
- Orbach, Susie. 1986. *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Overall, Christine. 1992. "What's Wrong with Prostitution?: Evaluating Sex Work." *Signs* 17,4: 705-24.
- Parmar, Pratibha. 1990. "Woman, Native, Other: Pratibha Parmar Interviews Trinh T. Minh-ha." *Feminist Review* 36: 65-74.

- Pateman, Carole. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pateman, Carole and Elizabeth Grosz. 1986. Eds. *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Place, Fiona. 1989. *Cardboard: The Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters*. University of Sydney: Local Consumption Publications.
- . 1989b. "Feminism Rewrites Psychiatry?" *Australian Feminist Studies* 10: 103-04.
- . 1990. "Representation of Hysteria and Eating Disorders." *Australian Feminist Studies* 11: 49-59.
- Pollock, Griselda. 1988. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London: Routledge.
- . 1992. "Painting, Feminism, History." *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Eds. Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips. Cambridge: Polity Press. 138-76.
- Porter, Dorothy. 1991. "Art of Expression." Rev. of *Close to the Bone* by Davida Allen. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 7 December: 44.
- Prunster, Ursula. 1985. "Project 50 / Perspecta '85: Transformations." *Australian Perspecta '85*. Ed. Anthony Bond. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales. 82-83.
- Reinharz, Shulamit and Lynn Davidman assisting. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5,41: 631-60.
- . 1987. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Essays 1979-1985*. London: Virago. 210-31.
- Roberts, Helen. 1981. Ed. *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge.
- Roberts, Michelle. 1978. "Epilogue." *Tales I Tell My Mother: A Collection of Feminist Short Stories*. Eds. Zoë Fairbairns, Sara Maitland, Michele Roberts, Michelene Wandor. London: Journeyman Press. 159-61.
- Robertson, Matra. 1992. *Starving in the Silences: An Exploration of Anorexia Nervosa*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Roiphe, Katie. 1994. *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Roof, Judith. 1989. "The Match in the Crocus: Representations of Lesbian Sexuality." *Discontented Discourses: Feminism, Textual Intervention, Psychoanalysis*. Eds. Marleen S. Barr and Richard Feldstein. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 100-16.
- Rothfield, Philipa. 1992. "Thinking Embodiment, Practising the Body: Medical Ethics, Foucault and Feminism." *Meridian* 11,2: 37-47.
- . 1992b. "Backstage in the Theatre of Representation." *Arena* 99/100: 98-111.

- Rowland, Robyn. 1992. "Radical Feminist Heterosexuality: The Personal and the Political." *Feminism and Psychology*. 2,3: 459-63.
- Rowlands, Shane. 1992. "De-Scribing Lesbianisms: Recent Cultural Production." *Hecate* 18,2: 131-41.
- Rowley, Sue. 1992. "Making Works: Art, Process and Subject Formation." *Writing Lives: Feminist Biography and Autobiography*. Eds. Susan Magarey and Caroline Guerin. Adelaide: Australian Feminist Studies. 56-68.
- Saluszinsky, Imre. 1992. "Approaching Australian Literature Three Different Ways." Rev. of *Meanjin, Meridian, Southerly*. *The Weekend Australian* 8-9 Feb: Review 5.
- Saunders, Lesley. 1987. Ed. *Glancing Fires: An Investigation into Women's Creativity*. London: The Women's Press.
- Schaffer, Kay. 1988. *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scholes, Percy A. and John Owen Ward. 1970. Eds. *The Oxford Companion to Music*. 10th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. rep. 1992.
- Schwichtenberg, Cathy. 1993. Ed. *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*. St Leonards (N.S.W.): Allen & Unwin.
- Shapcott, Thomas. 1991. "Modern Hurt Man, Modern Chained Woman." Rev. of *Close to the Bone* by Davida Allen. *The Age Saturday Extra* 23 November: 8.
- Sheridan, Susan. 1988. Ed. *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*. London: Verso.
- . 1993. "Australian Feminist Literary History: Around 1981." *Hecate* 19,1: 101-15.
- Showalter, Elaine. 1985. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830 - 1980*. London: Virago Press.
- Siggins, Phillip. 1990. "Serious Comedy at the Psychiatrist's." Rev. of *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing* by Margaret Coombs. *Australian Book Review* 119: 12-13.
- Singer, Linda. 1993. *Erotic Welfare: Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*. Ed. and introduced by Judith Butler and Maureen MacGrogan. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Hamilton. 1989a. "Portrait of a Woman as an Artist." Rev. of *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe. *The Canberra Times* 7 October: B5.
- . 1989b. "Spell-binding debut for Sydney Novelist." Interview and Rev. of *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe. *The Canberra Times* 8 October: 18.
- Sontag, Susan. 1978. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sorenson, Rosemary. 1989a. "Struggling Against Parental Brutality." Rev. of *Painted Woman* by Sue Woolfe. *The Age Saturday Extra* 29 July: 8.

- . 1989b. "The Pleasure of Exertion." Rev. of *boat* by Ania Walwicz. *Australian Book Review* 116: 34-35.
- Sorenson, Rosemary and Jenna Mead. 1990. "Subversive Desire: Feminist Writing." *The Age Monthly Review* 10,2: 14-18.
- Spencer, Beth. 1990. "Letter to the Editor." *Australian Feminist Studies* 11: 137-38.
- . 1991a. "Powerful Readings and Impotent Endings: The Trial of Helen Diamond." *Bodylines: A Women's Anthology*. Eds. Jillian Bartlett and Cathi Joseph. Broadway (NSW): Women's Redress Press. 74-81. Also pubd in *The Age Monthly Review* 10,1: 17-19 (1990).
- . 1991b. "The Little Golden Book of Patriarchy: Regarding Margaret Coombs' First Novel." *Hermes* : 19-25.
- Steffensen, Jyanni. 1989. "Things Change ... And About Time Too: A Critical Review of Women's Erotic Writing." *Hecate* 15,2: 26-33.
- Summers, Anne. 1994. *Damned Whores and God's Police*. Revised 2nd edition. Ringwood: Penguin. (1975)
- Sussex, Lucy. 1989. "Sizing-Up Anorexia." Rev. of *Cardboard* by Fiona Place. *Australian Women's Book Review* 1,2: 7-8.
- Tetzlaff, David. 1993. "Metatextual Girl: → patriarchy → postmodernism → power → money → Madonna." *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*. Ed. Cathy Schwichtenberg. St Leonards (N.S.W.): Allen & Unwin. 239-63.
- Thompson, Deborah Ann. 1991. "Anorexia as a Lived Trope: Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'." *Mosaic* 24,3-4: 89-106.
- Thompson, Denise. 1991. *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality*. Leichhardt: Lesbian Studies and Research Group, The Gorgon's Head Press.
- Threadgold, Terry. 1992. "Legislators and Interpreters: Linguists, Feminists and Critical Fictions." *Meridian* 11,1: 76-90.
- Threadgold, Terry and Anne Cranny-Francis. 1990. Eds. *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Trainor, Leon. 1990. "Traumatic Intrusions of the Past." Rev. of *The Best Man For This Sort of Thing* by Margaret Coombs. *The Weekend Australian* 26-27 May: Review 7.
- Trinh T., Minh-ha. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Trinh T., Minh-ha. 1990. "Woman, Native, Other: Pratibha Parmar Interviews Trinh T. Minh-ha." *Feminist Review* 36: 65-74.
- Tulip, Marie. 1989. "Women's Spirituality." *Woman-Church* 5: 23-28.
- Turner, Bryan S. 1990. "The Talking Disease: Hilda Bruch and Anorexia Nervosa." *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 26,2: 157-69.

- Vance, Carole. 1984. Ed. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Veitch, Kate. 1989. Rev. of *Cardboard* by Fiona Place. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 4 Nov: 84.
- Walker, Brenda. 1991. *Crush*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- Walwicz, Ania. 1981. "Big Red." *Goodbye to Romance: Stories by New Zealand and Australian Women Writers 1930 - 1988*. Eds. Elizabeth Webby and Lydia Wevers. Wellington: Allen & Unwin/ Port Nicholson Press. 251-52.
- . 1982. *Writing*. Reprinted 1989 with Phillip Hammial's *Travel*. North Ryde (N.S.W.): Angus & Robertson.
- . 1985. "The Fountain." Spoken Recording on 45rpm record accompanying *Off The Record*, Ed. π-O. Ringwood: Penguin.
- . 1986. "Ania Walwicz: Not a Polite Image." Interview with Ania Walwicz by Louise Dauth. *Artlink* 6,4: 28-29.
- . 1986b. "Australia." *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*. Eds. Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn. Ringwood: Penguin. 230-31.
- . 1986c. *Louder Than Words*. Videocassette. Performances by Ania Walwicz, Jas H. Duke, Eric Beach. Dir. Jenny Harding, Prod. Jenny Harding and Andrew Scollo in association with Film Victoria.
- . 1987. "The Writer, Writing: An Interview with Ania Walwicz by Ursel FitzGerald." *Mattoid* 28 Supplement: 2-23.
- . 1989. *boat*. North Ryde (N.S.W.): Angus & Robertson.
- . 1989b. "Statement." *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays in Australian Women's Poetry and Poetics*. Eds. David Brooks and Brenda Walker. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. 69-70.
- . 1991. "writer/reader." *Arena* 97: 82-84.
- . 1992. *red roses*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- . 1992b. "The Politics of Experience: Ania Walwicz Interviewed by Jenny Digby." *Meanjin* 51,4: 819-38.
- Webby, Elizabeth and Lydia Wevers. 1989. Eds. *Goodbye to Romance: Stories by New Zealand and Australian Women Writers 1930 - 1988*. Wellington (NZ): Allen & Unwin, Port Nicholson Press.
- Wolf, Naomi. 1993. *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Wolff, Janet. 1989. *Women's Knowledge and Women's Art*. Brisbane: The Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Division of Humanities, Griffith University.
- Woolfe, Sue. 1990. *Painted Woman*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin. (1989)
- Woolfe, Sue and Kate Grenville. 1993. Eds. *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.



Yanko, Suzanne. 1992. "Writing About Epilepsy — Conversations with Susan Hawthorne and John Hanrahan." Interview and Rev. of *The Falling Woman* by Susan Hawthorne. National Epilepsy Association of Australia Inc. *News* 33: 6.

## WORKS CONSULTED

- Bell, Diane. 1991. "Aboriginal Women, Separate Spaces, and Feminism." *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*. Ed. Sneja Gunew. London: Routledge. 13-26.
- Bender, Eileen T. 1986. "The Woman Who Came to Dinner: Dining and Divining a Feminist 'Aesthetic'." *Women's Studies* 12: 315-33.
- Berg, Maggie. 1991. "Luce Irigaray's 'Contradictions': Poststructuralism and Feminism." *Signs* 17,1: 50-70.
- Blain, Virginia, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy. 1990. Eds. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*. London: B.T. Batsford.
- Bordo, Susan. 1988. "Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture." *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby. Boston: Northeastern University Press. 119-34. First pubd in *Philosophical Forum* 17,2 (1985-86).
- Braidotti, Rosi. 1986. "The Ethics of Sexual Difference: The Case of Foucault and Irigaray." *Australian Feminist Studies* 3: 1-13.
- . 1991. *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*. Trans. Elizabeth Guild. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Burke, Carolyn. 1981. "Irigaray Through the Looking Glass." *Feminist Studies* 7,2: 288-306.
- Chodorow, Nancy. 1992. "The Psychodynamics of the Family." *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*. Eds. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit. Cambridge: Polity Press in assn with The Open University. 153-69.
- Chrisler, Joan C. 1991. "Out of Control and Eating Disordered." *Feminist Perspectives on Addictions*. Ed. Nan Van Den Bergh. New York: Springer Publishing. 139-49.
- Constantine, Shirley. 1987. "The Weaker Sex: Food and Feminism." *Arena* 79: 119-27.
- Coombs, Margaret. 1989. "Wearing the Dog-Suit; or, The Irrelevance of Irigaray." *Southerly* 49,3: 422-36.
- . 1991. "Escaping Without a Scratch." *Hermes* : 13-17.
- . 1991. "Black Sheep." *Island Magazine* 49: 44-49.
- . 1992. "Dangerous Reading." Rev. of *Melanie* by Fiona Giles and Melanie Woss. *Australian Book Review* 141: 49-50.
- . 1992. "Letter in Response to a Questionnaire." *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations*. Eds. Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O. Longley. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 111-14.
- . 1993. "Bikies Need Not Apply: The Politics of Organ Transplants." *Arena Magazine* 5: 28-30.
- Diamond, Irene and Lee Quinby. 1988. Eds. *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

- Fletcher, Beryl. 1991. *The Word Burners*. Wellington (N.Z.): Daphne Brasell Associates Press.
- Gallop, Jane. 1992. *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Gatens, Moira. 1988. "Towards a Feminist Philosophy of the Body." *Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledges*. Eds. Barbara Caine, Elizabeth Grosz, Marie de Lepervanche. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 59-70.
- Gibbs, Anna. 1990. "These Are Notes: Ania Walwicz's Writing." *The Age Monthly Review* 9,9: 9-10.
- Gillett, Sue. 1991. "At the Beginning: Ania Walwicz's Writing." *Southerly* 51,2: 239-52.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1987. "Notes Towards a Corporeal Feminism." *Australian Feminist Studies* 5: 1-16.
- . 1990. "Inscriptions and Body-maps: Representations and the Corporeal." *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*. Eds. Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 62-74.
- . 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Gunew, Sneja. 1987/88. "Ania Walwicz: A Non Anglo-Celtic Australian Writer." *Hecate* 13,2: 69-72.
- . 1987. "Multicultural? Ethnic? Towards a New Australian Writing?" *Outrider* 4,1: 50-54.
- . 1988. "Beyond the Echo: Migrant Writing and Australian Literature." *Displaced Persons*. Eds. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford. Sydney: Dangaroo Press. 54-71.
- . 1990. "PostModern Tensions: Reading for (Multi)Cultural Difference." *Meanjin* 49,1: 21-33.
- Gunew, Sneja and Kateryna O. Longley. 1992. Eds. *Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Hart, Lynda. 1988. Ed. *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hawthorne, Susan and Renate Klein. 1994. Eds. *Australia For Women: Travel and Culture*. North Melbourne: Spinifex.
- Huggins, Jackie. 1987. "Black Women and Women's Liberation." *Hecate* 13,1: 77-82.
- . 1992. "pretty deadly tidda business." *second degree tampering: writing by women*. Ed. Sybylla feminist press. Melbourne: Sybylla feminist press. 107-15.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1990. "Women's Exile." Interview with Luce Irigaray. Trans. Couze Venn. *The Feminist Critique of Language*. Ed. Deborah Cameron. London: Routledge. 80-96. Rep. from *Ideology and Consciousness* 1 (1977).

- Irigaray, Luce, Kiki Amsberg, Aafke Steenhuis. 1983. "An Interview with Luce Irigaray." *Hecate* 9,1&2: 192-202.
- Jacobson, Lisa. 1990. "Reading Ania Walwicz." *Outrider 90: A Year of Australian Literature*. Ed. Manfred Jurgensen. Brisbane: Phoenix Publications. 148-59.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. 1992. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. London: Routledge.
- Kirby, Sandy. 1992. *Sight Lines: Women's Art and Feminist Perspectives in Australia*. East Roseville (NSW): Craftsman House in association with Gordon and Breach.
- Lauretis, Teresa de. 1984. *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1987. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mayne, Judith. 1985. "Feminist Film Theory and Criticism." *Signs* 11,11: 81-100.
- Meehan, Maurilia. 1993. "Spot the Invisible Man." *Australian Book Review* 156: 34-39.
- Mercer, Gina. 1994. *The Subversive Fiction of Janet Frame*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Moi, Toril. 1987. Ed. *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Moore, Catriona. 1991. *Indecent Exposures: Twenty Years of Australian Feminist Photography*. St Leonards (N.S.W.): Allen & Unwin, in association with the Power Institute of Fine Arts.
- . 1994. Ed. *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-90*. St Leonards / Woolloomooloo: Allen & Unwin in association with Artspace.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan.
- Munster, Anna. 1986. "Playing with a Different Sex: Between the Covers of Irigaray and Gallop." *Futur\*Fall: Excursions into Post-Modernity*. Eds. Elizabeth Grosz, Terry Threadgold, David Kelly, Alan Cholodenko, Edward Colless. Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney and Futur\*Fall. 118-27.
- Nevola, Helene. 1992. "'Double Negation': Gertrude Stein and Julia Kristeva." *Antithesis* 5,1&2: 111-21.
- Reinelt, Janelle. 1989. "Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance." *Modern Drama* 32,1: 48-57.
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler. 1991. "Women and Medicalisation: A New Perspective." *Stateing Women's Health* Sep/Oct: 5,6,33.
- Sawicki, Jane. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body*. New York: Routledge. Thinking Gender ser.

- . 1991. "Foucault and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Difference." *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*. Eds. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman. Cambridge: Polity Press. 211-31.
- Schor, Naomi. 1989. "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming To Grips With Irigaray." *differences* 1,2: 38-58.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. 1986. Ed. *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Waldman, Diane. 1989. "Film Theory and the Gendered Spectator: The Female or the Feminist Reader?" *Camera Obscura* 18: 80-94.
- Whitford, Margaret. 1989. "Rereading Irigaray." *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Teresa Brennan. London: Routledge. 106-25.
- Wolf, Naomi. 1990. *The Beauty Myth*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Wolff, Janet. 1990. *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Woolfe, Sue. 1992. "Calculating the Madonna." *Island Magazine* 51: 52-56.
- Woolfe, Sue and Kate Grenville. 1993. "Sue Woolfe: *Painted Woman*." Interview with Sue Woolfe. *Making Stories: How Ten Australian Novels Were Written*. Eds. Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin. 252-81.

## APPENDIX

## INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY



i am becoming another self and another person she plays me an interview i gave and i can't believe that was me that i said that that it that i did i was so earnest then i was so serious then i was so earnest so serious trying to be so deep and serious not how i now am you know i see everything very differently now you know i am seeing everything extremely differently to then i am  
(Walwicz *red roses* 1992:179)

As outlined in the introduction, the interviews that follow were undertaken in order to construct a dialogue. I wanted to include the writers to allow them to articulate themselves as thinkers, theorists and practitioners. These are positions from which the academy traditionally excludes writers, as Margaret Coombs makes clear in her interview. Ania Walwicz also comments that "*a writer is never seen as an expert on their work. Someone else has to approve of them, talk about them. I should turn the tables. Professor Walwicz speaks about herself! Why not?*" (see interview). In relation to the politics of *écriture féminine*, women who are "writing (through) the body" are significant as embodied and positioned speaking subjects in this thesis. While some rejected the position of theorist, or even that they might have theoretical knowledge, all seven women were pleased to speak about their work and many were delighted to have been considered (which indicated to me how rarely they have been consulted about their writing knowledge and experience).

Almost everyone involved expressed some reservations about the permanency of recording spoken ideas as a medium of knowledge. As Margaret Coombs writes in a newspaper article earlier,

*I became a writer because I'm such a slow thinker. The wheels in my head turn far too slowly to deliver thoughts fast enough to keep pace with speech. Only when I write words down and turn them into fiction do they sometimes, after careful rearrangement, revision and editing, seem to have any connection at all with what I mean. It's ironic, therefore, that the very defect of slow thinking that drove me to fiction has driven me, through fiction, to situations in which I am required to explain myself in talk. I mean interviews, of course. (Coombs 1989:7)*

This anxiety was palpable with everyone, including myself, and although the option of written adjustments seemed to offer some alleviation, the written word also has deficiencies when it comes to containing ideas generated from growing and shifting subjects-in-process.

The interview process was quite lengthy: I have had contact with each writer for two years now and the relationships we have developed have been varied. As I was located in Townsville I began corresponding with each writer months before I arranged travel to see them, between September 1992 and March 1993. My initial letter included an outline of my project, my interest in them and their texts and my motives for interviewing. I also offered them the option of a list of guideline questions to indicate the areas in which I was interested, an option everyone took up. The list included lead in, or ice-breaking, questions which I did not think were particularly relevant to my topic, along with questions designed to elicit information I thought I really wanted to know regarding their knowledge of the feminist theories I was using. Ironically, perhaps, I was reluctant to vigorously pursue theoretical questions in the interview in case they were hostile to, or uncomfortable with, them while some of the apparently "irrelevant" questions brought invaluable material in their strong responses and the common threads throughout all their stories. This material largely comprises the "Polylogue" which I now regard as one of the most fruitful outcomes of the dialogue process.

Eager to implement a participatory model of interviewing and conscious of feminist research methodologies, I anticipated unstructured or semi-structured interviews based on mutual interaction: I expected to share professional and personal information in conversation so that the interviewees might open up to me and the process became one of exchange. Ann Oakley regards "a 'proper' interview [as] a masculine fiction" (Oakley 1981:55) and considers that,

the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest her own personal identity in the relationship. (1981:41)

Oakley's vision of sisterly identification and ensuing friendship has since been problematised in terms of universalising differences of race, class and age, however, the principles of listening to women's voices and their bodies (in non-verbal communication) during an interview remain desirable alternatives to objectively and

dispassionately collecting their stories as data in which the interviewer is not involved.

The concept of exchange in the interviews I undertook was evident in a variety of ways. Several writers mentioned their commitment to making time for younger writers like myself as they had so often been denied it in my situation. Every interview involved exchanging interviewer/interviewee "roles" at times when they asked me to explain myself as a reader, as well as my work as a writer. Even the "interview" by correspondence included questions directed to me by name. Debates about who has "power" in interview situations become much more complex when the dynamics shift freely like this (see Cotterill 1992). In speaking of the fluidity of our positions, however, I do not want to diminish the authors' anxiety about being questioned or the fact that I have the final word in arranging and using the material from the interviews.

A sense of a two-way dialogue was strongest for me with Inez Baranay when, at her request, I became a resource for her by sending her theoretical readings, initiating a period of work for her as writer-in-residence at James Cook University, and as I continue to act as a medium through which she can gain access to University resources. This sense of reciprocity reinforced for me what Shulamit Reinharz speaks of as facilitative, non-exploitative feminist research methods (1992).

In transcribing the interviews from tape I was surprised by the amount of hesitancy in everyone's speech patterns — the "you know"s, "sort of"s and "kind of like"s. Reinharz discusses these "subtleties" of women's speech as "requests for understanding" (1992:40) and maintains they should be listened to and reproduced exactly in transcripts as indications of their positioning within social systems (1992:45). Contrary to this position, a visiting editor-in-residence suggested that it was valid and desirable that I eliminate some of the oral "hiccups" so that they do not "detract" from what is said. In the end I decided to give the writers this editorial decision. I sent them a copy of the transcript and asked if they wanted to change, delete, add or edit anything. Sue Woolfe and Susan Hawthorne (who edit

professionally) and Margaret Coombs made some changes to facilitate flow; the other respondents made minimal changes if any. Some made a small number of additions; these are included as "Second Thoughts" in the transcripts.

To maintain the model of dialogue, I also sent the writers a draft of my chapter on their work; these responses (as well as being included in the chapter) are recorded at the end of the interview transcripts. This extension of the dialogue process was effective in various ways. In preparing the manuscripts to send to the writers I was suddenly confronted by the thought of *them* as readers rather than examiners as readers. Because I had already established personal contact with them, I was quite concerned about what they might think of my "criticism". In my covering letter, therefore, I mentioned my feeling of vulnerability in practising this research ethic of dialogue, and also stressed the importance (to me) of this opportunity for them to "speak back" in response to anything I had written. Those who did "write back" with objections, extensions, alternative readings, ideas and even praise, have contributed valuably to making this thesis a participatory and multi-voiced process of speaking, listening and writing.

INTERVIEW WITH ANIA WALWICZ

This interview with Ania Walwicz took place in her kitchen at Cremorne Street, Fitzroy, on Monday 14th September, 1992, accompanied by Mr Boopee, her cat, and a cup of herbal tea. In this case my efforts to make the interview situation informal and friendly meant that topics tended to drag on, more as if we were chatting. It is the longest interview, and Ania made minimal corrections to the transcript, mostly attending to errors made in the spelling of names.

For some reason I was surprised that Ania did not make any comments to the chapter draft. She writes, "I thought about a reply for a long time. I like the thesis and it engages with my work very well. I hope that you won't mind not having a reply — it doesn't seem appropriate. You converse with me, then my work, very well and I'm no longer engaged now — I agree with the way you positioned the work".

~~~~~

Alison: Shall we just talk about *red roses* first?

Ania: Yes, yes.

Alison: Well I really enjoyed reading it, and the length seemed to make a lot of difference as to what you were able to do in it, as a reader. Was it easy, the transition between writing small pieces and a major novel.

Ania: Yes, it was a natural transition, the next thing to do after *boat* was to do a very long piece and to have many things happening within the piece so it's like a collage, and also like a musical composition. To me it has different movements in it, beginning softly with a lullaby and then the movement becomes very circular and rounded (there, I'm making shapes with my finger now — a visual component!). No, no, sort of whizzing movement in language. That's what I've tried to create. Then it comes to a centre which then explodes and then the movement becomes slower and ends with an easy ending, I feel. But it's very connected with the personal experience described — the whole anguish of mourning really.

Alison: Of what sort of mourning?

Ania: For my mother.

Alison: Yes? Is that what prompted it?

Ania: It prompted — the death of my mother prompted the book. I actually started writing it nine months after her death. It's very curious. Like having a baby. But of course it was a wrong decision to write about it so soon, after her death, because it was distressing to actually write it. It's the only time in fact that I became frightened of my own writing. Just the reversal — the writing was haunting me, and I had to abandon it, because I think I was touching upon very painful areas within myself. And then I had to abandon it. Then I came back to it years later. And then I wrote it from a different perspective where it included my own anguish but also included other things, you know, other texts, and became an intertextual combination and became everyone's mother. It ceased to be just my own mother. At the beginning it was rather harrowing, at the very beginning of writing, yes. The author gets frightened of their own work. Ha! Yes, very odd.

Alison: And that hasn't happened before? Because you've said that in the beginning you started writing from your personal experience, like diaries.

Ania: Oh yes, but that was a very detached sort of medium, I think. No matter what you write it's never fully direct, because diaries deal with somehow trying to capture experience, note it — I'm keeping yet another one here — I always love diaries, but, diaries are quite detached. One never reworks experiences. It's putting experience at ease, putting it to rest. Whereas with my work, although it began from diaries then it got involved with enactment of experience through language. And then that *red roses* to begin with because the mourning for my mother was so vivid to me at the time it began as a sort of re-enactment of it in language — a redoing it and intensifying it, then I, it frightened me.

Alison: There's a lot to do with birth as well, especially at the beginning...

Ania: At the beginning, yes, nine months after she died when I was returning to this birth experience. And then I abandoned it and when I returned to it, it began from the same point — I used those notes again — but it had an easier tone to it. So it's a personal catharsis happening in there too although I point out that it's not a complete solution — writing never is. Although, partially it was. In lots of ways the book actually had very symbolic beginning and end. It began nine months after my mother's death. In actual fact that was — she died in '85 — I actually thought I could really write it in '88 and finished it then and then it was published in '92 which was exactly seven years after her death,

which is supposed to be the period of mourning. So I think in writing my work there's a tremendous sort of personal significance happening too. You know, on the conscious or unconscious level. So the work has a personal relevance very strongly and it was a cathartic experience to write it.

Alison: I notice that in *red roses*, the kinds of discourses that it uses are very international — they draw in lots of international cultures and put them together in a sort of hybrid mesh. Do you see yourself as drawing on an international framework rather than a specifically local or Australian one?

Ania: Oh yes, I'm very conscious of that. Well, also the way the book was actually written physically. Half of it was written in Australia with references to Poland or sort of nowhere place of memory, and that was written first in South Australia where I was doing a residency at the Experimental Art Foundation. Then in '88 I was working in Murdoch University and I was writing it again there in Western Australia so it was placed in an Australian setting. And then after that I went to England and then to France and I was writing it as I was travelling. So it became my mother was re-emerging through other images that I was looking at. So she became extended geographically as well and it was a real journey that I was conscious of that had symbolic references to my mother and her origins. Strange. And that even followed through the launch of the book which was done at ACCA [Australian Centre for Contemporary Art] in this art space; it was this completely white space with red roses from a florist which were a replica of the cover and the actual roses I found out later which were enormous, they were like pieces of liver, very dark, they were from Amsterdam — flown from Amsterdam. So there was that connection with the book right through. And of course my mother's death, even though she died in Australia, there were her origins, and the second world war and all this I was re-living while travelling and thinking about her. But I think the process of mourning is there, that one does, you know, think about someone and it returns to you through all the media of other images too. It's not a direct memory. Or sometimes it is, but often it's something that comes through another image, and that's the level that interested me: an image of my mother which is suggested, or an image of a mother which is suggested *through* other images. And the international setting, certainly, yes, it didn't deal with Australia. Oh it did a little bit, but not much. [laughs] I never deal with Australia. Well, I do. From an outsider point of view.

Alison: Have your books been marketed outside of Australia?

Ania: Well it's supposed to be marketed in America, it says so inside the cover, so I don't know how effective that is, or how many books they actually distribute. But we will see, there's no way of checking on this but it's still early days.

Alison: Yes, it would be interesting.

Ania: Yes, to see how someone else picks it up, or how someone else could see it. But I also would like to see how people read it because I only know of two readers who have read it in a particular way. One found it distressing reading. Another person didn't. It's interconnected with the way they actually related to their own mother. Did you find it a distressing reading?

Alison: No.

Ania: No. May I ask you a personal question?

Alison: Yes.

Ania: Well I wanted the book to be at the mirror too, so that the reader could project their own mother onto it. Do you have a good relationship with your mother?

Alison: Aah, it's ambivalent.

Ania: I feel the relationship with the mother always has ambivalence, but it's a good one?

Alison: Well, I guess we get on, but, you know, there's things that need working out still.

Ania: But it's strange, the person who liked the book has a good relationship, the one who found it harrowing doesn't. So I am suggesting areas of experience in the reader which are not fully conscious for them.

Alison: Well maybe I do have a good relationship! How do you imagine your readers? I mean, do you write it hoping that the readers question themselves while they're reading?

Ania: Oh yes, yes yes. Yes I hope that the reader has all kinds of emotional reactions of their own to the work. I am trying to touch a nerve in people, or touch upon their own experience so then it releases further images within them, so that the work being presented is an open text without closure of meaning, closure of approach. That means that they can have many personal reactions. And curious, because recently a woman told me she belonged to some women's group who were reading *red roses* and she asked me if I would like to come. But I thought I shouldn't, but now I wish that I did, or I might still go, just to hear how they read it. That's the interesting thing, how they saw it, because it started off as my mother, my mourning for my mother, my relationship with my mother and then the text — by including so many different texts, and opening itself to different ways of actually questioning itself or having a conversation with itself, because a text proceeds in this way, setting up this conversation with itself, proposing other images all the time. And so I would like to know what people's reactions are. So in a way it's sort of innumerable texts are included. And actually when I was proof-reading the work I found each time I read it was a different reading for me even. So I become the reader of my own work too, which is a fascinating thing because one thinks if someone writes something then they have the same response each time when they read it but they don't. And that's the curious thing. Although I know of course I wrote it, I haven't forgotten that I wrote it but the way I then receive it is different.

Alison: I find that it also makes people question the way they read things as well. Instead of just reading it passively they have to renegotiate your work, try different ways of reading it, otherwise they don't get very far.

Ania: Well it's true, so it's demanding of the reader. They have to engage themselves with the text. They have to participate in the formation of the text, and I'm stating in the text that I wanted intelligent readers.

Alison: Yes, I thought that was very flattering!

Ania: I flatter the ones who can do it. But then I'm also aware that the work frightens people who haven't come across any abstract writing, or haven't even read Joyce. I always assume everyone has. So, it's a surprise to me. It's a very different format to what people are used to. But I do involve them in this particular experience in which they themselves have to engage with the text actively and most reading is seen as passive sort of entertainment,

escapism. Here I'm doing the opposite: confrontation. So, it can be a frightening thing.

Alison: Sometimes it reminds me of Gertrude Stein's writing. Did you read a lot of her?

Ania: Oh yes. Not an enormous amount, but I feel, I actually when I first came across Gertrude Stein I hated her work. I think I was a teenager still and I found it extremely annoying. It was only when I started to write like her that I actually began to like her. Maybe unconsciously I appropriated her, even on an unconscious level without realising it. And then, when the rhythms of her work actually appeared in my own, could I actually read her with pleasure. Very odd. How do we read? Maybe all kinds of reading are a form of absorption. One is forever like a sponge. Well I think everything that I have read has entered into me and I can recollect it in some way, even if it's a tiny memory, so maybe we just accumulate everything and then, there's ways of showing it in that book. But I have bits of books in *red roses* like Vera Lynn's childhood, and actually when I was in England I got this book about her childhood, and included bits there. It's strange because I showed *red roses* to a person who started reading that and said "Oh, I like the bit about your childhood", but it wasn't my childhood at all. And that book questions autobiography too, because everyone's experience whole, maybe it's all the same, all the same — one thing.

Alison: Speaking of rhythms, I found that once I had heard you speak your work on a cassette tape that I heard, the rhythms in which you spoke it seemed to come through in the other work of yours that I read, like it puts a different rhythm on it to how I would read, and sometimes it makes it more accessible too.

Ania: Oh, really? Maybe I unlock the text in some way. Wow, could be. Gosh. But on the other hand I worry about the reading too because let's say Sylvia Plath, I used to love her work as an adolescent, I was telling you before, and when I heard her read her work I was devastated, that it was so dead-pan. I had my own interpretation, you know, because that's the way I would read my own work. So when I heard her I accepted it but I didn't like it. I preferred my own interpretation. So it's a dilemma: should a person hear me or not, because it's their own voice they have to hear.

Alison: So what sort of reactions do you get when you perform your work?

Ania: Well all very varied. Nothing gets thrown! Well I think a lot of people enjoy it, they enter into it. It's a form of hypnosis I actually do too. Well, indirect induction, where people then listen to my voice and my voice is melodious when I do the readings and then they follow the voice and they have to concentrate on that voice and look at me only — that's a form of hypnotic suggestion you know. Well, not a major one, they don't pass out — maybe in some way they do. Well that form of language, in the first place language [that] is not grammatical, which is fragmented, and which deals with unconscious experience. That does draw people on to a level within themselves. So I do that. But it's not everyone's cup of tea, this form of writing or this form of reading. It is a very extreme work which has no antecedents in Australian culture so it really doesn't feature as part of Australian culture. It's curious, just recently I saw Achternbusch's play *Ella* which was done here by an Italian theatre, IRAA, and it was a German play and that relates to my work directly. So I think German literature relates to my work directly, but not contemporary Australian work at all. And that's where my real emphasis is, I suppose, Australia's seen as not related to what I do. So. But German literature, European literature, yes, that's the background, it comes through. Whoa, just an expressionist. No no, being serious, there's never been expressionism in Australian culture. It's basically English culture, it's very restrained. There's a certain polite, you know, message of good taste. In lots of ways my work has been seen as an extreme work, expressionist work, but also work which upsets people too, or is found to be somehow contravening good behaviour. The rules of good behaviour are broken, by me.

Alison: Yes, I read a review of some of your artwork that said it wasn't "polite", or something — not a polite show, or something.

Ania: Oh really, I didn't even see that. Sometimes I think with reviews, no-one tells me, people assume that I've read them, and I never see them! What was that? Recently? Rude!

Alison: No, it was quite old I think, I'll send you a copy if you like.

Ania: Oh please. But then I think that I shouldn't even be aware of these things, that I shouldn't be at all reading what gets said because then it affects me.

Alison: Does it?

Ania: Well, in a way it does because everyone has a certain sort of *amour propre*, you know, vanity, and that shouldn't be addressed in my case seeing as I'm working in a very odd situation here. I don't know. My real longing to be published internationally, translated into German, then I'll fit in, and probably that's what I should do. That's a strange thing, yes. So I'm a sort of odd-bod figure. And yet I've had attention from serious critical situations where people have accepted it so it does fit into serious critical situations like Universities, literary studies, or it fits into *avant garde* literary circles connected with art and so forth, but the sort of literary scene it is, it doesn't really fit into it. I have no-one around me that I can actually perform with, or when I am part of readings I do stick out, rather. I am aware, I have an incongruous effect.

Alison: What about, you seem to be included in a lot of the anthologies under multicultural literary debates?

Ania: Yes, but not recently.

Alison: Not recently?

Ania: I don't know, the whole multicultural scene is, I don't know, maybe they have had them, but not recently. Oh well, the multicultural debate. Fair enough. That's one debate.

Alison: So do you feel happy sort of participating in that, or being sort of used in terms of that area?

Ania: Well I can't, for writers have no voice in those situations — it's very strange — and one is speaking all the time but one is used then by other modes of presentation too. So I do my work. The way it is perceived is not up to me. I can't stop anyone from perceiving it whichever way they like. The multicultural aspect, well that's a fair enough argument. At the same time it didn't deal with my work in terms of *avant garde*. It just presented it as a sort of remnant, or some fragmentation within the person as a result of displacement. That's one way of looking at it. Maybe that is correct. But I'm not representing multicultural views. I myself should be an expert on my work. Interestingly enough, a writer is never seen as an expert on their work. Someone else has to approve of them, talk about them. I should turn the tables. Professor Walwicz speaks about herself! Why not?

Alison: Yes — that's what we're doing now!

Ania: Yes, and I want to do some more actually. I've been encouraged. But I see myself as *avant garde*, that my work stems from literary consciousness. It doesn't stem from dispossession or fragmentation due to migration, because I started to write as an adult with tertiary education done within Australian milieu, so I can't claim to be such a European, really. I am interested in European modes because that forms my interest and of course innately connected to me as a person. But that's a more indirect process than actually me arriving here, being dispossessed and writing out of this dispossession. I arrived here at the age of twelve, so some time has passed. At the same time, multicultural argument is fine, but I would see multicultural content of my work as more related to my interest in European literary modes. And that's not a straightforward multicultural explanation. But then, I've never been happy about anything that's ever been written about me, if I were to be totally honest because I would like to write it myself. Perhaps I couldn't even do that. Maybe I should try. Because you know whatever gets written, I then look at it, but I'm not looking at some sort of ignorant point of view of a poor author who can't speak for herself, because I'm talking about this now and I've taught a lot in literary studies so I can't then assume the back seat. I'm the back seat driver, forcing my way! But it's a very odd and uncomfortable position to be placed in. Someone writes about me: should I agree with it, should I disagree with it, should I forbid them? Maybe I should! Maybe I should be the only expert, and only I will talk about myself. But, the position that writers are in is a very ambiguous one.

Alison: The way that I'm looking at your work in my work is through the perspective of feminist theories of women's writing.

Ania: Well I like that.

Alison: Do you? Are you familiar with those theories?

Ania: Some of it.

Alison: Are you? What sort of...

Ania: Well, the ideas. I like psychoanalytic approach to literary work, and the feminist, well, how my work would be seen as babble, and, the female speech. Definitely.

Alison: And are you conscious of those theories when you're writing your work?

Ania: I include literary theory in *red roses* — as inserts — but I don't think that one has to be conscious of those theories. I think they're quite elementary when they arrive from the writing process. A lot of actual consciousness of writing as it is produced comes from the actual process of writing. One doesn't have to have a reference book. One can work it out oneself. But I've got a lot of reading in psychology. That area interests me. So I can relate feminism to that most, and actually I analyse my own work, how it reflects these things. So, but I am aware of the theoretical background too, but I'm not sort of coming to it from some sort of inquiry or research. Once I come across books like this I absorb them but I am not getting the idea of the way to write from those books. There is a difference. I don't have to have direct acknowledgment of sources, too, which an academic does. It's a different business. But I am aware of those sources so of course it comes from this and also my writing stems from eighties which was the beginning of a collection of women's work and it was feminist awareness and readings that were set up by women, so inevitably my work was produced within context of feminism right from the beginning. And I think that shaped it. Absolutely. Even if it shaped it indirectly. That the work was looked at as woman's work, because before eighties that wasn't even done. And I actually started to write then. So in a way I'm a product of feminist criticism indirectly. Strange, yes. Because probably works like that might never have been published earlier on. Or I'd have been seen as too extreme, or not legible. Amazing. So feminism actually formed the writing practise and also formed the way of looking at my work, reading it, and has formed the writing of it. So, but not directly. Actually I wrote some work which is meant to be illustrating these ideas directly. Actually came out dreadfully badly. Yes, because it was very didactic and it just seemed propaganda-like, so I thought I will leave this in the background. It will come through anyhow. But the relationship between me and theory is much more indirect than your relationship between me and theory. But I still absorb it but it comes out in a different way. And it doesn't have to be a direct relationship.

Alison: No. I think there is a lot of interaction between the two.

Ania: Yes. But it's curious how authors are seen as always naive as though they didn't know about basic theoretical things. Why is that?

Alison: I don't know.

Ania: That's the old idea of looking at the author as a sort of *idiote savante*, you know they have this marvellous talent. but they're sort of idiots, or mad. [laughs]

Alison: They've just got creative genius maybe but don't know what they're doing.

Ania: Yes, and the creative genius comes out and they don't know what they're doing and someone has to elucidate it. That was the old framework, the theoretical framework to begin with. When I was at university it was like that: the author produces out of this wonderful source — god knows what it is, and never mind about it — and then the process is then intellectualised and then understood. But now there's been a reversal. The author's voice is becoming more dominant, or are people interested in it? Ah — there's my chance to write a book on myself. Curious, because I was spending some time with a student who actually asked me that question seriously you know, not believing that I had covered what she had covered because I was an author — that put me in the category of a disabled person.

Alison: So how do you see your relation between, the relation between you and like, universities and institutions and critics. Do you think you'd like more

Ania: It's changing, it's changing. Because I feel that I can have more of a voice now because the author's voice is invited back again, whereas when I was studying it was totally totally hushed up. No-one was interested in some diary statements — it seemed naive, idiotic. Now, that sort of form of speech from the writers is, well, welcomed. And now, you're welcoming me, that's part of it too. But I do want to write articles and essays on the process of writing. Because my form of writing is so fragmented there can be a sort of belief that I actually speak in this way or function in this way. I would be unable to function, but, interesting, isn't it. How did you think of me before you were going to meet me, by just seeing my work? That's worth working out. Mmm, a person who cannot speak, with a mad mad voice. It is a mad voice.

Alison: A mad voice, well, I don't think I imagined that you wouldn't speak, because I've heard your voice and I imagined, I connected that voice to you.

Ania: But you wouldn't have connected the cadences of my speech at present, or lucid speech with my work, you wouldn't have.

Alison: I don't think I thought about it — I presumed I could talk to you.

Ania: But it's strange isn't it? For all you knew, I could have spoken like this all the time. Hmm, that would have been something. Now, the author's voice is welcome back again because of creative writing becoming a subject at universities. That's the difference. The actual process of writing is seen as an important thing, but in America it was always taught, but in Australia following the English tradition it wasn't, and the creative side was seen as belonging only to this genius, the mad genius, and thus not capable of being intellectualised. But now the tables have turned so I feel much better about institutions and in a way I feel I have a revenge on the institutions. Aah, I can become a professor of creative writing. Well it's possible these days. So tables have turned, and especially in literary studies, completely different now, and much better, I feel. And because people can write themselves, as part of their study, so they're not just observing the author or participating in the process indirectly, they themselves can observe their own process. That's the difference. So I like it, I like what is happening now. Much more interesting.

Alison: Okay, what haven't I asked you ...

Ania: Do you want to put it on pause?

Alison: No, I won't risk it. Oh — do you read many Australian women writers, like ...

Ania: Funny how, I was talking to someone today and I was saying that the authors I relate to most are dead ones. Like if I were to meet an author, I would prefer to meet a dead one. No, I don't think I relate to Australian literature very much. No, I couldn't say I do.

Alison: What sort of books do you enjoy reading for pleasure?

Ania: I can read anything. I can read magazines, all sorts of garbage. I actually enjoy it. I can even read romances. I have a wide taste. You know, I was reading a Dumas, I was reading Dumas — he was a hero of my childhood — recently, *The Black Tulip*. I can read anything. No, I don't have a programme of reading. But I don't have a great relationship with contemporary Australian literature, no. But I don't know if Australian literature has a tremendous relationship with me either. I don't really know how I get seen, so it's hard to gauge one's popularity. I think I'm seen as a very, *outré*, extreme figure which creates unease, and is sort of embarrassing and, ah, odd.

Alison: Do you know if you are taught very much on courses?

Ania: I am. I know that because people have interviewed me and told me this, and at Melbourne University I gave a lecture recently, they all had my book there, dog-eared. That was a little strange because everyone *had* to read me and there was no choice. Suddenly I appeared like a living textbook. There's a sort of element of horror involved, you know. Hmm, I was institutionalised.

Alison: So did you tell them about your work?

Ania: Yes I did. So I read some of it and talked about how I wrote it and how it was meant to be seen and how it gets seen. And there was a comment I remember making that I have no control about the way it gets seen, and that was a worry to them because they thought that the author had control of the situation. Anything goes. Work can be seen in many different ways. No, feminist criticism and literary studies and the multicultural area, that's how my work got seen. Also, experimental writing, sound poetry, other categories. Woman's writing. Yes. So maybe there will be other categories, that's possible in the future however, you know, whatever else I write.

Alison: What about, is there much overlap in your work between your artwork and your writing, in the forms?

Ania: Oh yes they directly overlap, yes. And when I actually perform it in public that is a form of theatre already. It's very theatrical work. And with *red roses* when I wrote it I thought at first I could only read the beginning, the lullaby. Now I'm reading more and more of it. Perhaps the entire work can be read now. That was a surprise to me.

Alison: On one of those ABC audio books?

Ania: I could. I don't know if they would choose me. I don't get necessarily chosen. There is a tremendous ambivalence shown towards my work, too. The recent [Melbourne Writers'] Festival, I wasn't invited. Then I delivered a lecture at Melbourne University. So, it's always been like that. Tremendous ambivalence shown towards my work. I was given the [Victorian] Premier's Award and yet I could be rejected just as much, you know. There's tremendous ambivalence. Perhaps I should be glad of this. It's an uncomfortable thing to live with. But then, public acceptance for this sort of work, I don't know. It would have to have the right milieu. I don't know what that is. Not Europe necessarily because I was invited to do readings in Europe and I gave them and I found the whole scene there is quite conservative and what I was doing was seen as just as extreme as here. Because they have very little publishing of experimental works, in France. I also went to Switzerland. The publishing of experimental works is seen as almost impossible and so people function within festivals where they actually read their work — it was a musical sort of related event too, John Cage was performing there — but, that was just as extreme as it would be seen here. So I wouldn't have a milieu necessarily there. Otherwise, I don't know, German publishing is supposed to be more open, but then this work would have to be translated. But I do want to investigate these things now and actually want to be published outside of Australia. So the real wish is international right through. How far will I get? Walwicz everywhere — I can just see it — Walwicz everywhere.

Alison: Today Australia, tomorrow the world!

Ania: Yes!

Alison: So do you have much contact with other writers in Melbourne?

Ania: Not really. There's no-one that I could really say writes along my lines. People do affiliate themselves with people who do have something in common. No I don't. I have more contact in the visual art area. And the audience for my work doesn't necessarily come from literary area necessarily either. I think it comes from an area which overlaps theatre or visual art or that sort of area. It's not the traditional literary area. The launch of the book was at ACCA, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, where they had their own mailing list which was mostly visual art people and they were the ones who

came to the launch. Very odd. And I really saw who is my audience, you know, the audience that my work has, in that. So it's not the literary audience necessarily.

Alison: So do you see, or maybe they do, your writing as a sort of supplement to your other art-forms or ...

Ania: Oh, no, because my art-forms have been shown very little. I have very few shows. The writing has had more attention, and so the writing forms my sort of, I don't know, "fame". So the writing is the body of work that people have responded to.

Alison: So you get responses to your different forms of work as separate entities?

Ania: Oh yes I never try to combine it because, it's been suggested that I do, but it wouldn't be of any value because the work is separate, in identity. The paintings don't need writing the writing doesn't need a painting but, if I tried to combine them in a book it would be very expensive to print colour photos as well so it would just make it a more costly book. So it's impossible to produce it like that. No, I've always wanted to keep it separate, because, when I paint I don't write. I go through periods like that when I won't write anything, I'll just paint. So it's a different level. Maybe I should even have a different name. Show it under a different name. But the response to works? It's such an odd area. And I don't expect to *really* perceive it because I would like to be another person looking at my work but that's never possible because even the responses I do see, I then will justify in some way or personalise for myself. So one can never be objective about one's work, and truly see it dispassionately, seeing the work is so related to my own psychological states too. So it's deep deep stuff. But I've written now a play for children to do and that was, they could relate to it very immediately. I did find that working with children there was a great response to my work on a very simple level because they write like that themselves too. They can write without punctuation. I was actually invited to a school where they presented me with a publication of works done in my style. A teacher directed it, and I said "Oh, I don't know whether to be glad or call the police". But they certainly produced works on very similar lines. Maybe my work is very primitive. That might be one way of looking at it. In actual fact I had people who wrote me a letter and they wanted to meet me and they were shocked that

I didn't present this sort of persona that they imagined, which was this primitive persona. I disappoint!

Alison: So is there anything else that you'd want to make me aware of, as someone writing about your work?

Ania: Hmm. I always worry about saying anything about my work because later on, you know, I say Oh what did I say, or I disagree with myself very strongly. But that's the best way to think of things, that one can change one's mind. Sometimes it seems to me that way or another according to my mood. Because the work is very related to my moods too, or how I felt at a given time which I'm recording because that's the aim of the work, really. The aim of the work is sort of notation-dash-enactment of inner states of feeling/being within me, so it is my diary too. But depends on my mood that I'll see the work in a certain way as well. Hmm. Once I gave a talk and then afterwards I talked about my work then I kept on tormenting myself about what I said. It all seemed quite wrong, and I would like to redo it. No but I think the best way to look at the work is that it is a very changing situation. It always makes me think of an image of something that is sparkling and altering and moving in space, a sort of motility is being maintained, and I think that's the way to perceive it, in that sort of way rather than as rigid or categorised in some way. It is forever changing its shape and forever undergoing metamorphosis within itself. And my reading of it is always different too. But that's why, you know, being placed in any category, then the work assumes a finite shape or set of rules that one has to follow. But I never feel that. I always feel whatever I'm doing well next time I'll do something completely different. And actually the next book, *Voyages*, is going against that whole movement of fragmentation, it's coming towards literal language. I actually found your statement curious, how you wrote saying that my work was abandoning the fragmentation and coming to a more mundane area. That I worried about.

Alison: No, it was just at the end of that poem, yes.

Ania: That's how it seemed to be going.

Alison: That when it came to be more controlled by grammar, because there seemed to be a progress towards a more grammatical area and then it tended to stand still..

Ania: Yes, oh dear.

Alison: But that was just in that poem ..

Ania: That could be one way of looking at it ..

Alison: I thought that was satirical. I mean, the poem was commenting on that as well and then your other works disregard those grammatical rules and things keep moving ...

Ania: And it suddenly became static, in your view?

Alison: Well just in that poem it seemed to be saying that when you take on all those rules of grammar and

Ania: You resign yourself?

Alison: Yes, it's...

Ania: Well that's the strange thing that's happening lately. Maybe I'll abandon it! Also, sometimes I'll go off onto a tangent and then I abandon it. That's the thing when one talks about works in progress, before it's published, who knows. But I feel that the work lately has begun to assume more, not more rigid or static, but more segregated sort of level of experience. It's going in a different direction. It's closer to my natural speech. It's becoming more so. And I want to write all these essays so it will be even more so. God! Then I can always burst back into the fragmentation. But fragmentation has, it's dangerous too, because I can feel that I'm always redoing the same format. I don't want to feel then trapped in my own style or format too. Recently it was suggested to me I could write some pornography. But I would say I would do it under a different name — a man's name. But I could be sort of free of being Ania Walwicz and I could become this other persona. Because as soon as one writes then it all relates to me. I can't say I haven't written it, I can't deny that I have, and then I have to proceed maybe along the same lines, people get used to that. Then I'll have to be fragmented for the rest of my life, you know. I could do something quite different. I want to feel that I could. But it's a changing situation too, for me.

Alison: And you don't feel that you could under your name?

Ania: Oh I couldn't. I could actually under my name. Now I think writing pornography is not such a good idea. Now as a child I used to write a lot of pornography. Very odd. Now I've been reading more about that very factor in sort of psychological terms, what it could mean. The more I got to know — very worried! Ah yes, but as a child I was turning out this pornography, with images too, that made me rather popular with other children. Yes, I think my first wish to write was to be popular. Pathetic aims! You know, showing off. Yes. Lenny Bruce talks about that. Do you like him?

Alison: Who?

Ania: Lenny Bruce? This comedian. He just spontaneously made up language on the stage, I have tapes of him, and then I came across him in a book and he talks about the first wish to make art. It was showing off — Look at me, ma, look at me. That's how it started. But I can't go back to that childish abandon, now I'm much more conscious of what I do. But I want to do things that would be very self-conscious now. So, it will be directly opposite to what I have done before. How will that get seen? That's a worry, isn't it? I can just see, reviews: Walwicz loses her touch. But I should feel free of even my own terms, that I could suddenly change completely. You know that people who sell art are not allowed to? I've read that Picasso, well he had to follow a certain line and beyond that stage he couldn't sell any work that would go over that because he was already in the market, representing a certain figure. Hmm. This hasn't happened to me. But I don't think my work has reached that sort of best-selling stage. I needn't worry. But no, future best-sellers from Walwicz. But would you be shocked if you saw something of mine in totally literal form?

Alison: I think I'd be surprised, but then I think a lot of your work is so unexpected anyway, that you can't go there with expectations anyway. It all surprises.

Ania: No. I see. Well that's why a writer can only sum up an author when they're dead. Because then the production ceases. Actually a person told me who wrote an article about me that she was advised by a fellow colleague that writing about a live author was harder than writing about a dead one. Absurd! You have to be dead to be covered. You see, because you'll never know what I'll do next. But I feel, well these three books present a certain investigation. First one, semi-literal. Second one, totally abstract. Third one was collage, including other texts. And the next one, seems to be going towards literal

language, but, who knows. So, journey never ends. But this multicultural angle, how do you see it in relationship to my work, I wonder?

Alison: Well, I think the debates around the multicultural issue are, I find them really fascinating because they're sort of arguing with each other and it's something that can never be pinned down either. I just reviewed a book and the author had a great deal of trouble, I think, saying that these people are all Greek because they were all migrants and some of them had gone to, like it was discussing Antigone Kefala who was born in Rumania of Greek parents then went to New Zealand then came here, and she was trying to say that she was a Greek writer. So I think there's lots of sort of negotiating going on in those circles anyway. So in some ways I think your work fits in because it is constantly contesting, changing, accepted definitions.

Ania: But yet, the *avant garde* area, to me that seems a lot more flattering, and what I really want to do, because I've never consciously set out to be multicultural. No no that was something that was said about me, so it's a form of gossip. But I did set out to be an *avant garde* author. But then no-one writes about *avant garde*. Maybe that's seen as a total whole category now. Who knows. The only person who wrote about postmodernism who wrote about my work within the context of that. But he wrote it as more of a sound quality, because that's his area of writing.

Alison: Who was that?

Ania: Nicholas Zurbrugg teaches in Brisbane. But his interest is the sound performance. No I shouldn't worry. I suppose a meeting on that side is all right. As long as I'm talked about in some area.

Alison: Even gossiped about!

Ania: But the multicultural argument can be, well, it has been taken on a very simplistic level. People actually believed that I wrote like I do because of insufficient grasp of the English language. Yes, taking it at an absurd sort of level. And also once I was employed at a community arts job where the person in charge thought that I should work at migrant centres, because that's where multicultural writers worked. The poor sods couldn't speak English so they all wrote multicultural works. God! Astonishing, isn't it? No, the area of feminist criticism appeals to me more, and, I don't know, the area of

specialist works. But, I want to feel un — *je ne sais quoi*, what's the title of the song? Something — untrammelled melody, or something?

Alison: Unchained?

Ania: Yes yes — unchained melody. You know — where I can actually shift perspective again, and that I can never be pinned down. But inevitably, after death perhaps something could be said. But then maybe a woman who refused to be pinned down. But curious, isn't it? If a work forever changes and assumed new forms, would that be seen as anti-commercial or would publishing accept such things too? But I think it could be done.

Alison: Did you have any trouble getting *red roses* published?

Ania: Oh, not everyone wanted it. Books are seen as just articles for sale. Funny business. But one publisher told me that their biggest seller for them, even though they publish a lot of intellectual books and so forth, is a book on football. That's what really keeps them going. I wish I could produce bestselling books though. Why not? Yes, I have thought of this. Next book: intellectual best-seller. I don't know, could be a few footballs thrown in! But you know, one could write an intellectual best-seller. One of my ideas is to actually take this intertextual reference further and actually deal with popular forms of literature, or you know writing about genre — you know the romance story, and to actually deconstruct the romance story while writing it. And there is a publisher when I told him this idea he says, Oh, Ania, when are you going to do it? Keen and waiting! That will be different! But actually that would sell, because it would appeal to feminist consciousness related to those Mills and Boon sort of things, even though the whole debate of Mills and Boon is over and done with, that happened in the eighties, but, no-one's produced a book that was Mills and Boon but questioned the genre. Because actually a friend showed me the whole outline from Mills and Boon, you get that. People tell you how to write it. So I could actually re-write it as well.

Alison: And all the people reading the romances could buy it as well!

Ania: Yes, to give themselves an idea — it will be a sort of romance that constantly re-occurs. And I love romances, they're such kitsch. But they're so excellent because they're so interesting because they deal with repetition of the same format. And yet they're genuinely entrancing. They have a quality of fairytale

and they're basically masturbatory in intention. So they are pornographic in a way, too. Soft pornographic writing, and more so these days. I follow these things! My field is ever wide! Imagine that, this sort of bestselling book which questions the Mills and Boon, how will that be seen in multicultural terms? Hahaha.

Alison: That might upset everyone?

Ania: Right, but that's what I'd like to do — constantly come out with something different. But I do think it's possible for the form that I do to be saleable but it would have to have a different visual appearance. It frightens people a lot. See, it wouldn't frighten you because you are familiar with different formats.

Alison: *red roses* frightened me when I bought it.

Ania: Did it?

Alison: Initially ...

Ania: I suppose it's much like *Finnegan's Wake*. Did you ever read *Finnegan's Wake*?

Alison: No.

Ania: *Finnegan's Wake* is difficult to read because he makes up a lot of words. But once you enter into it ... But I think, I've never come across a text that I couldn't read. I mean, even if it seemed impossible, I would still get into it somehow, because I'm an addict of reading. I think that's what it is — a real addiction since I was a child, you know. Any book, any book — if I was presented with a bible I would read it for hours. I could. Phone book, perhaps — a little dull. Hm, that's the idea. So any further possibilities are there constantly. And that romance idea is with me and every time I see this publisher he says, When are you going to do it? So, ready.

Alison: Sounds great.

Ania: Do you think, would you read something like that?

Alison: Yes.

Ania: Yes, but it would be deconstructing it so it would be making the masturbatory fantasy impossible, so the traditional reader of Mills and Boon wouldn't read it, but of course the intellectual reader would. Ah, let's face it, I'm always aiming for the intellectual reader! Yes, but there are such people, but it's not the vast majority. So I suppose my work fits into a sort of minority publishing, but it doesn't really necessarily because it would sell more than poetry and it would sell a standard amount. So, not so bad. Growing market. But you see with *red roses* already that idea of using other texts or playing on genre is exploited. There are bits of Mills and Boon, you know — that Abby, that constantly walks into her arms — his arms! A person read it and told me it seemed like a gay book to them. All these people kept on coming out, that this person found fascinating.

Alison: There is a bit in there, isn't there, about the romance that went wrong?

Ania: Oh yes, there are romances, many romances. Oh yes, that romance that went wrong, that was actually a story of this woman who with her father in Italy — there are stories that I've included that are from my childhood. First romance I ever read was actually Italian romance, which is about the woman in Austrian Italy — Austria took over part of Italy in the war — a resistance fighter who her father hid in a tower dressed up as a woman. She became friends with this woman, thinking it was a mistress of the father. In fact it was a man dressed as a woman and she fell in love with this man dressed as a woman. But then of course she wanted to marry him, she gave him up to Austrians because he wouldn't marry her. And then she wanted to marry him — please marry me, oh you won't be killed — but he shook his chains and said, no, no, I will die for my country. That was the first sort of romantic reading I'd ever, you know, come across, and it seemed tremendously exciting, masochistic you know. Sort of wonderful, impossible love, so I included it. Yes so all my writing oeuvre is included in it, everything is included in it. But I wonder how it comes across. Did you feel they were separate texts or did you feel I was saying them all? Could be seen as though I'm saying them all?

Alison: Yes, I thought that they were all sort of meshed together and they all commented on each other as well.

Ania: Oh yes, but did, you didn't see them as all stemming from me, you could see there were outside sources?

Alison: Yes.

Ania: Yes because there were erroneous sort of ways of saying that I said them all, but, that's the whole idea of course. How can I be the nightingale of Berkeley Square, Vera Lynn? How can I? I could pretend I am. Yes, so the book to me had all this sort of interweaving things, but then that then leads to an idea of exploiting these formats, other formats, you know — the romance. The romance has always fascinated me. And I can actually read those sort of books and understand why they function so well with the public. Because people long for sexual fantasy really. They're mostly read by older ladies. I've seen them in trains reading them. Fascinating stuff. And I've also been asked about a book for children, which I will, but I haven't yet. It will be about cats. I think Mr Boopee perhaps — my cat — could write it, if only he could. Yes, so anything is possible. But through teaching writing, which I've done too, areas of writing about writing are occurring to me now. So there's more to be done. I think those three books will lead to other books. But I don't know how I'm seen, I mean, in courses are you presented, were you presented, as a student, as an Australian author or a woman author or?

Alison: Yes, as an Australian in *Transgressions*. I'm not sure how you were presented in the lecture, just clustered together. I mean, that was a very long chronology ...

Ania: Australian, hmm. Yes when I was performing in Geneva I was seen as Australian.

Alison: Were you?

Ania: Yes, no-one saw me as a European. No. And I was asked if English was spoken in Australia. That's how little they knew. They didn't have an idea. But certainly I was there representing Australia. Like a sports event.

Alison: How did you feel about that?

Ania: Well, I make big attempts to explain where I was born. See I was actually born in Prussia, what used to be Prussia. So I make points you know about where I was born, but it didn't matter to me either way because I think writing's the international business. I don't want to just be published in Australia and be here for the Australian public. That would be terrible,

because I want to, I don't want to read Australian authors necessarily either. Australian culture — two hundred years. How can major works be produced necessarily, when, I mean why should one negate someone like Tolstoy, you know. My first idea of literature was someone like Dostoyevsky, you know, serious, Russian literature, you know, something with passion. And that's, but I have a good sense of humour coming in too. But that was my first idea of profound works. When I was thirteen I read *Crime and Punishment*, you know just agony profound choices, suffering, you know that sort of thing? And actually the first introduction to literature came from my father who knew a lot of poetry by heart in German. Goethe. Erlkönig. He'd say to me in German, over and over, translated. That was my idea. When I was very little, before I went to school, before I could read. That was my first impression of literature. That it had to be emotive, powerful, and it was of course connected with sound, that he was saying it, but it was powerful, you know. And something that would emotively engage you. Or something that could make you cry. That was my child idea of good literature. But you see, the whole tradition of Australian literature, there isn't that. There is an interest in the opposite: how to tell an amusing story, you know? How to be detached, or how to engage the reader in a polite sort of level of entertainment. But I want profound things. But how does it come across? Who knows. Maybe I'm seen as some grandly annoying creature, you know, all the time harping on doing this mad stuff. People have said that. A person said You do this sort of manic stuff? You know, "mad person". There could be connections. When I actually perform my work in public there is a mad persona that I do create. You know, when a person's constantly experiencing pressure of speech and I'm sort of, the language sort of comes out at great speed and velocity. Some of it gets lost for the listener, through this.

Alison: Do you have different personas when you perform?

Ania: Oh yes, it's quite a theatrical thing. Actually that play, *Ella*, had a very similar sort of effect. And some of the language will be lost too because the enunciation became very fast. The person also had a very heavy Italian accent, like my Polish. There were similarities. So in public readings I come across as this mad person speaking uncontrollably perhaps. That gives people the idea that I might be like that in private. I think it might.

Alison: And does it take a lot of preparation to prepare those readings?

Ania: Well I think those, tonight, for instance, I'll read out of *red roses*, there's a section towards the end when I went to Pompidou, set up Pompidou, where there was actually a show of objects from the sixties. This was in '88, and I wrote all the work about that then and then I wrote out of *Vogue* magazines from the sixties so it has all the language of the sixties describing fashion of the sixties. I should really be dressed in the fashion of the sixties. Never mind. I will actually adopt a particular voice at a level that will suit that, very fay, you know? Very fay, a sort of a — [very fay] oh, she was wearing this — you know, something like that. Like a commentator at a fashion show. That is the persona there will be tonight. So each time I read there is a different persona. But some of them are very extreme personas so I remember doing a reading where I had to laugh or shout. Of course it absolutely horrified people at Monash University. You know, that's not the area they're interested in. But it is, the sort of theatre which interests me would be like Grotowski's work which was Polish theatre, experimental theatre, dealing with an extreme of physical presence and voice production. These are areas which are not at all familiar in Australian culture. But I am a nice person — not too over the top! The areas that do interest me are areas which are beyond the norm of human experience too which, other areas could be seen as female hysteria. But what is female hysteria but also the hysterical, you know. How does feminism see that — with great pleasure. Whereas I was forbidden to write about Sylvia Plath, I told you, because she was a hysteric. But I would be epitomising this kind of female hysteria, a repressed voice which arises and erupts in an abnormal way too. I'm quite happy to be considered like that within my work, yes. Sort of psychotic element is used there too, in my performance, I'm sure. That frightens people. You know, like someone speaking in the street uncontrollably or, putting on a funny voice too — uncomfortable. But I like to make people uneasy with me too, in performance. But they're not areas that people are familiar with, nor are they promoted areas within Australian culture necessarily. No, there is a difference between me and other authors. I would like to meet that German writer who wrote *Ella*. Yes, because I saw that play only last week it had a big effect on me. And I want to see another play production, the same actor — he actually studied with this Grotowski and he's doing another play in progress. I've been invited to that — select audience, you know, the opposite of general audience. So I will go and see it. Beautiful, you know, amazing stuff. That's what I can relate to, but that's Italian theatre. The European connection again. They tour in Europe too. But, the European venues — not such hot stuff. I don't know. The thing would be to be published

and whoever can choose me, whatever theatre, whatever, they could do it. But the European scene is not so excellent. It just sees pockets of things just like here. Yes, so there's no heaven of anything, you know. In America the most popular thing would be like you know Tama Janowitz? That sort of magazine culture. And then there would be sound poets, people would shout their words through various synthesisers. But still, I don't relate to that because to me language still has to exist as language at some level. I don't want to just be making noises. No, it's sad to be just making noises. So there's no country that I could really go to and feel this is home.

Alison: In regards to your writing style?

Ania: Yes. And my life as well. Because here I appear to people as a foreign figure. If I went to Poland I would be even more foreign. So, that's the multicultural argument. No, but I think publishing, more and more, in different formats, and that will be my aim. There are international agents in Australia too. So it can be done.

Alison: Yes, it would be really interesting to see how you would be received in a European context.

Ania: Well I already feature in anthologies there, and text books in Germany. That's an odd thing.

Alison: As an Australian?

Ania: Yes, as an Australian! That's the irony of it all.

Alison: And is it translated or in English?

Ania: In English. Yes it's published in English. There was a translation made of some works into German, but I don't think the publication ever got off the ground because there wasn't funding given to it. But that was five writers translated into German. The translator told me my work was very easy to do, because it's individual phrases, individual words. The grammatical structure is not there or it can be twisted many different ways. So the translator is not under pressure to form a grammatical equivalent so it's much easier. So anything is possible.

Alison: Okay, well I think I've run out of questions,

Ania: That was good to tape.

Alison: Yes, say whatever else you want.

Ania: How about my reaction to what you wrote! Ha. Now in there it came across that you, that the writing didn't strike you as fluent. Well, I don't know what you meant by that.

Alison: Did I say that? Was that just in that "writer/reader" poem?

Ania: No, no, the other one. No where you talk about this fairytale bit as being more fluent. Well I suppose you were aware of different levels in there, but I, don't know, maybe to me putting a sort of value judgement on it. You preferred the abstract works? Or maybe you don't remember what you wrote?

Alison: Yes, I was re-reading it this morning, what I wrote. I think the fairytale one is more fluent as in everyday language whereas the writer/reader one isn't ...

Ania: Hm, but you see I'm so interested now in using different levels of speech, or writing, that you know I'm not putting any judgement on that either. You know whichever way it will go, it will go. And that's the interesting thing. So even if it were to become totally literal it will still have my interests in it in some way. It wouldn't be completely literal. And the parody of the romance is a parody, and so on. So it would come out as a questioning of itself anyhow. But, yes. What will happen next?

Alison: Yes I think the fairytale one is great the way it changes the fairytale — it's a great story.

Ania: I love the fairytale performance. I wrote a play, next play, recently, *Telltale*, that was all based on a fairytale element. Little Red Riding Hood keeps on coming out — my favourite. Yes, so anything's possible but I feel I will have to write a bit more because in the past my relationship with writing was sort of sporadic. Now it will have to be constant.

Alison: Did you get any sort of grant this year to write?

Ania: No, that *red roses* was funded in the past. At the moment — last year I did get a grant to write the play. Now I am grant-less, perhaps I will be granted in the future. You see grant system at most can provide you with three years living and really after that, that's it. So it's not a perfect situation. I will always have to teach in some way. It gets a bit tedious because all one wants to do is one's own work. But I will have to do some more teaching. But I do like teaching and I also realise now when I want to write essays about the process of writing it all comes from teaching because I did do that different level there. So I'm much more diverse than I appear on the page.

Alison: Most writers are!

Ania: Yes but I don't want to — and this work can be accepted as an academic work, this actual text about the process of writing, and a person is there willing to supervise me, so. The very one who put me on the curriculum. So. Some days everything seems to fit, but I don't know whether I'll enter into this institutionalised situation because I could write the work by myself. But I do feel now that, I do feel it's a very good time in literary situation in Australia in terms of publishing, and in terms of academic situation, and after my European travels I really am convinced there is a more diverse publication system in Australia than there is in Europe. What an irony. So, I am an Australian. I am the end product of a system which supports diverse groups, and maybe this sort of writing wouldn't be published in Europe, in the form it is now, because the publication of books there is very limited and they have to sell within six months. Because bookshops there don't get a big cut like they do here so only big bookshops can survive and they have to sell books en masse. Publishing is very, smaller in numbers than here. For such small populations, Australian population is really doing the reading, and the Australian population even though they would see me as an odd-bod, a weirdest person, I do still feature. No matter what tremendous ambivalence is shown towards me, I am still taken notice of. So, what a situation.

Alison: Why did you go to Europe, was it to do the readings?

Ania: Yes, yes they wrote to me and invited me, yes. But no publications result from these things. The publications that have resulted, have resulted through different sources: University of Aarhus, Denmark — that was more connected with the writing that was seen there. And there was a publication that was distributed there that my work was in, that was the University of Aarhus

publication. So, different contacts. In England, through some work I did in *Transgressions*, in England. So, books do travel. That's the wonderful thing. It's cheaper to send manuscripts than anything. So anything's possible.

Alison: Well, I hope it all works out for you.

Ania: Yes, it must!

Alison: Well, I'll turn this off now.

[The tape is turned off here as the interview seems to be winding down, but then we begin talking about my work in relation to questions about the body and Ania asks to go on tape as she is very interested in this area.]

Ania: Everything about the physical relationship to the body has been written [in my work]. I don't know, I suppose because I am performing the work in public, that already becomes the embodiment of the work. That's an aspect. But even the writing itself has, embodies a gesture within it. The work for theatre I have done, where I've actually envisaged certain movements which I would then write in terms of language — not describing them necessarily, although hinting at them. Then the writing itself then conveys this, to the reader, directly or indirectly. So it can be done, the actual movements can be suggested through language. Certain words to me are completely aligned to movements so to me there is no difference between the physical act of performing or the actual act of writing — it is very physically involved. I have never even thought about this before. No, the physical relationship, because when I, I've done art performances myself where I've actually performed my work not only reading it but physically rolling around under the table, and then I would be doing various sections, but when I actually write for performance or for theatre, in theatre situation, live performance, the language is meant to have such a close relationship with the body movement or even involve it, constantly suggested, well, it encaptures it, or enacts it. Yes, so I do hope for this level of my language. But in that *red roses* it was there. In the centre part of it I was performing recently the part I thought I could never perform because it deals with a very distressed area, where I thought the language was becoming very fast and circular. And I actually did it at a reading where I experienced tremendous relaxation, which was quite the opposite of what I thought I would experience. And in fact what happened was, people told me that when I was reading I was lifting my

shoulders all the time — I was totally unconscious of this. Curiously enough, the work because of its speed, involved me in tremendous hyperventilation. So I was inhaling a tremendous amount of oxygen, thus making me light-headed, and relieved, and feeling well. But what was happening was this hyperventilation which my work does set up. And I did a public reading where a friend was present who then commented on the work saying that he felt his very breathing, the act of breathing was dominated by me, and he felt that. Something happened there without me knowing that would happen but it does. Because I am suggesting in the writing various rhythms of breathing and when I do it in public I actually enact it. And the physical thing of raising the shoulders — I realise as a child when I've been in a bad mood I would actually do this action, and there I was doing it on the stage. So when I read I also gesture, the body is already set in motion. So it sticks out immediately and the language sets it up. But there's such a close connection between the language and the body for me. One embodies the other and of course the breathing factor is the crucial thing in the writing. The very first writing in the middle of the book had heavy breathing, in out, in out right through and, well, as soon as one performs it aloud, the way I do, which is related to opera too, because it's a form of reading the work or saying it, halfway singing, halfway saying it, and that's, the breathing is set up. The movement of the body is already set up.

Alison: So do you think it's related to yourself as a specifically female body, or just as an embodiment?

Ania: Well it would definitely relate to a body — anybody's body, but I think the female form does come out there, because obviously being brought up as a female, or being seen as a female, being told that I was a female. Although I was brought up in a very unusual way. I wasn't really told I was a female, because, I was told in a way by my father, I was called by a boy's name. Very odd. So my sense of myself was always sort of a transvestite sense of myself. How does that fit into feminism? I'm banned! But that's the truth. My view of gender has always been a form of parade of gender. That's why I could relate to this play so much, where it was a man saying it was a woman's experience, where gender was suddenly fantastic, and here he, actually masturbating, but, from a female position it was totally abnormal and deeply fascinating. His toenails were painted. His legs were shaved. It was grotesque. I could relate to that! I wrote things about being a man, but that was never published. But I performed it in public. Yes, very odd. People do do it, I know. But in

that pink book, my first book, that *Writing* book which has been reprinted in black and white (I think of it in terms of pink), there is a piece called "male soldier" where I don't want to be a man any more. It's a transsexual sort of voice that comes into it. And when I actually read it in public, then I'm no longer a man, that means I'm a transsexual. I was a man. Of course, who is to know whether this is true, and I realise I am clearly quite feminine because I'm short. But you know, I couldn't convey a masculine persona, although I could suggest it. So indirectly I'm suggesting manhood which was behind me, left behind. And I think that very much relates hmm, to this gender, but it's not definitely woman's gender. But on some pieces — "the most beautiful girl in the world" — the idea of beauty it is totally the female aim to be beautiful. And the play *Elegant* which was again the female body but it was disembodied. That play was about — a language was coming out but the body wasn't integrated or related. It was sort of hanging around. So these various states I've been interested in, so it could be seen, you know, that sort of unbalanced, or mad element would be within those states that I do portray. And I create those states and recreate them. Who's to know?

Alison: So, when you're reading, every time you read a set piece do you tend to slip into a, the way you've read it before?

Ania: Yes, there is a totally actor-like persona. It's totally like an actor, where they will actually go over material then they have a set role. And I do that. And there it is, so I know next time, I'll do it like that. The reading I did from the middle of *red roses* wasn't set so I was surprised what happened. I didn't know what would happen. That's the most interesting thing, because, when one repeats it, it gets a bit dull, but the first time is exciting. But this rising of shoulders, everyone said, God you were raising your shoulders all the time, not conscious of it, and the breathing of it became phenomenally hyper. And the fact that this man said his breathing was controlled by me. That terrified me. Yes, because I never aimed to have such, I never wished to do this to people. I do want people to participate in it, to be involved with me, to react to me, perhaps to feel embarrassed on my behalf, yes, pity me — probably, to identify with me, you know. Well, the relationship between performer and audience is a very complex one because there is a projection of the self, there is the antagonism towards performer too. He becomes the centre of aggression as well for the viewer. Ah there is a complex relationship between the two. But that breathing, but when he told me about that, and he was totally sincere and I know he didn't make it up, that

frightened me. Because I was going further than I thought, because I didn't wish to have such an intimate relationship, but then I was having physically, it was physically affecting people. And that's something I've only realised recently. So the breath and the body being set in motion, already gesturing as reading it, and while reading it silently on the page, the suggestion of the breathing is there. So someone reading it might not even be aware of it, but there's a breath pattern appearing in front of them, and I suppose the static nature of literal writing, you can't do that in that. In terms of literal writing you can't suggest these things. In terms of abstract writing, as I've done, it can be done. Although I wonder, if I did place the form I do, but in terms of visual form to make it more legible, maybe the same thing will happen, I don't know. But certainly that breathing level, that's a recent find. Yes, so that's the body.

INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET COOMBS

This interview took place at Margaret Coombs' home in Petersham, Sydney, on Wednesday, January 13, 1993, around 3pm. Margaret seemed fairly nervous but well-prepared with pages of notes on what she wanted to tell me.

Her response to the transcript was initially to resist reading and "rewriting" the moment and subjectivity it might represent, which she felt would be to "comply with the notion that it's possible to produce a 'definitive' commentary — whereas 'I' believe that all commentaries are commentaries of the moment — ephemeral" (pers. com.). Margaret also expressed her feelings of vulnerability and fear at confronting an earlier, speaking self which she might find to be "trashy" and would want to reconstruct, or to be so clever and wise she would feel inadequate.

Having written this to me, she then felt free to read the texts I had sent her and felt positive enough to respond. Her editing of the interview cut some of the hesitant and repeated phrases, added much underlining emphasis (which I have italicised) and also inserted (and deleted) some ideas which are included in this text as "Second Thoughts". Her accompanying letter and the minimal comments she made to the chapter draft are included at the end of the interview.

I felt some hesitation including these documents as they were so "tearful with gratitude", as Margaret puts it, and might be seen to be representing "proof" that my reading is "correct" in corresponding with "authorial intention". In deciding to include them, I trust my theoretical framework forestalls these possible conclusions. The frequent response of profuse gratitude coming from the writers, suggested to me how significant it was for them to be taken "seriously" by academic readers and how rarely they are listened to. It is in this spirit that I include these very telling and valuable response here.

So, over an Earl Grey tea (which Margaret was very distressed to read she had offered me and was concerned to note it is not her usual beverage), we began by discussing stilted interviews:

Margaret: I've never known more stilted conversation than as soon as this [recorder] goes on. Anyway, well you know, do you want to sort of ask me specific questions?

Alison: Well no, let's just make it quite informal and see how it goes. Just talk about whatever. Did you find the questions useful for stimulating things you wanted to say?

Margaret: Yes, I did. Probably be helpful for me if I did actually use them. It's amazing, as soon as that [recorder] goes on, you know, you sort of feel that pressure of time, you know, that you can't leave these terrible gaps and not say something highly significant. But, anyway. One thing I suppose, things that have come to mind that I wanted to say was that I do feel there is a problem from the point of view of the writer like me, that there tend to be a handful of writers sort of very self-consciously interested in theory and who are mostly working within the academy and so sort of don't actually need to make a separate reputation outside of it. They've sort of got a ready-made power base so they can afford to publish very little and, you know, be cryptic. And on the other hand the vast majority of Australian writers seem to me to be extremely hostile to theory and, you know, well, sort of, irritatingly naive and some of them are technically brilliant and so it's terribly frustrating to me when these people can write beautifully and not be aware of the, what their work is doing, that their work is, that it is sexist or, you know, supportive of values and power systems that are really odious. And that there's an idea that ... like it's just a gift and just, you know, "what you truly feel", that that's going to be somehow okay and, you know, it's *not* going to be somehow okay at all. And yet it's quite difficult because on the other hand I feel a great deal of kinship with *that* group of people whenever I'm confronting the heavy duty academic who doesn't understand how hard it is to acquire those technical skills and survive in a literary market place where the prevailing ideas are very romantic and, you know, the values modernist and I get frustrated that those sorts of academics when they kind of under-support you. You know like it's *very* easy to alienate the romantics — very easy. The minute they sense that you've ever read a piece of theory, you know, they're threatened and you've alienated them. But if you haven't read *everything* you won't get the support of the others. That's basically the kind of position in my most paranoid moments I feel I'm really in. That I sort of don't get enough support from the academic critics and that I've severely alienated the mainstream people partly by trying to be a mediator between those two worlds and bring those ideas to these people out here. But *you're* here, so that's nice. I mean, interested in theory and eager to, well I like what you said in your letter. That sounds like a good thing to be doing. It really does.

Alison: Thank you. Do you have much to do with, those academic worlds, I mean, do you come into contact?

Margaret: Well I have by choice, or by chance of friendship, been in the past I suppose since about the mid eighties. There used to be a group at Sydney University English Department called FELT back in the days when everyone was all enthusiastic about opening up the academy and all that kind of thing. All those ideas have totally disappeared now as far as I can see, but at that particular moment there was a group there that was very welcoming and it was a great help to me to sort of have, basically, the encouragement of being welcomed back, you know, into that kind of setting, and being amongst people who were reading those sorts of books and who supported that whole idea about *that* being a worthwhile thing to do. Because the hardest thing about the isolation of the job (writing) is that you're just not daily surrounded by people who think what you're doing is a worthwhile way to be spending your time. And, so I did get support from that group. Elizabeth Webby was one of the people who basically started that I think. But, you know, she's now a professor and hasn't got time for that sort of thing any more. And, you know, a lot of the students who were involved have just moved on. But then I used to have a very close friend who was originally at art school but then became an art lecturer, you know visual arts theory teacher, lecturer, at University of Western Sydney, Elin Howe, and visual arts theorists obviously read much the same stuff as we do and so that was somebody to sort of discuss theory with in art. And then, somebody that I really admire in the academic world is Terry Threadgold. I mean I'm not a personal friend of hers but because of the kind of person she is, which is very, she's very welcoming, very very unpretentious indeed, and yet seems to me to know the kind of theory I'm interested in better than anybody else I've come across, and to be a really good mediator of difficult and "foreign" ideas to people with an Australian sort of education and cultural background. And she was important but she's moved to somewhere near Melbourne now, but, just this year did she get that job? — but she was a really good person to have around. And she's been outstanding in encouraging Australian writers, I think, in that she, that lecture I gave at Sydney University, that was at her invitation. And she also asked several other writers to come along and, you know, I mean I was I would say probably the *most* theorised of the lot, if you know what I mean. But although she knows it all herself she's prepared to sort of, you know, expose her students to actual practising writers and try to set up some kind of dialogue and get her students to realise that these people don't necessarily have a clue in a lot

of ways and also, you know, sometimes people's writing *practice* can be totally different from the kind of, ghastly ideas that come out of their mouths, if you know what I mean. And you know some people do quite exciting writing who are quite unable to say anything at all about it, if you know what I mean. Or if they do, you think. Oh Christ! So she takes risks, those sorts of risks, and that's really important encouragement to a writer like me. Hugely important because I've sort of felt a bit, you know, this business of sort of feeling a bit under-rated by the mainstream. But then again, my work's a threat to the mainstream so no wonder, sort of thing. But a bit under-supported by people who are, you know, I would have thought I would have got more support from, considering what I'm saying.

(Second Thoughts: And the way I'm saying it — the *literary* experimentation.)

Alison: So do you have much contact with other writers as well?

Margaret: It sort of has varied from time to time. I suppose, at one stage I did attempt to set up a, well first of all I got involved in Redress Press, which was a fairly small feminist publishing group back in the early eighties, and we were naive but it was a start for me in sort of getting interested in feminist theory because I wasn't, well I felt threatened by it before that but then after that I became very interested in it. So that was one good thing it did, even though many of us women involved didn't have a clue, you know. And it also, it was very good for me. It gave me, because I'd been an isolated mother, you know, it gave me a sense of, an awareness of my own competence, you know, opportunities to discover from experience that I could do things, all sorts of things, and better than a lot of other people there who were a lot more self-confident and surer than I was. Anyway, so when I was there I tended to, I guess be, well I did meet Kate Grenville through that. And I guess I would describe her as a friend even though I don't actually see her very often. But I see her occasionally and, yes, we're friends, I guess. I guess there are a handful of writers that I see occasionally and, you know there are some of them that I support even if they're not, even if they doing totally different things from me because there is that tiny area where you have more in common with a Mills & Boon writer than you do with someone who doesn't write fiction at all. Do you know what I mean? Someone else I got to know better through Redress is Carolyn van Langenberg, she isn't really well known yet. Even though I feel very uncomfortable about some of her work and yet I feel mean just saying that because she's friendly and supportive. Do you know what I mean? So, it's difficult. Yes I guess I do know a few.

(Second Thoughts: But I don't feel as if I do — except for some I know only through their books. Sometimes I think I know only the wrong people — a line of Peter Handke's, I think.)

Alison: Do you read a lot of other Australian women's fiction or don't you find ...?

Margaret: Well I certainly don't make a sort of strenuous attempt to. I mean, I'm aware of some other writers who really regard it as part of their job to read everything that comes out. I tend to let my reading run from one thing and lead to the next thing, and basically what I'm working on leads to what I'm reading. But I, well I will always read anything that came out by Marion Campbell because I think she's a really interesting writer. And, well she is someone who certainly knows her theory but then she's also within the academy and has a very strong support network of academic friends so I think that life's probably a lot easier for her. There are a lot of writers that I like *one book* of, or one short story of, even. I mean there's one short story of Michael Wilding's that I think is just wonderful, called "Class Feeling" that's in *Reading the Signs*, but, you know, then there are other things of his that I really have to struggle to get through. Do you know what I mean? But I think that's a wonderful story. Really wonderful. He's not a woman though! He's been supportive, now — he's another one, who's been supportive in some ways. Just little things that you, sort of come as a surprise. Like you might get invited to do something and you think it's just come out of the blue and you'll eventually be told that so-and-so mentioned your name and it's been Michael Wilding a couple of times. Is that making a funny noise? [the tape recorder is labouring a little] Doesn't matter? Nothing to worry about. As long as it's not about to explode.

Well Kate Grenville's, you know, I liked *Bearded Ladies* and *Dreamhouse*, I think, better than anything else. And of the writers you listed I really liked, there's a short story by Fiona Place in the *Speaking with the Sun* collection, I think that's wonderful. And I've read something, there's something by Susan Hawthorne in *Uneasy Truces*, I think that's her, that I thought was really good, that I think had an epigraph from Christa Wolf. Yes, so, I read quite a lot I guess as it turns out. But I don't systematically read everything that comes out. And I don't think there's anybody, well I mean, you know, if somebody else were like, sort of saying everything you felt had to be said

(Second Thoughts: — or using language in the same ways —)

you wouldn't be bothering to write, if you know what I mean. And as I say there are quite a few who I really like *something* of that I'm reluctant to say I love their work because there are other things of theirs that I really hate.

Alison: Your novels use quite a lot of other texts within them, too.

Margaret: Yes, yes well I do read a lot of writing but, you know, that's, I don't self-consciously read a lot of *Australian* writing. I feel a lot more comfortable reading books of people that I not only don't know, I don't know anybody who knows them, and so there's only the book that I'm dealing with. It is quite hard to, well I mean it's impossible to read the book of somebody you know without *that* colouring it, or somebody who you know is somebody else's friend or enemy or whatever. You know, it *does* colour it and that, yes I suppose, is part of what makes me more comfortable with non-Australian books. You know, you're bound to meet these people sooner or later. When people send me books or, I don't know it's, I mean I do it myself — I send people my books too — but you know that sort of stress of sitting down with something that you've GOT to like. Ugh. It's *torture*.

Alison: One of the things that I'm interested in is how theory and practice intersect and I found your books really good because you put a lot of theory into quotes in them. But they seem to comment on your work in a sort of retrospective time frame.

Margaret: Yes, well that is, you know, what I intended doing. In that lecture I guess I say a little more about that. And there's a paper that Terry Threadgold's written that kind of, you know, ficto-criticism, is that what it's called basically? I suppose that, yes, I really enjoy doing that. I really enjoy letting backing quotes comment on each other without spelling it out. And it's terribly frustrating when people just don't see the point at all or find that alarming in some way. I mean, there was quite a lot of reviewer hostility. People have said to me that the way I put quotes in *Regards to the Czar*, they couldn't see the point and certainly didn't like them being in black borders, framed. And, see, a lot of people tried to read and indeed a lot succeeded in reading *Regards to the Czar* as a very conventional, identify-with-the-heroine narrative, which I put quite a lot of effort into trying to prevent them doing. Do you know what I mean? And so, yes, they tended to read it in those terms and overlooked the attempts to block that approach — regarded them as "failings". But there were a lot of people who really did like *Regards*

to the Czar, you know, obviously they were reading it in that, "Let's ignore the hiccups" way, who really don't like this sort of thing and sort of kindly tell me that they hope I get back to writing in that "nice" way. And the great success of my work in mainstream terms has been "Nothing Happened" from *Regards to the Czar*, that, just that story by itself without any of the stuff around it to try to question and point out that it's not that simple. And so that's all very frustrating. There is that feeling of everybody wanting something different from you and you know what will get praised and that's going to be different from what you want to do. And so it's really quite hard to deal with for me. I think it would be easier in an academic environment where, there's a hugely strong immediately surrounding support for doing it the risky way. Because then it's not risky, it's become safe *in that context*. But I find it, a struggle. It makes it hard to write sometimes, this feeling that, they're not going to like this.

Alison: So are you very aware of readers when you write?

Margaret: Not when I'm actually writing, but the rest of the time I am. Yes. Well once you've had a book published and experienced reader response, I can't imagine how you could not be painfully aware of it. I think before that you can think there are these imaginary creatures that are going to be perfect readers from your point of view. You can be totally unaware of them, even banging around in your head, you know. Well it's like with a performance. Paul (the man I live with) works full time as an entertainer, a mime clown at various R.S.L. clubs and festivals and all those sorts of places and I used to work with him as a, you know, just as back-up, not as a performer, but all this made me hugely aware that the audience really does contribute fifty percent to the performance. I mean the concept of a good performance with a totally hostile audience is just — it doesn't even make sense. You know, there couldn't *be* such a thing. And so, you know, well this sort of product is what you write *plus* what the reader reads, and being a good reader is hard work and takes a lot of education and skill and practice, just like being a good writer. Yes, you know, a good reader is giving a lot to it. So I'm aware of all those kinds of things but I don't sort of sit there as I start to write and think, you know, who will I try to please? I'm just aware of all that.

Alison: Are you working on something at the moment?

Margaret: Yes, I'm working on another novel. It's always risky talking about things you're working on because they're likely to change or you're likely to, you know, start to feel that it's all a terrible mistake. But,

Alison: Well, don't say anything if you don't want.

Margaret: Yes. I'm working on another novel. (laughs)

Alison: Okay. Most of the theory that I'm bringing to your work is French feminist theory and Australian interpretations of that which is, seems to be different to the theories that you use in your novels. Do you have much to do with those?

Margaret: Yes, well I've been very interested in Liz Grosz's work and I try to look at the, that kind of theorising. And also Terry Threadgold certainly is, and, I guess the people you mention, Hélène - now you can tell me the proper way to pronounce her name!

Alison: I don't know about that!

Margaret: Well, her! Hélène Cixous or whatever it is, I mean is that roughly?

Alison: Well, I've heard it pronounced Cixous up in Townsville and Cixous down in Adelaide, so I don't know.

Margaret: Cixous, Cixous sounds, I've certainly heard the hard "x" come from authoritative mouths, so

Alison: Oh well, maybe we should believe that.

Margaret: I really enjoy her work and find her inspiring and I've certainly been exposed to part of Irigaray's work and I'm much much less familiar with Julia Kristeva's work, as far as, you know, like maybe I've had it in mediated form from other people but Cixous and Irigaray are the ones that I've, I suppose, admired. Well I think it's extremely hard to say precisely how theory influences your writing. You know, I sort of guess I think that if all this stuff has been fed into you that it's likely to change the way you write and affect the way you write. Certainly the things that you mention there as, well, you know, I'm certainly interested in trying to convey identity as fluid

and the complexity, you know the idea that as soon as you articulate a highly constructed entity that it's not me, sort of thing. And that identity is a process, not a fixed essence. And that, what Foucault said about it, I mean, I know he can be a sexist old hopeless creature, but, you know, I'm really interested in the power of knowledge. Maybe because of my education, though, I did philosophy, back then we didn't get people like that, we did all the, you know ...

(Second Thoughts: Nobody French except Descartes. No Foucault!)

Alison: He's very useful, he provides tools to write with doesn't he?

Margaret: Yes, I think so. And puts things very succinctly. And I find, oh, well, you know for instance, I find that Irigaray's "Divine Woman", that sort of writing, I, well, for someone with no sort of religious background, let alone a French Catholic background or whatever, and no special knowledge of the kinds of mythologies that she draws upon and assumes that you'll know immediately who that was and so forth, you know, I have to stop myself saying, That's just gushy stuff. But then I see the point of what she's doing but I find that sort of particular material she uses, the angel, divine woman sort of imagery a bit, not to my taste I guess! But obviously they influence my values, I'm interested in them. Yes.

Alison: I was also interested in the references to *The Daughter's Seduction*, to Jane Gallop and... Do you think theory is seductive in some ways?

Margaret: Well it certainly is seductive but whether it's seductive in a sense of being a bad thing for a fiction writer to be attracted to, is this what you're suggesting?

Alison: No, just trying to tease out some ideas.

Margaret: Well, I like reading theory and I think that, I know this is not really to the point of your question, but,

Alison: Doesn't matter.

Margaret: I really enjoy reading theory and, you know, there's a part of me that would happily be a philosopher and of course you know this is another thing: I mean I know I could be a philosopher, a feminist theorist. I know it. And I,

especially in the last three years or so I've put an enormous amount of effort into reading and learning this sort of stuff and I sometimes go to academic things that I know a lot more of that sort of stuff than a lot of people who have nice comfortable jobs as tutors, if not lecturers, do. And, yes, that can be frustrating, but then again I say to myself, Well I could have been a stockbroker or anything, I mean, that's not what I wanted to do, what's the problem? But then of course there is a part of me, as I say, is interested, really interested in all that. And, you know, it does sometimes tempt me away from writing, partly because I guess I can see that theorists get taken so much more seriously in a lot of contexts than a mere writer. Unless you're a writer who's, you know, *up there*.

Alison: Would you consider doing both?

Margaret: Well, I think it's extremely hard. I mean in a way, I've tried to do both in the past couple of years in the sense that I put a huge amount of thought and energy into a few little things I've done. I mean that, if you've come across the "Protect me from what I want" essay, in *Australian Book Review*, I put a lot of work into that and I found it terribly frustrating that, you know, some academics sort of liked it but, that one and another thing I did after that was a thing on organ transplants at the beginning of this year that was broadcast, and I also put a huge amount of effort into sort of making it, you know, not read like a conventional media academic essay. I mean I thought, especially in "Protect me from what I want", I thought I was doing the kinds of things that the French theorists are getting at, which is not to have a rigid, linear argument, sort of stripped of all metaphors and so on and so forth. And, and I mean I think I was, I sort of think that that's good. But what happens is that unless you can somehow *announce yourself* to be doing that and to have those knowledges and be *from somewhere* and all that, it's assumed that you're just an ignorant writer who doesn't know how to write a "proper academic essay", you know? And, I mean I sort of actually got a letter from some professor in Melbourne saying that he'd thought of asking me to re-write the organ transplant piece for publication in some academic journal but it wasn't sort of sophisticated enough and needed re-writing ... [plane roars overhead] I'm sort of beyond that, you know?

(Second Thoughts: I'm glad you put in the planes!!! I was furious with Hazel Rowley for implicitly ridiculing Christina Stead's complaints that aircraft noise stopped/slowed her writing!)

And so, it is, it's very difficult. I mean I'm at a point where, I've self-educated myself to a point where, you know, I can do that stuff and feel I know what I'm doing, but that I can't get it taken seriously because I haven't got the right credentials or I'm not in the right institution. And so I don't. For me to do both, gosh. You know, what would that involve? I'd have to go back and do a PhD. And I couldn't be bothered! It's too hard, you know!

Alison: I'm enjoying it!

Margaret: Well, you know, I can imagine it could be huge fun, but I mean it's not something that you could do on the side. I don't think. So I probably will continue to do both but with the academic stuff being in a small way rather than knocking myself out over it because it's just not rewarding enough. And doesn't get taken seriously if you're positioned as "a fiction writer". The people who have done critiques of IVF at Deakin. I mean, they do get front page publicity in the *Sydney Morning Herald* if they come up with something, but you just wouldn't as somebody who is not *from* somewhere or, what are your credentials? — you know, you have to have *authority*. And so, I just feel, I used to take on the whole idea of a fiction writer not being separate from other sorts of workers. I used to, you know, see the fiction writer as a cultural critic — see fiction writing as just part of the job of being a cultural critic and, you know, my whole life as a similar project. And I still sort of do, I still kind of agree with that idea but, I just, well particularly the organ transplant piece, I found that incredibly draining, and I just, haven't got that desire to do as much of that kind of thing. I mean, I got letters from, you know, heart transplant patients' mothers saying what a horrible person I was to, well you see it's terrible! It's ghastly, I mean I'm positive I'm right as far as cultural criticism goes. But anything like that does get taken personally by people. I mean if I needed a heart transplant I'd go and have one immediately, too — do you know what I mean? But people can't sort of accommodate that and see that. Of course we've all got to try to survive and of course you'd do anything for people you love and so forth, but it's just a farce to pretend that this is a service available to *everybody*, that it's serving "Humanity" because it's *not*. You know? And so I hated getting hate, it's the first time in my life I've ever got hate-mail, and I got hate-mail. And you know, it was just, you know, "little me", such a well-intentioned, here I was thinking I was such a nice, kind, well-intentioned person, which I *was*, and I got all this hate-mail. I got some support. A lot of support mail as well, but I did get some hate-mail and I thought, Ooh, not for me thank you very much!

Alison: Yes, I saw in the paper this morning they're doing the second pig liver transplant into someone today.

Margaret: Are they? Aah. How delightful. It's ghastly. I mean it's just, I mean what bothers me most of all is the pretence that it's, that the problem of resource allocation — allocating scarce resources and so on just doesn't enter into it. It's all done in the name of serving Humanity with a capital H. And that really bugs me. Anyway. So, yeah, I'll stick with fiction writing for a while! [pause]

Well one of the things I sort of thought that I'd like to make a point of, is saying, you know, what a huge difference it makes to me that I am a mother of two children. And, I think being a mother, at least in our culture, hugely differentiates you from those who aren't, and I think being a mother of two rather than one, or seven, is also, has it's own particular sets of problems and pleasures. And it's really important to me to look at things like, you know, motherhood, class and economic position and, well they're the things that particularly interest me. I mean I really have, I get very impatient with feminists who are unaware of the complexities of class, money and motherhood. And, that's sort of, that's made a big difference to me as a writer. For instance I've spent the past twenty years, or the years, you know before I was actually trying to write full time, say ten years, I was spending that time being a mother rather than, say, doing a PhD or being a lecturer at a University. And they, people that I sometimes feel envious of and exasperated by, are writers that did have academic jobs and then with a great display of, you know, "nobleness", retired to write full time and give up their jobs. But they take with them this huge amount of cultural capital in terms of a network of friends, the status of having been "from" there and knowing, of having been known to be, to have that background and so on, and so it's very much harder if that lump of your life was spent being a mother, which of course in our culture is to be sort of a nobody. And from that life you don't bring a whole network of friends who are useful in your career as a writer, and so forth. So, you know, I think you'll find that there are still very few women writers who are mothers or, you know, except for a couple who, you know there's always some sort of an explanation here, sort of had their children when they were forty or had a mother of their own who looks after their children or has a lot of money or something. Do you know what I mean? I mean it's very very difficult and, I mean it's not just writers that motherhood makes life difficult for. I think it's difficult for all mothers. But I am interested in, I mean it's part of how the body affects writing because,

you know, motherhood is the ultimate isn't it: the consequence of having a female body as it were. And so I'm really interested in all that and that is one of the particular concerns of my, of the book I'm working on now.

Alison: I was speaking to Sue Woolfe a couple of days ago and she was saying she's writing a book about mothering because since her last book she's had a baby and she was looking around for stories about mothering and couldn't find any. So ...

Margaret: Well, there are some, but I guess not that many and they tend to be the ones that are forgotten. I mean there's an absolutely remarkable naturalistic novel by an American woman called Harriet Arnow, called *The Dollmaker*, that was written I guess around when Steinbeck was writing and it's, you know it's a brilliant book and a Steinbeckie sort of thing but heaps better than anything he wrote and nobody's ever heard of her. Nobody here has. I only heard of her because Joyce Carol Oates, whose work I also admire, happened to have written an essay about her and I thought she sounded so interesting I'd actually made a huge effort to get hold of this book — and a huge effort it was! But that's certainly about motherhood, I mean it's motherhood as experienced by a Kentucky hillbilly woman immediately, or around the time of World War Two. I can't remember exactly when, you know, around then, and that whole social and personal dislocation of being moved from the farm to the city and so on. But that's a terrific book. And I suspect it's not so much that books about mothering don't get written as that they disappear without trace once they've been written. There's another one, *Picturing Will* by that, Will being the name of the child, by, another American writer whose name has totally gone from my head, but. Now there's another one again, you know, that's disappeared into thin air — *Escapade*, by Evelyn Scott who's an American — dead, now dead — an American writer who wrote a lot of books that everyone says are dreadful. I've never even seen them but I'm prepared to believe that, you know, she had to make a living and so wrote what she had to write, kind of thing, but this novel, *Escapade*, ...

[end of tape, turn over]

(Second Thoughts: It's just terrific. The mother in it eloped,)

Having been a rich Louisiana *lady*, she had a baby in South America which was born in really squalid circumstances and so on and you know, that's another remarkable book. So, but nobody's ever heard of it and I only chanced upon that in, because it was advertised for two dollars or something in *Academic Reminders*! So, but yes some good books have been written about motherhood

but nobody's much interested. That doesn't look very promising does it? No. But the thing is it's a start. I've been thinking about strategies, I mean *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing*, I now realise, I should have marketed as the first Australian novel that had ever been written about post-natal depression or, or the, you know, about the psychiatry set-up but I wasn't streetwise enough, hadn't thought of it in those terms. If you can think of describing your work in this way, you can get away with murder. I mean people are always describing their works as "the first" this or that, and they're bloody well *not*. But everybody believes them because nobody's read very much!

Alison: One of the things that interested me in both of your books was the differences set up between being an ordinary woman and an exceptional woman, the central character always thinking she was exceptional but being reduced to an ordinary status.

Margaret: Yes well I suppose, I guess I would see myself as trying to ridicule this desperation to see herself as exceptional and try to point out that the characters in the books are victims of essentialist thinking basically, that sort of desperate need to, you know, you have to, you are what you're born and you have to have been born "special" or you're worthless. I want my writing, my work to be a critique of that way of thinking and to bring out the idea that, you know, subjectivity is rather differently constructed and that it's, you know, you're a product of you class, your language, your circumstances, all that kind of thing and, you know, your luck, your education, and so forth and how, ultimately how destructive that kind of (essentialist) thinking is to the individual who thinks that way and to the, you know, those around her. But, so, on the other hand, as you may know if you've read the "*Idiote savante*" essay, I think it's ridiculous. What is ordinariness? Nobody's ordinary, you know what I mean? It's ridiculous.

Alison: No matter how you construct yourself people see you as they want to anyway.

Margaret: Yes, absolutely. But I suppose because I used to be one of them, I do get particularly annoyed with writers who are, sort of desperate to see themselves as "very special people", if you know what I mean. But, well, it's unsurprising, isn't it? Because you know, if you grow up in an Australian family and you are surrounded by a bunch of hostile philistine hicks I suppose it's tempting to think you're "special". Rather than that you were fortunate in your educational advantages or whatever.

(Second Thoughts: I'd like everybody to read Pierre Bourdieu's *The Inheritors*!)

Alison: Well, you look like you have a whole list of things you want to tell me about. Do you want to?

Margaret: Well I've probably told you most of them actually — well one person I wanted to mention who has been an important influence, or whose work I like is Jo Spence, who's an English, well she's died now too but she was an English, visual arts, photography person really, but she wrote a book called *Putting Myself in the Picture*, that's part photography, part writing, writing with words. I was sort of a pen friend of hers for a while, and I found her very supportive and felt a particular kinship with her because she was so interested in class as well as feminism and because she's very much influenced by Foucault and those sorts of ideas at the same time as being very interested in class and from a working class background and so not as inclined to just sort of forget about all that as some theorists with those sorts of ideas are.

And Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, because you asked here what books I liked to read, I think you did. *Journey to the End of the Night*, I really loved that book, even though, you know, he's sort of, it's a bit sexist in parts I suppose, but yes, I think it's terrific. But then other Celine books I'm not so keen on and, well I know Julia Kristeva's desperately keen on Celine but, I can't understand why she's desperately keen on him. I'm sure he would have hated her, is my interpretation of him, you know! I don't know.

The relationship between reading, readers and writers, it's interesting. This whole business of conflating women with their characters in fiction is a real problem. Especially for somebody like me whose work reads as, and to a large degree is, extremely autobiographical, as people usually use the word. But, you know, of course again, one of the really big things I'm trying to say I hope with all my work is *people change*, you know? And also that writing is writing and it's not the same thing as the writer. And, you know sometimes people are really sort of disappointed when you're not the character in the story. Like that, have you read that short story "Wearing the Dog Suit" that I wrote? [Yes.] Yes well a lot of, well not a lot I think, no. There was one particular woman from University of Technology who really and absolutely loved that story and when she met me I could see she was really disappointed that I wasn't sort of, you know. She had a boyfriend with a rock band or something and this meant she could really relate to everything, all the feelings in that story. And, you know, I think she expected *me* to be an

altogether different sort of person than I am now. Although I suppose that there have been times in my life that I've been much more like what she had in mind than I am now. And, you know, that's what that bit of writing came out of.

Alison: Do you find that a struggle, like trying to rewrite certain kinds of fiction when people read it a different way?

Margaret: When you know there's a danger?

Alison: Yes, when you're trying to readdress something and people refuse to acknowledge that?

Margaret: Yes, yes I certainly do. I find that really upsetting.

Alison: So do you think a lot about structuring?

Margaret: Well I think a lot about how can I make this so that it's absolutely impossible for anybody to read it other than the way I want them to read it and there's never a way. Yes I do think a lot about it. But then, it's complicated because I think I probably tend to sort of just write things down and *then* do the thinking about the structure. Whereas, for instance somebody who, when I read her work, I get the impression that she has very carefully thought it all out and then kind of filled in the spaces is Janette Turner Hospital. I don't know, I've never talked to her about that particular aspect of her work, but it seems to me very planned in that sort of way. Whereas I tend to write and then think of the plan. I think, but then writers aren't ... You don't really watch yourself working. That's my impression. Who knows?

And another thing that's a big problem for me as a writer but I don't know if it's of interest to you really, is the problem of the guilt and the suffering you have to endure because people read fiction as a transparent window onto "reality" and take it all very literally or, worse, sort of imagine terrible things you've said that you haven't actually thought about them personally, you know. I mean this sort of sounds trivial but it's a terrific problem. It's really hard when you're confronted with somebody who rings you up and says they're terribly hurt, and they don't say it in that cool tone of voice either, by something you've written. And I, you know I just, I guess it's times like that I am envious of writers who pride themselves on never writing an autobiographical word. Because I do definitely like to work from

things that have happened to me. But then it sort of becomes a very, well for a start it's my point of view and for another thing, you know, I'll sort of sacrifice anything for the sake of trying to produce the piece of writing I want to produce, and it is just terrible when people read something and read it as absolutely about *them* and assume that's your whole attitude to them. You know, that you see nothing more to them or less to them than that. Yes, it's horrible. And makes it hard to go on writing, that kind of thing. Because, it is, complicated, because they have to, you know, you can say to them all that stuff about, you know, "representation isn't 'reality'" and so forth, but, in a culture like ours where most people see writing as, the way they see photographs and they see each other; they've still got to put up with all *their friends* thinking that you've done this terrible thing to them so that even if you manage to convince *them* they shouldn't be upset they've still got to suffer *all that*. Do you know what I mean? So that's what it means working in a hostile cultural environment. When you use grand phrases like that, that's the kind of thing one means. So that the sooner, you know, everybody gets the education to problematise representation and read in a more sophisticated way, the easier it will be for writers to write.

I suppose another thing that I wanted to say is that sometimes I have the experience of readers who read everything I've written and then still, I feel, don't "get it", I mean that's sort of complicated too, but I mean there was one woman who is a psychiatrist who read all my work and thought it was wonderful and then said she thought it was a pity that *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing* didn't have a more optimistic ending. Well I felt that spoilt the whole thing, do you know what I mean? So you do feel discouraged at those moments as well.

Alison: Do you think, one of the questions I thought of was do you think it's possible to write exemplary female characters?

Margaret: Oh yes, I remember that question. Well, I think it's possible to write exemplary female characters but maybe I'm not sure what an exemplary female character is. I suppose it depends what you mean by that. Even in *The Best Man for This Sort of Thing*, I thought that character was really remarkably strong and, in a lot of ways, strong and determined and you know, having a lot of virtues of that kind[plane roars overhead] and still, you know, the whole, you know, it's impossible in those circumstances in that world and in that culture to not be in some way destroyed, you know. And I think that if you take feminist theory about phallocentrism and sexism and so

forth seriously then you've kind of got to believe it's at least very difficult, at least, I think it's, well, you know, obviously some, let's look at the world out there: some women are doing just fine. So I guess that you could write about them. Would that be an exemplary female character?

(Second Thoughts: Not necessarily. Anyway, I'm not interested in constructing "exemplary female characters". That's not my idea of feminist writing.)

Alison: I guess the reason why I found *The Best Man* so powerful is because of the impact, well it had a lot of impact because Helen, not really failed but, I don't know, because it didn't end happily, because there didn't seem to be a signal that made that clear.

Margaret: Yes, oh terrific, good. That's what I was trying to do!

Alison: Have you read Fiona Place's novel, *Cardboard*?

Margaret: Yes I have read *Cardboard* and it's also been pointed out to me and I think it's true that it's much more charitable than *Best Man* about psychiatrists and psychiatry, and with a lot more reason to be, you know what I mean? But it's nothing like as critical of, or sceptical about that world. It's a long time since I've read it so I can't make a detailed comment. Yes well she does triumph, doesn't she. She does certainly survive. So, I guess that, yes, well obviously none of us would survive unless ... obviously it's *possible*. But, well so why am I so interested in writing about those who get crushed? Well, you know, some of us *do* get crushed and so many of those who don't are very much hampered and, you know, have less than they deserve if I can use an expression like that. And so many women who "do well" in the world are very much Margaret Thatchers one way or another. But I do agree with those who say that even Margaret Thatcher was a victim of sexism because I think it's very clear now that she was. That, a lot of things that passed without comment in similarly ghastly males were very much criticised in her because she was a woman. So, I think none of us entirely escape it. It's a bit like, too, that some working class people make it and turn into Jeffrey Archers and are the first to say that everything's fine and anybody can do it if only they can be bothered, you know what I mean? I'm not interested in representing that kind of character, the female equivalent of that kind of character. Although I think there are plenty of those around. And, although I think there are some, who are the female equivalent of Jeffrey Archer, who are *aware* that it's been a matter of luck and that these people (i.e. women like themselves) are used by

the system to help keep other women down by sort of saying, See, it's possible, X did it! If you can't, there's just something wrong with *you*.

(Second Thoughts: The way Kate Grenville is publicised as a terrific writer who puts motherhood first — without any mention of the great STACK of middle class privileges that *enable* her to be both doting mum and writer is a good example of this.)

Alison: One of the major themes that I'm working on is how women writers are sort of redefining women's bodies in their own terms and their own kinds of languages and aware of the things that happen, are "happened" on their bodies. I guess with *Regards to the Czar* ...

Margaret: Right, yes. Well I guess it sort of surprised me in a way to realise that yes, this was such under-explored for what, you know, we were talking about. It was a real surprise to me for instance, with "Nothing Happened", when I became aware that why this was so fascinating for people was that, you know, it wasn't a theme that had been written about in Australian literature before I did. You know, it sort of actually came as a surprise to me. And, I mean. See I should have been smart enough to pick up on that and say this is an Australian first. This is where you really need a smart manager. But, yes, I'm afraid, you know, I've always in my life been acutely aware of being in my body, and for me it's been mostly really difficult, a nuisance. And, yes, I just, it was just sort of automatic to me to write of myself as an embodied self, you know, as a body. Because of all that, it really does fascinate me, you know, what a difference a body makes. And, well maternity ties into all that, you know? It's sort of, the difference that being a mother makes, is a product of all that.

Alison: Is there anything else that you think I should know as someone who is working on your work?

Margaret: Pretty well just about covered it. I don't think there's anything else that I desperately wanted to say. Except that writers really need that kind of work, that kind of support and that kind of interest and approach and I think, you know, it's a good thing you're doing.

Alison: Oh, thanks. I'm hoping to use writers as a source of knowledge as much as the theorists.

Margaret: Yes well I think that it's really, a really interesting approach because, and really worthwhile, and, you know the whole idea of setting up an interchange and the possibility of influencing each other rather than a sort of hostility. Yes, it does tend to be suspicion, fear and hostility now. I mean, I, you know, I sort of feel like I've always been quite eager to learn from feminist theorists and. But sometimes theorists are so sure in advance that you'll be hostile to them that they find it difficult not to sort of, just be polite, you know, when you're wanting some sort of substantial response. And again, you know, this is where Terry Threadgold's been really good and she can present theory without coming across as hostile, and can relate to people and, you know, that's terrific.

Alison: Okay, well thanks for that.

MARGARET COOMBS RESPONDS

COMMENTS ACCOMPANYING RESPONSE, AUGUST 1994.

I've just finished reading the Polylogue and draft of your thesis — and feel positively tearful with gratitude. What a LUXURY to have *you* as a reader. It's all *absolutely wonderful*. I'm very struck by the way the Polylogue so successfully generates a sense of writers working *together* — I mean in a spirit of cooperation. Critics just love to set us up in competition with each other — as I'm sure you well know.

So — I'm enormously glad I ended up doing the brave thing and reading your work (and confronting mine again). Virtue is rarely so generously rewarded! The only thing I felt seriously dismayed about was the mention of Earl Grey tea! How extraordinary that that was what I gave you to drink as I swear I never "normally" touch the stuff! It sounds far, far too genteel and "Anglo" for *me*! I'm *definitely* a coffee drinker — as any self-respecting Petersham/Leichhardt dweller *would be*. (This is Little Italy.)

That reminds me: somewhere I think you refer to me or my writing as Anglo-Celtic (or am I imagining this?). I think you did — and that I let this pass — but I shouldn't have. I feel quite touchy about my Jewishness getting ignored merely because I am not "the right kind of Jew" — the picturesque, romantic kind. (My vastly preferring coffee to tea is part of my construction of myself as a bit of a Jew — though of course my Jewish auntie drank tea all the time — and probably Earl Grey at that!).

Am I really "timid and nervous but passionately intense"? (I worry a little about the unflattering echo of Yeats's poem!) Yes, I probably am — or anyway "Margaret" probably is. "Very fierce on paper" is another unsettling description of "myself" that I've heard. Well, I can be that too, I suppose.

Thanks again for letting me see your (terrific) work — and all the very best with it!

COMMENTS ADDED TO CHAPTER DRAFT, AUGUST 1994.

p.84. [obstetrician's coercion] Yeah! Terrific!

p.91. [authority as illusion] I'm really *thrilled* somebody gets the point!

p.93. yeah!

p.94. [guilt of passive participation] Yes! I'm glad *somebody* has made the obvious connection!

p.95. Yes!

p.96. Yes!

p.97. Does he? No. It's just that he can't prescribe *STRONGER* drugs when she's breast-feeding because they might be transferred via the milk to the baby, and damage the baby — which is *not* acceptable even to him.

p.104. Yes!

INTERVIEW WITH FIONA PLACE

This interview with Fiona Place took place in Andiamo's Cafe on Victoria Street, Paddington on Tuesday, 12th January, 1993, at 9.30am, accompanied by the aroma of coffee, the sounds of a lot of other people talking, cafe music and traffic blaring. Despite this, this is the clearest and easiest tape to transcribe. Fiona is very vivacious and confident and energetic in her conversation, and I think I am slightly bewildered. We are also closer in age which seems to change the dynamics of this interview from the others.

Fiona didn't make any changes to the transcript but her response to the chapter draft was comprehensive and passionate. She initially asked that her comments not be used in their present form, and that she would prefer to comment on the next draft. As I wanted to revise the chapter with respect to and in dialogue with her responses, I wrote to ask that this be done "up front" in the chapter rather than behind the scenes where her comments would remain invisible and also unattributable. As Fiona consequently replied to "feel free to use extracts from my comments", I have included them at the end of the interview transcript.

~~~~~

Alison: So did the questions make sense?

Fiona: Yes, yes the questions made sense. Now this, "What sort of books do you read for pleasure?" Well, I must say amongst most of those writers I would have only done a skim, sketch-type reading of their work. I can't say that I've read any of them in great detail. I know, well for pleasure, I actually read more non-fiction now, than I ever have in the past. But I also like reading stuff like: *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Financial Review*, business magazines, sport magazines. Things that I've, before I would have always said, Forget it — I'm not interested, I'll never read them. I actually am, because I'm fascinated by how, what metaphors each of these discourses are using, like how they talk about this book. I've found that I've become a more open reader, and read a lot more stuff for interest that way. And would read more, as I said, magazines and non-fiction things. And when I read fiction, it's often that I'm so much aware of the technique, like I'm always reading from the Oh, okay, yeah I understand that, having done that, I've seen how you do that. If a book can actually engage me and I forget that well then it's absolutely and utterly wonderful. Like, you know, I think, Oh it's so fantastic. But I was

trying to think about what good books, good fiction books I've read lately, and it's a really difficult question to answer.

Alison: What sort of non-fiction do you read?

Fiona: Well at the moment because I'm writing a travel novel I've been reading things like *The Travels of Marco Polo*, histories of Venice, guide books on France, I've been reading a whole lot of stuff about travel in writing. So, that's what I've been reading and that's for my travel novel so it's got a specific purpose for reading those sorts of books. There's one very good book I read by Eric Lee called *The Mind of the Traveller* and it looks about how travel has changed from, you know, the first time that Adam and Eve stepped out of the garden of paradise, that was the first journey and he sort of goes on from there. And another book called *The Witness in the Other World* written by Mary Campbell which is, her argument is that Europe wrote about the far east in a way that put it down and made it something that could then be conquered, and that the way they wrote about the far east meant that they could then go and conquer South America. The trouble, the way one culture writes about another culture then positions it a certain way then certain things will actually be able to happen to that culture. So that I'm really interested in that. That's essentially what the travel novel is about. I haven't read any other ficto-critical novel that actually examines travel writing within it so that's what I'm working on, on that. So a lot of my reading would be, I'm reading travel magazines, like reading whole stuff, like reading holiday brochures on travel and just seeing how people talk and write about travel. So that's been one of my interests this year. I read *Toujours Provence* by Peter Mayles, well I can't say that I've read it: I got half way through and I found it so boring I couldn't finish it but I attempted it. So, it's sort of like there's a lot of reading that I feel like, is part of my research for this travel novel so that's what I've been reading recently. Oh, I read some Jeanette Winterson. I read *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*. I got really upset that I saw that tv thing before I read the book because I don't think the book, it couldn't come across to me as powerfully or as interestingly because I knew what was going to happen the whole way through, so I wasn't as blown out by it or, I mean I think she's got a fantastic technique and she's got a fabulous use of language and a whole lot of things. But I was, yes it was a bit of a shame that I'd seen the [tv] thing because it pre-empted the book. I mean I thought also that that script on the tv fascinated me, I just thought, How did she do it? It was fabulous, really fantastic. So yes, I think she can be very interesting.

Alison: You haven't read her new one have you?

Fiona: No, I'm waiting for it to come out in paperback, or waiting for the library to buy it.

Alison: Yes, me too. Actually one of the things I found really fascinating about *Cardboard* was the structure that you wove into it. Did you think very much about that?

Fiona: Well, if you really want the truth about how that happened. I had been writing poetry before I wrote *Cardboard*, right, and I was always going to stay a poet. I wasn't going to write a novel. And I was living with a guy who was a poet but he wrote epic poetry, like he wrote long stuff. And one day he just said to me, Fiona, are you just going to write pissy one page poems for the rest of your life? And I looked at him and I said, Oh, do you think I should write something longer? He said, Yeah, why don't you try a novel? And I thought, Well, okay. So I went upstairs. I got down the 25 000 words that I'd written six years ago which were the beginning of *Cardboard* — I had already written 25 000 words — completely forgotten about them and never looked at them. I took them out of the cardboard box. I started with the first sentence and then it just occurred to me, somehow there needs to be something else in here. And I guess because I had been writing poetry I had thought about it, I just tried it, I just put it in, almost like how it actually ends up being. And, yeah that worked. And originally though in the first draft I had whole poems the whole way throughout, and I realised, No, the flow gets broken, it doesn't work, something's wrong. And it took me quite a while to get the poetry so that it didn't completely and utterly stop the narrative. And then I realised you can only have three lines. Like, that took me a while to get to. But it was a very, it just was right. I got the form of, that novel I wrote in a month. And then I wrote, I mean I wrote the first draft in a month and then I wrote six other drafts. It took me six months to get it finished and then I spent, say three or four years doing another four drafts of very fine tuning stuff. But essentially the novel, how it was going to be, I got in six months. And it came. I mean, Jeanette Winterson said that about *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*. That novel was all ready, I didn't have — it wasn't a process of writing in the sense that, like what I'm writing now is really hard, tough work. Every sentence, every step of the way I don't know where it's going: it's much harder. *Cardboard* very much knew itself before I wrote it. But the poetry, that just seemed, at the time I wouldn't have, at the time when I wrote the novel either, I hadn't

been back to University. I hadn't had anything to do with post-structuralist theory, I knew nothing about any of that. I had spent six months before I wrote the novel writing an essay on language, which was, appeared in, some of the chunks of it appeared in the novel. And that was very much about how the medical discourse is essentially middle class and shapes people's pain in a certain way and all those ideas that I had in *Cardboard*. So I'd written that essay first so I had some theoretical background from where I was coming from. But essentially I hadn't been informed consciously by any theories, by anything. I mean I didn't even know poststructuralism, didn't even know who Derrida was! I wouldn't have known any of that when I wrote the novel. Obviously later on, I can see how a lot of the stuff that I'm saying in that is very very post-structural. There's a whole lot of images and connections, but they came later. And I just knew that it had to have that third person voice in the poetry, or else it just would have collapsed in on itself. It just wouldn't have worked. I mean, it was a very, gut, natural, instinct stuff. It wasn't as if I was conscious of the process of writing at that stage. I just wasn't. I mean it's much harder for me now, but back then, it was just, I just did it as it worked. I didn't necessarily analyse what I was doing. I just knew, that's how it will work, and that was the way to go.

Alison: Yes, I think that's really important, having that certain amount of distance from Lucy.

Fiona: Oh yeah, and also you've got a voice that can then comment from a different perspective in time, and yeah, I just think it would never, with that taking the poetry. I mean some people don't like the poetry, and some people said, Well why didn't you just take it all out? Well I'm convinced that if you took it all out, it would just, it would be relentless. Just far too relentless. And you, it would just be, boring. So, I think it worked. I mean, as a work, I still stand by *Cardboard*, like, yeah, I do. I'm quite happy. I would be very bored to write another book in that same voice or to use the same metaphors, but it's very hard to find a whole new voice to describe experience, to talk about things. *Cardboard* essentially, really took me say five years of writing poetry to get to a stage where I had that particular voice to tell that particular story. And yeah, to this day I would still, even though technically I suppose it could be tidier and neater, I'd still stand by it in a whole lot of other ways. So, I mean yeah, that feels good to be able to say that about it.

Alison: Were you happy with how it was received?



Fiona: Oh yeah!

Alison: Did it have any response from, say the medical community?

Fiona: Yes, well see I work within the medical community, so they were very supportive. Yes. I mean some of them found it threatening. But a lot of other people were really supportive. Because at the time I was published I was actually working out at Prince Henry Hospital as a writer in residence and most of them came along to the launch. So that in that way, yeah, it's quite different having also worked within the area. Your reception is slightly, well, you sort of get people who also know me, but the book has been picked up by various people in the medical profession. I mean they might use it for means which I would find quite spurious, but, I mean it's fascinating; I had one psychiatrist ring me up out of the blue and she said, You know, my patient and I, she reads a chapter out of the book each week and then comes and talks about it, and she can only talk about it to talk about her own personal experience. Now, I would never have intended *Cardboard* to be used in that fashion, but, if that helps, if that, for that particular person in that particular situation is what they're doing well that's fine. I mean I know that it also became *de rigueur* for all the girls who had anorexia in the hospitals in Sydney to read *Cardboard*, and that sort, like you think, Ooh. But, I mean it's had an impact. It definitely has. I get a lot of people who will ring me up and say, My daughter's got anorexia, can you help me? So, I think it has had a meaningful reception within that community. People have been affected by it.

Alison: It must feel good, to have that sort of feedback.

Fiona: Yes, yes. To be able to have, yes I think working within the field made it a lot better and I also admit that I was quite good at self-promotion. Like, I did a lot of marketing. Because it was produced by a small publisher, and they had no money whatsoever to do that, I had so much energy and enthusiasm for the book, that I was able to do an awful lot of publicity and sell the book. Because, partly because I really believed a lot of the things that I had to say and I did think it would be of use to people. And, I mean how luckier could I have been? Like, my second work of fiction I've just now given to my agent, but there's no way I could market it in the same way because, to my mind, it doesn't have as much of a social message, not as strong a one. I mean *Cardboard* I can justify its worthiness not just as a novel but as something that is of value in other ways. Now, maybe that's my hang-up. Maybe you can have novels that

just stimulate your imagination and, you know, I'd like to be able to think that I could do that. But somehow I find that a little bit harder to justify. For *Cardboard*, you know, I had a lot of strength behind that and I felt really good about publishing it. Yes.

Alison: So what led you to do the travel novel?

Fiona: Well, I went overseas. *Cardboard* won me a ticket overseas and I went overseas and I got back and because now it's sort of like you've become a writer well then you obviously have to write. I'd been finishing off my Masters, which is a, sort of a discontinuous narrative, and that was a really tough manuscript to work on. It had been really hard to get into shape, and, I don't know how I, well I suppose I thought, Well I'd better make use of the trip in some manner, shape or form. And then I just started writing and I couldn't see anywhere to go. But then I suddenly thought, Well you're interested in travel writing, and then it just took off from there. But it was one that I actually worked my way in. The ideas didn't come to me. It was more like once I started writing about the trip, I then, and I also decided that I wanted to try writing longer sentences and write more finely, or get a different, try and write something quite, a new leap on and bounds from *Cardboard*. Because if you have a character that writes in that same voice it's just too boring for me. I'd be bored brainless myself just writing it. So it was trying then to do something that wasn't going to bore me and that I could feel proud of and that would be interesting and so the travel novel just slowly, is developing. Like I've written 30 000 words now of it, and I'm still not, I still think that maybe that 30 000 words should become the raw material for the travel novel, but then part of me hasn't got the effort to do that because that would require a hell of a lot more imagination and some part of me says, Oh no, just stick to that and just write the way I'm writing. It's sort of, almost like, *Cardboard* I had the freedom to have this huge imagination and this huge, I could do whatever I want. It's like with the travel novel, I have the sense that I've never got the time in the world that I had with *Cardboard*. I don't get that luxury of being able to, just treat that 30 000 words as raw material and just start all over again. Which I know in some ways part of me would like to do, maybe I will, because I'm going to Paris in February for six months and I'll just write non-stop. And maybe I will do that with the travel novel. But I do find now that the further I've gone on in my career, the less I'm able to give myself that time. Because, like, you just have to be writing and you just, it's terrible. I mean, what wrote *Cardboard*, I don't allow myself any-more.

And that was time, imagination, freedom. And it's like you can do whatever you want, it's like now I've got to know what everything's going to be before I write it and I've got to be really, like, sure of it and everything. This must be the difficulty writers face with their second, third books. I hope that this phase passes, and then I can relax again and be really imaginative and open.

Alison: So do you think the way you're writing now has been influenced by the theories that you've come across?

Fiona: Oh, heavens yes. Oh, yes I became very... I went to UTS and I did my Lacan, I did my Cixous, I did my Irigaray, all that sort of stuff. I think now what I'd like to do though, is, I can't stand having to be politically correct because everyone says you should be politically correct. I find that, I just don't like it and I think you also end up hypercritical. So, yeah, I've taken all that theory. A lot of it I've found really interesting, but now, a sense that I want to go off and write. I mean, yeah, obviously you can't help but be informed by it. I mean, the paradox was *Cardboard* was informed by it, anyway. So yeah obviously those ideas have been, I've found a lot of them quite useful and interesting, but I think I'll also move on from them. But yeah they'll always be there. I mean, I would say the same thing that Jeanette Winterson says, is for me, if I'm not doing something with life, it's boring, and that's where I think I need, see *Cardboard*, if I really look at it, it probably took me, even maybe ten years to get to the point where I could write that book, and to be able to write something that is yet again another exploration of language and doing something interesting, you can't just do it like that [click of the fingers] whereas I expect myself now to be able to produce a book a year because if you don't — or at least every two years — because if you don't, people forget about you. And the whole thing is, if you want to be a writer you have to keep writing. I mean, once it becomes a job like that it's no longer what it was in the beginning and I have a very very strong work ethic, that I must write. You know, that I must keep, I must be seen to be producing all the time. So, and I don't think that's good at all. I don't think it helps, I don't think it makes you write well.

Alison: Do you have much contact with other writers?

Fiona: Well I would have had more contact when I was doing my Graduate Diploma of Communication. Well, not necessarily writers, but other people doing theory and stuff like that, and I miss that. And I also lived with a woman who was a

film director and she was always writing her own scripts and we lived together for four years and used to work at home all day every day. She's now just recently gone back to New Zealand and I'm now living with my partner and he's at work all day so that I'm alone at home all day and I hate it. Absolutely and utterly hate it. And I've also always before I got grants had part time jobs, with writing, to do with writing. And I've found that I just can't work at home alone. That I need to have contact. The only person that I'd see regularly was Amanda Lohrey, who wrote *The Reading Group* and *The Morality of Gentlemen*. She's a close friend of mine and we will often have long discussions about books and things and I love talking to her about it. Stephen Muecke too, he's a good friend and I'll have long discussions with him. Yeah I do miss not being able to discuss my work. I mean yeah that's why I really enjoy talking to people like you because other than that I get so isolated I lose a sense that it has any value or, you know, you just sit at home thinking, Why am I doing this? And I also used to publish a lot more in little journals, you know, *Southerly*, all of those when I wrote poetry and short stories. And because I'm not doing that sort of writing any more, I don't even have that forum any-more. So that, I really, because I'm now concentrating on writing novels, I don't tend to write little things for the journals any-more so I don't have that forum either. Yeah I really feel out of contact now with writers, but also out of contact with the real world. I think that you just can't sit at home and write all day. You can do it for short periods of time but I think you do have to get out there and be involved in some shape or form or else what are you going to write about? The four walls? Sure, you can write about texts *ad nauseam*, you can read, but I think you have to have some connection, or something with the outside world. So that when I get back I'll probably look at doing, either do either editing work, in medicine, some other field, but not specifically writing, writing in the humanities. Or even go off and do something completely different, like, be a mediator or, do something! I think, yeah, that you have to have contact with the outside world, or else your writing loses relevance. That's my theory anyway! Others may disagree. I found it interesting that you thought there was distance with Lucy.

Alison: Yes, what, reading it?

Fiona: Yes, I found that really interesting. I thought about that for quite some time and thought, That's interesting. I don't know if I, I don't think I deliberately set out to do that. And then I thought well that's interesting, maybe also what

it does is show the distance she felt from other people. Yes, I just found it interesting.

Alison: Actually I found that with another book I was reading as well. What was it? *Tell Me I'm Here*, about a woman with a schizophrenic son, and it really involved you with the son's life and then it would pull back for a few pages, and that was really necessary, just as a breather. And I think it was the same thing with *Lucy*, that although you're involved in her trauma, you didn't get that close so that...

Fiona: Yeah, so you can get through it. Yes, you're probably right about that. If I did that it was totally, um, I do think there are a lot of things that you know at a level when you are writing that there's no way you're conscious of. You know what a reader can and cannot tolerate. That's sort of one level, something unconscious. And I think *Cardboard* I got it right. And I think that's a hard thing to get right, but that book I got right partly because I wrote it all in one go. I think it's harder when you write something in bits and pieces, to do that well.

Alison: I was really interested in the way that romance operated in it, like a real drive, like it was the thing that kept me reading, was how it would end. But it was really interesting that the language of romance and sexuality was the thing that *Lucy* felt was holding her back as well.

Fiona: Her lack of it?

Alison: Yes, being unable to decode the subtexts.

Fiona: Yep. I think what I wanted to do there was, I didn't want the book to become something, I wanted the book to represent the complexity of life. I mean I know there are a few feminists that got really angry at me that I had a male protagonist, like the doctor should have been a woman. And I say to them, Well look, life is more complex than that. It's not as simple as wanting it to be completely and utterly some feminist statement. You do that, well then you're writing what you, your writing is such a narrow, whatever. I wanted to include the complexity that not all men are absolutely and utterly hopeless, not all women are absolutely and utterly fantastic. I wanted to represent the complexity about how unbelievably complex our whole culture is. Like there is something — such as that thing about romance, that it doesn't

necessarily have to be a bad thing: it can be a good thing, it can also be slightly bad, but they can all be absolutely and utterly interrelated and they're very very complex and it depends what angle you're looking at it on what particular day, how you see it. So that was, yeah, that was one of the reasons why I didn't want to go and write, because I think if I'd said, Okay I'll make that a female. I mean obviously the whole dynamics would have changed, and yes it would have been very very interesting, but I thought it would get too easily then people would see that you've contrived to make the women goody-goodies and the men baddy-baddies and I didn't want it to end up being able to be produced so simplistically with those sorts of messages. I wanted it to be far more, have as many different messages in it, and as much complexity as possible. So that, yeah, it couldn't be reduced, and so that it didn't say that some simple answer is the key.

Alison: Because it ends very open-endedly and ambiguously.

Fiona: Yeah, oh yeah I wanted to end it, I could never have had it not ending with an open ending. No. No I was quite proud of myself with the ending. That was fun, I must confess. Yeah. I wanted it to be really open, I wanted people to have different ideas about what happened at the end and I wanted them to have different ideas about the whole book, per se. So that, also to show that how people read it is very much what they think, not necessarily what the book's talking about, if you know what I mean.

Alison: Have you had much feedback on that sort of level?

Fiona: Yes I suppose a lot of the reviews, some of the reviews were quite interesting in the things that they had to say. Janette Turner Hospital wrote quite an interesting one about how it was a book about the philosophy of language more than anything else, and how she actually even said, you know, I don't know whether you can call it a novel, in actual fact. Which I found really interesting. I took that as a compliment in actual fact, that she was saying something really nice about me. A couple, as I said, a couple of feminists got onto me about having that male protagonist, and I thought, Okay, that's fair enough, that's their point of view. But I actually didn't want to count out the feminists as much as I didn't want to count out to anybody. So anybody it challenged I was quite happy about that. And I think most people were, at least if nothing else, got an understanding of what it's like for someone to have anorexia. And I think essentially that was my bottom line. I wanted people to have some understanding about what that process was like, and to understand

how it's not just a matter of, I don't want to eat that because I don't want to be fat. It's incredibly more complex than that. But by the same token I have to say that it is only one person's experience of anorexia, that different people experience it in different ways. But that was one of my main reasons: for people to understand that process of recovery, to actually go through it and see that it wasn't, was all bitsy and piecey, and one thing might go right and something else get right and that process of putting it all together, and that people can come out of that whole experience. And also I suppose it was a book of hope, you know, that things can change.

Alison: So how do you relate to feminist theories?

Fiona: I find them really interesting. I guess I'm not an absolute and utter disciple, but I'm definitely fascinated by what people have to say about women writers and how they write about space and how they write about gender and all of those sorts of things. I find all those ideas very interesting and I would use them, but I'm not going to expound one particular theory. I'd rather, question them, challenge them, or see where they fall down. Yeah, they're definitely

Waiter: Would you like another coffee?

Alison: Yeah, that would be good thanks.

Fiona: No thanks ...Yeah, I definitely find them interesting, but I also don't want to be closeted away just in that one particular viewpoint of the world.

Alison: What was your MA on?

Fiona: It was a creative writing MA which, I did quite a bit of research on the linguistic profile of people with anorexia and a bit more social semiotics and then did this discontinuous narrative that I've now just finished and submitted. So it's more, you do say four units of course work and then submit a thesis and the thesis was my latest manuscript and that's called "The Woman in my Feet". And it's quite different to *Cardboard*. I don't think it's as emotionally powerful. I mean I think that's the one thing I will never ever I don't think write anything as emotionally powerful as *Cardboard* and I think there might be a lot of people who when they read "The Women in my Feet" if it is published, go, Oh. But I don't see how I can avoid that. I mean it's a whole different... That is always my biggest fear, that people will forever, you

know, the impact of *Cardboard* is so great that, doesn't matter if I write better later on, hopefully I will, but that will be hard for a while. I think maybe that has built up people's expectations in a certain way. I just have to wait and see though. Maybe I'll be pleasantly surprised.

Alison: So are you conscious of having a readership when you write?

Fiona: Well, yes and no. I mean, sometimes now I won't, as I said, won't let myself go the way I did with *Cardboard*, but when I wrote *Cardboard* I wrote it essentially for me in many ways. I mean, sure, I never doubted that it wouldn't get published. I knew from the moment I started writing, I was very very, I had no doubts whatsoever. But I also wasn't mixing with writers really so I, I didn't have a real conscious sense of a readership. It was about, yeah I had more a sense of, I don't know who they are or whatever but I would have a sense that this needs to be read and I would get worried, like am I boring them here, I'd be more conscious of those sorts of things and I won't just let myself go and write what I want to write for me any-more. I find that harder. I don't think it's good, but yeah I would have some sense of, Oh what would someone think of this? Which I don't think is particularly helpful.

Oh about the, the women's, I do think that the way women use language can definitely show how women are placed within phallogentric discourse. Like *Cardboard* in many ways shows you where women are positioned in language. I mean, you've got, I think it's impossible to come up with a female language. I don't think you can from where we are situated in a way that's essentially it's men that set up the way we talk about the world. So I think women's writing can do interesting things in at least showing women how they've been positioned, where they are in language, and how they might at least try to redefine their sense of self. But I think it's important that women are made aware of that. I mean, when I was younger I was one of these people who just simply said, I couldn't understand feminism. I don't understand, I've got jobs, I've done this, I've done that, I've wanted to do things - why do people whinge about being women? I just couldn't understand at all. And then once I got politicised, I realised. I mean, Oh yeah okay, I understand, blah blah. But that was, I don't criticise myself now for not having understood before. And I know that there are lots of women who do not have any idea, like they'll say to me, Oh women can get jobs just as well as men and blah blah and like all on that and rather than criticise and say, God don't you understand? You're so stupid. you're this, you're that, you're much better off finding some way that it becomes accessible to them, that they can understand that.



Because, and I don't hold it against women that they can't understand, I mean, I suppose I've become more accepting in that way and realise that you've got to work from where people are rather than just say, Tsst you don't understand. Because, I mean, what right have I got to take the moral high ground? There's that choice.

Alison: So do you have struggles with language when you're writing or do you find it easy to access?

Fiona: I guess I've always found it quite easy to write. Yeah, yeah I've never, I might find it harder now, trying to do interesting things, yes I do, but no, essentially no. When I started writing it was always something that was relatively easy. It wasn't hard, no. No I didn't have that sense, like, as a woman not being able to find her own words, no. I didn't. Not in the particular way where the words were difficult. But that doesn't mean to say that I think language is easy for women if you know what I mean. But yes, okay it was easy for me. I think my, I've always been good at words. So, yeah.

Alison: So is there anything else that you would want me to know, as someone writing on your writing?

Fiona: Oh, you asked me if I was conscious of writing as a woman or as an Australian. I guess in some ways, yes, I would. Maybe, the Australian especially with the travel novel. Because, yeah I'm really interested now in how I as an Australian view Europe, rather than, because a lot of the travel writing that's been written has been a British person writing about Europe or an American. Whereas an Australian view is different yet again, and how Australians have got that view of Europe - that's really interested me. So yeah at the moment with the travel book I am extremely aware of being Australian. That's really important in that book. Obviously with *Cardboard* it was extremely important to write as a woman, although I couldn't say that I was overly conscious at the time when I wrote it that that was that important. I mean now I can look back and say, That's definitely written by a woman and I can see a whole lot of things about it. But, yeah in the one that I'm writing now the Australian thing would definitely be the predominant thing. And I think probably that will change, book to book, what it is that's most important in writing that particular book.

Alison: There's just been an anthology about Australian women's travel writing.

Fiona: Yes, I haven't managed to get a copy of that one either. Look it's just too much money! But yeah, that's another one that I should look at. I mean travel writing's going to boom. It's a new academic interest, it's a new genre that everybody's going to be writing about.

Alison: And are you including Asia, or just Europe?

Fiona: Only, well at the moment I'm writing about Europe. In the submission that I sent for the novel, I was also, I'm also planning to write about Noumea, and the Nullarbor. So, hopefully I will. At the moment I'm just concentrating on Europe. So, yes my idea was to have it the way we as an Australian see Europe and then now, Noumea is sort of like the French tropical paradise close to Australia, and to write something more about that and then actually go to the centre of Australia. So you're going to the furthest away, coming closer and then going right to the heart of Australia. And, I've had a lot of really interesting ideas about it, but, I don't know if you've ever had that thing where the light dawns and you can see how it all links but if you don't get it down quick enough, and now I sort of think, Now what were all the links I had between the three of them. Because I know at one stage I had it all in my mind, but I'm finding it, as is always the case, to get it from there [head] to there [page] is phenomenally difficult. Because in *Cardboard* that was very easy, but it's a process and it takes time so that this thing's sort of in my head, but to get it actually from there to there is just, unbelievable. Like I spent literally a month on one page, trying to get from there to there. I mean I finally got it, but, unbelievably hard. Like this one's been hard that way. Like, I can feel it, I can sort of get this light, but actually getting it on words and making the reader being able to get the same idea, it's hard. Really tough. Yeah.

What else do you want? I mean, what else would you like me...

Alison: Actually a lot of the work, or one of the main themes I've been working on has been how women have been sort of redefining the body. And that was really interesting in relation to *Cardboard* as well, especially in terms of the language. Like, I noticed near the end of the book there was a greater emphasis on how Lucy was looking and what clothes she was wearing and things like that.

Fiona: That's true. Yeah, I guess that's, like some people have said, like, Why didn't you talk about the body in *Cardboard*? And it's really interesting: I don't have a great, I think one of the reasons I steered clear of the body in *Cardboard* was because I was sick to death of everyone assuming that anorexia had something to do with your body. I mean, I know that it does. But I think I just wanted to flesh it out in a much more psychic way with people's, with ideas and feelings. But I felt that the body was a trap in that situation. I actually didn't want people to be all that interested in what Lucy looked like, or what she was like physically because I wanted them to actually be in the place of that character. If I gave too much away about the body then the character would have become much more "out there", they could see it was somebody else that was not themselves. I think there were lots of reasons why I wasn't overly interested, or wanted to write about "the body" per se in *Cardboard* and I have noticed also in my other book that I don't actually write that much about it. I think it's, maybe for me, it's because I don't want the reader to be able to easily visualise the character and have that distance: I want them to actually be able to put themselves in the character.

Alison: I thought that was quite relevant, that absence of the body, being present by its absence.

Fiona: Yes, yeah I definitely strove to keep that out. Like for me, it was just of so little relevance I just didn't want to write about it or talk about it or have it in there. And different people reacted to it in different ways. I mean one woman asked me, Do you hate your body that much? And I was really shocked. Like I was just, I mean I had absolutely, and then I thought, well maybe the reason why I didn't write about it too was because I have absolutely no problems whatsoever with my body. I mean it wouldn't even occur to me to, maybe that was also one of the reasons why it didn't occur in *Cardboard*, because it's never been an issue for me.

Alison: Well most of the treatments that were happening to Lucy were all focussed on the body.

Fiona: They were all on the body. I suppose also I can't, I hate the way women are always tied to their body. You know, whether she's got good tits, or rear or, I suppose I find that all so boring that I just didn't write about it in *Cardboard*. I just didn't want to. And even now I don't like, I don't like connecting women's identity just, and immediately then slapping it into a body. I don't know, but

for me at the moment in this point in time, yes, it almost seems too fixed. Almost seems like squashing her into somewhere. I don't know, maybe I'm going to have to experiment though. Maybe I'll have to write a piece that is all about "the body" itself. Could be good for me maybe. But yeah, I definitely have reasons for not having any in *Cardboard*. But yeah, as I say, people's reactions were varied. Like I was really shocked when that woman thought that that's what it meant. She said, Do you still hate your body that much? Never even occurred to me.

Alison: Well I think that's covered all the things that I was looking at.

Fiona: So what other books are you going to be looking at?

Alison: Aah, this is where my mind goes blank, when people ask me for this. I'm looking at Sue Woolfe's *Painted Woman*, [Oh right, yup] I interviewed her yesterday and that was great. And a few of Janette Turner Hospital's books, [uh huh] what else? Susan Hawthorne's *Falling Woman*, Ania Walwicz's books, Davida Allen's, she's written one called *Close to the Bone*, do you know that? [Yup]. Margaret Coombs' two books, and Inez Baranay, I've just become interested in her as well. Actually she's written a travel one called *The Saddest Pleasure*. It's mostly about Bali and her travels ten years ago and then in the present. [Oh right] What else? And one by S.F. Melrose called *Eating Out* [yep, yep], that's fascinating. And the anthology called *Bodylines*, which is just short pieces of writing. There's about fifteen of them I think.

Fiona: Fifteen books?

Alison: Yes.

Fiona: Gee, so what year, are you just?

Alison: I'm just coming up to the end of my second year.

Fiona: And how are you finding it?

Alison: Well, I love it, it's really enjoyable, yes.

Fiona: Really? You don't get lonely?

Alison: Well I've got an office in at Uni and there's just been an influx of post-graduates in our department, there's about six or seven of us now, so we're forming this little community in the last couple of years, which is good. So, no.

Fiona: Well that's fantastic. I mean I think when you've got an office somewhere and you've got a few to work with you, then you've got that sense that your work actually has a context and a place.

Alison: Yes. I see my supervisor quite often and I do tutoring sometimes as well in first year, so that keeps me in contact.

Fiona: With the babies! Well that sounds fascinating. Yeah. And so you're trying to pick out ways people deal with things or, things in common or,

Alison: Well, I'm trying to look at the intersection between theory and practice [right, yep]: French feminist theories and what they say about women's writing and what Australian women are actually writing about. Just how they interact and intersect and how they comment on each other and the reason I'm doing these interviews is also to use the authors as a source of knowledge as well so that they also comment.

Fiona: I mean that's very interesting because, I don't know if you've heard of what's her name, she's just published the book about anorexia: Martha, Martha? Her name's gone out of my head now. [Matra Robertson] She actually quoted *Cardboard* in the book and made out that I actually was doing along the lines of, what's the Irigaray? That what I was saying was that women don't have a language. Which in actual fact I maintain that in many ways she's interpreted *Cardboard* how she sees fit, but it's interesting she was actually using *Cardboard* to say that I was expounding what the French feminists were saying. And I would say, Yes she has a point and I can see how she's reading it, but also no. I was also saying a lot of other things besides that. But yeah, I mean it's also interesting, her as an author, how people then who want to expound French feminism can look up your work and say, She is writing about how X,K,Y and Z. So that it can be used, it's then used by different people to back up different arguments, how they see fit. Which, you know, is fine and fair enough, but I would hope that it does deal with a lot of the ideas the French feminists are talking about but then grounds them and places them and it maybe even contradicts them, maybe expands them, but hopefully does

interesting things with them. That's what I would hope to do most. That you can then use it as even further, a further understanding of what the French feminists are on about. Because I think they themselves have many contradictions and many areas that they don't explain or many things that they can't talk about. So that I'd see it as a complement to them.

Alison: Sometimes I find that the fiction actually works through ideas that French feminist theory has and sometimes comes across blocks, or deficiencies and gaps.

Fiona: For me, I would hope that I'm dealing with a lot of the ideas that they're interested in, but for me the only way that I can deal with them is in fiction. Like, and I hope that most people can read it in my fiction. I'm not sure that a lot of people do. But I know myself that I'm dealing with a lot of those ideas, but I can only deal with them through fiction. I find it extremely difficult to deal with them in academic language. I just find that so hard. And yet, I understand them in academic language and I go yeah yeah yeah. But then my only way of talking about them is through fiction. And I think that's another level that *Cardboard* works on, but there would only be a certain number of people that would read *Cardboard* in that manner. And that's fine by me. You know, the most fantastic thing you can do is read a book that has a wide readership and people can read it on many different levels. Some layers may not mean anything to them at all and other people can read layers and it's really exciting when that can happen, when you can write something that has all those layers in it. But yeah, I would hope that *Cardboard* would have that layer in it because I definitely mean it to be there and I hope that my future work would have that there. But for me, yeah, it's only in fiction that I can talk about those ideas. I just cannot write about them academically very well at all.

Alison: I find it interesting the ficto-criticism that's emerging with them both together.

Fiona: Oh yeah. It's a good one the old ficto-criticism. That for me is the easiest voice. I find that works for me. Yeah.

Alison: It's very playful.

Fiona: Yeah, it's good fun. Because if it's not fun, either, it just won't, if you're not having fun, it won't work out well.

Alison: Well thank you very much, that was wonderful.

Fiona: Oh, that's okay. It's good to talk. Earbash you!

## FIONA PLACE RESPONDS

RESPONSE TO CHAPTER DRAFT, JUNE 1994.

p.114. I am still not sure whether I think the body does take up so little space in the novel. I realise it isn't signalled conventionally, that it isn't described in real terms but I am not sure I can equate this with an absence of the body. I consider the desire as experienced by Lucy to be grounded in her body, it may not be spelt out step by step but I would have thought as she begins to name her own experiences that her body is incorporated in the new ways of experiencing herself. At the beginning of the novel she matter-of-factly describes the pain she inflicts on her body — she is out of touch with her emotions at the same time as being far too much in touch. By the end of the novel her body is her — once again though it is not signalled as obviously as — "I now like my body."

p.115. To say "Lucy colludes with the psychiatric discourses" is possibly "true" but I would argue not the whole truth. Why she colludes must also be examined. Yes, she is using her body as a way of searching out meaning for her life, and this is painful and sad, but it cannot be assumed she therefore hates her body. It may simply be the way she needs to outline her confusion, it may be something she feels is changeable once she has worked things out. This is hard to explain! What I am saying is the meaning is individual, that the meaning is not solely sociological, and that how Lucy uses her body isn't static or necessarily to be taken as the main event.

p.121. I think the therapeutic relationship between Lucy and Dr E is extremely complex and cannot be reduced to "his trying [to] make her fit a classical model". Amongst many things the two relationships, i.e. Dr E and Tim contrast the difference between an object-relations theorist (Dr E) and a self-psychology theorist (Tim) and the attributions each associates to certain effects (emotions).

There are also issues of generational differences, i.e. Dr E is a man in his late forties while Tim is a man in his early thirties, and of how this age difference affects how a therapist facilitates the client/patient naming their own affective life.

An object-relationist focuses on the negative effects, on hate and rage as well as fear, while the self-psychologist focuses on the positive effects such as excitement and desire. The object-relationist believes the patient/client must face their depression while the self-psychologist believes the depression can be dealt with while also moving forward.

Of course to simply classify one therapist as an object-relationist and the other as a self-psychologist also serves to diminish them as complex human beings. They should be seen as the complex individuals they are and in the times they worked — Dr E in the seventies and Tim in the eighties which also can account for many of their differences.

p.123. It must also be stressed that Lucy is describing Dr E and Tim. That the reader must always be aware that this is **how** Lucy is choosing to describe things, that sometimes Lucy is reductive, sometimes she is selective, that what she sees is a complex mix of what she wants to see, does see, and that she may weight the description a certain way at a certain time and another way at a later time. Hence the narrative of *Cardboard* could be seen as the way Lucy is telling the story at that point of time, that on a different day she may tell it very differently, and that both are equally valid. That this narrative is not fixed. That there is a plurality of narratives about any experience.

p.126. It would seem to me to read Tim as "arrogant" makes for a narrow reading of the text — one that is based on certain notions of power and unable to contextualise "Tim's arrogance". For example, to see his arrogance merely in terms of the stereotype fails to ask why he might have acted this way, or why Lucy feels he is acting in this way. Possibly it also served to suggest to Lucy that her wish for understanding was OK? I believe it is vital that a feminist reading does not dismiss an affective reading of the text.



To state "The recovery of these fragments might indicate success with Tim" is to infer a certain view of therapy. But is this view consistent with what the novel is saying about therapy? Therapy is more than the recovery of fragments. Lucy's mentioning of various sexual memories is vitally important, but it is also vitally important how they are dealt with. Another therapist may have seized on the actual details, to have insisted Lucy redefine these memories in a way that suited them — whereas Tim allowed Lucy to create her own affective meaning. Possibly because it is a novel and not a textbook on therapy, there is much more scope for these issues to be misread. While a misreading often produces interesting results I think it is important to acknowledge where you are coming from, i.e. a feminist reading which then explains the weightings you give to certain details. For example another reader may find these fragments signify something quite different other than indications of success or failure.

I was shocked to read Lucy was "raped." I suppose you could make this reading but why paint a worse case scenario? Why make her a victim? Did Lucy say she was raped?

- p.128. I definitely think it should be possible for Lucy both to disavow the importance of being attractive to men as a cause for her anorexia and to also express a desire for a relationship and intimacy with a male. The two are quite different. The main difference is she wants to choose, for it to be on her own terms.

The book is only ideologically problematic if it is to be locked into being a feminist statement. For example, why is [it] that Tim is seen as the hero? Why is it not seen as Lucy constructing him as a hero for her own purposes, that she can appropriate the fairytale recovery narrative for herself? It must be remembered that she is describing Tim. She is shaping him. And that how she chooses to do this may incorporate fairytale images.

Feminist readings often seem to me to want to keep Lucy a victim.

NB "At least therapy ended as relationships in real life. Unresolved."  
THIS REFERS TO DR E, NOT TIM. (Though I guess I have to let the reader do their own reading!)

- p.131. I would not see Lucy as merely representing herself in the context of psychiatry as represented by Tim. I think this devalues her ability to shift herself out of the role of patient and into the new and as yet unformed role as woman. Tim provides a bridge, a shaped bridge, but one that is open to re-

shaping by Lucy. When it comes to contextualising a conversation, to exposing the myriad of layers of meaning, I find text sometimes so limited.

- p.132. To call the reshaping of the clinical gaze to the erotic gaze as the reason for Tim's success seems so reductive a statement. While it can be seen to be in a way "true" it is also extremely limiting and distorting in its own way.

To read it as Tim claiming he has in effect made Lucy a woman is, to my mind, stretching interpretation of the text and once again only reading it from a feminist viewpoint without contextualising it, without undertaking an affective reading.

- p.133. Couldn't Lucy being doing any of these things for herself? Couldn't she want to do the Madonna look for herself as well as Tim? Isn't she empowering herself?

Maybe she wants to be a sexual object!!

Are you sure Lucy is saved by the handsome Tim? Couldn't Lucy have saved herself? Couldn't she have worked at making the experience with Tim what she wanted and made it work for her? Is she so helpless it has to be read "he did this for her"? Such a reading only perpetuates her role as helpless woman.

It would seem to me the dangers of applying a strictly sociological feminist reading is that it runs the risk of closing off other readings and enclosing Lucy once again in the victim role.

Why is it that many a feminist reading seeks out to re-affirm the negative possibilities, to insist on narrow interpretations that affirm Lucy as a woman who is unwittingly still weak and whose definition of herself is still dominated by men?

Why are there few readings that describe how it is that she is subverting and defining herself within patriarchy? Why do some feminists want her to exist in a certain way, and that only in that certain way, which seems to be exclusive of so many ways of thinking, will she be acceptable?

And why are the readings of Tim and Dr E so often reductive and stereotypical?

Feminist readings have their own limitations and own distortions, which I think run the risk of being so prescriptive that they hinder women in the very same way they criticise patriarchy. They must be inclusive rather than exclusive of women's voices

## INTERVIEW WITH INEZ BARANAY

This interview took place on Sunday, 14th March, 1993, at Machans Beach, Cairns. Before the interview I had been corresponding with Inez while she was in New Guinea for about six months in response to her enquiries into the University's writer-in-residence programme; two years later, she completed a nine week residency jointly funded by James Cook University English Department and the Australia Council.

During this interview, my efforts to minimise the formal hierarchy of the "interview situation" were complicated by each of us being hyper-responsive to the other. Inez was nervous about not "knowing theory" and regarding me as the "expert", while I was regarding her as the "expert" and trying to reap her knowledge. (I think both of us have de-mystified our constructions of each other now.) Inez also seemed hesitant about the prospect of going "on the record"; when I stopped the tape recorder she was more forthright about issues we had previously touched on quickly and keen to discuss feminist and post-colonial theories in relation to her writing project on Papua New Guinea.

Because of the vague dissatisfaction I felt about our interview, I sent the transcript to Inez very soon afterwards to see if she wanted to elaborate. More than with any of the other interviews and responses, I can feel a stronger sense of process and interaction in the dialogue between Inez and myself, possibly because of our increased contact and proximity but also in terms of overlapping lives and ideas.

So, over strong coffee and scones in a house right on the beach ...

Alison: Do you want to start with these questions?

Inez: Yeah, sure. Whatever.

Alison: Then if we wander off onto something interesting...

Inez: Yeah, right.

Alison: Well, what sort of books do you like reading, for pleasure?

Inez: What *sort* of books? Um. I don't know what, see this is one of the things — how do I describe the sort of books? I read the kind of books I like to read. And that covers a whole range of things: I tend to read a lot of fiction, I probably like it most, and biographies. Now the thing I read recently was Colette's *The*

*Vagabond*. Have you read that? [No] It's wonderful. You must read it. It re-awoke my adolescent passion for Colette so I've been reading a whole bunch of her books again lately which has been wonderful. And biographies, and so on. But a lot of the time I'm really restricted by what falls into my lap. I can't afford to buy books lately. I'm really interested in books written in English that are not from England. So, you know, I'm reading some translated stuff from African writers and things like that. Just like to think things from some perspective or experiences that aren't kind of commonplace to me.

Alison: And do you read many Australian women writers?

Inez: Um, I really don't like thinking of books like that. I guess I do. Who do I read? I read Helen Garner's last book, I really loved that. I really like Joanne Burns' stuff. And Pamela Brown's. See I know these people so that's why it's easy to read their poetry and find out how good it is. And I'm interested in all that so, it depends on a lot of things — just what falls into my lap. I don't go looking for things just because they're by Australian women.

Alison: So do you have a lot of contact with other writers?

Inez: Well some of my best friends are writers, I suppose. But, a lot of them aren't. And I'm not a kind of social literary person at all. I have been more isolated, I guess, than that. [The whipper snipper outside is reaching an insistent crescendo.] That's awful isn't it? Do you want to move? Or you think it will go soon?

Alison: Oh, won't last long, will it?

Inez: Wouldn't you know it, once every three weeks, and it happens right when you're here. I do think that's funny.

Alison: Have you read any of the other authors on my list?

Inez: Oh them, no. A lot of them I think, Oh I really wanted to read that, and I haven't. Sue Woolfe, I haven't read her novels but I've read a couple of short stories and I think they're great. Davida Allen I haven't read. I think she sounds fascinating. Susan Hawthorne I think is wonderful. What was that book of hers of short, stories I guess, prose pieces that interested me. I can't

remember. Didn't she have a book of short stories, or am I thinking of someone else?

(Second Thoughts: I think I mean Susan Hampton who wrote *Surly Girls* which I loved.)

Yeah. Anyway. So. but I haven't read any of them recently.

Alison: It's funny, most of the people I have interviewed, they haven't read the other people.

Inez: Read the other people? Isn't that funny! But, I don't know, it's not like avoidance or anything like that. But it's, as I said a lot of things just sort of happen my way, and they haven't. Ania Walwicz I read because I read her in anthologies a lot. That's really. that's really fascinating. That interview with her in *Meanjin* a couple of months ago. Now she's *au fait* with all the theory and so on, isn't she? So interesting, that approach. I just, it's very different. It's fascinating.

Alison: So you haven't come across any feminist theories in regard to writing?

Inez: Well I probably have but they're put in disguise in novels or something I suppose. or in life itself, or something. A lot of these things are just names to me and they've been on my Must Read This One Day, but haven't fallen into my lap. So, not really. I mean, where do you? You have to go to University don't you, to come across that thing?

Alison: I suppose so, yes. Most people probably do come across it there.

Inez: See, and I don't have any truck with Universities. So, I don't know how you would, because it seems to me it's a real academic thing. Like all the kids — now, teaching creative writing there are a lot of kids who are going through, or are just graduated from University, or often UTS in Sydney where apparently they're big on this kind of thing. and they're all, you know, they've all done their essays on all those things. I think they did semiotics in highschool. By the time someone got around to explaining *that* to me I said But that's all obvious! Everyone knows that.

Alison: So when you teach the creative writing do you find that that offers anything to their creative writing? To the people you're teaching who have that knowledge?

Inez: I don't know how you measure that because there are so many other factors in what makes somebody, you know, how they work as a writer and how they develop and all that kind of thing. Not that I notice that I could say Oh the kids that have done theory write in a certain way, or something. They may be more familiar with, kind of responding to texts than other people writing maybe. But not necessarily, no.

Alison: One of the things that I was interested by in *Between Careers* was the coda, which seemed to get a lot of ambivalent comments by the reviewers.

Inez: Yeah. I get such extreme responses to things, or else extremely contradictory. Like that's the best thing in the book to that's the worst thing in the book, could do without it, you know.

Alison: Yes. It seemed to me, that what was happening in there was looking for alternative ways to write about "happy endings" or,

Inez: Yes, oh absolutely.

(Second Thoughts: I wish I'd heard *your* ideas on the coda of *BC*!)

Alison: Do you want to?

Inez: Talk about that? Okay.

Alison: Like, I'm really conscious of this in your writing as sort of ways of avoiding that romantic genre.

Inez: Exactly.

(Second Thoughts: And what is romance? You could say Violet's encounters were the more "romantic" )

Well, I mean in *Between Careers* before the coda the last words are "happy ending" and, that was a kind of, one of those tricks, like I'm going to put in a happy ending but this is how I do it by asking really a question about it. And of course, in life, in everything there's no such thing as a ending. So that is kind of the ultimate artifice in a way, where you end something, isn't it?

(Second Thoughts: Where you end a piece occupied my mind a lot.)

Because it's the end of the book but it's not the end of it. So there's all that to think about. And also writing about women who are not victims or whose end

is not to be a victim poses a question too. Because you just don't, you don't want a kind of other version of "and then they lived happily ever after" like, you know "and then she went off and did her thing on her own and never had a day's fear again" or something. You know, it's not like that either, but you want something with some sense of triumph about it. Especially writing about experiences that are meant to disempower and degrade women like in *Between Careers*. A lot of people couldn't handle that aspect of it, that it wasn't about being destroyed by those experiences. So you have to kind of write about a sense of something gained, that's, where the something that mightn't be happiness but it's something positive. But it's not an ending either.

Alison: I thought it was interesting that there were lots of links made between creativity and sexuality, and then at the end when Vita is writing she chooses to be celibate.

Inez: Um, I think that's a transition phase to her because that was also written and set in a time of great re-assessment I think, the early eighties. After that kind of really liberal seventies, and then, you know, and then AIDS and recession all at once.

[Phone rings] I'm busy.

And I think in a lot of ways, I mean, what it meant in that as a coda to *Between Careers* which was set in that era of like, absolute, you know, what how would you call it like total freedom, question mark, question mark. But that era, and then people are re-assessing it so, I think in a way that choice is a way of being able to distance yourself from one set of circumstances and behaviours and all that and kind of re-invent another. So it seemed to reflect its time very much too, I think, to write about somebody who chooses that.

(Second Thoughts: Yes, the eternal question, relation of sexuality and creativity — the kind of question that doesn't have an answer only different ways of asking it. The question of is it (either/both) focussed or dissipated. Was thinking about, also, celibacy not as negation of sexuality; but as another way in which to acknowledge/explore it.)

Alison: So do you think there is, did you find it difficult writing about a relationship from a woman's point of view that got out of that romance model?

Inez: For the coda particularly do you mean?

Alison: Yeah.



Inez: For example, the friendship?

Alison: Well, it seemed to me that by having Violet be a prostitute it sort of undermined the whole concept of the romance which happened in the second part.

Inez: Oh yes, absolutely.

(Second Thoughts: I never felt drawn to or dominated by the "romance model".)

Was it difficult? It was a wonderful challenge to find a way of doing it because there seemed to be almost no models for it, really. And, knowing that I wanted to do that but finding a way was, it was wonderful really. It was sort of, that was my first time at it! And of course it was difficult. It took a long time to get the way I wanted to do it. See it was my first book. I wrote this massive first draft of it, of which hardly anything remains, I imagine, but it was like having to say every last little thing. And then I wanted to write it in this really direct level, the way it was. Yeah, see I don't think necessarily that the kind of corny romance is the only, is such a dominating, what would you say, thing about how a relationship has to go because there are so many examples where it's not necessarily. I mean I used to read Colette and Jean Rhys you see and not, I don't know, I mean where do you? Jane Austen — I mean, I think she does it really well, she's not too cold, you know.

Alison: And Judith provides that nice counterpoint too, with her creativity invested in her clothes.

Inez: Yes, the virgin. Ah, it was a while ago.

(Second Thoughts: Judith: the phantom pregnancy: ("a while ago", I meant, since I thought of these things, these issues that seemed most important to me then. *Between Careers* was written 1979-82 though not published til 89) the virgin who maybe gets "pregnant" when watching porn videos: in an era when sex seem-s/-ed to be talked about in every aspect except as the way babies are made — maybe Judith knew unconsciously about this meaning of sex: the first thing about it (and yet it's not the first thing learnt always, her first thing "known" though not consciously is the odour of her mother when the men stay).)

(Second Thoughts: Joe's phantom orgy: in an era of the quest for the perfect fuck — but longing is not stilled by acquiring the object (or experience) which longing creates: so the perfect fuck/orgy could not have been "real"? (I'm

trying to remember and tell you the kinds of things I was thinking about when writing that.))

Alison: Was there any particular reference back to, having Vita and Violet, back to Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis?

Inez: Ah well that was a way, no it was just a little, you know, they just seemed the perfect names. And I was aware of that connection and, you know that that was that and, it was just a kind of thing to play with really. They seemed the perfect names and it just amused me that it would have that kind of meaning that, you know, you could make it mean something or not. But that must have been where I got the names from because I can't remember which one I thought of first. Violet or Vita. But whichever one I thought of first the other one came because of that association. And then it just seemed like they were the right two names.

(Second Thoughts: Violet/Vita — one woman or two? — IS the questioning of it: who has the "romance", which one of them? (Which one does he want?) — the way women split themselves: - to have a romance thing with a man  
- the part of a woman who engages in romance is not the whole woman  
- the way many women "feel like a whore" with a man.)

Alison: And, I was interested in, the other work of yours which I'm using is *Pagan*, which interests me because it seems to present an alternative construction of a female outside of the mother-virgin-whore sort of triad.

Inez: Absolutely.

Alison: Which tries to make positive that witch image that's

Inez: Yes. It was amazing that story kind of coming to me at a time when suddenly all this material was available on exactly that. Yeah, it was a real way for me to find a whole range of really interesting new, you know, stuff in which women's thought was going, you know the kind of spiritual aura and looking at our unconscious mind and archetypes and all that kind of, you know, mass psychology level of feminism I guess. I did a lot of research for that one. It was good, I enjoyed that.

(Second Thoughts: Researching and writing *Pagan* I thought very much about what I termed "the patriarchal colonisation of our spirituality": that feminism/s had looked at the social the political the domestic etc — and not (as far as I

could see, not in the mainstream, though a tidal wave of books on goddess spirituality, newage-ish stuff, and so on seemed to start around then) not the spiritual aspect of our lives and culture — which is, in a way, fundamental.)

Alison: It reminded me in a way of Kate Grenville's re-working of Bee Miles' life in *Lilian's Story*.

Inez: That's a wonderful book, isn't it? Well,

Alison: You know, taking characters from Sydney's folklore.

Inez: Yeah, and then writing them from the inside so you really, it's the person not the kind of tabloid, front page image etcetera. But, of course *Pagan* is different because it has all the different voices etcetera. And Nora too. I mean, to write that young lover couple and make that believable but, you know, not a kind of corny, in the rain say will you marry me darling and live happily ever after, or some kind of you know, Now that I have found myself I don't need him kind of ending either. That was a challenge. That was fun to think about.

Alison: In most of the writing I'm working on the form seems to be equally important to the content.

Inez: Well, it's just that whole thing, it's a one, really, like the body and the mind, isn't it? Yeah. I don't see how it can be otherwise. Do you?

Alison: No. But it seems to be talked about, divided.

Inez: It seems to be what?

Alison: Talked about separately?

Inez: You mean critically, critical approach? Yeah.

Alison: So do you have any, sort of, relations with the Universities or academics or?

Inez: No no. None. I just don't. When I was in Papua New Guinea I met these two lovely guys who teach at Garoka Teachers College, I told you, and because they were academics but absolute darlings and interesting people it really made

me think that, you know maybe this is what's normal. So I'm sure I gave a much kinder reception to your letter than, if a young academic a year ago that said I'm writing about you. Apart from, you know, it sounded more interesting. But I don't know how you would. How do you as a writer? I suppose some writers are University people. See I would have felt University was, I mean there was a lot — I got to read all these great books and everything, from the eighteenth century. But, I had to get over it. It was like, you know, you had to grow up and leave home. But that was, kind of, partly because of when I went to University I think.

Alison: Am I allowed to ask when that was?

Inez: Yeah okay. My first year was in '68. So '68 to '72. So this is a time when there was a big kind of clash between the old conservatives who were like really, patriarchal is the word we'd use now, and the people who were responding to all those kind of exciting ideas that were around at that time, in the sixties. And I went to University at a time when the English school was extremely conservative, you see.

Alison: Which University was it?

Inez: New South Wales. But I was much more interested in the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll of that era. But I didn't see that reflected anywhere in how the classes were conducted and what we were reading. Not only what we were reading but how it was talked about. So, I was really impatient to, I didn't find the kind of, where I wanted to go in my mind there. And yet it gave me the discipline to kind of read all this stuff, that, it would have taken me a lot longer if, to sit around and read like I don't know what, you know, the nineteenth century poets and novelists and things like that, Chaucer, and a bit of background in Old English and all those things, having to copy. That was good.

Alison: So how do you think, are you happy with the ways in which your books have been received or don't you really worry?

Inez: Oh, it's something that's not worth really thinking about too much. Um, I'm glad that they get the attention because that gives them, you know, credibility, it means I get a contract for my next book and so on. You know, like most people say, at least there's a review in *The Age*, you know. They spelt your name right. It doesn't matter what they said. Of course I'm pleased

if I see something that seems to respond to the book, like, what it really is and it's really saying. Yeah, but, I mean there's a lot of really stupid things there but, it's just a matter of, it's not for everybody and somebody gets to review it who it's not their kind of thing or whatever. That's how it is.

(Second Thoughts: I wish they wouldn't: criticise a book for being what it is and not being something else; assume anything's in there by accident as if you haven't spent months and years thinking every last thing about it.)

Alison: So do you write with any agenda, why, do you have particular motivation?

Inez: Why do I write? To make life bearable. That's the best answer I've ever heard. I can't remember who said it but I thought That's the one!

(Second Thoughts: "agenda" comes after the need to write, writing is as if primarily a need in itself, then you think of the what and the how and the who for and the what for.)

Alison: So, what did you think when you got my letters and saw that I was writing about you?

Inez: Ah, I thought What a lark. Because the way you wrote about it was so interesting I didn't feel as threatened or whatever as, you know, I would be because, you know if some of the reviewers — but they wouldn't you see. I mean no-one would do it unless they regarded it as really interesting, and would kind of respond to it. I just thought Oh, what a lark! And doesn't this sound interesting, her approach. Look, it might be fun to hear about. How do you do that? That's not how they wrote essays when I was at University, thank heavens.

Alison: So is there anything, that you want me to know as someone writing about your work?

Inez: I don't know, no. What kind of thing? I don't know. I'll tell you what's really funny is the way, you were talking about how people receive your book. Well, people who adored *Between Careers* and hated *Pagan* because it wasn't *Between* — they hated *Pagan* full stop. The reason I inferred was because it wasn't *Between Careers* part two, you see. They really enjoyed whatever, about that and they just wanted more of that all the time. Now that I've had four books out and I'm working on something completely different again I think that what

I do each time is just look for some really new thing to challenge and excite me about, you know, form and content.

(Second Thoughts: I try to find all over again the appropriate voice for each piece, whether story, novel, article. I found the right voice for *Between Careers*. Some people who enjoyed it *wanted that voice* from my writing. Privately several people expressed disappointment that *Pagan* was not like *Between Careers*. The one review that hurt me was the *Sydney Morning Herald* one of *Pagan* — someone who had responded most favourably to earlier work and was vicious (most unjust I thought) about *Pagan*.)

Alison: Actually one of the things

Inez: There should be a word for form-content, like they say space-time as one word. Sorry, go on.

(Second Thoughts: In knowing quite clearly that form&content are one, that a woman who knows her body as a woman writes from that knowledge, and similar things not articulated, I am helped in my study of yoga: it is a language that makes sense of such things for me, not (only) the writings of yoga but its practice.)

Alison: No, sorry. One of things I really like about some of your short stories is writing about women living singly, by themselves and enjoying it. Because there seems to be a real absence of that.

Inez: Yes, it's funny isn't it? I mean, god if more people knew how good it was they'd be doing it. I mean, that's it, too. I mean you don't see, yeah it's true, I suppose it's still true; you don't see a lot of reflection of that do you? I mean, I haven't thought about that a lot but I do remember now, that I used to often kind of think about how there was so little reflected in art, you know in popular art, in movies and popular books and so on, on how I, yeah things like that, women living happily alone.

Alison: There must be lots still doing it.

Inez: Yes.

Alison: So what did you want to ask me about my thesis?

Inez: Oh yes. there's something about feminist too. Because, sort of, people say to me Are you a, do you call yourself a feminist and all that sort of stuff and then, you use the word, don't you, feminist? [Yeah] And then, it's all, like, what do you mean by it and, you know, this thing is about women but it's not feminist and all that. It's something that I'm thinking of writing about at the moment, in connection with the whole thing of, whether women's development in third world countries is feminism or not. So it's a whole lot of questions about, it's similar I think in, you know, is feminist whatever you choose it to be, or what?

Alison: In that way that I'm using it in my thesis?

Inez: Yes, the way you are.

Alison: Well I think I call my approach feminist because I'm using French feminist literary critics.

Inez: Yeah, now I should be taping this!

Alison: I'll send you a copy! So, yeah, so the theoretical approach of my work is feminist because it uses those feminist critics.

Inez: And do they, do they see things you feel that that's your way? That they give voice to how you approach things, in a way? Or do you, do you have any argument with them?

Alison: Yeah. Like, what I'm trying to do is set up the writing Australian women are doing now alongside what the French feminist critics see women's writing is about and seeing

Inez: Oh, I see, and whether or not it is so?

Alison: Well it's seeing how they overlap, really, like,

Inez: Well what do they say for example? Like what's this thing you call *écriture*?

Alison: *écriture féminine*? That's their theories of how women's writing is, or how women's writing might be that is, sort of woman-centred rather than male-centred. And one of the, I always get into knots when I try to explain!

Inez: It's probably a good thing to do.

Alison: Yes. One of the main things is, finding a language in which women can speak, which doesn't necessarily mean another language, but just finding the words to, or making new words and putting the words in different ways, which is how I'm using Ania Walwicz a lot because of the really interesting things she does with language. And, one of the main things they say that needs to be done with words is to be able to describe the female body. So they say that, in female terms rather than in medical discourse or in a sexual discourse. So one of the things they say women's writing should be is sourced in the body which,

Inez: What does that mean, exactly?

Alison: Well, from how I understand it, it's that, well it is from the body because it is an actual physical process of writing but it also relates to a female point of view in that, females do things that men don't do with their bodies and have different perspectives and different positions in society. And also ways of describing how it feels to be in a female body, and to experience things in that body. And, I mean even describing the outsides and how the body moves and stuff like that. So that's one of the main areas I'm looking at, that's dealing with bodies and how they're written about. And that's where *Between Careers* interests me and, yeah, and I'm sort of writing about that in a cluster of books about, that deal with women's bodies. Like, in Davida Allen's book it's about being a mother as well as an artist, and in Fiona Place's book it's about being an anorexic in that body, but interestingly there's not much of a body there in the book. So the adjectives they use about, like being fluid and open ended ...

Inez: Well I do that you know, and I've put that into one of the stories. At this women's writers' workshop somebody wrote this story about this menstruation disaster basically and, so we sort of talked a little bit about how, that, kind of what you're saying, how it's not written about, but, and I thought you meant that, you know, it was, men still found, menstruation scenes — in *Between Careers* too. the sponge that sprays in the shower and things like that — I really want to show these things that you don't, that I've seen some really kind of, things in, like critical writing and so on about women who write about menstruation - oh, really, you know, please! It's one of those books about all that kind of thing.



Alison: My mum reacts like that too!

Inez: It's funny isn't it?

(Second Thoughts: I am sorry when a female critic "playfully" calls for the destruction of books that go on excessively about menstruation and not only cause I think she means me (Margaret McClusky in the *SMH*) — I love to see women's truths in writing, and menstruation fascinates me (want to re-read *The Wise Wound* and anything of similar kind) as I was brought up competently to deal with and then considerately to ignore it but I believe our lunar/lunatic cycles must COME OUT in order to feminise the world which is something I also kind of believe in at present. Speak the unspeakable, find words for what is not said. I love it when I see something that does that.)

Alison: Yes, but I think it's wonderful. I mean, it's just a shared experience and it's a recognised moment. Yes.

Inez: And it's so much a part of our lives. It's so, you know, it's like in, when I read those long nineteenth century books and nobody ever goes to the toilet. You know, that kind of thing. I sort of wonder about, I suppose, you know, people say we talk far too much about that kind of thing these days.

(Second Thoughts: I'm excited by this discussion and will respond to it more in responding to some of those articles you sent me YES I have thought much about body/ femaie body/ femaleness/ female writing.)

Alison: But it happens all the time I suppose. Yes, so while, I'm trying to integrate a sort of new form to my thesis, to the thesis form while I'm writing about these things, so that's why I'm doing the interviews to try and

Inez: And do you look up people's reviews and things like that too?

Alison: Yes, just to, so that, because I wanted there to be as many voices as possible in my writing too so, there's the reviewers and the fiction and the theorists and the authors.

Inez: Sounds really interesting.

Alison: Yes, it's really fun.

Inez: What do you do after that?

Alison: I don't know!

Inez: Do you get to be a professor?

Alison: No! Depends on the job situation. I don't know if I want to! Well, I think we've covered most of the things.

Inez: Yeah, it's interesting isn't it? The way people respond to your books and just don't, but that's a whole other, thing isn't it?

Alison: The way they respond to it?

Inez: Yes, when they're asked to give a kind of, you like reviews and critical things and all that kind of

Alison: So how do you like writing reviews?

Inez: Oh I don't. If you love something it's wonderful and I just like to only write about things I really love. So it's you know that the only way that you're really giving a really proper, "proper", response to something is, and everything that's written is loved by somebody else, besides the writer. I'm sure of that, just to get published. So it should always be like that. But it can't happen that way, so, I'd just as soon not do it. The rewards aren't great enough anyway.

Alison: Yes, I've found it a real struggle writing reviews.

Inez: Do you? Yes, and it's interesting how different people do it, when you're kind of noticing, like, I don't see the *Sydney Morning Herald* so much, but you kind of know who these people are and their approach and the way. This is this thing about, hm, this is off the record okay...

## INEZ BARANAY RESPONDS

COMMENTS ON THE TRANSCRIPT IN ADDITION TO THOSE INCLUDED AS "SECOND THOUGHTS", APRIL 1993.

First, the transcript. I did laugh, in an embarrassed way, at my speech. "kind of you know like um sort of um that thing kind of thing." It seems affected to me, talking like that and probably is (I am able to speak with more certainty when I need to — e.g. on the radio) and I guess I do that to demonstrate the uncertain, provisional, hypothetical way I view my own ideas and the expression of them. I distrust certainties and often deliberately express ideas as questions; that's one reason/way I use different voices and points of view, e.g. in *Pagan* and *The Edge of Bali*.

Plus I have this overbearing pushy aspect to my personality and I thought (not really "thought") that if I talked too much you would see it and not like me.

Yes, nervous! Yes, I was, about the "on the record" part and the "I don't know this theory stuff" part. But that part's over too. The record: you say something that's an idea, a maybe, a mood, what you think that day, it gets recorded, it's on the record, it's there to define you. Now I think "so what".

I asked you to turn off the recorder in case I was going to overstate my case against certain reviewers — I didn't — and soon thought "the recorder could be on now really" but it wasn't. If you remind me, e.g. what issues we only touched on that I rethought, I'll tell you again.

What I do think is that certain academics, and as far as I've observed they're male, review books in what I call a "points out of ten" approach: taking a position of "objectivity" and of knowing what is "good" and how this book stands up against certain criteria they know of. A schoolmasterly, authoritative, judging style. It is my impression that certain writers, and they tend to be female, are more willing to expose/display/admit their own position from which they review and respond to the book in question. Clearly I prefer the latter approach, it's what I believe in.

I was reticent about the PNG book as I still was — am — finding out what it is, not sure how any of it will turn into words. There is more I can say about it now. I am interested in the idea of "woman" as a "culture" and, while trying to tell as simply as

possibly the story of my year in PNG, coming up against personal and general ideas of what is: a story, woman, race, culture, postcolonialism, development/aid — and so on. And at a stage where I was looking for new reading — thank you, you provided it — where these questions were articulated somehow, to give me something to respond to, some terms to employ, some idea of how they were approached.

"I read the kind of books I like to read" sounds boorish, but it's still a question I don't know how to answer, and wish I did. Like, what kind of people do you like? I could list a few adjectives but there'll always be someone I like who doesn't fit them, and they (list of adjectives) don't sound true (answering the question) anyway. I'm just reading some Italo Calvino, for example and I *hate* the way he assumes a male reader, I hate it when male writers do that, but I love so much else about his writing. I could say I like "women writers" but how fatuous: of course there are any number of women I don't want to read. Etc Etc. (And my current thing is I don't differentiate "women" and "feminist", i.e. I wouldn't say I like feminist writers.) I could say "this week I read this and last week that" but my reading might not at present be "typical".

I do adore Colette, though. Here's a page of *The Vagabond*. I gave it to the first meeting of my Women Writers' Workshop.

I was talking with Joanne Burns once and we told each other we'd seen where Martin Amis said his favourite writers were Don de Lillo and Elmore Leonard and we said "me too" and we said "but they're *boys*!" and then we said "I don't care anymore do you?" and we said "no".

I'll look at the list of questions you sent earlier, respond to those while I'm in the mood to keep doing this:

Reader and writer: the relationship, do you mean, of oneself as both? Adoring and needing to read leads to writing, there's a book you want to read but it doesn't exist 'til you write it.

Feminist of course though I will say "depending what you mean by the word" as alas alas it is used to mean e.g. humourless man-hating separatist (which I am at times!) what a problematic troublesome word — but let's use it, I say, don't let it be taken away. It's like "God" isn't it. "Do you believe in God" as I think it was Carl Sagan was asked on the radio the other day, and replied something like, "definition? Not the white bearded patriarch in the sky, but if as Einstein said..."

Women's writing MUST be different from men's and offer something different because woman is not man and so on.

See, I didn't know what *écriture féminine* meant but I see that theory reflected in e.g. Colette — who came first. As far as I understand it so far it makes sense to me.

Writing as a woman — as what else? A person, a writer only? There might be times when person or writer is the appropriate thing — some writing issues are not (necessarily) a matter of gender: of course. And some are.

I would have said NO, Puh-leeze, no! to "as an Australian of non-Anglo Celtic background" but would have been lying. My piece "You Don't Whinge" (in *The Saddest Pleasure*) was put together for an anthology of "multicultural women's writing" (*Beyond the Echo*. UQP). BUT this thing has now happened: the Multicultural Industry and so on, leave me alone!

But writing *Pagan* I was VERY aware in writing of Nora and Magda that I KNOW these people and in writing of migration that I KNOW about it and that what I know is not seen in what I read and that people have talked such bullshit about us migrants all my life and now I'm saying something about it.

But knowledge comes from imagination always.

You are the start of a different "contact with academic institutions".

COMMENTS ADDED TO THE POLYLOGUE, JUNE 1994.

p.12. [please insert if possible] and re-discovering Colette, who I adored in my late teens and early twenties, has been the great reading pleasure of the year. And especially *The Vagabond*.

p.14. And then I did go (to university) kind of through you. I read some of the theory that you sent me, and it was a delight and astonishment: language stretched to express familiar thoughts. In those essays, as in what follows, there was much "stuff I recognise".

p.21. and now that I've seen it in practice, I know it works!

p.22. Yoga: it makes me practise what I work for in my writing: that attention, that constant refining, that precision. And intelligence that is diffuse in the body (: a yoga instruction might be to bring intelligence to the big toe. And you find you can. And your intelligence is then expanded).

p.23. (stands to reason)

p.24. (apropos "tradition" etc) Well exactly! That's why I don't see myself as having, or being inside, any "tradition". Particularly, I can't relate to the demands I identify as primarily an "Australian" writer (rather than, for one thing, an English-language writer, or a writer who'll fall in love with Colette every couple of decades). I do, however, and probably for the first time, recognise and accept myself in a context HERE.

p.25. "articulation of a subject position" is a good phrase!

p.29. Yes we all want to tell what we don't hear told.

#### COMMENTS ADDED TO THE TEXT OF CHAPTER DRAFT, JUNE 1994.

p.139. incidentally and not importantly — the name Violet — also "the odour of sanctity"; also from Violetta of *La Traviata*.

p.141. I think this is brilliant!

p.143. plus, the language thing: using language of erotic texts (I had Anaïs Nin at my side) to — what? mock? describe ironically? parody?

p.147. An especially vicious remark — unjust — as, of course, the Coda was not the *only* thing I wrote during the fellowship. I mean, even if it were! But it wasn't.

What I read after this, Alison, was a great experience for me! The first time I've read anyone really understands what I was doing in the Coda.

p.148. Right!

Also the Foucault idea that the emphasis on sexuality is to silence other desires.

p.151. I love the way you write about this. I felt strongly that I was telling a true important story with Judith — a fable, a parable — but never could explicate it as you have.

p.153. I think it ends just fine as it is!

## INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN HAWTHORNE



The interview with Susan Hawthorne took place in the Malthouse, a performing space in South Melbourne, amidst Melbourne Writers' Week, on Sunday, 13 September, 1992. I was amazed to be there, at a writers' week and my first interview, especially after being beset by technical difficulties; the tape recorder I borrowed to bring with me stopped working the day before; the tape recorder I bought the day before stopped working on the day; thanks to Fran and Tim Bass with whom I was staying, a third tape recorder was procured on a Sunday morning and stayed working for the afternoon.

When I sent the transcript for checking it received the benefit of Sue's editing experience with minimal but effective changes to increase the sense of flow.

Sue Hawthorne's responses to the chapter draft I sent her in March 1994 were forthright and valuable. Her additions, hand-written in the margins of my text, comprised the sort of dialogue I envisaged in wishing to construct a many-voiced format. It was the passion and self-assuredness of her ideas, I think, that makes her dialogue interact so strongly and productively with mine, especially when she took issue with some of my points.

In a performing space in the top of the Malthouse, we began ...

Alison: I thought if I could just ask you some questions about *The Falling Woman*, and then move onto more general things about publishing, if that's okay?

Susan: Okay.

Alison: Is there a history behind the publication of *The Falling Woman*, or did you always intend it to be published by Spinifex?

Susan: Well, there's history in a sense. I actually started it about ten years ago, back in '82, and I kept thinking at various points along the way that I was finished it, like in about '83 I thought I'd finished it, and then I realised about six months later that in fact no, I hadn't, and that this wasn't, and most of what that was the bits that are now in the italicised voice and I realised that it actually needed something more than that. It needed somehow more substance and it needed something a bit more mundane added to it and a bit more of an ordinary kind of story, so that people wouldn't fall asleep after the first two pages. So I then started writing the Stella sections and I wrote them

intermittently I guess between about '85 and through to about '87. And then I didn't actually do very much on it for a long time because I was working full time and I just didn't have the mental space and then I went to the States for six months as an "Adjunct" in the Women's Studies department at San Diego and I spent all of that time writing and that was when I wrote the Estella part which I hadn't written at all up to that point and I completed the Stella bits that I hadn't written. And I wrote a few new pieces for the italicised voice. And by the time I got there I knew the basic shape that it was going to be, it was just a matter of getting it onto the paper. So that was 1990 that I sort of basically finished the first final draft. And then it went through another couple of versions. Various things got chopped out and added in and so forth and then late last year, during the editing process, I chopped about another hundred pages out of it and rewrote a lot and did a binge on that. So that's how it got into the shape that it is now.

Alison: So, why did you start writing the italics bit first? Was there a project behind that or, why did you think people needed the other part to supplement it?

Susan: Well, when I started it I didn't know I was writing a novel. I mean I just started writing. I had this idea of a sort of utopian novel, which was what I was really interested in at that time. And so the whole novel has completely shifted its focus. There were other characters in it then that are no longer in it, and so forth. So that, I mean I started writing it because that was what I wrote. But my idea of what it was going to be at that time was very very different. And what had actually initially inspired it was a trip I took to the Flinders Ranges in South Australia in '82 after the Women and Labour conference there, and somehow, I don't know, it was the place — it's such an amazing place — it just sort of inspired this idea for a story. But now, I mean, that's not even a recognisable part of it really, even though the Flinders Ranges comes into it, it's no longer the central focus of the book, as it was when I first started to write.

Alison: When I was reading it I thought that the structure was really one of the most interesting parts of it. Did you have a definite sort of project in mind when you were making it sort of interweave like that or did it just evolve like that?

Susan: I spent a lot of time thinking about the structure. I love structure. I'm really fascinated by it as a concept, and I guess, it was the point at which I felt that it needed something else that I hooked onto the idea of having three narrative threads. And I knew from about '84, I knew what they were. What I didn't know was how they were all going to connect up, and one of the reasons why I wanted that was that I wanted the freedom to have a range of viewpoints and yet still retain one character as central to it. And I like the idea of having, not a multiple personality, but not a false single personality structure. I don't think any of us are that straightforward and that was a way of being able to look at things from different angles. And I quite like almost the discipline of writing in a particular voice, as well. I think it, for me at any rate, those sorts of things somehow help, help the voice, help the writer to create a particular form. I like the discipline of form and structure, and that's something that I always find comes quite early in a piece that I'm writing. Every now and again something just falls on the page, but basically I do think about things in that sort of way.

Alison: There seems to be a shift also, especially in the italicised part, with a perceived sense of time and space too. Was that related to structure, or maybe to the utopian project at the start?

Susan: In the italics there are various shifts. Although it's in the I voice, there are a number of different kind of areas that that "I" is in and there are a number of different uses of the "you" in that as well: there's the singular you and the plural you but I don't make, I don't actually signify that but I leave that up to the reader to figure out. I guess also the thing was a way of trying to capture a sense of inner experience that I think is very hard to get if you are trapped in a third person viewpoint. I mean you can do it but it sort of doesn't ring true in some way and so, and because of that, because the I is sort of fluid then the temporal stuff is also fluid and that also ties in with the epilepsy theme, of a sense of timelessness or a sense of dropping out of time. And so it kind of, I mean, I wish deconstructionists didn't exist but I want to say — because they use the word differently — it sort of deconstructs the text in a way. It disrupts it. And yet I don't mean that in a deconstructionist sense. I mean it in the sense that, in the same way that when one has a seizure, life is disrupted and interrupted then this also does that. So it's partly a formal thing but it's also the nature of the voice and the themes coming together in that.

Alison: Actually sometimes I found the you, when you addressed the second person, quite alienating, as a reader, as if there was something, some other source of knowledge there that wasn't, that the reader didn't know about but the voice had access to. Was that deliberate?

Susan: Well, the ambiguity of the you is deliberate and there is a sense in which the you could be either a character in the book, it could be the reader or it could be a collective, sort of body of women or something like that, you know. I mean the collective you of any particular group. So that sort of ambiguity, yes that was intentional. I went back and actually fiddled with that. I had many more characters in it, many more names and characters in it at one stage. I also decided that that was getting too complicated and that it needed simplifying. Which was also why I cut back to the you.

Alison: The way that I'm looking at your text is in relation to some work I'm doing which is using a lot of the French theorists on theories of women's writing and *écriture féminine*, and I was wondering if you were familiar with them and if you are conscious of them in your writing? Or if you think your working through aspects of them ...

Susan: Yes, I am. I'm familiar with them in, I guess the period between about '83 to '86,'87, I did read a fair bit. What disturbs me about some of the French feminist theorists is that sometimes they're said to be the first person to come up with that idea, when in fact a number of American radical feminists have come up with very similar ideas about five or ten years earlier. So what I was drawing on was much more my experience of the women's movement in the 1970s and the sorts of theories which were floating in the air but which were not written down at that time. And also reading from the States in particular about women's literature. And it was only then after that I came to the French stuff. And they seemed to be saying very similar things. So, what I've got in there is a bit of a mix, I mean, I've used everything. And I certainly found some of the ideas interesting. I mean, for example, say, mirrors or something like that. The whole notion of playing with the idea of a mirror, I know that came out of some of my reading at the time but I also know that it's wider than that. Or the notion of the female body as a source of writing. Now I think that that very much comes out of my own experience of my own body and of having epileptic fits and things like that, so that in that sense it's writing my own bodily experience. But it was made easier to do that by the existence of those ideas. And by the fact of taking a female body, a

woman's body as *the* central thing, in a world view, or a woman-identified world view rather than a male-identified world view. And I wouldn't have been able to think those things if I hadn't gone through the '70s, and if I hadn't lived a fairly strongly separatist lifestyle at one stage, and certainly thinking and developing intellectually alongside a whole lot of other women. And I actually see that as much more central to the kind of theoretical face of the work than the French feminist stuff which was just the bit poured in at the end.

Alison: One of the other things which interests me is the connection between the theories and the practise of that writing and how much they interact and, if the theories are sort of workable in a practical way, or if the writing adds things that the theory can't touch.

Susan: I remember in the late '70s there was a lot of discussion of the idea of "Is there a female aesthetic?". And this was before the French feminist stuff was available in the English translation, and I don't read French. And, I mean I remember having conversations about those sorts of things with people like Finola Moorhead, and other friends, other women who I know, and we often talked about how the shape of a women's novel could be different. I remember we used to make jokes about how the phallic climactic thing of a man's novel, you know he has one orgasm and then the book ends, whereas what we had in mind was a multi-orgasmic book that didn't necessarily have this sort of shape. So those ideas were there in my head and certainly I know that that has fed into the structure. I also happen to like the number three. It's just a number I identify with, so that's partly why I have three voices but every time I write some long piece it always has three parts to it. All my bits fall into three so, you know, that's not unusual. But it was also that that actually allowed me to have a complex sort of wave formation going.

Alison: I noticed that one of the reviewers, I think it was a male one, noted that even when Olga and Estella reach the Rock and the Olgas there wasn't any excitement, it was just treated as one of the events in the book, as if he was expecting some climax.

Susan: Well, there are a couple of little climaxes, but I didn't actually want it to have, you know, this vroom, sort of climax, because that went against the grain of what I was trying to do.

Alison: So do you think that women's writing does offer something inherently different to men's writing or is it something that you think has been worked on at the moment?

Susan: Well I think that women at the moment are experimenting more with form and with content, and style and with genre — the whole thing. I think women are actually, women and I think it's also happening amongst other groups like you know black writers, indigenous writers etc, people coming from cultures which are not currently in dominance. I think that part of the reason that's happening is because we haven't had a voice, and the old forms don't necessarily suit us. And it is, it's much more fun to write something that you think has your own stamp on it or you think is a bit different from what's been done before, and there's that challenge also to do something a bit different. I mean if I wanted to write a kind of Iris Murdoch novel well I'd sit down and write an Iris Murdoch novel but I wouldn't find that as challenging or interesting because somebody's done that before, and it's a more usual form in structure and so forth. And I think that when you have something different to say then you are forced to say it in different ways and so you have to seek out a form that's going to suit your needs, suit the needs of the text and of the content and the themes that you're dealing with, and the perspective because you've got to be able to challenge the way that people read, and you've got to make them sit up a bit so that they actually take notice of what's in there and not just read it as a trash novel then throw it away.

Alison: So how would you regard your relationship as a writer to the reader, is it confrontational like that?

Susan. Hm. I guess I feel a kind of sense of friendship with potential readers and although I want to startle them and I want to challenge them, I don't want to hit them over the head and I don't want to undermine them necessarily. I don't see it as a confrontational thing. I see it more as a sort of give and take thing. And I think that each reader does bring a set of different expectations and experiences to whatever it is that they're reading. But I also think that the author, I don't think that the author is dead, for example. I think that the author also brings a whole lot of things and cannot, doesn't control the reader's responses but can shape and influence the sorts of responses that readers have. I don't think it's a one-way relationship. I don't think it's all the writer doing the work and the reader being a blank idiot, and on the other hand I don't think it's the reverse, you know, I don't think it's — as critics

would say — that it's all the reader doing the work and the writer is irrelevant. I think that there are important interactions there between writers and readers, and I think that's partly what sparks the interest amongst readers to come and look at writers — at writers' festivals — and listen and try and have an interaction because I think that's what stimulates that desire and I think it's a real mistake for literary theory to start saying that the writer is irrelevant, or conversely, that the reader is irrelevant. Neither are. It's a two-way thing.

Alison: So how do you regard the sort of academic part of the literary world. I mean, do you, obviously it would be nice if there was interaction between them and the writers and, do you think...?

Susan: Well there is to some extent. I mean, a lot of writers actually read in academic areas as well and there are numbers of academics who work in writing fields. So I don't think the divisions are anywhere near as stark as they're often made out to be and I guess, I mean, I work in a range of different fields. I write academic papers from time to time and I write reviews of books and things like that so, and I actually think that that's an important part of the work that I do because I think it's important to feed that critical work back into the literary community and into the feminist community. It's like those Venn diagrams, you know that you have at school, where you have a sort of circle and there are various parts of the literary world that are not overlapping with one another. I mean popular literature and readers of popular literature might never read a book of literary criticism but that doesn't matter: there's still a relationship. I mean there's still a relationship there even if it's an indirect one. And I think that writers of fiction and poetry and the like have also contributed a lot to the development of critical theory because it's the writers who actually do it before the critics realise it's been done. Modernism, for instance, came along before anyone thought of calling it modernism, as did postmodernism for want of a better word. I mean, writers were actually writing postmodernist texts long before the word was in use, and in fact probably writers are stopping writing it now because it's been overdone. It's time to move on and do something different. So I think that there are important connections there and I think that writers actually contribute a lot more to it than they're given credit for.

Alison: So do you find that your different activities as writer and reviewer and publisher and editor feed into each other or are they sometimes in conflict, at all?

Susan: Oh yes. They're not in conflict for me. I think that they add to one another. I read a lot of international women's writing and I find that really interesting and that was why I actually offered to do a column for *Australian Women's Book Review*, because I wanted to have some way of you know talking about these books that other people are not reading and it was also a way of making myself keep up with things. Because it's very easy to you know let it all go and not do it. The main problem is time, I mean that's the main conflict. I would rather be spending all my time writing fiction and poetry, but that doesn't earn me my keep. And as well as that I think it's important to do other things in addition to that and I enjoy all the different sort of sides of things that I do. I enjoy publishing and reading other people's work and helping people develop their work and seeing the final product, you know, those sorts of things. Or getting an idea for an event and running with it and organising some things. So, I see all of those things as very important and they each feed in to one another in different ways.

Alison: So you find that, you used to work with Penguin, didn't you? Do you find that you have more agency in your own publishing venture?

Susan: Well, there are different kinds of agency I guess. I probably have a more restricted range of things that I can do now because in a small press you always have to think Is this book going to work? Can we afford to do it? And if we can then, how can we do it? And so forth. Whereas at Penguin there was a much wider range of material coming in and that was always very exciting to work with. But it was always a matter of, Well I can recommend this, but isn't necessarily going to get published. I can jump up and down until I'm blue in the face and if somebody higher up the hierarchy says No, this is not a goer, then there's nothing I could do about it. Whereas at least now, I mean I can make that decision for myself rather than have somebody else influence those decisions. So there's different kinds of agency and, of course, it's much easier to publish risky things with other people's money. So, you know, there's a sort of freedom in that, but there's also a lack of freedom in it because you, you know, unless I was the publishing director I wouldn't have the final say.



Alison: Some of the other people I'm going to, or I hope to, interview are people like Ania Walwicz and Margaret Coombs, Sue Woolfe and Davida Allen and Janette Turner Hospital. Have you read any of their work?

Susan: Yes, I've read all of their work except Davida Allen. Don't know her work.

Alison: That's fairly recent.

Susan: That's the one that's on the shortlist, yes [for Victorian Premier's Award].

Alison: Do you consciously read work — well you said that you read international women's writing — but in the same sort of area? Of people doing sort of similar experimental stuff that you do?

Susan: Yes I do, and amongst those I'm actually reading Janette Turner Hospital right at this minute. I've been reading her *Isobars* collection which I should have read ages ago but I had never got around to. And I really like Sue Woolfe's *Painted Woman* book, I think it's marvellous. Who else did you mention?

Alison: Ania Walwicz and Margaret Coombs ...

Susan: Ania, oh yes. Actually I haven't read Margaret Coombs. Confession! And it's not that I haven't wanted to it's just that I, you know, you don't always get around to everybody's. I read pretty widely ...

[End of side one, lost a bit of discussion on books read.]

I read poets, I mean I like people like Dorothy Porter's work. I find hers very interesting, the *Akhenaten* collection that she's just published. And I also like the work of people like Helen Hodgman, and Finola Moorhead and various others, I can't — I mean they're all there, but, in that kind of area. Joanne Burns. Jan McKemmish, and so forth. And I think that Australian writing, Australian feminist writing is really, I mean it's more than world class, it's really good writing. The fellow that publishes at Serpent's Tale in London, I had a talk with him a couple of years ago and he said, I don't know but Australian *avant garde* writing seems to be more *avant garde* than the *avant garde* anywhere else, and I went Oh, really. And I said, you know, Why do you say that? And he said, Well, you know, look at Mary Fallon, look at Alan Wearne, look at various others, and I actually started to sit down and think

and I thought, Yes, Australian writing — and I think particularly feminist writing — is just so good, and when I compare it to say writers at a comparable stage in their writing career in America, I mean, America, it's not as rich. There are certainly very many good American women writers but most of them are well and truly established and recognised and so forth. Whereas, there's, you know, I find difficulty to find the same kind of experimentation with ideas and form and style as we get here in Australia and to some extent I think also in New Zealand. And I think that's part of that whole thing of being part of the dominant culture or not, and that the problem of the American women's movement is that, like it or not, they are part of a dominant culture and they forget, they don't know what the other side sees. And the ones who are writing and doing different things in the States are not from the white population. They're usually blacks or Chicanos or Native Americans. So, and amongst those groups there is some exciting work happening, you know, I mean it's that sort of thing. So I think that Australian writing you know still has a long way to go in getting adequately recognised for the quality of the work that's coming out.

Alison: I've heard it said also that once theories come — literary theories come — to Australia they get mixed amongst all the international sections and become sort of hybridised Australian, sort of Australian-characterised theories.

Susan: Yes, I think it's the same sort of thing and I think part of that is because the, it's not so comfortable for us, we can't always easily fit in to the sort of theories that have grown up, say, in the northern hemisphere. I mean, it can even be as basic as that, and I sometimes wonder how that changes us, and I certainly think that it helps to create an interesting and imaginative approaches to things.

Alison: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me, as someone writing about your work, you know, to make me aware of, any agendas in your work?

Susan: Well I suppose one of the other things which interests me ties in with what I've been talking about is a sort of mixing of genres and things, and it probably also comes from working in a number of different forms, so that I'm quite interested in the ideas of, you know, say mixing fiction and non-fiction, and those sorts of things. I guess the other thing that is important in *The Falling Woman* and in my collection of poems coming out next year with Penguin called *The Language of my Tongue*, is the epilepsy theme that has

been very important in sort of generating that, the collection of poems is specifically about the experience of having epileptic fits and trying to explore that whole area. And some of it, there is a bit of crossover of material, but where there is crossover the form has changed and so it's not exactly the same in both. And I guess that that's been an important generating thing for me, that I sometimes think well maybe that's what made me want to be a writer, you know, that I felt that I had something I had to write about. That and I guess the point of a lesbian perspective on things as well. And one of the rather funny things that's happened actually in relation to *The Falling Woman* is, I had a review done of the book for the National Epilepsy Association and they couldn't handle it, and , it was just incredible, and so the review writer came and interviewed me instead — I still don't know whether they're going to publish the interview. I don't know, I think probably what she wrote in the review was much milder than what I said to her. One of the things is that there's been a sort of interesting reactions of people to that. Some people have said, Oh, How do you feel coming out? And I said What do you mean, coming out? And this friend said Oh well, coming out as an epileptic? And I said Oh, all right, you know, I feel a bit funny about it every now and again, but basically all right. And she said Well you know, you're such a well known lesbian that that didn't even cross my mind that that was what I might mean. Whereas for my parents, they have this opposite view, you know, where it would have been a perfectly nice book if it hadn't had any lesbians in it, and that I might as well run up a red flag in the main street. And so there's this interesting sort of "battle" going on out there with other people, in other people's minds, about which is the most important coming out story! And, going back to the Epilepsy Association, there's this sense, and I mean also out there, there's this sense that you know, one difference is enough. That for instance if you have epilepsy then obviously you live in a nuclear family in the suburbs and you're a normal person and you make every effort to be as normal as you possibly can. And of course if you're a lesbian, I mean it just doesn't work! And, you know, I mean it's not the same, I mean within the lesbian community, there isn't that problem, because the world view is taken as normal, and as one's own, so that adding the other is, I mean it's no great big deal. So there's been interesting sense of, kind of reactions to those issues and things.

Alison: I thought that was one of the exciting parts about the different narratives that they all tended to centre around different bodily actions, sort of, in the main character, and all interwoven...

Susan: That was also why I wanted to do that, because there's been lots and lots of lesbian novels out now. There's no need for a coming out novel as such, and I wanted my characters just to exist in the world in which they exist and not make any excuses or justifications or whatever for what they are. And yet it was also necessary to deal with the process of coming to that point, and so that variations of voices as well came to play there because it was possible to do a little bit of a coming out story in the middle of it, and yet having it so obvious that, for these characters, it's really not a problem. And these characters, you know, just exist in this world. And they don't see themselves as being as other in any way, and yet that's a process that the characters have been through at some stage to get to that point.

## SUSAN HAWTHORNE RESPONDS

COMMENTS TO CHAPTER DRAFT, MARCH 1994.

p.155.[relationship comfortably established]: But when the novel opens and at its close they are apart and longing to be together.

See footnote in my paper [re use of "epileptic"]:

I do not use the word epileptic, except as an adjective, since it is not a defining characteristic; and in general the only illnesses used in these ways are those considered as having an overwhelming mental element and having negative overtones: *cf* an epileptic, a schizophrenic, a paraplegic, a manic depressive, a spastic, a nymphomaniac, a kleptomaniac etc as against: an arthritic, a peptic, an anginic, a canceric — as you can see I'm having to make up words. ("Theories of Indifference: Feminism and Epilepsy" by Susan Hawthorne. Unpublished paper presented at Politics and Poetics of the Body conference, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA, April 1994.)

p.156. It wasn't the reviewer who couldn't handle it. Suzanne Yanko and I met because she read my book and liked it — but the "institution" of the magazine — the editor(s) didn't like the lesbian content — not wholesome family reading I guess! She was restricted — what she could write and still have it published.

p.156. [re being a wonderful role model]: There's irony in this comment of Suzanne's.

p.158. [re doctor's absence inscribed on body]: An interesting point.

p.160. The names are in fact names I know some aboriginal women have — there is the marvellous painter Dorothy Djulkulul whose work I admire. Iris is a Greek name meaning rainbow and messenger and it makes the link between the two worlds so far apart in time and place and yet there is an overlap of symbolism. These are hints in the text and meant only to be hints. *cf* the seven sisters story. [p.42 *The Falling Woman*.]  
I'm trying to show metaphorically/symbolically connections across cultures.

p.164. Precisely — that's the role of Stella's voice — namely to keep the reader going because we all respond to the pull of storytelling / of narrative. Stella is there to keep the reader happy.

Estella's part is much more mundane and is there to de-exoticize and demystify Estelle. I would re-edit some bits of Estella now. But she's "real life" in a sense — we'd all edit our lives if we could "do" them again.

p.167. One makes policies of selection in an anthology but not a novel — where it's much more complex.

p.167. [re landscapes as sexual metaphors]: Yes, that's so.

p.168. The important difference between *Moments* and *Exploding Frangipanni* is that the latter was about sexuality and was very little concerned with sex. Stories about work or culture or relationships were chosen to show specifically that lesbians *do* more things than just sex in their lives. In a similar way *Falling Woman* is not attempting to be *only* about the sex aspect of lesbian lives. We also have other histories, we have other things we think about including our dis/abilities, our work, our ideas about the world and the universe.

p.169. [re desert as dry and arid]: This is a culturally determined view and a Eurocentric view. My deserts are alive and rich and full of life *all* the time — if only one takes the time to look, to know, to see differently.

p.170. I am playing here — but showing how it might be possible to argue for a completely different erotic economy and metaphorical world view than the one we now inhabit (intellectually) and which is dominated by postmodern — i.e. European / Northern preconceptions.

- p.169. [re little fluid/water]: but plenty in terms of heat. Heat, warmth are important metaphors. Metaphorically I am (perhaps) saying that warmth of feeling is a precondition of lust. ie. I am challenging the merely technical and mechanical basis of lust — lubrication. Lubrication alone is mechanical and possibly Eurocentric. Heat, lust, warmth are the lead up (like sensuality) to satisfying and multidimensional (sexual) relationships.
- p.171. [re excess as prescriptive]: Good point. That's what I'm trying to say about the prescriptiveness of fluids too. Connection with Eurocentrism is the simple difference in rainfall — in the European imagination deserts = fear; in an Australian imagination it could be different.
- p.172. [re use of "normal" to describe lesbian world in novel]: "ordinary" may be a more useful word.
- p.173. [Sylvia Martin quote]: Precisely.  
[re lesbian writing arena]: It is centrally located in a "tradition" (meaning 10-20 years) of *international* lesbian fiction. H.D., Woolf, Stein, Barnes, Wittig, Rich, Lorde, Namiooshi, even Winterson are influences. In Australia this is best represented by Moorhead and Hodgman.
- p.173. [re "epileptic"]: see footnote in article.
- p.172. See Sappho Fragment 31 Variations for a connection — strangely no one will publish them! When I've sent them out into the world with other poems — they are the ones that are returned to me.

## INTERVIEW WITH SUE WOOLFE

This interview with Sue Woolfe took place at her home in Balmain on the afternoon of Monday, 11th January, 1993. We sat on the balcony, half inside half outside, drinking riesling chilled for the occasion. There were birds twittering in the background (something I noticed on the tape afterwards but was not aware of at the time of the interview), huge gusts of wind (which caused static on the tape), and occasional planes roaring overhead. Sue speaks in a very deliberate and considered way and we began and ended by speaking about the interviewing experience as Sue had just completed a book, with Kate Grenville, of interviews with writers about their writing processes.

When I sent the transcript back to Sue she gave it the benefit of her editing experience and heavily edited out repetitions and clumsy speech (thankfully, mine included!).

~~~~~

Alison: So, have you read many other Australian women writers? Do they influence your work?

Sue: I certainly read them. I want to tell you how I see my writing so I can answer that better. I feel very much that I've got to write what is important to me. I often read articles by critics who suggest that we should be writing about such and such, for example, about women who are victorious, and we shouldn't be thinking about the struggle. And I think Yes, this is right, but when I'm alone with myself and my writing, what emerges — what *has* to emerge — is what I feel most deeply about. That probably comes from a pretty painful source but that's what I *must* write. I am speechless when I think about what I should do. There are lots of things I'd love to write about, situations that I think, if only I were Helen Garner or somebody I could really make a story about this. But I'm not, I'm merely me. So, when you ask me do other people influence me, I suppose they do in certain ways, like, I feel braver because of their work, more daring. I find Margaret Coombs' work quite enabling, for example — I think because she's so honest, and so passionate.

Alison: What about, do you read much literary theory, like, articles and things ...?

Sue: The book I'm doing now is called *Leaning Towards Infinity*. In *Painted Woman* I feel I was light years younger then. I had a baby between the two of them and that really ages you. I don't mean you get more wrinkles, I mean you shift in all sorts of relationships, particularly your relationship to yourself as a woman, and to your mother, and now I've got a daughter, so it means being female has shifted. Before I wrote *Painted Woman* I don't think I read much theory at all. I have a friend who was always passing on articles which I would skim and dip into. And from them I cobbled together some theory. Perhaps I'm not a very good reader of theory. What happens when I read theory is that just a phrase creates such a whirlpool of images that I want to just go away and think and dwell on that and I don't want any more.

Alison: I'm sure most people do that — take what's relevant to their lives from theories.

Sue: Yes, and there's so much in that writing that's so full of poignant phrases. A friend gave me an article by — I mispronounce everybody because I don't actually hear people talk about them, by Luce Irigaray — is that how you say it?

Alison: Um, I've heard lots of pronunciations so I'm in the same boat. That sounds good.

Sue: It started "Mother with your milk I have sucked ice". Do you know that one? Wow. And that kept me writing for the last four months, that phrase. I just found it so, so rich. So full of meaning. I'm trying to write about the silence of motherhood. How, I feel deeply that there are no real mothering stories. There are a lot of stories about good and bad mothers and negligent mothers and nurturing mothers but there are not stories about how mothers live in themselves, and how they feel about their lives. There are lots of stories about how they feel about their children, but not about their lives. That sort of lack I suddenly realised when I became a mother and I want to write about that because when I looked about for mothering stories I felt there were none. None that were about anything else than the mother as nurturer.

Alison: When I was re-reading *Painted Woman* I noticed there was a huge division between the mother and daughter, and between the central character and the other women.

Sue: Except Molly. I think Frances had to learn to connect with women didn't she? And Molly was the one who taught her how to be with another woman. And in that learning, she became free, it was part of her freedom. Did you think?

Alison: Yes, but then Frances' final freedom was really individual, rather than being connected to anything. It was strong though.

Sue: Yes. I suppose I feel we're surrounded by the concept of being nurturers and I wanted to give Frances a different sort of freedom, a freedom which was, was artistic, rather than about family and romance.

Alison: In rejecting the romance and marriage with Tim, that comes through as well.

Sue: Yes, yes. Why did you choose me, why am I in your group?

Alison: I remember reading your novel, I think I bought it at the end of 1990 and I found it really powerful and what I originally wanted to do my thesis on was how women are represented in the visual arts, which is in a round-about way what I've come back to. It's so powerful and it traces a woman painter sort of coming through the struggle to be autonomous. Now my thesis is divided between books that deal with writing about the body, and about women's bodies and how they're represented and being redefined, and how that's been written about in the visual arts in film and photography and things like that.

Sue: As soon as I had the title, *Painted Woman*, which came to me very early, I came across the idea of women as object and subject. It stunned me as having a whole galaxy of meaning. In one way Frances is an object because her father sees her and paints her like that and she sees herself as an object to be painted and she sees herself as an appendage of her father. Then part of her emergence is having her own mind. It seemed to me such a fragile freedom that she was learning and I was probably learning that with her too. It's hard for me to conceptualise freedom for another person because for me we're essentially individuals, and we're all alone, like her.

Alison: Yes, I noticed there was a lot about her feeling invisible, without her father acknowledging her body as well, and one of the things that became important to her was that her hand was visible and acknowledged as part of her body, and of course it was also the part that activated the painting. That was interesting because all the previous work I'd been doing on bodies...

Sue: Yes. It comes quite late doesn't it, that she has denied herself so much and just seen herself as part of this order with her father? He is that order and she has abnegated herself to the point where she doesn't realise she possesses her hands. And I kept on thinking about hands because his are very powerful in a horrific way. He strangles her mother with his hands. His use of art is to subjugate whereas she has to learn something very different.

Alison: And she takes on, or seems to take on, some of his philosophy of the violence he brought into art, as well.

Sue: Yes, yes.

Alison: Do you think that's inevitable?

Sue: I suppose I was questioning whether, whether in the very act of constructing something like an artwork you are being violent because you are separating the thing from the world which encloses it. You're being violent in that sense of the word. It was a worry that took me through one of the last drafts of *Painted Woman*. I kept wanting to explore whether art is in itself violent, or whether it's a sort of energy that's not violent in itself, that it just makes that separation with the world. So I felt she had to take on that violence because it was part of the world that she lived in and maybe it's part of the world we live in and we have to take on that violence too. But we can use it in a different way. She uses it to paint. I suppose I believe that violence is inherent in the world, and that we can use it for destruction or we can change its meaning. Which is what she did. Partly writing for me is having a long debate. It's probably not so in early drafts but as I get deeper and deeper into the work, and arguments present themselves, I have to address them and they become another draft while I have another long argument about whether such-and-such is so in this case. I'm not universalising, I don't, it's an argument related to the particular world of the novel.

Alison: Have you read any of Janette Turner Hospital's? She seems to have similar themes in relation to photographs and the violence in capturing things there. And you said you were writing about mathematics and philosophy, there's a novel of hers — *Charades* — which uses a lot of physics and things.

Sue: Yes, I've talked to her about that because just as I was beginning *Leaning Towards Infinity*, it came out and I was very jealous! I think it's marvellous.

I love the way she addressed those ideas of physics. I thought that was marvellous.

Alison: So how are you using — it's about mathematics and mothering isn't it? Sounds like a wonderful combination!

Sue: The thing I like about writing — is that it is really mysterious to me. What I meant to do was write a novel about a woman who was a mathematician and who discovers this wonderful equation but she doesn't want to tell it to anybody an equation that unifies everything: a theory of everything. And at the same time I was writing a book about mothering, a diary of the first year with my baby which I actually took down notes for but had never written up. And I found myself, I found myself compelled to write the diary when I was supposed to be writing the maths book and I felt very guilty about this. And after a year of struggling with guilt and truanting from my novel, it came to me one day, this wonderful insight that anybody outside could have said with a moment's thought, maybe they're the same book!

Alison: So, it sounds like you have a lot of contact with other writers, do you?

Sue: I suppose I do, yes. Yes, I love talking about writing because I find it so mysterious and, so unfathomable. So in a way humbling because you seem to be doing something and you find that you're actually doing something else. I remember thinking when I was writing *Painted Woman* that the progression of the novel felt like painting, that each stroke not only changed what was ahead but changed what had gone before. So everything was in a state of flux, and if you tried to pin a pattern on things too early the whole thing died. You had to let it move of its own accord because I think there's a bit of the mind which is much more, much richer than the rest of the mind works and if you allow that to work then the writing gets richer too.

(Second Thoughts: There's a section in *Painted Woman* where Frances is at last painting the way she was born to paint, and she realises this as she works — you have to let the painting paint itself. As I was working, I was having the same realisation about writing.)

Whereas if you try and stick it in a little framework of meaning, for me that doesn't work. I'm influenced by a book that I acknowledged somewhere in the front of *Painted Woman*, a book by Marion Miller called *On Not Being Able to Paint*, where she — do you know it? [No] — where she talks about trying to become an artist and she couldn't do it until she allowed some other part of

herself to paint without setting patterns and formulae and instructions and subjects for herself, until she learnt to let the painting paint itself. Then she became fluent.

Alison: So do you imagine yourself having readers, when you're writing?

Sue: No. I would be far too shy to do that. I would be terrified. There's some point, very very late in a novel, where I could conceive of having readers but that's when I've got rid of all the embarrassing bits or as many as I can without taking the whole thing apart and starting again which is always a huge temptation. That's right at the end when you're correcting the spelling. *Painted Woman* is knee high in manuscripts. And the new one, I know because I posted it back from Greece, the first lot of notes — not even the drafts, and I'm only talking about being at first draft stage — was fourteen kilos when I posted it from a Greek Post Office. So, did I answer your question? What did you ask me?

Alison: What did I ask? Ah, it was about talking to other writers, miles away!

Sue: Ah yes, I do all the time. Incessantly. Yes. About the writing process, if they'll talk about it. Some people are intuitive writers and don't really want to talk about their process, in fact they feel that it's revealing something that ought not to have words put on it. I don't. I would never show early drafts of my work to anyone. I fear they'd think I'm deranged! But I like talking about the process. Part of it is that writing feels like a sort of madness. And it's comforting to talk, particularly to other women writers, to see if they share the madness because then there's a sense that if many of you are mad then that has its own form of normality.

Alison: So, how do you relate to critics and the academy. How do you see your work as, do you see your work as fitting into that sort of situation?

Sue: Mm. I read bits of critique in the academy with horror. No — terror is the word. Terror. Because I don't feel I fit in. And it goes back to what I said before — I don't know how to fit in, I don't know how I would create, given other people's conceptions of what needs to be done in literature. And I agree there are things that desperately need to be done, particularly in women's writing. The fact is, I can only do what I can do. And, that's the reason for my terror. I would like to be doing what I should be doing. But I can only do that

which appals and fascinates me. It's my own private fantasies I'm dealing with. I mean, back to your previous question about thinking of readers, there is a point very late in a novel where I'm hoping I'm reaching someone. But I very much follow the idea that I'm not Robinson Crusoe so there will be somebody out there who might see the world this way. *Painted Woman* I wrote with no concept of readers at all. I don't think I would have written it if I'd have thought of them. For me writing, initially, was a process of, a step of great courage, because I grew up in a very chauvinist family, a large family. My father, whom I adored, had a firm concept of the place of women which was behind their man and women mustn't sort of push themselves forward. It was a bit like the father's attitude when he tells the little Frances that women's mouths move in an ugly way when they're being assertive. My dad never said that. I must say my father was an artist but he was nothing like the artist in *Painted Woman*. Nevertheless he had such firm ideas of the position of women that I always assumed that books were written by men to the point where when I read Harriet Beecher Stowe I thought Harriet was a man with a funny American variation of Harry. I mean I just assumed men, because they were gods, did the writing and I was very timorous about writing. But I also felt it was something I had to do, to make meanings for myself, however my mouth moved.

Alison: So do you think women write differently to men?

Sue: Yes, yes. One of the things that propelled me through *Painted Woman* and still propels me is this incredible loneliness that we're not known as females, that we're not known in any way, that there are no stories about us. That, when you think: What's it like to be a mother? I'll pop to the library and get a few books about mothers. I don't mean, like how to mother, I mean like the imaginative experience of mothering, and there's nothing there. And it's so easy to think, My god, I'm all alone. I'm the only person in the world that's a ramshackle mother and everybody else doesn't need stories about them, that's why there are no stories. Or sexuality. I think, how do I *feel* sexuality when all the stories seem to look at sex from the man's point of view? How do I feel sexual, when I haven't got a whole web of stories inside me and I hold myself up and there are no stories to show me how other people who are women feel about it? I think there's this incredible gap that you feel as a woman that there's a whole lot of stories and a whole lot of language out there and it only partly fits you. You feel an outsider. You feel like someone crouching on the sidelines, wanting to join in but not being able to and thinking, Well the game

is really not for me. And that's what compels me to write, that feeling that I want to tell, tell it like it is. But of course I don't know what it is objectively because I have always been in a culture that doesn't fit. I mean, I know a little of what it's like for children of migrants because my mother was Spanish, although she was first generation, and my father was English and it's rather similar. You don't quite fit in the country that you're in, and you're always thinking that over there somewhere might be your real home. And, as a woman, our culture is somehow not our home, and I want to try to make it my home by writing about a woman's experience. So I feel, I feel a tremendous compulsion to write about life meticulously and to see it as truthfully as I can. So I want to mix up, say, ideas that fascinate me with minute details of how to shell peas, because that's been something that I've experienced. I want to move across that whole sort of spectrum of domestic and metaphysical truths, because that's to me how women's minds work, well, my mind works like that and my friends seem to too, particularly friends with children. They're talking about an abstraction one moment and worrying about how to deal with a lettuce the next.

Alison: So do you find a difficulty with language?

Sue: Yes yes yes. I fight with words all the time. I mean, a simple phrase can take two pots of tea. But I feel obliged to explore it. As if for the first time. If I, if I render anything in the way other people render it I feel I'm being untruthful. I'm telling a lie. I feel an enormous compulsion to try to put words on it that really fit my experience, if I can. Of course, I'm a long way from it because I'm making the same mistakes as everybody else. But I still have that compulsion. Yes. So it takes me a long, long time and many, many drafts. If you looked at my drafts you'd see, for example I'm trying to get an image for something and I, it may be on the twelfth draft that I finally am satisfied. Sometimes I'm never satisfied. It just has to go as it is and I have to say, Well it's as good as I can make it at the moment.

Alison: So what are some of the writers that you admire that seem to capture...

Sue: My all-time favourite writer is Marguerite Duras and *The Lover*. I'm reading her *Summer Rains* at the moment. She was a really enabling force to me. I'd rattled to the end of what I thought was a first draft of *Painted Woman* — I was working in Greece at the time — and I came back to Australia and I picked up *The Lover* at a bookshop and as soon as I read the first paragraph I thought, I

know how to do this novel! If you looked at my novel you'd wonder what the connection was! Well, I suppose I felt that she had that quality of inwardness that seemed to me to be true to a woman's experience. To me the whole method of telling events as a story seems not to be how we experience life. Life seems to me to be composed of people saying something with a whole lot of silence going on in between. And I'm fascinated by people's chatter, and the depths of their thinking between the chatter. And I wanted to do that. I can see that she plumbs those depths. She doesn't have people chattering. In fact the people speak in a very idealised way but she plumbs those depths in an incredibly honest way. Do you think so?

Alison: I haven't read any of her. [I did the next day.]

Sue: Oh, then you have a lovely experience in store.

Alison: Yes, when I finish this!

Sue: How are we going? Is the tape still turning? Now look, this is fun for me but I don't want to just ramble on and have you feeling things are just a waste of time.

Alison: No, this is great. I love the structure of *Painted Woman*, because it seems that by the time you get to the end you realise you have been on a sort of guided tour of all of these paintings, and I've found that most of the novels I've been "doing" are really innovative in structure, and the structure seems to relate inherently to the subject. Did you find, did you have to think a lot about the structure?

Sue: Yes. The structure came very slowly. It was, ah. Shall I tell you how the whole thing, the whole process? First of all I was writing a funny book called "Wigs" and it was very external, an external narrative, and I was at about page one hundred and quite bored. Then somebody said to me, we were standing on a footpath: Did you read the newspaper article about the man who murdered his wife in bed and got away with it, got acquitted? And, I said No. And this person said, Apparently he murdered his wife in bed and the judge said, Any *man* could do this in a moment of passion. And it was one of those moments when the world shifts. I went home shuddering, I couldn't get it out of my head for days and days. I was so obsessed by it, I never saw it in the newspaper article, I didn't want to go and look it up, but I started writing a

newspaper article on the typewriter, obsessively thinking about who the judge was and his world attitude that made him able to make such a judgement. And I was grieving. I was grieving for the unknown woman. Her fate. Our fate. Then I went overseas for the first time and I wanted to finish "Wigs" and what happened was that it kept on turning into what eventually became *Painted Woman*. It kept on centring on that judge and that judgement. And I made a deal with myself. I said, Okay, this "Wigs" will be the second part of a new novel and now I'll write the first part which explains the main character. A friend of mine had read "Wigs" and said, This woman in this novel, she's so self-abnegating. Why is she so self-abnegating. And I said, Okay, I know why she's so self-abnegating. I haven't explored it, but I really do know. Because of the woman who was murdered in bed, I knew. So I thought I'd write the first bit up to "Wigs" and then "Wigs" would take over and there'd be a lovely thick novel. And what happened was that the story of that judgement took over. As I wrote it I became more fascinated by that man's judgement of women and I suppose what I did was — this is an indictment of judges — I gave that judge's attitude to the little girl. And then I watched her realise this. And all that relates to what you just said, and I can't remember the question you just asked me, I can't remember what it was.

Alison: It was about structure.

Sue: Oh structure, right. So I wrote that story to what I thought was its end and then I had my baby. And I hadn't done anything for about six weeks after the birth and an old woman's voice, the more mature woman's voice, started talking to me. At first I thought it had nothing to do with the novel. Then I realised that she was actually a counterpoint to the little girl, and that she was indeed Frances when Frances had grown up, and she'd shifted considerably. And that gave the structure. I began to realise that the novel was to be in various parts and that the mature woman artist was taking us through a gallery and it suited the idea of a triptych which I've always loved as a form. But it was a process of lots of work and only very slow realisations. It's as if you write towards a thought. Writing to me is actually like talking. I feel like a sleeping dog most of the time, and then I write and then it's as if I'm having a really good conversation with somebody. White paper is wonderful. It's a great friend. Blank paper.

Alison: Like the letters in Margaret Coombs' book when she writes to the piece of paper.

Sue: Yes.

Alison: Did you read that book by Davida Allen called *Close to the Bone*? That's really interesting, about a mother who is an artist and painting out her fantasies, and how mothering affects her life as an artist.

Sue: No, I haven't yet. Yes, I must read it. It's been on one of my lists of things to read. You're going to interview her?

Alison: Yes, I "interviewed" her by post, which was really interesting. She sent about ten pages back which was great. She lives a bit out of Brisbane. Well, I think we've covered everything that I wanted to. Is there anything that you want to tell me as someone who is working on your work, someone who's using your work in an academic way?

Sue: I think it's lovely you should bother. No, I mean that. It seems to me that until novels are reviewed and criticised as the works they *have* to be, there will always be a process of evaluation quite spurious to the artist. Probably not spurious to what some people see as what the times are about, but then the problem is that you don't know what the times are about, we probably will only know afterwards. Perhaps future generations will be able to look back and define it for us but we can't crystalise it now. It's just that I feel criticism is quite arbitrary. I've found some women very impatient with writers who don't do what needs to be done.

(Second Thoughts: So I think a critic must look at how well a work does what it's trying to do, rather than take what is really a moral position.)
What are your thoughts on that? Do you think I'm being fussy?

Alison: No, I find it a real battle with my work because I find the way I've been taught to analyse literature necessarily implies a valuation, and a hierarchical valuation which is one of the things which I'm trying to get away from in writing a feminist thesis and using feminist theory but it's really difficult to get away from it, from critiquing it and saying it does this but it doesn't do this. And I find it a real battle in myself, trying not to do that. The only way around it I can find is by commenting on it, by being aware of it.

Sue: Yes, I suppose you feel you ought to show the lack. It's just that no one artist can, I mean there might be somebody who's really in touch with the zeitgeist and can get, fully address it. But the zeitgeist may not in the end matter. It

may seem awfully important now, but in ten years time when the book is still around it may not. Look at the way feminism's changed since the seventies. I much prefer what I hear and what I read in feminism now, to what was going on in the seventies. The seventies, looking back, look silly, naive. Don't you think? It was a time when we had to insist we were equal with men. We hadn't the sense of ourselves as being a different society almost. And now that there's much more commonly this sense of the different society, a unique cultural environment, I feel much more comfortable because it seems to be much more truthful — much closer to the truth. I'm not suggesting we were lying before. But ideas evolve, and that's what we were talking about, the emergence of ideas. These things can't be known immediately.

Alison: Yes, I find it really difficult. I've just started writing book reviews and I find it really difficult criticising people who I really admire too. I find it, it's really a contradictory impulse. I don't know if I like book reviewing!

Sue: You asked if I read much literary theory. Do you find that fiction writers actually write from ideas?

Alison: From theoretical ideas?

Sue: Yes, a sort of illustrated Irigaray?

Alison: No, not really. I find that a lot of them are informed by those ideas and most have read bits and pieces of theory but when they come to the writing it comes from a different area.

Sue: Yes, I think that's true of me too. I'm informed by the ideas that really hit home and they change my life, and by changing my life and my attitudes they certainly affect my writing. But in no sense am I doing an illustrated Irigaray. But, for example, when I read "Mother with your milk I suck ice", that meant so many layers of things to me, and someone, maybe it was Elizabeth Grosz, talked about the mother as a lost territory, that we look back through the mother as a lost territory and maybe that's why we write about her so badly. That phrase struck home. I suppose it's a bit like that newspaper article I told you about, where I didn't need to read more, it had enough significance to carry me through for a couple of years.

Alison: Yes, I'm finding that with the theory and the fiction I'm reading too, that it's having, making great effects on my life as well, which means that I read other sorts of theories and information and it's all so integrated. It's difficult to separate.

Sue: Yes. I suppose I'm trying to integrate maths ideas and mothering. I have a certain theoretical framework that makes me determined to do that, no matter how difficult. Because the disjunction of it is part of what worries me about our culture's attitude towards mothering. That maths in the "high" culture and the bond with your child is in the low culture, and I want to show that there isn't that distinction there. There isn't that hierarchy.

Alison: So when can we look forward to this?

Sue: I hope by the end of the year there'll be something.

Alison: Well I've got eighteen months to finish so maybe I can get it in before I finish.

Sue: Have you? Well if you do, if I finish it I'll send you a copy. I'll certainly try. I think in a way it's wonderful to be a woman writing at this particular moment of this century because there is, it's unexplored territory. We're exotic to ourselves. And so any little exploration we can make feels, well feels to the writer, exciting.

Alison: Mm. Have you read much on post-structuralism?

Sue: I keep trying to, and I, I feel it is a duty and I try to. I find it, the language very difficult but I struggle with that. So I sort of have and I haven't. I've been to two courses on them. Sort of mini courses. Why?

Alison: I just wondered, I guess because I haven't read that much on it but it's sort of infiltrated through the women theorists that I've read.

Sue: I live in such a state of intellectual flux that I'm very affected by almost everything I read. But, I wanted to say something to you when you were talking about the academic world, the academy. This isn't about the academy but it is about reviewers. One of the things that distressed me a lot about the way *Painted Woman* was reviewed and everybody just about was very very kind and generous, but people kept on seeing it in ways that I suspected that

they wouldn't if it had been written by a man. Does this sound like sour grapes?

Alison: No, I noticed, I was thinking the same thing when I was reading the back cover, when, I've forgotten — was it Thomas Keneally saying it was written about a woman and then it becomes more universal, was it something like that? And I was thinking well it was written as much about a man as about a woman. How did you react to them?

Sue: Well I was terribly pleased that he said nice things at all. I expected everybody to remain entirely indifferent. But I suppose I meant on a more general level. A lot of reviewers said it's a girl who's besotted by her father. Or, they said, I got a review in England that said it was a novel about domestic violence. And that is very different from what I thought I was doing. Certainly domestic violence is in it, but it isn't the whole of what I thought I was doing. I mean, maybe it's just that everybody approaches a novel in different ways. They've got every right to make a decision on what it's about. I really believe that the reader has as much part in making the meaning as I do. I want to write like that. I don't want to be an authoritative figure. So they can say it's a novel about domestic violence but I thought it was about a conjunction of a whole lot of things. I was very worried in the later drafts about whether art is a violent act in itself. I mean that goes right to the depths of what I'm doing as an artist, in regard to my position as an artist, and the mature Frances talks a lot about this. What's your opinion on that? I mean you brought up the idea of art and violence so you obviously noticed it. Maybe their copies of the novel had lost most of the pages.

Alison: Yes, I did because the mature Frances was talking about it and incorporating it, but the painting that's given the main focus, *The Dance*, seems to be liberated from that violence. It's sort of, the specifics of the body and acknowledging her body dancing. So, I noticed that element, I mean, domestic violence is an element in there, yes, in conjunction with a lot of other things as well.

Sue: I sometimes think if I'd been a male that that issue might have been addressed more.

Alison: Yes, yes it's difficult to know.

Sue: I hoped in the reviews for some discussion of what other people thought about that idea, because it had worried me enough to occupy me all those drafts. In a way, I suppose, when you finish a novel and it's been published, if you have to go through the process of reviewing, you'd like to know other people's reactions to the ideas in your work, what they think about it so that it can be a dialogue between you and the people that write about it.

Alison: The thing that came to my mind when we were talking about it at the beginning was some of Susan Sontag's ideas on photography, about how some tribal people regarded that photography steals away the soul and is a violent act in possessing something of the person. Which, I guess relates to that idea of objectifying things, removing them.

Sue: Yes. That's why it goes to the depths of things. That, in a way although I was writing about painting I was also writing about writing. I was cheating making the parallel between them because I really don't know, from first hand experience, about painting. I mean I've watched painters, I've never done it myself. There's an act of artificiality in writing that goes against the truthfulness I'm trying to get to, and you've got this tension between the two. If you shift everything away but the thing you're looking at, you shift away the things that are inessential. But in the very act of making that shift you've changed the nature of the thing so inexorably. So, is it in, in its very fabrication, is it a lie? That divorcing of the complexities of the world so you can look at the thing might end up ruining the thing and the whole endeavour.

Alison: So do you think writing has a purpose, like, a political agenda, or... Why do you want to write?

Sue: Yes. I do. A friend of mine, Patti Miller, said that when she holds herself up to the light she sees an interweaving of many stories who tell her what she is. I suppose that to me is a political agenda — that we all are our experience because of the stories told to us. I imagine that my little daughter goes around with gradually more and more complex stories in her head about who she is. If we have stories that discount us, that make us feel that we're not part of the culture, or that don't explore what is really our experience, and I think that's happened with women, then it causes us not to live fully. So my political agenda is to try to tell stories that make us know who we are. I'm not sure who I am, but that's part of the exploration. Do you agree with my position? I imagine you do.

Alison: Yes. I've certainly found it very eerie walking around Sydney, and I've only read stories about Sydney, and I've come across places that I've read about in stories and it feels really weird to have read about it first and then experience it.

Sue: Yes, yes I have that feeling when I go to England. I wept the first time I put my hands in the Thames. I mean, all my childhood reading was stories where people in an English culture talked about English things in an English way.

Alison: Well, thank you for that. It was great.

Sue: Well it was a pleasure. It was fun for me...

SUE WOOLFE RESPONDS

COMMENTS ADDED TO TEXT OF CHAPTER DRAFT, JUNE 1994.

p.191. Exactly! I wanted to seduce the reader into Frances' youthful position! At the end, she realizes "all I'm doing is painting." Molly is a microcosm of Frances' movement — she begins in the 'bourgeois art' position and ends up saying: "I love art, but I can't stand the smell of it". Frances feels the same, but keeps on painting.

p.207. (before "The turning point ...") But more importantly,

p.208. (before "Appropriately, this painting is ...") This is her turning point. From then on, "I know at last my life's purpose etc." [164]

p.211. I wanted "all I'm doing is painting" to bring the mythology of the grandeur of art crashing, and to replace it with the things that Frances' life struggle is about — the fantastic determination needed to paint, the painful nurture of the creative spirit, the uncertain worth of the whole endeavour, and the wild heroism of the woman artist.

p.213. I wanted to underline the irony of the myth that certain people, particularly men, use violence: I believe that violence uses us.

INTERVIEW WITH DAVIDA ALLEN

Davida Allen lives west of Brisbane and when I contacted her for an interview she suggested we write because of her location. As with the other writers, I sent Davida a page of questions to indicate the areas in which I was interested, and stressed they were guidelines from which she was free to stray. In her reply she kept strictly to the questions: it was the format of her correspondence that "strayed" and has taken much consideration in how it should be presented.

When I "tidied up" her letter to render it more "acceptable" in my academic format, it began to take on a very different tone: three consistent fullstops in every ellipsis was not the same as having two, and then six; one exclamation mark signified something quite different to the twenty Davida typed. The decorated envelope and accompanying hand-made Christmas card also signalled a departure from the "conventions" of correspondence.

In her reply, I sense a gentle mocking of academia and criticism which is challenged by her refusal to "conform" to its writing conventions. As she tells me, "I don't think FOR A WRITER I am making myself terribly succinct here Alison!!!", but that seems to be one of her points. Her "mis-spellings" have taken on a life of their own for me, after (necessarily) frequent proof-reading: "frogs muscus" seems much more descriptive than mucus; parriarchal seems to take the sounds of paring, pariah, and the witch's pyre to patriarchy. It is apparent that Davida can spell, so I don't think my replication of her words will reflect negatively on her writing ability.

So, at the risk of appearing negligent and "unscholarly", I decided to let Davida's "unruly" words speak for themselves. Emphasis and spelling is hers throughout.

~~~~~

3 December. 1992.

Dear Alison,

Whenever I do these question things, I always manage to answer no. 2. in no.1. and so on and so on....so I will just write little answers and you can decide which question they relate to best.

I find answering questions difficult, because there is never a right answer...and what is seemingly sensible to me today can be stupid tomorrow because of the influences that can play on the vulnerability of creativity.

In my novel, I wanted the relationship between my writing and my reader to be intimate and ADDICTIVE.

Davida Allen the writer hides inside Vicki Myers. Through her, I hoped to set up an immediacy of intimacy with the reader.

Vicki Myers was the paint. The brushstrokes were words.

Davida Allen the writer is not a reader in real life!! I wrote the book to tell a WHOLE story ...My painting has been bits and pieces of the same imagery .

I wanted an assured intimacy of audience that I had more control of than in my paintings...and the medium of telling a story inside a book was a logical answer.

Giving the audience trust through this intimate medium, Vicki Myers then launches into her desire to entertain...at the same time warning her listener.."you don't hav to read it!."

I personally hate books where I, as the reader, am aware that someone is the author of what I am reading....by this I mean..a history book is often written by a historian giving a special slant on things that have happened..and the reader is constantly being reminded that what is being read is from the author's point of view.

Or I have read some books where just the manner of writing is peculiar to This Happened...in the past tense.

IN THE PRESENT TENSE....I PERSONALLY CAN GET INTO IT AS IF IT IS HAPPENING NOW..AND I AM A PARTICIPANT OF IT.

The books that I relate well to ( remembering I am not a big reader..) are when I become involved in the writing forgetting it had a writer to make it happen long before I picked up the object. I don't think FOR A WRITER I am making myself terribly succinct here Alison!!!

WRITING FOR ME IS LIKE I PAINT. I WANT THE PAINT TO HOLD IT'S SMELL IN THE VISUAL IMMEDIACY OF THE BRUSH STROKES AND THE AFFRONTATION OF MY SUBJECT MATTER AND THE COMPOSITION OF THIS.

Most of my images in paint are isolated thoughts about a lot of complexity.

For instance...There is a painting called "Mother driving children to swimming class." It is an image of abstract Mother and children.. a woman behind the shape of a steering wheel and three toged shapes of children behind her, each with a black seat belt shape in front of them. The whole canvas depicts the inside space of the car. The colours are hot mauve and pink and yellow. Emotionally it is the mother's havoc.

This specific image is a frozen example of the plight of the woman at home with the children.

Each canvas for me is a specific SENTENCE if you like. I found the writing more complete a picture...In a PARAGRAPH..I could write about what happened just before the children got into same seat belt swimming class car,.....and what the mother was thinking while she was driving to the swimming class, and what smell the car had, and what the sound of the rain on the car roof was like....

ALL THIS SIMPLY EXPLAINS MY EXCITEMENT AT TELLING A STORY ALISON.II

GOING BACK to how I personally don't like the idea of being aware of the author of a book...but wanting the story to be coming out of the mind of the characters inside the story....the little face through out the Close to the Bone Novel is a subtle reminder that this is Vicki Myers...she could be the child on page one who had doodled her image throughout the pages of the story...or it could be Vicki's face just there to RE EMPHASISE her presence///// so that the reader is never ever given a chance to think WHO WROTE THIS BOOK...because the strength is I AM WITH VICKI MYERS HERE ON EVERY PAGE..

"WHAT IS A PORTRAIT .*Images of Vicki Myers*" ART COMPANION BOOK is a little tongue in cheek with what I have just said ...in that I as the artist Davida Allen want people to see my images about Vicki Myers...Of course they are said to be Images of Vicki Myers...and I had to make myself her in excuting the images..but like the chicken and the egg....Davida Allen was an artist before Vicki Myers and so I think maybe the art companion book is a complex message....for art historians it is a playing with a fictious character as an excuse for Davida Allen to continue in her output of what she has always been up to.....expressing her own life.

For the audience who has never heard of Davida Allen the artist, and who picks up the art companion book *Images of Vicki Myers What is a Portrait*....HOPEFULLY it will entice them into being inside visually with this character and they will want to read her story...

Alison...may I say at this point....the underlying need to write and draw both books was my insatiable greed for audience !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

"You don't hav to read it."

Being a mother has allowed me to see the child's intrinsic qualities that as an adult I have forgotten my own! ( make sense? quite a bad sentence, but I like it!!)

I am always hearing my children's vulnerability in their thinking I am not interested to read their English essay...their vulnerability is because they think I will get irritable with them because I look too busy to fit it in..or they already know it is riddled with mistakes...or that maybe it is not going to excite me....and in the end..their ego rises up above all these nerve endings...and they really don't care in the end if I like it or not..they've finished it and they are quite pleased with it....but if I do read it..they are desperate that I will like it!!!!!!

and so, with the same intrinsic child vulnerability.. "you don't hav to read it."

In 1986 at my Survey Exhibition at M.O.C.A. [Museum Of Contemporary Art] in Brisbane...one critic wrote about my art .."she paints about life, death, sex without shame..." this was aimed at being a derogatory review...it is probably the most apt thing that has ever been written about my work!!

Over the 20 years I've been painting, it has become as plain as day, that my audience either LOVES or HATES my work...there has never been MAYBE. I am happy enough with this...I find it interesting that what I paint and now write about can actually make people so upset!!

You write.."By naming the book an autobiography, however, you already draw attention to the false divisions made between fiction and autobiography."

NAMING THE BOOK AUTOBIOGRAPHY IS TO TRAP THE READER INTO THE IDEA..THE LOGICAL IDEA..THAT VICKI MYERS WROTE THE BOOK ABOUT HERSELF..THIS IS THE TRUE MEANING OF THE WORD:"AUTOBIOGRAPHY".

So, having read the correct meaning..this is the story of Vicki Myers. written by Vicki Myers. the reader then sees it is written by Davida Allen.

Why is Davida Allen calling herself Vicki Myers?

Is Davida Allen Vicki Myers?

Who is Vicki Myers..could she in fact be anyone?

At the end of the book...at the end of the story...HOPEFULLY..THE READER has identified with Vicki Myers intimately enough and shared and empathised with her psyche..that it is totally and utterly irrelevant if it is Davida Allen..

I leaned on the experience of once,,a long time ago, having read Gertrude Stein's book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*....so, dear dear Alison...It's not an original idea by any means...but the critics and the readers all wallowed in my game...and so smiling like a cheshire cat, I read their articles and comments and don't care anymore about the heat of is it or isn't it me..."just read the bloody story..and if it really matters to you if it is or isn't Davida Allen...I think it sad..You have not got enough out of Vicki Myers...." I tell them..

THE OOZES ETC...ARE NOT THESE THE SIMPLEST OF THINGS PERTAINING TO LIFE.

I can't imagine writing a story and not mentioning them.

But ..you must understand..this is a painter writing....the thing I love most about when I am painting ..is the smell of the oil..!!!!

Re your question..what sort of a construction of a female artist did you want to create?

=I didn't.

The topic is Creativity.

If I had been a man artist...my story would have told of the masculine point of view.

I just happen to be female, mother, wife, artist....and I wanted creativity to be exposed in all these roles..NOT JUST IN THE BEING AN ARTIST.!!!!

THE BOOK.....I HOPE.....SUGGESTS...THE ARTIST FEEDS OFF VICKI MYERS BEING FEMALE, MOTHER, WIFE, LOVER.

I hope my images both in paint and in words can give a light at the end of the tunnel as it were, to deranged mothers at home with screaming infants!!!!!!

Needless to point out, dear Alison, the book started to be written when my fourth child was at school.

I could not see any fucking light myself when she was in nappies!!!!!!!!!!

SUBVERSIVE??? FEMINIST??? I tend to shy away from these words, as firstly I do not understand their current meaning...and also, I simply had a story to tell, and still have stories I want to tell..and images I want to paint..and they arrive out of my own angst...my art output is initially simply cathartic in a true selfish sense....and when it does get born and is viewed by critics and discussed in university theses ... I only hope to God the simplicity of the work is not analysed into complexity beyond it's reason to be born.

Obviously, you and any one else INTERESTED IN THE FEMINIST DEBATES, HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO HAVE YOUR OWN SPECIALIZED OPINION...BECAUSE THE WORK IS IN THE AUDIENCE DOMAIN..I have no control once I let it be born...But I struggle with the fear of how to say something without it's carrying a moral judgement.!!!!

..the artist in a patriarchal world.?????

I have no answers.

I only thank god that I have been blessed personally with a most remarkable man as a husband who is addicted to my artistic output.

I feel like a fat pig in it's pen, knowing there are a lot of starving pigs and unwanted and unloved and unsuccessful pigs.

What can I do?

Paint about what I know more vehemently.

There is a truth in the old saying about behind every great man is a great woman....The story of Vicki Myers is quite bluntly exposing the truth behind this artist is the husband.

I am riddled knowing there are so many potential Vicki Myers who do not have a Greg....I feel wretched at their lives..but what can I do?...paint my life more preciousy.!!!

There has indeed been articles about my work, describing the images or ME being obsessed with motherhood.

THE TRUTH IS = I AM.

HAVING 4 DAUGHTERS ...IF I WASN'T OBSESSED BY THE DUTIES IMPLICIT IN THIS ...IT WOULD BE A VERY SAD STORY I FEEL.

I AM GLAD I AM OBSESSED WITH THE ROLE.

WHAT FRIGHTENS ME THE MOST IN MY LIFE IS NOT BEING OBSESSED ABOUT ANYTHING. IT IS MY WORST FEAR.

Vicki often mentions madness as another role available to women?

...Does she???? I did not think she did.

The word fantasy is what I think you may intend in this question.

Madness is awful..Vicki does not want it..She is perhaps AS AN ARTIST, able to direct her madness...but if she could she'd give it away free to anyone who was stupid enough to want it!!!!

Alison,,,it is Fantasy..Imagination...that Vicki Myers is subconsciously suggesting can save the day....but this is my next book!!! Vicki did not really spell it out clearly enough in "*Close to the Bone*." She was too young to understand it fully....

Give me a couple of years!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The fragmented narrative style.....THIS IS JUST THE WAY I WRITE ALISON. I DIDN'T THINK IT UP...I PAINT THICK ..IT'S JUST THE WAY I PAINT.I CAN'T DO IT ANY OTHER WAY!!

I found dealing with sexual desire in the script easy..because it's as much a part of life as anything else. ( probably one of the most important elements to MY female psyche.)

It was easy to write about it...as easy as the imagery of the poohy nappies that are also Vicki Myers life as also Death of her father etc etc etc...

I have never in my life found it hard to talk about anything THAT I KNOW AND UNDERSTAND.

FEMINIST THEORIES....I am perhaps a true feminist in the specific sense of the word..to believe the woman is as good as any man..to be truly liberated in the household and work place and not be inferior...

But I am not painting or writing these issues Alison. Rather I am more interested in shining a congratulatory light on the women in the house doing the nappies.....on the woman struggling to maintain some sense of sexual self in her tired marital bed...some sense of worth at her demeaning day's housewifery...

and that is why I am slightly irritated by the obsession of the critic or reader who harps on the issue is this the story of Davida Allen ...I believe it could be any woman's story if she had the chance to have a loving husband!!

and for those women who do not have this luxury, this life support, maybe they can concentrate on their own potential through living Vicki Myers hopes and aspirations and do something to make this come about in their own life.

I did not write the story to give out answers, or philosophies Alison,,,I just had a story I wanted to share.!!

I am not aware of Helen Cixous or Luce Irigaray ....

I am sorry if I am frustrating you with my retardedness!!!

Funny really....I have Peta, my 19 year old daughter, who is doing all this stuff at the A.N.U!!!! OF COURSE SHE WON'T EVER MENTION HER DUMB MOTHER in any of her essays on Feminism..!!!!!!! But she knows all these names you know. I feel old and stupid. But there's too much I can do that you and Peta can't and so for my own sanity I just can't allow myself to get upset about what I don't know!!

I am reading a book at the moment which I am enjoying. The reason I am reading it is that it was given to me by the author, whose sister is an artist and likes my work. Like answering your questions, Alison, I feel obliged to read this novel.

It is called *The Mint Lawn* by Gillian Mears. It got the Australian Vogel Literary Award in 1990.

I live a fairly secluded life, Alison. Secluded from people other than my family.

I have spoken at the occasional Women's Writers' Morning teas !!! and here I am spending my morning writing to you...I sometimes feel a terrible loneliness.. without any other artists as companions to meet and talk with .as I suspect would be the norm in a city life style...

This loneliness is acute with my writing aspirations also....

But I think it is just the way it has to be...I am concerned with the ordinary truth of living....family, sex, a vase of flowers on the table, frogs muscus on the windows, children reaching puberty, ...(I give you all the clues for my most recent work!!)...

PERHAPS IT IS JUST MEANT TO BE...THAT I AM LIVING IN ISOLATION, IN ORDER TO NOT BE DISTRACTED FROM THE SIMPLICITY OF DAY TO DAY LIFE...the DAVIDA ALLEN images of which both excite or offend the audience that views them.



Good luck with your Thesis, Alison.

I believe it is very important on a one to one level....that I reply to your questions.

In my own life, so often have I not been replied to when I was in your shoes, and I think it is sad when that happens.

I wish you every success.

Yours Sincerely.

Davida Allen.

## DAVIDA ALLEN RESPONDS

Allen's response to the chapter I sent her eighteen months later was in the form of four pages of collage. These were based either on pages of my text (that I had sent her), or on white paper on which was pasted various magazine recipes for onion soup. Paragraphs or sentences from my chapter were glued onto the pages, around and over which Davida commented in thick black text. Letters, words or phrases cut out from magazines or newspapers were included in her comments, so that the pages resembled those anonymous letters in old detective films. Most of the paper is cut with the zigzag of pinking shears on the pink paper of my chapter. There are also pictorial comments — illustrations of clothes from magazines, photographs of women (mostly in underwear) from advertisements — as well as scattered fragments of phrases enigmatically placed over the pages and the envelope.

The visual impact of this response was very striking for me. In the spirit of this impact, I have reproduced some of these pages. These follow the transcript of her comments, in which the magazine and newspaper phrases are indicated by capitals and Davida's hand-written comments are in lower case.

RESPONSE TO DRAFT CHAPTER, JULY 1994.

[over p.1.]

INCREASED UNDERSTANDING

KEY POINTS

Congratulations you're being the ACADEMIC is AMAZINGLY STYLISH and: at the same time THE VIEW REINFORCING "curiously so SO THIS IS WHAT I CAN'T SAY.

WHERE I'm at.... there is SPECIFICALLY NO CLINICAL FORUM!!

THE CAUSE OF THE SYNDROME IS UNKNOWN

CLOSER INSPECTION

'POINT OF VIEW'

THEORIES

WHICH GUIDELINES TO FOLLOW? DON'T IGNORE GUIDELINES

LAUGH

[over p.233 on Vicki's sexual passivity]

Maybe Vicki Myers just needs to be conquered by Greg because Because Because

A POWERFUL STRIKE

...she's the one doing all the Conquering in Every Other Field!!! ie: Mothering EXPANDING THE IMAGINATION Domestic Duties.

Is it the DISTURBING POSSIBILITY Alison: for her to want to be the one RAVAGED ENRICHINGLEY

[on p.238 re reading Vicki as some woman who's totally deluded]

This interpretation sadens me!!!

But But But — Obviously, you and any one else interested in the feminist debates, have every right to have your own specialized opinion. [previous quote by Allen pasted in and circled]

FOR THE REST OF US, SUFFICE TO SAY THAT IT COMBINES RAW POWER WITH ASONISHING ECONOMY.

[on p.241, arrow to *Painted Woman*]

....please write with name of Book etc. I think I'd enjoy this!!

Proof of my insularness .. not knowing this Book hey??

spelling on paint, get [corrected]

Good Luck Alison.

=It's Good!!!!!!

Davida.

anything I say please argue back with me. and if you hate

This interpretation  
saddens me !!!

30  
written about women's sexuality which might be used as  
theoretical starting points, like Davida Allen's. But for all  
or Viola's feminist art I still read her as some woman who is  
just trying to please men, who's totally deluded.

But  
But  
But  
...

... obviously with his *mea culpa* attitude means she passively  
accepts his apparently justified abuse.

Obviously, you and any one else  
INTERESTED IN THE FEMINIST  
DEBATES, HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO HAVE  
YOUR OWN SPECIALIZED  
OPINION. BECAUSE THE WORK IS IN  
THE AUDIENCE DOMAIN. I have no  
control once I let it be  
born... But I struggle with the  
fear of how to say something  
without it's carrying a moral  
judgement.!!!!!! (Allen inf)

For the rest of us, suffice to say that it combines raw  
power with astonishing economy...



Fig. 5. Letter from Davida Allen #1.

she's the one doing  
the murdering  
all the work toward exposing the repressive implicit in  
discursive representations of male sexuality, Allen flaunts  
Vicki's pleasure in that violence  
it's EVERY OTHER  
FIELD!!! is: Mothering  
the passivity of Vicki's sexuality here is the antithesis to

# Domestic Duties

Is it the disturbing possibility  
Alvin: for her to want  
to be the one

enriching **LEY**

423