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Rebellion and Resistance
Rébellion et résistance

Table of Contents / Table des matières

Daniel Salée
Introduction / Présentation ........................................ 5

Collin M. Coates
The Rebellions of 1837-38, and Other Bourgeois Revolutions in Quebec Historiography ........................................... 19

Peter Campbell
East Meets Left: South Asian Militants and the Socialist Party of Canada in British Columbia, 1904-1914 .................................................. 35

Émile J. Talbot
Literature and Ideology in the Thirties: Fictional Representations of Communism in Quebec ................................... 67

Guy Chasson et Joseph-Yvon Thériault
La construction d'un sujet acadien : résistance et marginalité .......... 81

Martin Papillon
Mouvements de protestation et représentation identitaire : l’émergence politique de la nation crie entre 1971 et 1995 .................. 101

Annis May Timpson
Royal Commissions as Sites of Resistance: Women’s Challenges on Child Care in the Royal Commission on the Status of Women ............ 123

Open Topic Section / Articles hors-thèmes
Bernhard Kitous
Un rêve de la foi publique au Canada? .................................. 151

Donna Palmateer Penne
Culture as Security: Canadian Foreign Policy and International Relations from the Cold War to the Market Wars .......................... 191
Review Essays / Essais critiques

Alvin Finkel
Rebellion and Resistance of Aboriginals and Labour ........................................... 217

Lynette Hunter and Susan Rudy
Living Together: Critical Writing by Women in Canada 1994-1999 ...................... 231

Valerie Raoul and Keongmi Kim-Bernard
Women's Writing in Quebec in the Last Five Years: New Products? ................. 257

Authors / Auteurs ................................................................. 265

Canadian Studies Journals Around the World
Revues d'études canadiennes dans le monde ....................................................... 267

Introduction
Présentation

Il est plutôt rare que l'on associe d'emblée l'idée de rébellion à la société canadienne. L'historien A.R.M. Lower a déjà dit des Canadiens anglais qu'ils étaient austères et dotés d'une imagination politique limitée. Et il n'est pas si loin le temps où le Québec évoquait surtout l'image d'une société ossifiée, réactionnaire et éminemment conservatrice. Pourtant, l'histoire du Canada ne manque pas d'épisodes importants marqués au coin de la résistance et de la transgression. Les soulèvements de 1837-38 au Bas et au Haut-Canada, celui du nord-ouest en 1885, plusieurs conflits ouvriers célébres et le terrorisme indépendantiste québécois des années soixante s'imposent à l'esprit comme autant d'exemples notoires de tourmente sociale qui devraient faire mentir le stéréotype selon lequel les Canadiens seraient un peuple placide, conciliant et peu enclin aux grands emportements populaires. Il est vrai qu'il s'est souvent agi d'actes manqués et d'échecs retentissants : l'histoire officielle a eu beau jeu d'en minimiser le sens et la portée.

Il n'empêche, quelle que soit l'issue de ces moments clés, l'histoire de la société canadienne, à l'instar de l'histoire de toute autre société, s'est déroulée et continue de prendre forme à travers la réalité des résistances les plus diverses aux manifestations polymorphes du pouvoir. Qu'il s'agisse de grands mouvements collectifs de remise en question ou de révoltes

The concept of rebellion is something that most people rarely associate directly with Canadian society. The historian A.R.M. Lower once wrote that English Canadians were "a dour and unimaginative folk," and it was not so long ago that the primary image associated with Quebec was that of an ossified, reactionary and eminently conservative society. And yet, episodes marked by a spirit of resistance and transgression are not lacking in Canadian history. The Rebellions of 1837-38 in Lower and Upper Canada, the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, many famous labour conflicts and the terrorist movement for Quebec independence in the 1960s come to mind as notorious examples of social upheaval which should give the lie to the stereotypical image of Canadians as a placid and conciliatory nation, little inclined to indulge in major public uprisings. It is true that those movements have often misfired and that they were resounding failures; consequently, official history has always found it easy to minimize their significance and their consequences.

Regardless of the outcome of those key moments, the history of Canadian society, like the history of any other society, has been shaped by, and continues to take shape through, the reality of highly varied forms of resistance to power, in its multifarious expressions. Whether we are dealing with major collective movements calling the status quo into question or with more ordinary
Lynette Hunter and Susan Rudy

Living Together:
Critical Writing by Women in Canada 1994-1999

Becoming Closer Readers

The exceptional fecundity of women’s writing in Canada has generated substantial critical response. Moreover, women writers in Canada frequently write cultural, literary and feminist criticism and theory. In a move peculiarly located in Canadian publishing and society, many readings and commentaries are simultaneously writings and translations. This jointly translated/transatlantically review limits itself to books from the last five years, and even more particularly, focuses on only a few of those engaging with reading, writing and translation. By translation we mean reaching across, out of, through and over the differences in our lives. For us, this has been an electronically-enabled reaching, with one of us in Europe and one in Canada. The position from which we are creating this review has made us especially conscious of how we read those acts of translation made by others also reaching over difference, difference in sexuality, in ethnicity, in gender, in language, in class.

One, and possibly the only, element common to all the books we are reading, is their acknowledgement of the difficulty and odd pleasure of negotiating difference. Lynette Hunter is commenting on seven literary/critical books on women’s writing by academic women. Susan Ruddy is commenting on nine books of essays written by women, only two of whom are academics, the rest writers. The books, published between 1994 and 1999, have all come into social discussion as books, but many contain essays written over a number of years, during a time of uncertainty in the women’s movement. Reeling from the necessary combat of the 1970s and 1980s which decried academic feminism as white, liberal and middle class, which pushed to the fore issues of ethnicity and sexuality in particular, many women critics turned to post-colonialism and gender studies.

Many of those who continued to write about women’s issues have done so in carefully delineated settings. To try to generalise about them would be ridiculous in a review essay of this length. Also, embedded into this opening comment is another recognition: that much of the work being undertaken on women is not yet in book form, nor may it ever be so, for it circulates as performance, article, essay, newsletter, diary entry and indeed e-mail. We have dealt with our task in different ways. But underlying the split in the writing, the lapse or difference, is our shared hope that we could develop a
Lynette Hunter

Falling in love with the text

Pauline Butiling’s Seeing in the Dark: The poetry of Phyllis Webb opens with an argument for the “value of situated and historicised criticism” (ix) that looks at the “recurrences, intersections and interventions within social and epistemological formations” in the writing. What results is not only a close and intense exploration of different ways of reading Webb’s poetry, but also one person’s history of recent feminist thought as well as her histories of Canadian literature and criticism. When Butiling, in the first chapter, speaks of Webb’s movement from a split sense of objective/subjective self to a questioning of “how” to break this apart (9), she describes her own processes. Webb is read as moving from Romantic (nineteenth century) to post-modern poets. Yet the process of Butiling’s close readings makes available to us, her readers, not only an understanding of why she wants Webb to develop post-modern poetics, but also, more importantly, a set of strategies for reading Webb into our own engagement. The reading that is offered demonstrates that Webb moves from being positioned within the struggles of the female subject under patriarchy to a “woman’s-tongue” language, including the language of the lesbian erotic” (22). The theory rehearsed in the background of this development comes from the academic feminisms of the 1970s and 80s, inflected by the more recent discourses of Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler. It is like watching a huge, powerful machine in the hands of an expert technician, coming down onto a complex texturing of silk threads and torsioning it through several degrees. For many people who decide to live in the conceptual shits of their time, this violence may feel familiar: a massive wrenching out of the representative position that is disorienting and frequently painful. Yet at the same time, Butiling steps delicately through the threads, working away so that we can watch the labour. Webb, we are told early on, blurs binaries “by imitating a seeing within the dark” (1), a darkness “intermingled with light” (2). She destabilises the lyric “I” with her “tone leading of vowels,” “the breath line” and “field composition” (21) that combines particle physics and gestalt theory. The dark that is woman’s lot in the blindness of representation is infiltrated by “nonlinear grammatical and discursive structures” (24) to “initiate a transformative process” (29). I was going to say that Butiling is teasing apart a dense, suffocating fabric, whose loosened fibres begin to let in light along the striations of the fibres, but that is not what is happening here. Instead a material change in the fibres makes them radiant with light as the writer and reader work on them. Butiling calls this work “free translations” (31).

The participatory reader is key to Webb’s writing, and is most fully studied in the concept of “clustering” where “particles of language cluster into different arrangements of rhythm, tone, sound, and meaning” (40) so that each theme, meaning and subjectivity only “temporarily cohere.” Both writer and reader “re-member” while they work on the text. Butiling then makes a superb move. She underscores any notion that these devices in themselves can provide a methodology for changing the “dark,” and insists on Webb’s growing attention to interventions in “restrictive social and epistemological systems,” (47) interventions that are local and interactive. This is especially important in Webb’s use of the ghazal form to create gaps in Western thought, and demands an ironic consciousness of the “impropriety of her borrowing” (65).

Among the strategies Butiling discusses is the use the white space as an “energized silence” (66), the long line/short line gaps of the verse, and different kinds of repetition of rhythm and sound. She proceeds to discuss the movement of pronouns, so pronounced in Canadian writing, from the Cartesian “I” to the “participatory I” in framing oppositional politics (81). All of the strategies, including a predominant use of intertextuality that is “imitation, theft, translation, allusion, parody, pastiche...” (90) builds an aggregate structure that leaves the poetic processes “visible” and particular. But a key element of the intertextuality is Webb’s attraction to the intertexts of “father figures,” often male poets. While she recognises her work, she asserts her difference from them. Butiling suggests that the effect of this engagement is that Webb establishes “a textual, social space for female subjectivity and agency” within that empowered position.

The penultimate section of the book rehearse the critical reception of Webb’s work, noting that “aesthetic judgements are necessarily informed by social values” (109), and that as people in positions of artistic power have shifted in the late twentieth century, so have the “ethics of the local... contextcised subjectivities” (111) also shifted. The shift in critical emphases has started to value Webb in far more interesting ways because her poems, according to Butiling, are precisely engaged with the local and with contextualised subjectivities. The final chapter offers us the “Bio as Text,” a “parallel text or intertext” (125), with a decisively written piece of literary history that takes in archival material, poems, history, opinion and analysis, to give a detailed pre- and pre-TISH perspective on Webb’s work. It is a background that illuminates the specific kind of “dark” Webb and Butiling are and are dealing with, but is properly placed after the work on strategies so that that labour of love is not forced into false oppositions.

A similar labour of love pervades Coral Ann Hollis’s book Margaret Anwood. While she moves the ground from language to genre, Howell’s begins with the same problem as Butiling: they are reading writings that they need if they are to find agency as women in a political system that basically ignores them. Each reader/critic translates the text into agential mode.
Howells says "Atwood’s fiction draws attention not only to the ways in which stories may be told but also to the function of language itself: the slipperiness of words and double operation of language as symbolic representation and as an agent for changing our modes of perception" (8).

At the same time, the reading is primarily focused on the way Atwood delineates the borders and extents of power as she plays with realism and its associated genres, testing their seductions, cruelties and abuses, their false representations.

The critical text here focuses on historical, social and political contexts for the writings, and is rooted in the field of discourse studies. It looks at the concept of "authenticity" in politics by reading Atwood’s development of the topos of wilderness, and demonstrates the acuity with which the writer questions the notion while simultaneously valuing it. Howells offers her own history of feminism, reading it through the structures of fantasy, the gothic, cultural displacement, science fiction and autobiography that constitute Atwood’s narratives. The political power they address is consistently contextualised within issues such as globalisation, Darwinism, pornography and gender construction. Howells interweaves questions of the "unaccommodated remainder" that men pose to some forms of feminism, the "Derrida domesticated" (56) into the deferred meanings of women’s lives, and the way that Atwood’s prose is so often a literal re-working of theoretical suggestions, as in her display of Cixous’ elaboration on gender differentiation in The Handmaid’s Tale. The acuity of the readings is found in their insistence that realism does not rely. There is no "referential plenitude" or ideological "truth". Yet just because Atwood works with elements within the subjectivity of women in western nation states today, just because she works with the commonplace and undermines its capacity to satisfy, the writing is unsettling, and Howells’ readings pick up on the nervous energy of desperate control.

What arrives strongly from the translations in this book is the way that Atwood’s writing understood, so many years before the women’s movement articulated it, the difficulties that would arise with white, liberal, middle-class feminism. Where Howells is most subtle, where she risks most, and delivers her body to the text, is in the commentary on the gothic. How the gothic genre asks the reader not to participate as an agent, so much as to become complicit in the structures of power. How the later work by Atwood in the gothic genre erodes and blurs the boundaries that we think lie in place between our “moral engagement” (10) as individuals and our subjectivity, between our bodies and their representations. And how any action that goes “beyond decorum” (81) invokes an “otherness” that has to be destroyed (84). It is as if the critic recognises the desperation of the story, the courage of the “indecent” woman who has to be annihilated (84). Atwood is concerned with the suffocating stench of the dark: our fears, worries, anxieties are her medium, and that we do survive the texts has its own radiance if we care to attend to it.

Alice Parker’s Liminal Visions of Nicole Brossard is dealing with concepts as with a fistful of snakes. Brossard’s work does have this effect on people: they feel as if they are staring into Medusa’s face, serenely located in the light flashing the conceptual lines unwinding in the open air, an impossibility for many readers to take on, an enchantment for others, a combat for some, an embrace for a few. Parker carries out work of immense care as she moves chronologically through Brossard’s texts. There is a need here for the critic/reader to instantiate Brossard as a writer moving from modernity (different from modernism) into postmodernism, and as this delineation comes into place the dependence of modernity on an edge of transcendence becomes clear. Transcendence is that element that has kept aesthetics going for most of the modern period. It promises us that we will overcome the inadequacy of language but simultaneously locks us into it. As a result, the early chapters of this book stage a tangle between the hegemonic structures of beauty and the gradual netting of an écriture au féminin. At the same time as reading is aligned with “unlearning” and writing with “learning,” reading and writing are both positioned as similarly directing us to memory work. Just so, Parker says that writing suspends our sense of “reality,” of history, that is tied to the representational or fictional. But what then of the hurried returns to social immediacy and political efficacy that occur toward the end of most of the early chapters?

Beyond that snarling of threads, Parker gets us to think that perhaps reading Brossard is instead about altering our body memory. We need to learn to breathe with the text, slowly, arresting time, breaking down the representative functions of words, their sounds, their look, their collocations, their syntax and grammar. This we do because the writer is also breathing with the text, through that huge second lung, the skin, the surface of syntax, grammar, wordplay, phonics, stretching it into different extents and shapes so that we distort representation, torision at the surface of containment. Although Parker does not write in quite this way, the reading would not be possible without her reading/writing, and she notes later that reading is “delirious,” getting closer to the surface. Yet, both reader and writer re-work the points of tension and torsion: as Parker notes, Brossard “displaces traditional rules and patterns, incites/inscribes sensual excitement.” This is work on the body, and the work-in-process is memory, and when memory articulates itself into the political it may not deal with “history” as a fixed past, but it does deal with history as the future. The need for the future becomes clearer when the critic’s reading moves on to the later books (96).

The analogy of the spiral, widely recognised as central to Brossard’s conceptual activity, allows Parker to set out the “contra-actions” of the writing from the 80s: outside/inside, reality/subjectivity, daily life/fiction, social programming/desire, evidence/epistasy, the dark night of patriarchal history/the luminous certainty of lesbian memory. The pairs are not opposites, nor even particularly contestatory, but part of a spiral with a
centre of inner “forgetfulness” (58). Parker goes on to elaborate on Brossard’s “fiction theory” as no longer linked to representation, but giving birth to reality (75). It is, however, a holograph, because it cannot be translated discursively beyond the frame. What is of philosophical note here is that situated textuality, the textuality of situated knowledge, does just this kind of work. If a central dilemma of contemporary Western thinking is to do with the extent of determination by ideology, the overdetermined, the “always already,” Brossard neatly opens another place. If we do not think in terms of ideology and the temporary holograph, then the holograph becomes the structure of another location in which activities happen in another way. Ideology does not go away, but its power to define the representations that allow us subjectivity is profoundly diminished. Furthermore, the memory-work of the holograph has considerable power over the skins of those representations. It is not a one-way street. We do have agency.

Significantly, when Parker discusses fiction theory she also introduces Wittgenstein’s work on the situated knowledge of the sentence. One of the knots in the reading is the early claim that Brossard is not doing “situated knowledge” existing alongside continual and ever more precise references to situated knowledge as the critical reading moves along. The knot locates Brossard’s important realisation that situated knowledge needs to be textualised. When Parker reads Brossard’s engagement with reading the writing of Dijana Barnes, this realisation enters the text. At this point, Parker begins to elaborate not only on the “generic woman” that overwrites the phallic mothers and daughters of representation and “reinscription reality as a revised ecosystem” echoing with the work of Donna Smyth or Laphne Marlatt, but also on the way readers invent themselves when they read (111), and on the various strategies that can help. When we “read, write, imitate, mirror another” (115), we take the “other” as a guide or translator into another possibility, something Brossard has called “virtual” but which retains none of the teleological connotations that now pressure the word from the computing world. The other becomes our community (116).

Parker says of the relationship between Barnes and Brossard, what might be the relationship between Brossard and herself, or between her self and her readers, that the text is subversive and intertextual, “it solicits a reader who engages a text as a lover, passionately, while reinventing the context of its creation and the material circumstances of the writer, collecting and collating all of the testimonies” (118). Readers and writers become translators, transforming subjectivity, here female subjectivity, as does the collaborative work of Daphne Marlatt and Brossard in their transformative work. A key conceptual shift read by Parker in Brossard’s writing from the late 80s is that of the agency released by distinguishing between the private and the intimate (174). The private is the alternative face of the subject, the repressed shadowland of the banal. But the intimate is reinscription of the individual, the overwriting of the subject/private that works on difference rather than on the principle of the same. Translation is taken not as the violence of the same, but as working on difference, in the “lapse” (167).

Parker’s readings then turn briefly to strategies for the generic woman, focused through Brossard’s rituals of reading that bring the reader and writer together into the inter-text, into the physical work on the body that the memory re-members in breath (skin) and poetry. The first ritual, of “trembling,” is the recognition of/by the body. The second, of “shock,” is the consciousness of the suffocating texture of representational words. The third, sliding, is for me the most complex because it locates, in the skin of the text, the intensity needed to trench the word into that “revised ecosystem.” Parker briefly promises a set of linguistic strategies, such as the activity of the verb, but does not push much further. And the fourth, breath, is the stage for the performance of our reinvention, the “stage on which poetry is enacted” (183). At the same time, the rituals are not chronological but cyclical. So much has been gestured to in this section by the preceding body of the book that it is almost disappointing. In retrospect, however, many of the strategies Parker engages are in the process of her earlier readings.

At this stage, Parker takes on the social and political dimension of Brossard’s textuality, and outlines a radically altered notion of “presence” as “particular, embodied subject positions” (203). Further, “To be present is to reject one’s location in a masculinist imaginary, in history, in fiction that masquerades [sic] a reality” (191), and to engage in body work. The body is the hinge between the social and the individual, and “Writing, poetry and fiction-theory... explore these thresholds” (206). Writing is the intimate scene of textual embodiment, for writer, reader and translator, as they work on the “lapse” (213). Parker’s brave embrace of the Medusa will translate many readers into love.

What I find interesting, from having written about Howells’ reading of Atwood and Parker’s of Brossard, is the enormous control that Brossard places on trembling and shock, which are presented as dangerous because of their complete rupture from reference (180). Curiously, Atwood, especially in her last three novels, focuses precisely on the apparently uncontrollable destructiveness of that rupture if there is no supportive community for the individual to turn to. And many of Atwood’s women are profoundly isolated. Brossard’s use of the word “lesbian” to delineate an “intensification and refinement of the word woman” (35) that is not conflated with “homosexual,” is withdrawn at many points in Parker’s text to argue for the social reality of women’s life with women. Brossard is not as simple as suggesting that Brossard’s generic woman can move on past fear because she has a lesbian community, or that Atwood’s women are caught in heteronormative patriarchy. There is simply no theorising about the heterosexual erotic outside of the heteronormative, a queering of the heterosexual if you like. There is yet no writing that positions the
heterosexual woman in a located place of radiant transformation, rather than the private hallucinations of representative subjectivity.

Smrto Kamboureli's Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada is a salutary reminder that the "racialised" body also has few located positions of value recognised by the predominantly white, mainstream, theoretical domain. Much of this book is not about women's writing, but about the way writing by writers designated as "ethnic" is read and theorised by academic critics. This is important because academic critics are among the few communities with the time and commitment (albeit induced at times by ambition rather than love) to work on new ways of reading. Through the educational system, they also form one of the most influential institutions for the dissemination of new reading strategies and hence new writings. However, the analysis prepares us for the last quarter of Kamboureli's book that emerges into my readings for this review because of the focus that her analysis gives to the racialised woman's body in Joy Kogawa's Obasan.

The argument centres on the wider reception of Obasan as a novel that reaches some kind of reconciliation or assimilation, a reception Kamboureli suggests, following Roy Miki, based on a postmodern notion of pluralised ethnicities. Pluralism functions through toleration, through implicit, invidious and hidden structures that demand "sameness." Kamboureli's reading of the novel situates Naomi's body as a memory site for race, gender, sexuality and nationalism, and reads the ways this memory is worked on by Naomi and the textual context for the constituting of her character. Despite Naomi's apparent affirmations at the close of the novel, the critic/reader of the writing argues that the character "misreads" (220), that the text engages us in a recognition not of Naomi's desire to assimilate, but of her bodily need to articulate difference.

Here, Kamboureli makes a distinction between her reading of "body" and Judith Butler's to which we should attend (180): Butler's early notion of the silent body permitted her to designate many of the ideologically disempowered as abject. But Kamboureli works on Kogawa's writing in a careful following of the threads that imbicate the language of the body into the language of the text. It allows her to read Naomi as a body that continues to be racialised by the representations of the society in which she lives, which is surprisingly, a generative reading. Rather than assimilation into the representations on offer, the fate of the desiring, abject, racialised other, Kamboureli would have Naomi's body as scandalous, different, hence full of possibility. Yet "possibility" for whom? Naomi? Kogawa? The critic? The reading? The community? (What community?) Certainly one possibility is the recognition of the continued othering of those visibly different from a young, healthy, white norm, and with that recognition, impetus to political change. But it is more difficult to see how the scandalous body can offer a location for working on articulations of need within the ethnic community itself.

Central to the collection edited by Barbara Godard and Coomi Yevaine, Intersections: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women's Writing, is this question of locations for working on articulations of need within communities of difference. One of the examples is indeed Kogawa's Obasan as the text of the hysterical, split subject, as a site for the "creative potentialities for splitting, of becoming, versus the fixity of the fetishized other in the elegiac discourse of loss and abandon" (45). The introduction, written by both editors, begins by underlining the importance of reading and writing, and proceeds to argue that India has developed advanced discourses for reading cross-culturally particularly because, like Canada, it is made up of many different cultures defined by language, yet unlike Canada, has addressed these differences for a much longer period. The collection will offer the opportunity for "dialogue among / minoritized groups outside the centre-periphery axis of hegemonic discourses" (12-13), and takes on theoretical positions from Jan Mohamed's "collective subject-position of the minoritized subject" (13), to McFarlane's "dead bodies" of those excluded from Eurocentrism (14), to Kristeva's "abjection" (latterly Butler's) (37), to Bhabha's logic of mimicry, of the series, of slippage in discourse (48), to Gunew's (Brossardian) vocabulary of the "virtual," "figuration with a speculative discourse of writing as research... as the embrace of fluid identity" (49), to Chow's claim that all literature is resistant (49), to Partha Chatterjee's "imagining of a 'community', a process distinct from, rather than co-termi-nous with, the consolidation of a nation-state" (50).

The thematic areas addressed are as follows: first, the rupture of identity posed with the loss of language (38); second, mourning over silence, or the agon with the mother tongue, the elegy of re-membering the maternal body; third, that the body provides a figure of genealogy in excess of the absent national language; and fourth, the body as the site of sexual difference. Just as with the previous readers/critics, these areas indicate the pulse of need within the textual engagements. Each of the essays on First Nations writing, by Yevaine, Sacat and Thompson, deals with the illusion of satisfied desire promised by assimilation. Yevaine relocates indigenous writers in a position of healing and change through their focus on an "integration of spirituality with politics" (69). The spiritual is associated with the oral in Sacat's study of Rudy Slipperjack's writing, and is the primary means for focalising the importance of the "Native tradition of community" (84). Thompson picks up the problematics of the braided oral text positioning Beatrice Culleton's In Search of April Raintree, and April Raintree as autobiographical versus collective memory, the latter being referentiality but constituting a "concrete and situational realism" (97) that invites "participatory performance" (98). There are gaps and slippages around notions of orality which rhetoric teaches us has just as much potential for fixity as writing, and around the situation of the critical reading, yet the readers are clearly preoccupied with the focus on the
autonomous individual that deprives them of the community support
needed for change.

Similarly, there are three articles addressing Black women’s writing in
Canada, by Godard, Krishna Sarabdhikary and Sunanda Pal. Godard
skilfully demonstrates the contesting discourses of socialist feminism used
by Black women writers and the “literary theory of Canadian feminists
[white?]” (108), that contains both within each “regulating discourse of
power” (111), and asks for a textual politics grounded on a notion of
“incommensurable differences” in which all parties may take part (113).
Sarabdhikary reiterates the notion of the loss and damage that occurs when
Eurocentric discourses determine the language of experience (118) and
argues that Dionne Brand turns not only to the memories of the past but also
to an “aesthetic community of resistance” to find “radically different
forms.” The attack on Eurocentric discourse is continued by Pal in her
reading of Claire Harris’ writing, as it attempts both to “de-colonise
the language” but also, importantly, to “reconstitute it” not only in a new
poetics, but drawing strength from the “nurturing aspect of female
bonding” (140). The insistent need here echoes the importance of the
supportive community, and focuses on the expression of difference.

The five articles on Indo-Asian writing in Canada, by Uma
Parameswaran, Kavita Sharma, Buvanath Harishankar, Soshan Shahani and
Susan Jacobs, raise issues of location. Parameswaran asks pointedly what is
“South Asian Canadian sensibility?” (146), and proceeds to situates several
rather different writers and different discourses. Sharma I shall return to.
Harishankar analyses the complexities of seeing and seeking, being aware of
difference and the problematic of defining cultural plurality, in writing
by Bharati Mukherjee. Both Shahani and Jacobs turn to the difficulties
posed by the writing of Himani Banerji. Shahani insists that the value of
Banerji’s work is precisely that it does not restrict itself to what Brossard
would call the banal daily, to a “complaint of a localised system” (183), but
turns ethnic issues into ethical issues in a critique of the larger global
political system. Yet her work is also local. Just so, her aesthetics is poised
between art and propaganda, concerned both with static identity. Writing is re-membering and re-collecting as well as “lapising” or allowing silences in the factual. This writing/reading in motion makes it possible to resist re-entering the static definitions of
representation, to alert a migrant rather than immigrant voice, that
continually attends to difference rather than locating itself specifically in a
new, fact-based place. Answering the concerns, Waring tends to ways we
can write a “strategic identity politics” through a reading of Helen
Weinzeig’s Basic Black with Pearls which plays with the realist genre and
its codes, turning the unproblematic into the surreal with repetitions and
displacement. One cannot read either the memory of the immigrant nor the
presence of the character referentially, and interestingly, this reading needs
“a space which makes it possible to imagine a heterosexuality beyond
patriarchy and ethnicity as hybrid and self-defined” (263). The final
interview by Sukhmani Roy reiterates these attempts to dislocate identity,
keep it on the move, with Kamboureli’s phrase “Playing the hopscotch” (267). Yet rather than another plurality, Kamboureli contextualises this movement as one that is “more concerned with the dynamics of an existence than a fixed ethnic identity” (267). Quoting Sneja Gunew, and echoing Brossard, Kamboureli says, “we move towards our origins. Our origins are in the future” (267).

The collection as a whole has a wide variation in tone from the formal to the descriptive to the authoritarian, but the consistent element is the desire for understanding: not only of the writings being read, but through those readings, of the locations of the critic/readers. At the same time, the reader of the criticism can feel that pulse of need, needing support, needing difference, needing locatedness for the writer, needing as a reader to be part of the situatedness, needing the invention of self that is not representative. The structuring of the articles into groups addressing writers by their ethnicities encapsulates the problem of needing the supportive community, to people precisely because they have designated “communities” which are locate the future woman, the woman who changes the hegemonic structures, and is no longer “minoritized.”

The work on First Nations women writers in Janice Acocoll’s Ishkwewak: kah’i yaw ni wahkamakanak/Neither Indian Princesses nor Easy Squaws is directly concerned with the hard graft of articulating selves that are neither representative nor even represented. Acocoll opens her work with a narrative of social location for herself, which is interwoven with political and historical events both in the public world of the nation state and in her personal world. It is an intimate documentary of the shame of difference that encourages us to assimilate (29), and then of the tough and painful anger when she recognised that she had become the “same,” being “heavily influenced by the white-christian-canadian-patriarchy” (or wccp: white-euro-canadian-christian-canadian-patriarchy) (30-31).

Acocoll’s readings address the death of images for indigenous people, and the appalling racism of the impoverished representations that are in circulation. She moves through the interconnection between racism and literary image, the activism by women in the years 1970 to 90 both politically and in writing, the subtle and invigorous representations of indigenous women by non-indigenous writers such as Kinsella and Lawrence, the changes that began to happen around the time of the publication of Campbell’s Half-Breed, the flowering of indigenous writings, her hopes and worries for the future.

The most intense reading of writing, translation, occurs around the work of Maria Campbell, who set out to decolonise the English language for her people (92). Immediately Acocoll enters the problematic of that act: using the English language, the language of oppression and abuse, using the term “half-breed” with all its derogatory implications, as a term simultaneously of pride, of anger and of daily life. Impressed with the range of representations for women that resists the binary of princess/squaw (96), the critic-reader also finds the writer caught into stereotypical comments on “Treaty Indians” and “Half-breeds” (99) which she later in life rejects. The reading points to an on-going dilemma, that we may, with Brossard’s language, palpitate a new skin for the representation, we may breathe it into performed reality in our words, but we do this bit by bit. Every stepalong the way is vital, literally. Unlike clothing that we put on, skin has to grow, and we have to live with what we have grown our bodies into.

What is interesting within the conceptual structures that other writer/readers are exploring in these texts is that Acocoll takes the position that she and her community are living and working in a location that is out with the predominant determinations of ideological power. Inflected yes, but nearly destroyed by it, and hence recognisably not part of it. In other words, her community is not a holagram, although she acknowledges its vulnerability saying that “contemporary Indigenous writers are writing their cultures back into stability and thereby assuring survival” (114). This refreshing trust in situatedness is built on a supportive community beginning to value its own difference. The strategies for that valuing offer metatexts for the readers reading Acocoll to take into their own labour of love.

To conclude, I would like to refer too briefly to Julie Cruikshank’s The Social Life of Stories. This reading of the stories mainly told by Yukon Native Elder women over the period 1970-85 is one of the most extraordinary labours of valuing difference I have read. This may partly because I find, as do most of my known co-readers, that the stories are virtually impossible to read. Cruikshank, whose editing of Life Lived Like a Story is a crucial contribution to the issues of representation and articulation, has done more than most academics to learn about the situatedness of the writings she attempts to read and to devise ways of valuing their difference. This of course is partly about the writers, writing, and more largely about the reader’s craft of translation, her ability to value difference in others becoming the skills and strategies she can deploy to value the difference in herself. Cruikshank says, in a summary of her project, that colonial expansion inevitably “threatened to dislodge or trivialize local systems of meaning, yet Yukon elders have never been deterred from telling narratives that address precise local concerns” (xiv). She notes, and later expands on, the “interplay of externally imposed categories with local concepts” and the implications for the speakers’ sense of “belonging in the Yukon” and that intersection with “regional and global issues.” And she concludes, modestly, by saying that the strategies she has deployed for reading may enlarge the “academic narratives” if “we take seriously the stories people tell about themselves” (xv). It sounds so simple. And it is significant that she deploys Bakhtin, Innis and Benjamin, early contributors to situated knowledge, as her guides. This is not a book about
women reading women, but it is one. And that hesitation over gender could prove helpful.

These texts, written by readers of writing by women, pose particular questions about the etiquette/ethics of aesthetics. For the most part, the critics here recognize that attempts at neutral comment, no matter how respectful, are essays into a system without desire let alone without recognition of need. All eschew the aggressiveness that forms from frustration with difference, a sense of helplessness in face of it, and are more concerned to work on ways of valuing it. So, close readings are labours of love within different contexts: they can be enclosed, they can be engaged and vulnerable. So, "theoretical reference" is an apology to understanding, a courteous courting/wooring of difference into the room, but also at times a hedging, an option-control, a hedge-fund to reduce risk, sometimes a cage, sometimes a violence. Not all engagement is violent, but all engagement takes risks. So, a "discursive" reading is always ironic, always works from known grounds although in differing ways: to repeat, to oppose, to contradict, to transcend. As the writer/reader reads through the writing writer or the writing writer reads through the written writer, in a negotiation of ideology, hegemony, subjectivity, representation: As the text negotiates the impossibility of saturating desire. So, a "situated" reading can be reductive or it can work allegorically at the event-horizon that necessarily changes its situation. Most critics or readers fall in love with the writing text, after all they dedicate their lives to it for several years. Even if their writing desires difference, the reader of the critic can feel the insistent pulsing of need through the arcs of impossible saturation. These writers, readers, translators, rarely merely tolerate difference, they learn to love it.

Susan Rudy

Sorting Out Our Differences

More vibrant possibilities exist in the multitude of voices now emerging in this country. These voices see the imagination as transformative, as leading out of the pessimism of colonial discourse, as making new narratives. (Brand, "Whose Gaze and Who Speaks for Whom" in Bread Out of Stone 168)

Women's critical writing published in Canada since the mid-1990s offers "vibrant possibilities" at the same time as it draws our attention to the difficult pleasures and responsibilities that accompany new knowledges. Like Dionne Brand, many see "the imagination as transformative" and believe we can make "new narratives." But the books I am about to review include a "multiplicity of voices" who question just who "we" are, who value what is "new" and imagine "making" (and unmaking) quite differently. My review considers nine books that I would like to introduce initially in terms of their contexts. Barbara Godard's Collaboration in the Feminine, on Women and Culture from TESSERA and Madekis Silvera's The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature are both edited collections of essays by a range of women writers and critics, several of whom published books during this same period. Five books are single-authored collections of essays by women writers, all of them poets: Dionne Brand's Bread Out of Stone, Daphne Marlatt's Reading Through the Labyrinth, M. Nourbese Philip's A Genealogy of Resistance, Lola Lemire Tostevin's Subject to Criticism, and Phyllis Webb's Nothing But Brush Strokes. Finally, Arun Mukherjee's Postcolonialism: My Living and Himani Bannerji's Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism and Anti-Racism are written from the perspective of Professors of English and Sociology (both at York University in Toronto), respectively. Bannerji is also a poet.

When Barbara Godard writes, in Collaboration in the Feminine, that TESSERA's project has been to engage "in an exchange of letters" thereby "creating a community of women of letters" she might have been describing the effect these books have had on at least some readers (269, 258). A community of women of letters has indeed developed in Canada over the past twenty years. Significantly, these critical "letters" take the form of the essay, not the book. In "Criticism as Self-Reflection," Lola Lemire Tostevin argues that "because it is crucial for women to bear witness to our own circumstances, our experiences and desires, inscribing ourselves into a critical genre affords us a vehicle through which we can explore the different faces of new territory while creating new levels of understanding" (10); it is "no accident that the essay became such an important genre for women in the last few decades" (9). As Godard emphasizes, the exchange of letters the serious distribution and proliferation of ideas, words, insights — is a "crucial feature of identity formation" (269).

But "identity formation" is complex. Who are "we" in Tostevin's argument for example? Perhaps women are cautious about claiming the authority of a single-minded vision or book-length argument given our awareness of the multiple claims on our identities. As the women writers in the single-authored collections remind us, they have been and continue to be several selves. In Phyllis Webb's words in her "Preface" to Nothing But Brush Strokes, "If there seems to be a multiple personality running loose in this book, it can probably be explained by the time-span these prose pieces cover — twenty-five years — and the diversity of occasions that called them forth." "RE," Tostevin's piece in Collaboration in the Feminine, speaks directly to the complexity of the writer's (re)reading self:

writing as reading (the past?) would only be writing
without breathing a word while reading as rereading doubles back to recall to hear again the resonance as re tears from the rest reenters the mouth. (40)
Similarly, Nicole Brossard’s “Certain Words,” also in Collaboration in the Feminine, reminds us of reading’s promises: “Every reading is an intention of images, an intention of re-presentation giving us hope” (49). Daphne Marlatt’s Readings from the Labyrinth are critical writing as “Essays” which try “to read the complex interactions between cultural representations and self-representation” (ii). For Marlatt, the reading self is a critical — a crucial, necessary, even essential — self, a “woman in process, rereading, writing herself in as subject” (183).

Why then do such conscious critics often absent themselves from the titles of their books? Why is their relation to their material hidden? Consider the titles of some books under review here:

- a genealogy of resistance
- bread out of stone
- collaboration in the feminine
- nothing but brush strokes
- postcolonialism: my living
- readings from the labyrinth

subject to criticism

Note the scarcity of verbs. “Living” can be read as a verb, and so, possibly, can “reading(s).” But the nouns are here in excess: bread, stone, collaboration, nothing, strokes, postcolonialism, labyrinth, subject, criticism. Several words establish relations including propositions (from, out of, to, of, in) and articles (my, the, a). Who do we imagine is speaking in (the titles of) these women’s books of critical writing? Who are the implied subjects of these sentences? What are the contexts?

Let us imagine subjects, actions and contexts:

Having found her way through, she writes her Readings from the Labyrinth.

Resourceful and hungry, and recalling her mother’s words, she makes Bread out of Stone.

Whether she likes it or not, she feels Subject to Criticism.

Although everyone sees its difficulty, she thinks of her writing as Nothing But Brush Strokes.

She reclaims her history as A Genealogy of Resistance.

Wanting to change the world, she enters into a Collaboration in the feminine.

“She” the implied but absent feminist subject, writes, makes, feels, thinks, reclaims, joins, stands. But most crucially, she lives. But how? With whom? In whose interests?

Only Arun Mukherjee, in Postcolonialism: My Living, problematizes his subject and her relation to it in her title. In her introduction, she explains what is suggested by the ambiguous word “living” in her title, that postcolonialism has been her “living” in two senses. Because she has been a teacher of “postcolonial literature” for the last ten years, it has been her “living,” her “bread and butter.” But postcolonialism has also been her living in the sense that she was “born a British subject 1946 and became an Indian citizen on August 15, 1947, the day of India’s independence and partition” (xii). Like Raymond Williams, she sees postcolonialism, then, not as a theory, but a “structure of feeling”: “not all “the colonized” are equally oppressed and ‘the colonizer’ can be oppressors too” (xix).

In general, Mukherjee’s essays explore what she calls the “contradictions and conditions surrounding the teaching of what we are forced to call postcolonial literature” (xx) and examine the effects of postcolonialism on women, the reading and teaching of literature, and the lives of non-white academics.

Himani Banerji’s Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Anti-Racism and Marxism provides substantial evidence that the rise of postcolonial theory has not eliminated racism in postsecondary institutions. The only book under review by an academic woman who is also a poet, Banerji is acutely aware of her positioning in terms of her sex, race and class. Her essays are “situated critique[s]” that “think through some of these makings and unmakings, doings and undoings — which happen in a banal, routine manner in where and how we live and in where and how we want to become politically actionable” (13). Like Dionne Brand, she thinks of this project as an engagement with “transformative knowledge[s]” (13). But her message is tentative, cautious and full of pain. Somehow, like the other sixty-five women whose insights are recorded in these books, Banerji still wants to connect and believes in the possibility of change. Without question, particular difficulties in “making new narratives” are encountered when some of us move toward transformation without all of us. As it is for M. Nourbese Philip, critical writing can be a “traumatic interruption of the New World” (126). But Jam. Ismail in an excerpt from Diction Air, reminds us of the potential of interruption in her parodic and incisive re-dic-tionning: “words, incited (see also metonymy), words ar like money they hav no backing other than us” (101).

Goddard’s Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from TESSERA gathers essays previously published in the bilingual feminist journal of innovative writing by women, TESSERA. The title of the collection anglicises and repeats the early feminist label for women’s writing — écriture féminine. Moreover, it recuperates and extends the notion of writing in the feminine to include a sense of community, indeed of “collaboration,” which suggests the kind of covert, strategic and deliberate workings of a counter-dominant group. But the subtitle reveals significant assumptions that the women who have edited
International Journal of Canadian Studies
Revue internationale d'études canadiennes

and published TESSERA over the years have had the privilege to be able to make: most obviously, the assumption that women’s writing can afford now to be considered within the larger project of an analysis of culture. In saying this, I feel my own negotiation of difference more acutely than ever. When I attempt to compare Collaboration in the Feminine with the other collection of critical essays — The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Canadian Literature edited by Makeda Silviera — its meta-discursive analysis appears in an uneasy relationship with ordinary racism.

Unquestionably, Barbara Godard and Makeda Silviera valorize women and women’s writing. But the differences between them and their edited collections illustrate the range of possibility and the potential for misunderstanding among thinking women in Canada today. Barbara Godard, a Professor of English at York University in Toronto, is also an accomplished translator, most notably of the work of Nicole Brossard. Her collection gathers previously published essays from a journal she helped to found and contributed to editing for many years. The collection includes several collaboratively written texts and transcribed conversations such as "Theorizing Fiction Theory: "co-written by Godard, Daphne Marlatt, Kathy Mezei and Gail Scott, the founders of TESSERA whose talking together appears, alongside Susan Knutson’s in another piece, "In Conversation." In the Quebec context, “What We Talk About on Sundays” documents the conversations of key writers and thinkers Nicole Brossard, Looky Bernatnick, Louise Codo, Louise Dupré, Gail Scott and Françoise Théoret. In addition, theoretical musings on language and subjectivity by writers as different as Daphne Marlatt (who are "Writing Our Way Through the Labyrinth") as well as her "Self-Representation and Fictionality” both appear and Linda Hutcheon on ("Incredulity Toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminisms") are included.

Since TESSERA "had to be critical writing with difference, reflecting new forms, new relations to reading" (17)— "difference" understood here to be politically motivated formal difference — none of the essays finds it useful to analyse writing by women in Canada as part of a wider "Canadian Literature." Lorraine Weir’s "Wholeness, Harmony, and Radiance" and Laura's "Women’s Writing" for example refers only once to Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro and invokes Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to argue that a more critical perspective in Canada is required in order "to move theme and style toward open forms" (22). According to Gail Scott, the "other sine qua non was that TESSERA should be a meeting place for women writing in French and English" (17), a requirement that proved to be, as she herself says, "limiting, inasmuch as it so inadequately reflected the Canadian context" (17). But even this requirement is compromised since the collection is clearly directed to English readers. Texts previously published in French appear in English translation: Daphne Marlatt and Kathy Mezei’s translation of "The Doubly Complicit Memory" by Louise Dupré, and Barbara Godard’s translation of "Certain Words" by Nicole Brossard, for example. Not that issues of power and ethics are not revisited in several of the papers, particularly Kathleen Hart’s "Power, Ethics and Polyvocal Feminist Theory" as well as Marlene Nourbese Philip’s "Whose Idea Was it Anyway?" Significantly, only one other piece by a woman of colour appears: Jan. Ismael’s "Dictionary Art." In "Women of Letters," Godard’s "Reprise" or closing essay, she describes Ismael’s piece as a "resistor's dictionary which refigures the language of feminist theory to bring together under the category 'words' both the definition 'Chinese characters' and 'the idea of race'...as autonomous, scientific and legal status'.

Makeda Silviera’s collection The Other Woman is, in her words, a long-awaited celebration of the writing of women of colour [who know who we are: women of the First Nations, South Asians, African Canadian, East Asian, Indo Caribbean, Afro Caribbean, Latin American, Japanese Canadian, Black, Chinese Canadian, African] in Canada... The voices in it speak not necessarily in unison but to and of a common interest" (x). Quite differently from Collaboration in the Feminine, The Other Woman values, includes and indeed names the presence of women writers who have only recently been considered eligible for inclusion in the canon of "Canadian Literature." Claimed as sign of this writing, the illicit, illegitimate, heterosexual connotations of the phrase "the other woman" are revised and reclaimed through an ironic reversal. The apologetic claim that the notion of "the other woman" has conventionally lacked, and which the notion of "collaboration" unironically assumes is brought forward. In a sense, collaboration "in the feminine" draws unquestioning on the resources and possibilities of collaborative work (previously reserved for men) and now appropriates them for (white) women. Since Silviera’s women have had no male precursor to (or want to) recuperate, the place of the other woman is the place of a woman outside of patriarchy and from "legitimate" womanhood. The women in Silviera’s collection write from her othered place.

And yet Godard and the women included in Collaboration in the Feminine are not unaware of the complexities of differences of race, sexuality and class, as well as gender. In fact, Godard’s collection records the movement of feminist thought through the 1980s and into the difficult 1990s. As she writes in "Women of Letters":

In recent years, following the critiques of exclusion in the discourses of Euroamerican feminisms, race has become a major category for the consideration of the production of meaning and value. Issue 12, "Other Looks: Race, Representation and Gender" (1991), demonstrates a range of strategies for writing the syntax of race and ethnicity, an oscillation between reclaiming "home" through memory, or a syntax of "retentive" particularity, and an in(in)vention in a new country through dissidence, one of "restitutive" particularity. Some texts also manifest a third strategy, a transformative project that seeks to read one cultural
Dionne Brand’s *Bread Out of Stone* brings to the forefront another critical difference, a difference of sexuality. In “This Body for Itself,” Brand writes:

I think that women learn about sexual pleasure from women. The strict code of heterosexuality would have us think that we come upon sexual pleasure when we notice men or that we should. But codes are only necessary where there is variation, questions of power. The need to regulate reveals the possible. Despite all this, I think we catch a glimpse, we apprehend a gesture. We remember despite the conditioning we receive as women not to remember other women, or to be ashamed of that memory or to think it immature. This gesture is where we learn our sexuality, however — lesbian and straight. (33)

For Brand, writing might dream us into memory, into alternative worlds where more than just a glimpse of the possible is revealed. Indeed, Brand goes so far as to insist that “There is only writing that is significant, honest, necessary — making bread out of stone — so that stone becomes pliant under the hands” (23). For Brand, “writers mean to change the world” (25). As her poems suggest and as these essays argue, we are able to imagine, which it take which it take includes our ability fundamentally to “read” in order to make alternatives, to require “new narratives.”

A key essay in the *Readings from the Labyrinth*, Daphne Marlatt’s incisive play on the words “her” and “here” in the essay “Her(e) in the Labyrinth: Reading/ Writing Theory” (1992/1997) suggests a reciprocal and constitutive relation between her critical and writing selves. The sixth in Kamboureli’s NeWest “The Writer as Critic” Series, *Readings from the Labyrinth* tracks Marlatt’s participation in feminist politics and writing in Canada since the late 1970s. Many of her essays have been published in key works of the early literary feminist movement in Canada: *In the feminine: Women and Words*, *Les Femmes et les Mots*, several issues of TESSERA including its inaugural French issue published in *La Nouvelle Barre du Jour* (57 [1986]), and *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English*. Her many other influential essays, previously published in journals, conference proceedings, or at conferences, appear chronologically following an introduction that contextualizes the piece. In addition, *Readings from the Labyrinth* is invaluable to feminist history since it includes journal entries, letters and photographs of the women who have nourished the emergence of feminist writing and criticism in Canada.

Lola Tostevez’s *Subject to Criticism*, its first collection of critical writing, includes previously published essays, reviews and afterwords referring to the work of Miriam Mandel, Diana Hartog, Elizabeth Smart, Sylvia Fraser, bpbNichol and Daphne Marlatt. Her published conversations with Fred Wah, Christopher Dewdney and Anne Hébert also appear, as does a written correspondence with the critic and poet Smaro Kamboureli.
Several musings on women’s writing — “Breaking the Hold on the Story” and “They’ll Say It’s Stolen, or Else It Was by Chance” — also appear. On the whole, Tostevin’s critical work reveals a subtle and informed intelligence. “[T]he essay,” she argues, is “an act of personal witness: at once an inscription of the self and a description of subject and object as they relate to each other” (10) from her positioning as a writer.

Finally, Phyllis Webb’s Nothing But Brushstrokes: Selected Prose is the fifth in Simaro Kambarrell’s NeWest “The Writer as Critic” Series. The essays collected here are mostly on literary subjects, many previously published in key feminist journals (In the Feminine, Language in Her Eye) and the Malahat Review, Brick, and the magazine MacLean’s. One of the most stimulating recent pieces — “Poetry and Psychobiography” was first presented as a lecture at the Vancouver Institute in 1993. In it, she reveals her formidable critical and ethical acumen. In the midst of her investigation of art’s relation to its artist’s psychology, she takes us to Diane Wood’s Middlebrook’s biography of Anne Sexton, which draws on over three hundred tapes of the poet’s sessions with her psychiatrist. Webb takes issue with Middlebrook’s facile attempts to connect a therapy session to a particular poem when she does not even bother to read or interpret the poem. Asking herself why she felt this particular moment in the book was exploitative and others were not, she supposes that it is because “Sexton’s vulnerability is so crudely exposed,” moreover, as readers “we have not earned such knowledge” (91).

Repeatedly, in the context of fre- lance writing pieces, commissioned essays and conference papers and anthologies, Webb foregrounds the fact that her critical writing life has its impulse outside of herself. “[T]his very book,” she writes in her “Preface,” “got put together because of an invitation.” She figures herself caught between what she calls two contradictions for her soul, one which delights in “being wasted,” the other a punishing voice that claims “we won’t make it easy for you, stupid.” She makes peace with them by imagining they are either trying to protect her poet self or pulling her toward the visual arts, a form that has compelled her for the last several years and which is gestured toward in the title itself. Like brush strokes, these essays touch down softly and unpredictably on various subjects and in multiple forms. “On the Line” and “Up the Ladder: Notes on the Creative Process” — both significant articulations of her poetics from her first prose collection Talking (1982; now out of print) — are included. The most recent piece is an exquisite “Photo-Collage Essay” called “The Mind’s Eye,” which juxtaposes laser prints of original collages, seven by Webb, and one by Greg Curnoe.

All of these critics see the collaboration between history, culture, context and reader as inextricable in the construction of women as “others.” Resistance to these constructions requires similarly wide-ranging collaborations. In her essay “On Poetry,” Brand returns to her history and rereads it by representing a self reading a picture of a child self. Still, watching, she comes to the recognition that “Poetry is here, just here.” Something “wrestling with how we live, something/dangerous, something honest” (183). Criticism too is “something dangerous, something honest.” For Dionne Brand, since “the eye has citizenship and possession” we cannot help but “look at the location of the text, and the author, in the world at specific historical moments” (169, 163). Text and author, language and materiality, words and bodies. Like Brand, political scientist Elizabeth Wingrove has recently argued that we need not choose between “the creative and destructive powers of language, culture, and society” on one side, and “fleshy, vulnerable, bleeding, needy bodies” on the other (870). As the work of so many of these women attests, critics who are writers see both the difference between and the inextricability of language and bodies.

To conclude, a poem by Phyllis Webb that usefully reconfigures difference as a verb, rather than a noun:
The pull, this way and that, ultimately into the pull of the pen across the page.
Sniffing for poems, the forward memory of hand beyond the grasp.
Not grasping, not at all. Reaching is different — can’t touch that sun.
Too hot. That star. This cross-eyed vision.

("Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals," Water and Light 18)
The pull for all of these writers toward poems, essays and each other is a "reaching" across difference. More than that, "Reaching is / different," perhaps even "difference" itself. Just as reaching is beyond grasping, seeking difference is a moving toward without the requirement of a complete understanding. Webb confabulates bodies and language when she grounds writing in the physicality of "sniffing," locates "memory" in the forward motion of another’s "hand beyond the grasp." Eyes looking across. In a hopeful inversion of Stevie Smith’s poem “Not Waving But Drowning,” Webb figures herself as not grasping but reaching. Such critical moments of uncertainty produce “this cross-eyed vision,” and the differences we make.

Notes
1. The next two notes reproduce, in slightly edited versions, a pair of our e-mail correspondences. The first is from Lynette Hunter to Susan Rudy (Sunday, 28 November 1999), the second from Susan Rudy to Lynette Hunter (Monday, 29 November 1999). This particular conversation opened up what was to become the key point of this review: that these books provide evidence that women in Canada value — indeed are deeply and consistently drawn to — difference.
2. “So Susan to continue what I started late last night, it seems to me from the outside that from about 1990 to now there really has been little intellectual fear and anxiety. Women have been worrying about not having the vocabulary to within feminism (and reflecting it off into postcolonialism). Not having the day so always looking for the big issues.”

“This is understandable if we remember that 1987-90 were the years when universalizing, middle class, white, liberal and narrow-minded. Although there Williamson’s interviews [Sounding the Difference], these were probably projects started before the collapse really came along. In effect, I think that apart from a few women writers speaking about their individual experience/particularity, the women have written valuable and interesting books, it’s as if many of the critics and other commentators have got cold feet about generalizing. This means that there’s a lot of good work being done all over the place but in much more delineated settings. So trying to generalise about them is difficult if not ridiculous in a review essay of the size we have got.”

“So my problem is trying to figure out a way to talk about all this diversity within women’s writing communities, when it’s near impossible for any one person to do so. I feel that I could take a shot at a section on women writers, and look at Coral [Ann Howell’s, Pauline Butting and the like, one plus a section on the few books that try to do a broader picture like Godard and [Coomb] Vevalina’s collection]. Or I could look at the few books that do a historical job, like Misio Dean’s, or a few books that try to do women and... I am Smao Kamboureli. But I also feel that I should be gesturing to all the other more specific areas of work like Maritime and Toronto Black women, Vancouver and Western Canadian East Asian women, South Asian women, Latin American women, the Quebecoise, middle, west, northwest, and northeast). Of course I’d be bound to leave out all sorts of groups who should be included, like white middle class liberal women. Or I could organise issues like postcoloniality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, racism, political franchise, work, position within the home, performance, nationalism, globalism, etc. In either of these cases the significant emptiness is found in the huge area of white working class women. I am nonplussed about this difficulty, and would dearly love to hear your response. I hope it can be sorted out one way or another but I need to discuss it.”

3. “Lynette, Thank you for writing down what you’ve been thinking about and sending it to me — I’ve found so very much that is useful in what you’re saying. I am especially taken with your naming of women’s worries, fears and anxieties in the 1990s and wonder whether we might not organise the review around what I think is an extraordinary key issue you have raised here. Not in terms of lack (i.e. ‘not having’) but in terms of what ‘we’, that is all kinds of women, have been doing about difference.”

“In your words, I think in our review we could begin to develop the ‘historical imagination’ we need in order to ‘value’ the small steps that each one of us has to take every day — this is just gorgeous, I almost wept when I read it. Actually, I think that as it was at the [Women and Texts] conference, valuing what we do in our daily lives is the key point to be naming here. And we need to value all of them all small steps we have been taking intellectually too. What about considering what an historical imagination might be for us as academic women who read women’s writing? Perhaps by articulating the areas of difference between women writers have been examining? My sense is that writers do this so differently from critics (unless they are critics who are also writers). And yet I guess what I’m trying to say is that I see the pivotal difference here is around trying to accommodate models that are not binary. About trying to value one kind of work without assuming that that means excluding another kind. A key point that I’ve recognised in the books on my list is that women are not using the genre of the book-length argument at all. These ‘books’ are in fact collections of essays written over a long period of time (up to 25 years in the case of Phyllis Webb). They are records of the development of their individual historical imaginations if you like. So that too is saying something about how women move in small steps. But such ‘movement’ needs to be valued. When we consider the work of academic critics — your more difficult list — I’m more hesitant about what to do. Again, I think that we/women are so careful about acknowledging our ignorance about difference that we move even more slowly (i.e. the reticence you’ve noted in the 1990s) when we are not sure where we are going, or with whom. But even this hesitance is a kind of ‘movement’ to be valued, don’t you think?”

“I’ll send this back to you now and see where we go from here.

4. Essays by Himana Bannerji, Dionne Brand, and Anur Mukherjee appear in Silvera’s The Other Woman. Essays by M. Nourbese Philip, Lila Lemire Tostevin, and Daphne Marlatt appear in Godard’s Collaboration in the Feminine. All are reviewed in this article.

5. She has published two poetry collections, A Separate Sky (1982) and Doing Time (1986).

6. The final essay in the collection, Godard’s article is entitled “Women of Letters (Reprise).”

7. The introduction to Subject to Criticism.

8. “Here” signifies on and walking with the earth since, in the full text of the poem, the small girl has just shaken gravel from her shoes.


Books Reviewed


Valerie Raoul and Keongmi Kim-Bernard

Women’s Writing in Quebec in the Last Five Years: New Products?

Unlike most review essays published in this journal, this one does not focus on a few specific works; rather, it reviews the reviews, scanning issues of the Quebec literary journal Lettres québécoises over the last five years, to ascertain what writings by women have received attention. This cursory overview is a preliminary step towards a more extensive study of the critical reception of women’s writing(s) in Quebec. One thing is clear from this initial, non-exhaustive inquiry: there is certainly no homogeneous “Québécois women’s writing.” The field is characterized by a rich diversity, not only of ethnicity, but of producers, readers, subjects, genres and forms. Consumers and critics alike have an “embarras du choix” between established values and new-name products.

The “vintage” metaphor raises questions of quality, classification and marketing.

No discussion of Quebec literature can ignore the importance of writing by women. In Canada, female authors have generally occupied an exceptionally important place in the literary canon. It is widely acknowledged that although women in Quebec, as elsewhere, wrote “in the father’s house” (to use Patricia Smart’s term), the first modern Canadian novel, in French or English, was Laure Conan’s Angéline de Montbrun. That text has served as the starting point for a number of analyses of the position of women in Quebec as writers. More recent “great names” of Francophone Canadian literature include Gabrielle Roy, Antoine Maillot, Anne Hébert and Marie-Claire Blais. The first is still very present on the scene because of the success of François Ricard’s biography (now available in English) and the ongoing edition of her private correspondence being undertaken at McGill by Ricard, Jane Everett and others. Two of the three other writers are still very much alive and they have all published new works in the last five years. The loss of Anne Hébert was announced as this issue went to press: her textual legacy is rich.

Vintage Authors: Appellation contrôlée

Lettres québécoises and other literary reviews pay due tribute to new evidence of these authors’ survival of early literary canonisation. In the case of Maillet, Le Chemin Saint-Jacques (1996: LQ 85) continues in the same vein as her previous work, weaving into the verbally effervescent story of...