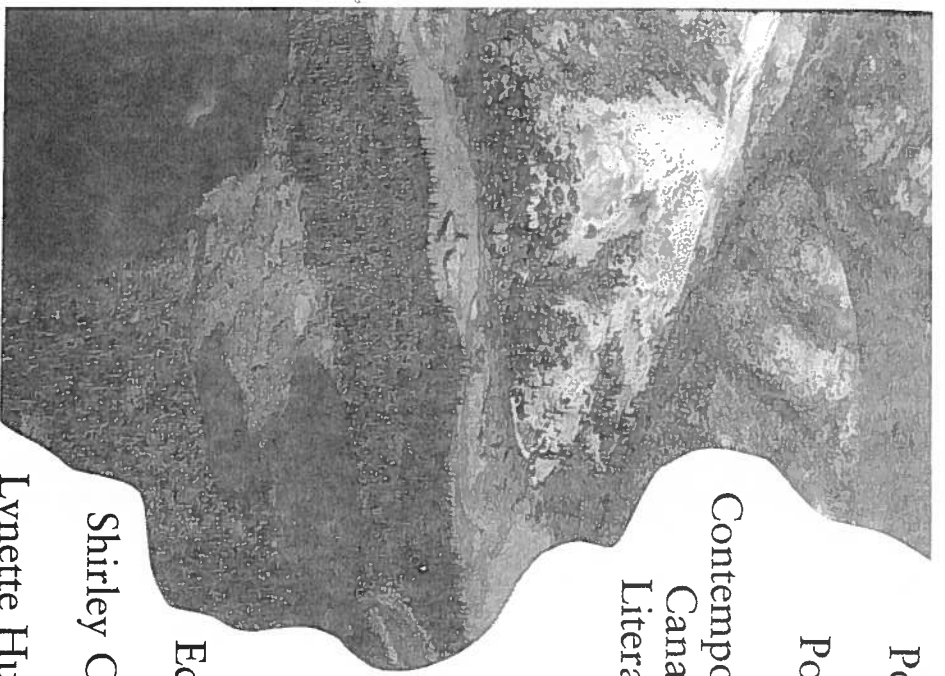


Poetry
and
Poetics
in
Contemporary
Canadian
Literature

Edited
by
Shirley Chew
and
Lynette Hunter



Borderblur

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Essays on Poetry and Poetics
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Quadrigo

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Quadriga

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Foreword

Since its inauguration in April 1984 at a Seminar on Canadian Literature at the University of Leeds, the Literature Group of the British Association for Canadian Studies has played a significant part in promoting the study of Canadian literature in this country. An obvious example of its achievement is the strong and continuing presence of literature at the annual conference of the BACS. But, away from these big occasions, the Group has also been concerned to make space and time for a good deal of literary and critical activity. In this respect the tangible evidence of its success is the several volumes of criticism published over the last twelve years. *Borderblur: Essays in Contemporary Canadian Literature* is the most recent to date of these publications and the editors are pleased to have had the opportunity to bring it out. With one exception the essays submitted to us began as papers given at a Colloquium held at Leeds in October 1991. One of the highlights of that occasion was the presence of three Canadian writers – Joan Clark, Kim Morrisey, Nancy Mattson – who read from their own works and contributed to the various panel discussions, and the editors regret that circumstances have made it impossible to include their works in the volume.

To compare *Re-visions of Canadian Literature* which appeared in 1984 and *Borderblur* is to note several shifts of emphasis which have taken place in Canadian literary studies in this country. First, while the established writers continue to claim attention, it is no longer the case that they are all white Canadians. Included among the subjects of these essays are writers of Trinidadian, Australian and South Asian origin who by their presence call for a widening of critical approaches and a focusing upon cross-cultural exchanges. Second, while there is clearly a growth and consolidation of interest in Canadian women's writing, this interest ranges from criticism on the work of single authors to work produced by collectives of women. Last, while established academics are as usual represented in this volume, there is a strong presence of younger critics who gave their papers as postgraduate students and have since gone on to university posts in Britain and Canada. 'Borderblur' was a term adopted by bpNichol who involved himself in exploring work which ranged across different mediums and genres. Perhaps it is vainglorious even to borrow a term from a writer

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Bodily Functions in Cartesian Space: Working on Women's Writing

Lynette Hunter

Since the late 1970s there has been an undercurrent rumbling about theory and language-focused writing, and the high profile that this writing appears to maintain in Canadian literary culture. To an outsider listening casually to conversation in a variety of literary sites in Canada from writers' workshops to libraries to academic institutions, this rumbling has centred on the erstwhile Canada Council grants system and particularly on the makeup of its juries. Another crude analysis will throw forward the unusually close connections between academics, small publishing houses and language-focused writers. This essay will not attempt any detailed historical analysis of this background, but the frequency of related comments indicates the problems of socio-cultural reception encountered by such poetics in Canada. What I am particularly keen to study here is the way that women's 'language-poetry' in Canada has been traversed by the politics of Freudian/Lacanian language theory and its associations with recent French philosophy. I am not concerned with commenting on the poetic texts themselves, but on the philosophical and cultural filter they acquire in critical and academic responses. The discussion attempted here assumes that philosophical thinking is always a political act, with a greater or lesser social effect.

An Analysis

The debate between language-focused writers and generically accessible writers involves the public perception of a number of issues on both sides. J. Marchessault in 'Is the Dead Author a Woman?' suggests that the two are oppositional.¹ She notes that 'the critique of realism that evolved out of psychoanalytic feminism in the mid-1970s was

an essential step in confronting the oppressiveness of prevailing forms of narration and representation . . . Our thinking continues to be informed by the rigid opposition of realism and modernism, of truth and its negative' (p. 87). Yet an analysis of these, indicating quite similar constraints on each, could proceed in the following way:

- a) Public perception of philosophy
- b) Public reception of language-focused writing

OR

- ai) Philosophy as philosophy: logic-chopping, male discourse
- aii) Philosophy as Freud/Lacanian: focus on language

bi) Language-writing as difficult

bi) Language-writing as male discourse

BUT

- a) Philosophy/theory needs to be seen as a site for work on articulation, therefore a moral site bound to daily living
- aii) Freud/Lacanian is part of Cartesian space, and relegates the woman to the silent or sacrificial. There is a need to work through Cartesian space to the other side, and find other images: not for the sake of new metaphor/metonymy but for the sake of moral action/stance

AND

- bi) Language-writing is not difficult in itself, but in its shift of naturalised common grounds. All writing does this, and language-writing needs to be seen as a site for work on articulation, a moral site
- bi) Language-writing's alliance with male discourse ties it to Cartesian space and collusion in women's oppression. There is a need to take on the authority of the voice in order to have effect, and to work through it to other sites: not for the sake of authority but for the sake of women's oppression.

AT THE SAME TIME there is a problem with

- c) Public perception of women's discourse
- d) Public reception of culturally-foregrounded 'genre'-writing

OR

- ci) Women's discourse as private, intimate, with no valid broad common ground
- cii) Women's discourse as 'genre'-writing and/or personal autobiography
- di) Genre-writing as easy
- dii) Genre-writing as culturally safe discourse

BUT

- ci) Women's discourse needs to be seen as non-institutional social action: a site for the extension of political rhetoric parallel to the nation state
- cii) Autobiography (intimate) and Genre-writing (grand cultural gesture) are accessible and open to complicity. Accessibility and popular culture are places where we could find a place to value women's daily lives. We need to do this not only to be oppositional nor to replace the institutional with a new framework, but also for the sake of defining another discourse field where other things can be said

AND

- di) Genre-writing and autobiography are seen as easy because they are accessible. All ideology is accessible; work with these writings needs to be seen as a site for dealing with the sophistication of institutional discourse
- dii) Genre-writing/autobiography because they are dealing with institutional discourse are collusive in women's oppression. They need to be taken on despite their collusion partly because of their wide audience and learning potential: not because they are populist but for the sake of articulating a world in which women work, so that it can be spoken, critiqued, changed

Both language-focused writing and autobiography/genre writing are weakened by their potential complicity in the institutional. Both are strengthened by their commitment to the community of women from which they draw their alternative discourses. Here I want to focus on some of the problems deriving from both the public perception of philosophy and the public reception of language-focused writing. The institution of which I am part and of which some of my audience will

be part, has been deeply infused by the attitude to philosophy often used to anchor language-writing and particular to the post-Cartesian theory of Freud/Lacan. Much of the authoritative language/vocabulary used by institutional commentators on feminism is still part of this psychoanalytic discourse field. I want to examine the grounds, work through them, and discuss some of their implications as they emerge in feminist discourse in Canada surrounding language-focused writing.

An Opening

The curious compound, 'language-focused' writing, usually refers to writing that radically disrupts the current conventions of verbal linguistic expression. In Anglo-American criticism, commentaries on it have leaked into the gaps left by the narrative impetus of much structuralist and post-structuralist theory dominating literary and cultural analysis since the 1950s. Yet a number of Canadian writers and critics have been particularly responsive to the need for some kind of discussion and critique; for example, the Toronto Research Group papers in *Open Letter*, issues 1973 to 1978 inclusive, are substantial contributions to the discussion.² More generally, the philosophical, literary and linguistic theory has come to be seen not as engaging with the devices of 'language-focused' writing, since both have the common concern of working on historically appropriate articulations, but as language-focused writing. Criticisms of the poetry use the theory as ammunition, and *vice versa*. As a result, despite contributions such as those from the TRG, there is little assessment or critique of either except to dismiss their political effectiveness. Any one theory, from for example Derrida, Lacan or Cixous, is taken variously as (a) prescriptive and speaking in jargon, (b) processual and trying to avoid meaning, or (c) temporarily interruptive and chimerical.³

During the 1980s elements of this debate transferred into the commentary of women writers, particularly acutely in Canada where for a variety of reasons a number of women writers have chosen to develop their craft in this way. Erin Mouré has spoken about the suppression she experienced when writing 'anecdotal/conversational poems without reversal (which is to say, without the language confronting itself and its assumptions in the poem)'.⁴ Several accounts are brought together in Smaro Kamboureli's 'Theory: Beauty or Beast? Resistance to Theory in the feminine',⁵ counterpointed in the same year by Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel's *Language in her Eye: Writing and Gender*.⁶ None of this story is straightforward. Part of it is related to a separation between generically specific (and therefore easily publishable/consumable) and generically non-specific (and therefore 'difficult' to read) writings. Generically non-specific writing

works largely within techniques and strategies that the society takes as 'naturalised'; its actions are capable of inverting, displacing, changing, the cultural commonplaces of language or linguistic object in ways that call for radical response because they unsettle tacit agreements about communication that are frequently taken as self-evident or axiomatic. For some women writers this generically non-specific writing promises a useful ground for speaking of different lives. Gail Scott for example speaks of the need to write against the 'reader's line of least resistance'.⁷ Smaro Kambourli calls contradiction in language a political act.⁸ But allied to this promise is the difficulty of getting the writing published.

Part of the story becomes tied to an anglophone Canadian perception of Quebecoise language-writing, which appears to get published and win respect.⁹ The early Tessera editorial collective is at least partly attempting to duplicate not only similar concerns with poetics, but also the publishing platforms their Quebecoise sisters set up during the 1970s in for example *La Nouvelle Barre du Jour*. In the view of anglophone writers Quebec has an intellectual community without the academic institutions which dominate English-Canadian intellectual products and which are predominantly male.¹⁰ For anglophone women therefore, there is by example a promise of an alternative community for the poetics of difference.

The story is complicated by the increasing numbers of women who entered Canadian academic institutions in the 1980s, many of whom appreciate and indeed practise generically non-specific language-writing. These women, and the few who preceded them such as Shirley Neuman, Barbara Godard, Lorraine Weir, Sherrill Grace and Linda Hutchison, see the success of the tactics of their male colleagues and work on the authorisation of this poetics through criticism. More helpfully, they work on teaching strategies of reading that enable readers to take the chance of commitment to a text, to find ways of reading appropriate to these ways of writing. Now the story is further complicated by a broader movement in Western feminism in which the univocal presence of the articulate, largely white, middle-class women of the 1960s to 1970s makes way for/is shattered by newly articulating voices from different races, classes and genders. This shift, which has been well-documented, often places the 'authorisations' of women's language-writing in a discredited field of masculine poetics, whereas some of those authorisations may also be read precisely as attempts to save women's language-writing from accusations of racism, exclusion and class blindness.

As with any attempt at an alternative movement there are necessary engagements with the dominant modes of power, and neither the anglophone women writers until recently, nor their authorising critics,

have addressed that complicity directly, or have attempted to assess how the writing is positioned in the social. The antagonism they set off is understandable.¹¹

What is interesting to note is that the impetus from Quebecoise writers occurred at a time in the late 1970s when French feminist theory was becoming available in English translation.¹² This language-focused theory, implicitly and explicitly offering a Lacanian analytic, was profoundly influential on the development of Western feminist discourse especially that focused on writing. However, Quebecoise writers such as Nicole Brossard had already worked through this analytic to a critical and more materialist basis by the early 1980s.¹³ Brossard's work was available in translation from 1975,¹⁴ but it is unclear how widely read and critiqued her work and later work by Cixous and Irigaray¹⁵ also critical of Lacanian theory, was until the end of the 1980s. As a result the authority of a Lacanian analytic far outstayed its helpful stage and added to the negative reception of women's language-writing. The conflation of women's language-writing with Lacanian analytics has brought immense criticism from socially based women's studies theory and has led to unnecessarily prolonged divisions.

Many of the negative accounts from Canada condense into an argument that a set of women writers, including Daphne Marlatt, Gail Scott, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Betsy Warland, Kambourli herself, are too language-centred, too theoretical. What seems to be signified is that this writing is prescriptive, particularly about the need for women to find a different language for expression, and that this writing is difficult to read. Specifically translated, the objections are *first* with the writing's often overt connection with Lacanian feminism and *second* that it is part of an experimental graphical poetics related to concrete/breath poetry that is merely relativist and with no social relevance: either it is process only, with no immediacy, or it is unnecessary, because language is neutral so there is no need for 'feminine' writing. The underlying argument is, *first*, that if these women are the avowedly feminist writers they say they are, then their theoretical jargon/complexity and their linguistic obscurity/difficulty put them so far away from the usual concerns of women as to make them useless.¹⁶ And *second*, that the theoretical concerns of graphic linguistic experiment are part of a masculine tradition and the engagement of these writers with these concerns compromises their work and places them in collusion with women's oppression.

In effect we can take pieces out of the poetry by writers such as Marlatt, Scott, Tostevin, Warland and Kambourli, and indicate the apparent separation of the words from the concerns of most women in Canada – or elsewhere. And of course it is just because of the

decontextualising that the pieces appear to be neutral. For example, there is, from Lemire Tostevin's *Gyno Text*,¹⁷

mute
skeleton
moves
to
muscle
string
pulled
taut
from
A
to
Zone

or, from Warland's *Proper Definitions*,¹⁸

induction
showing 'our sexes'
women's texts subtext
between
the
line
context pretext text:
'in the original language, as opposed to a translation
or rendering'
pre-text
mother tongue:
'a language from which other languages originate'.

But there is not a single writer here who does not engage in a narrative that can provide a location for the neutrality of out-of-context settings. This writing also tells stories, not merely as a strategic sop to narrative expectation but as a necessary link to practical issues.

In this, the pieces are supposedly unlike comparable writing by male writers, such as Steve McCaffrey or Christopher Dewdney, although this apparent masculine neutrality has increasingly been questioned and challenged, by McCaffrey and Dewdney included, in the pages of *Boundary*, *Open Letter* and *LANGUAGE*, and in a number of recent

articles and books.¹⁹ Betsy Warland explicitly comments that the motives moving language-poetry by women are different to those for men. While for women it is a matter of survival, for men it is often a game lacking any root analysis of patriarchy. She lists the adjectives 'aggressive', 'cynical', 'witty', 'enerverted', which are the melancholy points to which the gamesmanship of postmodernism rolls. But for Warland this is not an essentialist split where women go looking for a biologically feminine sentence, but where we all look for the disallowed language appropriate to our needs, our 'dialect'.²⁰ For example, there was/is by Nichol as a male writer with an ability to critique gently, to 'circumvent the despair of the dominator's role' and to 'delight in the daily world as a coinhabitant' (p. 292). All that Warland says generally about male writers is repeated by others about women language-poets. And her conclusions on Nichol can aptly guide the reader to commentary on herself.

There are problems here raised both by the notion of 'poetics' and of 'theory': I will begin with those clustered around poetics, and follow them into theory. If we take a step back from the debate, it is possible to observe an on-going anxiety about any poetics in the post-Renaissance Western world. A problem with a new and challenging poetics is the need for mediation into that poetics: first time readers of Dryden or T. S. Eliot typically have similar problems. Poetics have always separated, united, dislocated the *loci communes*, the topics of society, that keep that society bound together. The activity of poetics described here is specifically relevant for Western European and hemisphere societies and their affiliates, that have depended upon a classical education in rhetoric which provides the methodology for all social agreement from consensus to totalitarianism. Learned in a historical context poetics works alongside rhetoric to open up the verbal media. Both writer/hetor and audience need to be able to assess relevance, and for today, need particularly to address graphic poetics as they have developed since the Renaissance within a very small class-dominated context of power, education and publishing: what is called 'literature'. In that context we need to ask: What is the relevance of a writer's craft developed within a state nationalism structured by the closed systems of club culture? What is the relevance of a reader's craft developed for an ability to recuperate by appropriation? How do the writer and reader bring a reflexive application of their skills and craft to a historical context so that they may enable critique? It is not the poetics that are a problem, for no device or structure is inherently enabling or disabling, but in the way that poetics crosses the border into rhetoric. What complicates the issue for Canadian women writers of language-focused work is partly a social context in which the audience is increasingly varied in terms of culture, education and political

expectation; and partly the strand these writers make regarding theory *and* the specific theoretical ground which they claim. Association and theory and philosophy should never disable poetics, for all are concerned with articulating the immediately pressing needs of life; but the association can jar badly where the philosophy is one that can be elaborated without attention to the contingencies of daily experience. That's the problem with the public perception of current theory.

More serious a consideration is that the theoretical ground that is understood from much of this language-centred writing, as *A Mazing Space* repeatedly points out, is the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse that has infused Western feminist discussions about language. While it seems quite clear that the writing deals with women's oppression on the grounds of the world it inhabits, and that this discourse has been one of the most enabling, albeit authoritative, devices for articulating that oppression, the discourse also sets up conceptual barriers. Those who speak it have large authority because they speak the language of men and men listen to them, doors open to publication, distribution and dissemination, but at what cost? Being imprinted, impressed, put to bed and made public. Those who speak the discourse appear to be an anathema to the feminism of community activism, social policy and women's studies. The 'academic' or intellectual woman writer working in this discourse acquires a public persona that separates her radically from other communities of women.²¹ It is not a rhetoric that encourages commitment from the reader, indeed it leads either to alienation or to a sense of collusion.

Cartesian Space: Fantasy, commodity/fetish and reciprocity

To look at the kind of crossings between poetics and rhetoric that have been imagined in recent theory, I wish first to put forward a classical text, the *Phaedrus*, that offers metaphors for working on this problem. It is a text where Plato is concerned not with a 'true' but with the social, the body action of the 'good'. *Phaedrus* explicitly addresses the relationship between social conventions for communication in both oral and written media, and the need to negotiate these in response to immediate needs, by way of a metaphor of 'love'. To keep it brief, the text looks at love gained for money: i.e. acquisitive; love exchanged for the pleasure of regarding oneself: i.e. for power; and love which works by allowing oneself to be changed: i.e. by receiving the gift of the other, this third being the ground for a proper interaction between poetic and rhetoric.²² This metaphorical triptic insistently throbs through Western philosophy from Plato to Derrida. What is interesting here is what

happens to it in Cartesian space – or to be more exact, in post-Cartesian space.

Cartesian dualism, conventionally read, splits the brain/body from the mind. Descartes proposes this as one way of explaining the limitations of language in its attempt to re-present the phenomenological actuality of the world. While Descartes recognises this as unstable, the suggestion gains actual currency via for example Post-Royal logicians, and even the Royal Society.²³ The possibility of progress toward a stable representation of referential actuality, phenomena, occurs concurrent with and no doubt as part of the political necessity for the emerging nation states of Europe to present a coherent argumentative ethos to each other. It has withstood the tensions of the rational via Kant's relational twist to ideological representations, which (simply) throws into relief the elements of structure that need to be readjusted to keep the status quo static. The Cartesian split becomes an appropriate common ground, self-evident fact, and generates two interlinked spin-offs about the body and about language that in contemporary cultural theory are both linked to desire.

First, the body: of the many developments from the mind/body split, the most urgent for women has been its use in sexual and gender oppression. Currently laid out in Freudian-Lacanian theory,²⁴ the split allows for the suggestion that if you have a different body you must have a different mind – but technically this is illogical, for if there is a split there may be no connection between the two: just one of the enabling contradictions of this theory that Freud emphasised increasingly in his later writings. Lacan describes the system of stable representation of the state ethos as the symbolic: made by men for men because they control economic and governing power; they hold political office; they operate within and strengthen the ideological stability necessary to the nation state. Because women are somatically/physiologically different, they cannot conceptualise in the same way and cannot fully enter the symbolic.

But also, Freud and Lacan work in Cartesian space because they need the split to cope with their fear. This fear is hydra-headed, but the one analogical example I shall pursue in the next section is the fear of inadequate language. To cope with fear the concept of a split self, found in abundant psychological metaphors throughout the nineteenth century is formalised/scientised: the self is accompanied by the 'other' in different ways that generate the classic psychoanalytical terms of narcissism, neurosis and psychosis, and that indicate desire at work. The underwriting of stable ideology via an elaboration of the Cartesian split into the imaginary (body) and the symbolic (mind), tautologically sets the ground out to enable a justification of the self as a split subject. The search for any completion of the self becomes, by definition, a

denial of the subject, a fantasy, something that drives desire. But fantasy doesn't search for the complete; it invents strategies to suppress awareness or knowledge of the other: sometimes with the intention of realising the other most acutely at the moment of suppression (the fantastic), yet most frequently leading to a dominating process that seeks to create ignorance/ro repress – a repression which lies at the root of narcissism,²⁵ and at the centre of the fetish.²⁶

This reworking of Cartesian dualism does interesting things to the Phaedrean triptic. From money/power/change/gift as metaphors for verbal communication describing different ways of interaction and engagement with the social, money is eliminated (cancelled by the professional exchange of psychoanalysis) and the remainder is inverted. The interaction of poetics and rhetoric in the metaphor of love as change/gift is found only in the semiotic, the imaginary, the chora; while the exchange of love for a version of oneself that describes the narcissistic and dominating gesture, provides the necessary stability for the representation of ideology and becomes the central metaphor for the symbolic. The reversal allowed Lacan to gender the account of ideology via power: to provide a vocabulary for talking about the subordination and oppression of women; and to imply that there is a place pre-power, pre-symbolic.

Unfortunately, what Descartes remembered as unstable, and what Freud described as repression, Lacanianism sets into the possible as the ideal strategy for the power abuses of Western state nationalism: doublethink: you accept that there is an 'other' and simultaneously repress it; you remember to forget the other. The psychoanalytic stance foregrounds ideological power as the determining characteristic for both gender and language, and then analyses how we ignore it. This dis-membering forgetfulness has emerged in the multinational state as ethnocentricity and can be read as a backlash, similar to the backlash against feminism in the 1980s, against the moral intensity of theorists/philosophers such as Derrida and Brossard who use the Phaedrean triptic in its fulness, as well as a backlash against the overwhelming needs of the disempowered 'other' as presented to the empowered by their own media/communications technology.

The shift of the Phaedrean triptic to a hierarchical duality of an initial change/gift, and then more important, exchange/power, also has implications for the social understanding of poetics. Freudian/Lacanian theory is built on post-Cartesian thinkers and their conceptualisations of the self, and it achieves a flexible and popular discourse for these ideas. Just so, the implications of the theory for nationalism lie in the discourse field that opens up to the concepts already articulated in another domain; and the implications of the theory for poetics are most evident in the sophisticating of a vocabulary for contemporary

practices. The dominating metaphor for poetics becomes individual sacrifice within and to a system of power,²⁷ that elaborates on the essential activity of fantasy, the role of commodification within fantasy, and the difficulties of reciprocal exchange that make the fetish both banal and constructive:²⁸ all of which is predicated on the concept of the inadequacy of language.

Now, language: if Descartes dreamed of a language that could fully represent phenomena, he knew the limitations of language as a condition. But those working in Cartesian space took the dream as a possibility. This possibility held within it a multitude of utopias, including the hope that the new political systems of increasing state government could create a large and cohesive commonwealth to replace the feudal: no small dream. However, while the poets always knew differently, the politicians, scientists, philosophers, theologians (who had always had this tendency to forget) began, at least on the printed pages we still keep, to forget that representation is *necessarily* limited, and to think of the limitation as a problematic inadequacy. What Freud made accessible to everyone was a vocabulary for discussing this idea that representation is inadequate.

If Cartesian space splits the body from the mind, thought becomes articulable and separate from the body. Further, the mind cannot deal with the possibility of inarticulated knowledge. The history of psychology since the seventeenth century is an attempt to deal with the detritus flung from this severance which makes the inarticulated/able (i.e. not systematic/ideological) 'mad', located in the body, derailed. Just as there are tensions in Freud's simultaneous and contradictory linkage and separation of the body/mind, so there are tensions in his contradictory separation and hope for linkage between the articulated and the inarticulable. At the centre of Freud's definition of psychosis, neurosis and narcissism, is the 'other' as inarticulable. The 'other' becomes allied with the inarticulable body, hence what is articulated is never complete, never adequate to reality because it doesn't deal with all phenomena. To articulate, to *think*, in Cartesian space is to enter a system of representation increasingly dominated by the need for stable representations of ideology. The more pervasive this ideological discourse becomes, the more stable the representation, the more inadequate the inarticulable. This is the strategy that invents desire.

When Lacan extends this inadequacy into the split between the imaginary and the symbolic, the symbolic, like the mind, becomes what is articulated, what can be said; and the imaginary becomes the 'body', what cannot be articulated and is pre-symbolic. This is a necessary move if he is to make a case for the split subject and the structure of fantasy, and to prove his point he introduces the different bodies

of women, using them with a casual curiosity. When you enter language you lose 'phenomenological plenitude'. This loss divides the self, leaving a desire for wholeness. The subject is always made up of the symbolic (necessarily masculine and phallic) and this inarticulable 'other', which is constantly desired via Lacan's notion of reciprocity. 'Reciprocity' has been developed in terms of fantasy and resistance to commodification, of considerable interest to women given that because women can't fully enter the symbolic they are 'other', and because they are 'other' they can't enter the symbolic.²⁹ The movement between desire and knowledge as a movement between inarticulated and articulated, is one that depends on a notion of linguistic adequacy underpinned by a profoundly post-Renaissance Christian ideology. A desirable object becomes known by being commodified, fully represented. The pleasure of such commodifying practice reinforces the sense that people live in an ordered, rational world of stable representation. Desire becomes something that leads to the satisfaction of repeating that order (repetition compulsion); or, it may lead to the terror felt at the edge of chaos (death), coincident with bliss or jouissance. Bliss is felt to be closer to the real because it's as if we make order out of chaos, risk ourselves in a metaphorical sacrifice. This also accords with a post-Renaissance concept of 'beauty'.

But in effect it is impossible to distinguish between the two because you can never know whether 'risk' and 'chaos' is simply the result of not understanding the systematic order all around you. The one is fully-fledged narcissism, suppressing the absent term and projecting completions/commodities such as God or woman from the phallic symbolic: the economy of the same. The other is a fetishisation of desire that locates the 'other', displaces into commodity rather than completes the subject: an economy of displacement, the failure of which makes necessary sacrifices. Both operate within the structure of fantasy and assume an inadequacy of language. The problem for women is that in either economy they are not only a central metaphor for desire, power and commodity, but also they are inarticulable and therefore unable to articulate.

The reciprocity that fantasy enables can devolve, as just drawn, into commodity or banal fetish, but some readings offer reciprocity as a version of dialectical reasoning, constant exchange between self and other, so that identity is internally alienated, the subject is never complete. In this version, women cannot be offered linguistic adequacy but neither are they commodified by others. The 'other' here is rooted in the body and the inarticulable, but can be written into the symbolic as the mystical, the religious. Of course in one sense this is Lacan (and others) simply re-discovering through poetics the limited rather than inadequate work of language, in a political world which has denied the

instability of representation, but in another, it is a dangerous sidelining into experience marginal to ideological stability. In the face of theories that deal otherwise with the fear of chaos via concepts of total system (Althusser) and total inadequacy of representation (Baudrillard), Lacan has tried hard to deal with the sense of individual response, yet like them is still caught in the ambergris of Cartesian space.

Contacting Reality in Cartesian Space: Inadequacies and Practices

BUT, there are different approaches to the limitations of language made possible by reading Freud in alternative ways. To return to Descartes: by remembering the instability of language, part of the common ground for Descartes' thinking is that 'thought' is a way of working toward articulating the not-yet-articulated. Like 'theory' which in many contemporary discourses tends to get separated from practice but which is in effect the same thing, his 'thought' is trying for appropriate representations of practice: but why? Articulating practice is understood variously as a way of contacting 'reality' and as a way of making individual practice social.³⁰ Freud described the inarticulable as the repressed, focusing on two different kinds of repression: into the unconscious (not possible to articulate) and the subconscious (possible to articulate). The 'unconscious' becomes a concept responding to the sense of a systematic stable ideology inaugurated by nation state governments that emerge in post-Renaissance Europe. It is a way of providing an origin or *raison d'être* for the 'private', and links the private with the body, particularly the body we cannot articulate.

If the unconscious is understood as a constructed political response to authoritarian politics, then there is a clear transition into a wide variety of social repressions under state governments which institutionalise community functions. If the state is authoritarian but also powerful and systematic, then the disempowered are not just partially repressed but completely repressed, eradicated from participation. The terms become unconscious vs. system; private vs. state; isolated individual vs. nation. But what this also does, apart from providing a political rather than a biological reason for the unconscious, is ally the impossibility of articulation with disempowerment.

The alliance has a curious effect on people who are in effect empowered and should thereby be able to articulate because the system works for them. They hold the position they are in because a state system defines them as powerful in a particular way, so if people are empowered then their inability to articulate must be a result of the system. This seems to make sense because the system is presented as a symbolic mode of representation that is taken as necessarily (and hopelessly) inadequate. It is only those who are disempowered who

understand that (in)articulation is work. The unconscious as the split self, is the response of the public representation of the symbolic the hopeless inadequacy of the public representation of the symbolic to their individual and 'private' lives. And it is those who have been *relatively* empowered who have used the 'unconscious' as an analytical tool for articulating systems of authoritative power: for example, Franz Fanon on the colonial subject or Juliet Mitchell (among others)³¹ on the repressed woman.

It is vitally important that authoritative systems of power are analysed critically from within their own terms. They cannot 'hear' anything else because it is repressed, absent, dis-membered by forgetfulness. But those relatively empowered speakers are in a highly ambivalent position, dependent on the degree of their disempowered status. Within this powerful system of discourse, in order to talk about the disempowered, they have to talk about the unconscious, but in talking about the unconscious they accept the framework of authoritative state vs. private that creates disempowerment. If their aim is to interpellate a disempowered subject into the representative system (already taken to be inadequate) this is valuable because then that subject can be 'heard', but simultaneously that subject is dismissable as inadequate. This inadequacy only diminishes as the representation moves closer to the sufficiently adequate and the subject is systematised.

In the eyes and ears and mouths of the powerful, the disempowered are dismembered, part of the unconscious, the body, the private. Like the unconscious/body/private, they are part of the 'natural', the 'intuitive', the 'primitive', the 'not-civilised', the not-articulated. For example, until recently the metaphors for women make no separation between gender and sexuality because the body defines their position outside the symbolic. Just so, the body defines the position of visibly 'different' people outside the system. This is one reason why class analysis was effective for so long: it was difficult to locate the 'poor' outside the system on body terms, so it was done in terms of the 'private' – although the spurious connecting of a working class with sexual 'per-version' or the cultural battle over fashion are indications of the way the media are used to transfer 'poor' into bodily 'difference'.

The relegation to the unconscious by state ideology, of women and other physically 'different' groups of people had been so effective a political strategy for stable representation that Freud's popularisation of an emerging vocabulary for discussing this repression was of course profoundly unsettling. By definition the unconscious should have remained inarticulable. With psychological and psychoanalytic methodology, a discourse was formed both to enable people to talk about the language as inadequate and why representations are to be distrusted, and even ignored as in the forgetfulness of ethnocentricity;

and to encourage people to attempt articulations of the 'different', often using the body as the site for alternative articulations as in feminism's 'writing the body': re-membering and dismembering the individual in Cartesian space. But this version of language underwrites the sacrificial metaphor for poetics. Women, and others, can begin to talk and insert themselves into the dominant, but only at the cost of severance and mutilation. *The symbolic is powerful because it is defined by contradictions of inadequacy materially realised by 'others': women are by definition inadequate.*

This is where it gets really difficult: this version of 'writing the body', re-membering the individual, within a system based on notions of linguistic inadequacy is always going to run close to accepting the concept of the unconscious as biological and hence of a private, owned and commodifiable, sexuality and writing. Brossard speaks of writing as different from text, and 'thought of as a machine capable of helping us resolve problems of sense, puts us in a position where we think we are able to produce truth, that is, reality',³² or that is, adequate representation. The urgency of Cixous' early writing, which reclaimed the body from metaphors in the symbolic system, is carried out by repetition – repetition that can never be exact and is therefore potentially various, yet repetition always under hideous constraints demanding that poetics becomes a heroic attempt at individual adequacy, challenging the *a priori* inadequacy of anything without ideology. Or Kristeva's linguistic terror/ism. The violence of this enforced opposition describes precisely the system's brutality to all who are different, here women. At the same time it participates in the sacrificial metaphor, the writer undergoing mutilation and severance on behalf of a community.

Put in this abstract and rather dry manner, the sacrificial metaphor appears obvious in its futility. Yet it is not surprising that women writers exposed to a pervasive philosophical discourse field that defines poetics in this way should try to write back through it, as I am doing here, to other philosophical authorities in a search for another metaphor. For example, there is Daphne Marlatt's writing in *Missing with the Mother tongue*, through etymology and myth to the Kristevan chora. Or there is Erin Mouré's stab at Aristotle by way of a peculiarly Canadian emphasis that has been provided via the large number of writers who came into contact with the work of George Whalley: i.e. Plato's Aristotle. Brossard speaks of this in *Picture theory*³³ saying,

No matter which cities, books repeat us, take the form of our emotions. The necessity for certain positions prior to feminist thought. Yes this body takes up a strategic stand in the streets of the Polis of men, yes, this body displaces the horizon of thought, if it wants, this body is generic. (p. 143)

Generic bodies, articulatable bodies, have to work through the sites of philosophical discourse to understand both how they come to be articulated and whether they can be articulated differently.

The see-saw between system and individual, authority and arbitrary, determined and relativist, nation state ideology and subject, this see-saw is predicated on a notion that there is an externally ordered world: a system. It is predicated on the concept that language should be able to represent that order. However, neither the order nor the representation is ever complete; and yet because it is 'supposed' to be, the incompleteness is taken as an inadequacy, a failure, something to drive a naturalised power-relation. Because many Western societies accept a version of this implicitly in their structures of state government, it becomes an immediate reality that has to be dealt with on its own terms. And there are many writers in relatively empowered academic and intellectual communities who attempt to do so. But it can also be addressed, as Brossard addresses the writing of Stein and Wittgenstein, working with the flexibility of a language never intended to be adequate. And it can be addressed on the other terms of 'writing the body' suggested by the political gesture of the unconscious: of making practice social.

Making Practice Social

To 'write the body' by writing from the practices of life, must partly be in response to institutional systems, yet it is also to do with many areas of non-institutional daily life. I would like to argue that there are many sites where language is not considered a problem of inadequate representation with its penumbra of failure, power, desire and commodification. Rather there are places where we negotiate communications, work with other people to arrive at immediately appropriate uses, places where in effect we sometimes resent the sacrifice-at-a-distance made 'for' us by someone who has the apparent luxury of being *able* to choose to become 'other'. If representation is taken as necessarily limited rather than inadequate, all order is necessarily socially questionable and negotiable.³⁴ There is no mysteriously (or mystically) externally-ordered world. There is no need for the terror of chaos, and when things get commodified we know about it. Unarticulated knowledge can here be seen to resist commodification to the extent that it cannot be systematised. But the attempt at an articulation of it is helpful: we value the articulated particularly at the moment of its articulation because we know the context and the activity of discussion that made it possible. It becomes part of the way we assess common ground, take decisions and act.³⁵

Poetics in Western thought has always been a place to work on articulations that are difficult to make. It has provided a location for focusing on cultural tensions or knots and unpicking them, unravelling the weave of social texts and retexturing, hammering out appropriate words, shifting the common grounds. Prior to the Renaissance other pressures bear upon the direction of poetics, but increasingly since the seventeenth century, poetics has become contextualised within the pervasiveness of state ideology necessary to nation state ethos, and the context has shifted the emphasis to the heroic and sacrificial poet also coincident with Christian humanism, that reinforces the primacy of power over change: gift interaction. Recent Western writers have turned to craft and skilled practice, or the labour of care, in order to find articulations to value daily work without the success/failure criteria of symbolic power.³⁶ *Phaedrus* offers medicine, gardening, writing as textuality, as examples of the practices, the labour needed to maintain love as change-gift.

What emerges is a metaphor of labour, connotative of class struggle, physical work, birthing. There can be puritanical associations, but 'labour' here is not put forward as some grim duty; it need not be without a sense of Derridean 'play' but it is insistently communal in a way not easy to recognise in Derrida's own direct rejections of inadequacy in his concepts of fold, erasure, difference, supplementarity, etc. And while labour is work, it is not put forward as a mechanical or technical exercise in strategy, as in recent theories of communicative argumentation, but more as in Wittgenstein's own attack on the poverty of the case/silence duality, with his development of justificatory negotiation rather than judgements.³⁷ 'Labour' for me is also for the moment more enabling than 'sacrifice', partly because sacrifice is cast as individual while labour is more frequently communal and I'm tired of being alone, and partly because I'm also tired of being a sacrifice and continually returning to heroic self-mutilation in face of the symbolic.

Poetics as Labour

The problem with poetics as labour is that it requires commitment to working on a communal agreement of some kind however context dependent. Poetics asks the writer/audience to deal with the difficulties of articulations that untie cultural knots that bind us in particular ways, and reweave them into appropriate textures. This is difficult work because it requires time and energy, so we need good reasons before we can commit ourselves to it. This is also vulnerable work because between the untying of the knot and the retying of the strands, our common grounds, which we both stand upon and understand, fall away. We need to trust to mutual support before we can do it. Again,

Brossard describes such an 'assemblage' or *contextus* of women working together at a film festival, 'Invigorated, we are women's creative energy gathered together' (*The Aerial Letter*, p. 129), and later, context as 'inspiration' that 'restores to the community of women their energy. The energy of each captivating woman activates women's energy, and it is from this energy that a collective consciousness of who we are is born' (p. 130).

The commitment to the poetics of labour has to come from the response of an audience that wants to attempt new common ground – but there are many difficulties surrounding both commitment and support. A common way of proceeding is via a small group thrashing things out and hoping by mediation (in print) that others will recognise the appropriateness, see the light. The structure is avant-garde, and runs uncomfortably close to ethnocentric club culture and to much modern science. Larger audiences/communities are more difficult to form unless one goes for less difficult shifts in common ground. My argument is not that the more difficult it is: the fewer the number of people who will read the writing, or: the more challenging it is. Rather, the argument is that the more dislocating the writing is to a *particular* common ground, the more or less committed people will be to responding to it, and that this commitment is affected by numerous conditions. For example, since dislocations to culturally foregrounded structures are easier than dislocations to more naturalised structures, generic and narrative grounds in which Western education and mass culture specialises are the most likely to gain a large audience in the short term, but just because they are culturally foregrounded they are more constrained in the extent of their dislocation. It is more difficult to gain a commitment for a dislocation to a naturalised common ground because they are more difficult to see as grounds, but the effects are far reaching.

Given this, dislocation can be an act of desperation, to loosen up the social and cultural restrictions no matter what: a gamesmanship of which language-poetry has been accused. If language-poetry addresses the frames of language itself – syntax, phonemes, morphemes – it will be more difficult simply because people take these grounds as natural. But it doesn't generate much commitment from these grounds as natural. As Jameson does, that since you can't disorganise the fetish of capitalist society the poet must work in the pre-symbolic of languages; or to say as Hartley does, that poetics is meta-symbolic: you can't dislocate the symbolic system but you can comment upon and critique the structure. Both responses are from a position of relative empowerment, they both assume Freudian/Lacanian linguistic inadequacy and are rootedly anarchic acts which like all anarchy are contained within the system. Yet dislocation can also be a directed act, positioned toward

a particular kind of work, with the problem that the positioning may not be recognised because the grounds are so fundamentally shifted, or possibly that this work may be of a kind people do not want to do on that position – they may not think it important enough or they may find it too frightening even with support.

Commitment will come from the perceived or enacted stance of the poetics, mediated by its cultural and social position (race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality . . .) and medium (magazine, book, newspaper, sheet). Commitment comes not from ethos, which is the relatively stable construction of the writing's voice whether generically specific or non-specific, but stance, which invites into shared work on articulation and gift, presumes that the individual is working with other people, doing work that is acted upon but not contained within state discourse, that power is a contingency. It also presumes that the individual is not alone because this would be an impossibility – there is after all no such thing as a private isolated individual. In effect we work with others all the time on a common ground of power relations which, with support, we are always able to attempt to reground by work on appropriateness for our communities.

Lola Lemire Tostevin opens her introduction to *Redrawing the Lines* . . . 38 by proclaiming variety, stating that the women contributing to this issue 'never violate other women's theories, other women's freedom to express' (p. 5), yet notes that not many women of colour responded to the invitation to contribute. Partly this may be due to the status of *Open Letter* which is from the world of the relatively empowered, the marginal intellectual. Partly one suspects, in the absence of any information about how writers were invited to contribute, that it has to do with the penumbra of Lemire Tostevin = language-focused writing = white/male elite literary culture. However, among the contributors' accounts of their writing lives there is some awareness of this particularly in the essay by Marchessault, cited in the opening to this discussion.

The accounts of women's writing lives consistently describe the importance of finding a textual community. Several do so through the vocabulary of Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis as it is mediated by Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray and others. Many do so through Brossard's theoretical writings. But all do so through lists of other women writers who form their communities and who are spoken of in terms of gift: change, embrace and love. Joanne Arnott says, 'The poem is the vehicle inside of which she and I meet, embrace, and give each other strength for the journey' (p. 8). Anne Michaels says 'not action instead of words, but rather, action and words. Writing is one kind of giving. To become what you wish to give, quite another' (p. 99). Or there is Nancy

Charter's political self-love which is love within a 'collectivity . . . commitment/responsibility/accountability to a community or larger social context' (p. 32). Perhaps because these accounts are autobiographical they do occasionally construct a curious intersection between genre-writing and language-focused writing, that moves toward the kind of materiality of labour for writer and reader that Brossard and Marhatt work within. This is the kind of stance that engenders commitment. It offers recognisable common grounds and provides a poetics to challenge, unpick and retextualise. In this it is no different from genre-writing texts, Marchessault's 'realism', where working on materiality also goes on.

Coda

Work on materiality and common ground is often unexpected. It is not to do with identity politics, solidarity or authentic voice, but with being part of work with other people on the articulation of aspects of life different to those defined by ideological representation. That difference, and the perception of it, is important to our awareness of the limitations of the ideological. But simply noting difference in say class, gender or race, is to note only the representation of it, not its agency. To understand the agency you need to be part of the communal work. Representations of difference are important but need to be contextualised within their complex relationship with ideology, for ideology is itself the strategy of a stable ruling system of permitted representations that position the subject.

Psychoanalytic vocabularies offered by Freud and Lacan provided a way of describing and analysing this relationship between the individual and the nation state, and their focus has been on ways that sexuality had been constructed into a statement about the position of the subject within ideology. Writers such as Foucault have of course elaborated on sexuality not as the bodily erotic, but precisely as permissible representations of the body within the state system. Indeed, the erotic is rather a mode of agency: the eroticisation of desire occurs at the moment when the physical body fits the sexual/sexuality; eroticisation can be viewed as a way of bringing the subject into the representations of ideology. Just so, beauty can be the individual eroticising actuality into representations of reality defined by ideology. Power can be constructed similarly as an eroticisation of ruling.

But if the agency of eroticisation brings individuals into representation, it also indicates that there are moments when individuals are not represented within ideology. The moment of instantiation into representation is at the same time the moment of commodification, and ideology simultaneously gives that sense of 'fit' to representation and

necessitates the activity that leads to it. You could think of ideology as the source of contemporary Western aesthetics, the bliss/ouissance of instantiation being dependent upon it. The simultaneity of bliss/ouissance with commodification in 'fit' is also the source of the attempts to maintain that moment, to extend recognition of beauty/desire/power beyond the moment of its occurrence, which lead to the frustration of desire and yet also to the satisfactions of pleasure.

The possibility of 'fit' implies both notions of adequacy/adequate representation and of places without 'fit'. Those places without 'fit' may be preliminary unarticulated desires, or they may be quite different to the limited articulations of the ideology-subject axis. Within that axis all need becomes desire, and deprives the individual of further agency, leaving them overdetermined in commodified representations. Yet living together with other people alongside the operations of ruling state systems as one set of events currently defined by the ideology-subject axis, need is not turned into desire but is held in the middle of many contingencies. Here, alongside, agency becomes the inability to turn need into desire.

Many language-focused writers, writing through the vocabularies of Freud and Lacan, write at the centre of the ideology-subject axis, because that vocabulary is located precisely there, between the nation state and the individual. Yet many also write through to the other side of representations, dealing in the middle of the difficulty of articulation with the agency of words that net together a material ground. This work is not representative; hence it can easily also be taken as undemocratic. But if we work with it, rather than merely note or observe its lack of representation, we may find unexpected commonality in the labour.

Notes

1. In *Open Letter*, series 8, 4, Summer 1992.
2. A recent summary is provided by A. Karasick, 'Tract Marks' in *Open Letter*, Series 8, 3, Spring 1992. Karasick tries to make a case for Marxian connections, but at least in the emphases she chooses I see more in common with American culturalism: i.e. cultural not economic production. For a longer list see B. Godard, 'Canadians? Literary? Theory?' in *Open Letter*, Series 8, 3, Spring 1992.
3. E. Moure, 'Poetry, memory and the polis', p. 205.
4. Smaro Kamboureli, 'Theory: Beauty and Beast? Resistance to Theory in the Feminine' in *Open Letter*, 7, 8, Summer 1990.
5. Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel, eds., *Language in her Eye: Writing and Gender*.
6. G. Scott, 'A feminist at the carnival', p. 250.
7. S. Kamboureli, Interview with R. Kroetsch.

9. Despite for example L. Bersianik, 'Aristotle's Lantern' in *A Mazing Space*, eds., Kambourji and Neuman (1986).
10. The tape of the editorial collective is held in the Special Collections section of the National Library of Canada. A much shortened version containing some of this material is found in the editorial statement made in the first issue of *Tessera*, published as *A Room on One's Own*, 8, 4, Jan. 1984.
11. Although some writers clearly show this response operating and document their answer to it. See Libby Scheier, in 'Chopped Liver', *Language in her Eye*.
12. Especially essays such as Cixous' 'Sorties' and 'The laugh of the Medusa' and Kristeva's 'Woman's Time'.
13. N. Brossard, *These Our Mothers*.
14. Indeed Brossard was invited to tour the UK courtesy of Cedric May of the University of Birmingham while I was working at the University of Liverpool in 1978/79.
15. Such as 'Coming to writing' or *Vivre l'Orange* by Cixous, and *Speculum of the other woman* by Irigaray.
16. This was the argument of Bronwen Wallace as well as Dorothy Livesay.
17. L. Lemire Iostevin, *Gyno Text*.
18. B. Warland, *Proper Definitions, Collected Theorograms*.
19. See for example M. Perloff and G. Hartley.
20. B. Warland, 'the breasts refuse: suffixscript' in Scheier *et al.*
21. See D. Mariart, 'Telling It, women and language across cultures', ed. Telling It collective, p. 12.
22. L. Hunter, *Rhetorical Stance in Modern Literature*, chapter two.
23. As above, chapter three.
24. See the bibliography for much-referred to primary texts, and for widely disseminated secondary commentaries.
25. L. Hunter, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy*.
26. T. Modleski, *Feminism without Women*, p. 162.
27. See M. Whitford, *Lucre Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*.
28. T. Modleski, *Feminism without women*, p. 163.
29. Many commentators have discussed this element; Marchessault uses it to focus her argument about the oppositional in 'Is the Dead Author a Woman?', as above.
30. See L. Hunter, 'Artificial Intelligence and Representation: An argument for legitimization' in *Artificial Intelligence and Society*, 1993.
31. See bibliography for several commentators on psychoanalysis and feminism.
32. N. Brossard, 'Intercepting what's real' in *The Aerial Letter*.
33. N. Brossard, *Pictive Theory*.
34. L. Wittgenstein is particularly helpful on this in *Philosophical Investigations*.
35. A. Tanesini, 'Whose Language?'
36. L. Hunter, 'Artificial Intelligence and Representation: An argument for legitimization' in *Artificial Intelligence and Society*, 1993. See also the work on tacit knowledge by A. Janik and the Swedish Centre for Working Life studies; or the vocabulary of care, in for example, D. Smith, *The*

37. A. Tanesini, 'Whose Language?'
38. *Open Letter*, series 8, 4, Summer 1992.