Feminist poetics from *écriture féminine* to *The Pink Guitar*

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I dedicate this to my dad, David Thomas Trainor.

Abstract

This dissertation offers the first full-length study of five feminist writing practices developed between May 1968 and the publication of Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *The Pink Guitar* in 1990: *écriture féminine* (Hélène Cixous), *écriture au féminin*/writing in the feminine (Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin), lesbian/political writing (Monique Wittig), *innécriture* (Trinh T. Minh-ha), and writing as feminist practice (DuPlessis). These share what I call a feminist poetics; I develop the concept of "sympathy" (the transmission of symptoms from one body to the next) to explain how they nourish one another. I recount their poststructuralist context, and outline key historical influences, such as the student protests of 1968, the nascent women's movements in France and North America, and feminist cultural production in the 1970s. I then describe their poetics—the textual, grammatical, and semantic strategies used to undermine the patriarchal symbolic. I focus on the status and function of the female body in this feminist poetics, and suggest the body provides it with a non-essentialist theoretical foundation. I conclude by evaluating two models that best describe these writing practices: the palimpsest and the matrix. While the palimpsest, with its textual allusions, is an attractive model, I suggest that the matrix offers two advantages: its corporeal connotations and its emphasis on writing as process.

Résumé

Cette thèse présente la première étude approfondie de cinq pratiques féministes de l'écriture développées entre mai 1968 et la publication, en 1990, de *The Pink Guitar* de Rachel Blau DuPlessis : écriture féminine (Hélène Cixous), écriture au féminin/*writing in the feminine* (Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin), écriture lesbienne/politique (Monique Wittig), innécriture (Trinh T. Minh-ha), et écriture en tant que pratique féministe (DuPlessis). Ces pratiques partagent ce que je désigne comme une poétique féministe; je développe le concept de «sympathie», (c'est-à-dire la transmission des symptômes de corps à corps) pour démontrer les façons dont elles se nourrissent. Je revois leur contexte poststructuraliste et leurs principales influences historiques, tels les événements de mai 1968, l'origine, en France et en Amérique du Nord, du Mouvement de Libération de la Femme, et la production culturelle féministe des années soixante-dix. Je décris ensuite leur poétique—les stratégies textuelles, grammaticales, et sémantiques qui ont pour but l'ébranlement de l'ordre symbolique patriarcal. J'examine surtout la position et la fonction du corps femelle dans cette poétique féministe et je propose que le corps constitue une base théorique non-essentialiste. Enfin, j'évalue deux modèles qui résument mieux ces pratiques d'écriture : le palimpseste et la matrice. Bien que le palimpseste, avec ses allusions textuelles, soit un modèle séduisant, je privilégie la matrice, qui offre deux avantages : les connotations corporelles et un accent placé sur l'écriture en tant que processus.

Introduction

The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully. The ape is too distant to be sedulous. Perhaps the first thing she would find, setting pen to paper, was that there was no common sentence ready for her use [. . .] *Indeed, since freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of the art, such a lack of tradition, such a scarcity and inadequacy of tools, must have told enormously upon the writing of women. Moreover, a book is not made of sentences laid end to end, but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades or domes. And this shape too has been made by men out of their own needs for their own uses. There is no reason to think that the form of the epic or of the poetic play suit a woman any more than the sentence suits her.*

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own (76-77)*

In her 1928 essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes of the difficulties a woman writer faced when she looked to "the great men writers for help." Just as a "man's sentence" is unsuitable for a woman, she argues, so are the literary forms or structures—the arcades and domes—created for the male writer's use. She contrasts these artificial, man-made constructions which have "hardened" over time with the possibility of an organic model for a female literary form, speculating that the "book has somehow to be adapted to the body" (78).

What might this new form, whether sentence or book, still inchoate, and modeled on the female body, look like? In a review of Dorothy Richardson's *Revolving Lights* six years earlier (*The Times Literary Supplement,* 19 May 1923), Woolf had identified a prototype of this "woman's sentence":

> She has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extremes, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes. Other writers of the opposite sex have used sentences of this description and stretched them to the extreme. But there is a difference. Miss Richardson has fashioned her sentence consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness. It is a woman's

> sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex. (191)

Woolf suggests here, not that Richardson has discovered some essentialist female form, but rather, has deliberately fashioned this woman's sentence to capture the consciousness of a woman writer.[1] Dorothy Richardson confirms this in her foreword to the 1938 collected edition of *Pilgrimage*, in which she describes her attempt both to create a new sentence—"Feminine prose, as Charles Dickens and James Joyce have delightfully shown themselves to be aware, should properly be unpunctuated, moving from point to point without formal obstruction" (12)—and a new form of feminine realism. While Richardson suggests both Dickens and Joyce write in the feminine, Woolf includes Dickens in a list of male authors to whom women may go for pleasure but not for the model of their prose. Yet Woolf's admiration of Shakespeare for his androgynous vision and Richardson's invocation of male authors to illustrate what feminine prose can do, indicate that for both women what they called an androgynous or feminine style represented a conscious political deployment and not an essential or organic expression unique to women. As Gillian Hanscombe has argued, Richardson's new sentence, which broke the conventions of syntax and punctuation, provided Richardson with the "technical unit" for her developing feminist consciousness (*Art* 40).

In order to further explore the concept of a woman's sentence, Woolf creates the fictional Mary Carmichael, author of "*Life's Adventures*, or some such title [. . .] her first book" (79). As she reads *Life's Adventures*, she finds that not only has Mary Carmichael broken the sentence of men's prose, but she has also broken its sequence by writing of a taboo scenario: "Chloe liked Olivia." Woolf describes how the usual smooth gliding of prose is scratched and torn by Mary Carmichael's pen. Here she could be aligning Mary Carmichael with Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot and the difficulties she felt they had with a "man's

[1] See Michèle Barrett's introduction to *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing* in which she outlines Woolf's general account of women's literary production and argues that Woolf's discussion of a "woman's sentence" is based not on essential differences but the "deliberate and conscious" use of language by women (25).

sentence"; Brontë, Woolf argued, allowed too much of her feminist anger to appear in her writing. But she is also suggesting that Mary Carmichael had a need to tear up the male prose style in order to introduce such a taboo subject—"Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature" (81). Woolf describes this step positively as the lighting of a torch in a serpentine cave, an image which suggests the illuminating, through Mary Carmichael's writing, of a woman's consciousness. Woolf's own use of somewhat vague, searching phrases in her essay to describe such attempts at illumination suggest her own quest for a new woman's writing: she writes of "unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling" (84), of the need for "entirely new combinations of her resources" (84), of "the shortest of shorthand, in words that are hardly syllabled yet" (84). Referring to women's attempts to write their experience, she notes the inadequacies of the language of power: "the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room" (86-7). What is this room that a woman goes into and needs such new resources to describe? Certainly Woolf is referring to women's historical and cultural confinement to domestic, interior spaces, rooms such as the sitting room, the dining room, the kitchen, the nursery. It could also be a reference to the room of her own, whether this is a physical space indicating command of leisure time and material resources, or a metaphor for a woman's psyche, her unconscious, her body.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that Woolf's call for a woman's sentence is

> a *fantasy* about a utopian linguistic structure—a 'woman's sentence'—to define (and perhaps disguise) her desire to revise *not woman's language but woman's relation to language*. In fact, we want to argue that when she elaborates upon her dream of the woman writer Mary Carmichael Woolf at least half consciously means that her fictive Mary has triumphed not by creating a new sentence-as-grammatical-unit but by overturning the sentence-as-'definitive-judgment,' the sentence-as-decree-or-interdiction, by which woman has been kept from feeling that she can be in full command of language. The utopian concept of woman's grammatical sentence is thus for Woolf, as also perhaps for contemporary American and French linguists, a veil that conceals the

more practical idea of woman's legal sentence. ("Sexual Linguistics" 522-23)[2]

By "woman's legal sentence" and "sentence-as-decree-or-interdiction," they refer to Lacan's Law of the Father, which is said to govern the symbolic, to regulate symbolic exchange. They also refer to legal interdictions against women in the form of denied access to education, to literacy, and to certain juridical, scholarly, medical, holy, and poetic languages and texts. Lacan himself is identified as the proscribing father who metes out linguistic interdictions. Gilbert and Gubar read Woolf's call for a woman's sentence as a call to rethink "woman's relation to language" and in turn, as a call to sentence, as opposed to be sentenced by, men. In this study I place great emphasis on the concept of sentence-as-grammatical-unit. Formal and stylistic considerations including syntactical and grammatical experimentation, and the attention paid to gaps, breaks, white space, and erasures, are significant aspects of a feminist poetics. Yet I like this extension of Woolf's idea of a woman's sentence, particularly as it hinges on a punning play on *sentence*, a play which points to the flexibility and evasiveness of language, and its ability to outrun patriarchal law. Along with attempts to significantly modify the sentence-as-grammatical-unit, defining a woman's sentence as both a refusal of patriarchal sentences and a rethinking of women's relationship to language is at the heart of late twentieth-century feminist textual experimentation: *écriture féminine*, *écriture au féminin,* lesbian/political writing, *innécriture*, and writing as feminist practice.

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[2] Gilbert and Gubar offer several examples of nineteenth– and twentieth– century women writers who have participated in this linguistic fantasy: Louie Pollit in Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* creates a "witchlike private language that sounds suspiciously like a parodic mix of Latin and Greek" ("Sexual Linguistics" 528); Edith Wharton in the short story "Xingu" "hints at the existence of a language with Amazonian connections and Eleusinian connotations" (529); Gertrude Stein "remakes English itself into a foreign language when she seems to speak in tongues, testifying to the authority of her own experience" (529); and in *Trilogy* H.D. "reconstitutes a new language through a magical, alchemical process [. . .] For H.D., a word is a jewel in a jar, incense in a bowl, a pearl in a shell, a sort of mystic egg that can 'hatch' multiple meanings" (530). They go on to counter Lacan's equation of the phallus with linguistic authority and his assertion of women's fundamental alienation from language, with Erich Neumann's alignment of the womb with the mouth, an "upper womb," and hence birthplace of breath, the word, Logos. Their argument is that if the womb can be a mouth, a mouth a womb, this suggests that Logos is metaphorically born of woman, which "implies that women need not experience any ontological alienation from the idea of language as we know it" (537).

Feminist Writing Practices[3]

While frequently associated with Hélène Cixous, the term *écriture féminine* has been used to designate the work of several French writers, including Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Xavière Gauthier, Annie Leclerc, and Marguerite Duras, although they themselves might not agree with such a categorization. This will become apparent in my outline of Monique Wittig's theory of writing, which is in strong opposition to what she perceives to be an essentializing discourse in the work of Cixous. I will be using the term *écriture féminine* to refer specifically to Cixous's personal development of this concept in her writings, a term which first appears in her "Sorties," (in *La Jeune née*) where she argues that it is "[i]mpossible à présent de *définir* une pratique féminine de l'écriture, d'une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas" (*Jeune* 169).[4] Certain key theories which inform its practice can be identified however, and include the development by Barthes and Derrida of the concept of *écriture*, of the *lisible* and the *scriptible*, a working against patriarchal binaries and phallogocentric tendencies, and an alignment of sexual difference with *différance*. Its formal characteristics include a reworking of mythical and historical sources, a repetitive, fluid, and sometimes lyrical style, and an attention to the actual process of writing as a material practice, which includes acknowledgement of the body's presence in and its contribution to the text. Most importantly, Cixous believes that *écriture féminine* challenges traditional

[3] While I use the present tense to describe these writing practices, this study examines texts produced between 1968 and 1990. My parameters are the student-worker uprising of May '68 in Paris, which can be thought of as a watershed for the nascent *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* in France, and the publication of Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *The Pink Guitar* in 1990. Some of the writers I study here may no longer practise or advocate such approaches to writing. However, in a crucial sense, these writing practices are still present; readers necessarily enact them. Reading in itself, as DuPlessis explores in her essay on Beverly Dahlen, is a kind of writing. See also Daphne Marlatt, "Writing Our Way Through the Labyrinth" (*Readings from the Labyrinth* 32-35).

[4] "At the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist" (*Newly Born* 92).

categories and oppositions and attempts to inscribe the female body in writing. The female body then becomes the source or content for this kind of writing, an assertion which leads to fears concerning biological essentialism or determinism, and to compelling questions regarding the status of this body as already contaminated by patriarchal legal, medical, and social inscriptions. As such it would be a corrupt source for a new feminine writing.

Ecriture au féminin, usually translated as "writing in the feminine," is a variation of *écriture féminine* developed in Quebec by Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and Madeleine Gagnon, among many others, and then further explored and transformed by English Canadian writers such as Lola Lemire Tostevin, Gail Scott, and Daphne Marlatt.[5] As with *écriture féminine*, it understands the body as text, as already written by patriarchal discourse, and seeks to rewrite this female body and in doing so to undermine the patriarchal symbolic. As Gagnon, publishing in *La Venue à l'écriture* with Hélène Cixous, writes: "Mon corps est mots [. . .] je veux inscrire mon corps en lutte car quelque chose me dit [. . .] qu'une grande partie de l'histoire, pour ne pas avoir été pensée et écrite par nous, s'est figée dans la mémoire du corps femelle" (63).[6] As a Québécoise writing practice, *écriture au féminin* lies at the crossroads of French poststructuralist and feminist theory (Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva), and American feminist theory and practice (Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, the women's movement). At the same time it is embedded in a particular social and historical context which includes the experience of being a French minority in an English-dominated North American setting, the influence of the Catholic church, and the significance of the mother in traditional Quebec society. A handful of conferences and publications such as *Tessera,* which developed out of the Dialogue conference held at York University in 1981, made *écriture au féminin* accessible for English-Canadian writers, although it always remained a marginalized practice. Translation also becomes a

[5] Gail Scott, a Montreal writer, and Lola Lemire Tostevin, a Franco-Ontarian writer, are bilingual, but write primarily in English. Daphne Marlatt is based in Vancouver. I have had to select only a few writers and texts as representative of *écriture au féminin* and its English language counterpart.
[6] "My body is words [. . .] I want to write my body into struggle, because something tells me [. . .] that a great part of history, never thought out or written by us, has been embedded in the memory of the female body" ("My Body" 273).

trope for women's writing in general: women translate their experience from a marginal into a dominant culture and back again.

For Monique Wittig, any attempt to escape a position of marginality and infiltrate the dominant culture is a violent one, just as Cixous uses the imagery of death, decomposition, and resurrection to describe women's relationship to language, and as Brossard must first declare, "I killed the womb" before constructing the feminist textual matrix of *l'Amèr.* Wittig's fictional texts, from which a practice of political writing or lesbian writing can be inferred, make use of violent, bloody imagery to describe the violence of the inscription of the lesbian body/subject into language and patriarchal discourse (Wittig, *Lesbian Body* 10; Crowder, "Amazons" 122; Wenzel 284).[7] As with *écriture féminine* and writing in the feminine, the body is a central preoccupation; however, hers is a concrete, unmetaphorized lesbian body in its entirety which is (dis)articulated:

> CORPS CAVERNEUX LES BULBES DU VAGIN LE SQUELETTE LA COLONNE VERTÉBRALE LES CLAVICULES LES COTES LE STERNUM [. . .] LA VULVE LA MATRICE LA VESSIE LES INTESTINS LES REINS LA RATE LE FOIE LA VÉSICULE BILIAIRE L'ESTOMAC LES POUMONS LE COEUR [. . .]. (*Le Corps lesbien* 128-129)

> Abominable maîtresse j/e suis par toi saignée tout entière [. . .] M/es artères ont été sectionnées, m/es veines sont dilatées de façon systématique. Les artères plantaires péronières tibiales fémorales iliaques carotides cubitales radiales sont les plus grossièrement tranchées, tailladées est le mot [. . .] J/e vois comment complètement vidée sans plus d'épaisseur qu'une carte de géographie m/a peau va être par toi étirée tendue [. . .] m/on corps tout entier tout juste prêt à présent à être punaisé sur ton mur [. . .]. (141-2)[8]

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[7] These texts include *Les Guérillères*, *Le Corps lesbien*, and *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*. The terms "lesbian writing" and "political writing" are those of Wittig, who felt they best described her writing, as distinct from a feminine writing. She rejects the terms "feminine" and "feminist" (Crowder, "Amazons" 119).

[8] "THE CORPORI CAVERNOSA THE VAGINAL BULBS THE SKELETON THE VERTEBRAL COLUMN THE CLAVICLES THE RIBS THE STERNUM [. . .] THE VULVA THE WOMB THE BLADDER THE INTESTINES THE KIDNEYS THE SPLEEN THE LIVER THE GALL BLADDER THE STOMACH THE LUNGS THE HEART [. . .]" (*Lesbian Body* 115) and "Abominable mistress *I* am bled dry by you [. . .] M/y arteries have been severed, my veins systematically dilated. The plantar peroneal tibial femoral iliac carotid ulnar radial arteries are most rudely severed, slashed is the better word [. . .] *I* see how completely emptied with no more thickness than a geographical map m/y skin is going to be stretched out taut by you [. . .] m/y entire body now absolutely ready to be fastened with drawing-pins on your wall [. . .]" (126).

The female body as it is traditionally depicted in the *blazon de beauté* (lips like rubies, skin white as snow) is submitted to a textual autopsy—blood drained, veins dilated, arteries severed, and skin stretched out like parchment on the lover's walls—in order to reconstruct the lesbian body, which she identifies as distinct from a heterosexual woman's body. "Woman" is not a natural category, Wittig argues, but an ideological formation; women constitute an oppressed class which must work ultimately to eliminate itself ("One is Not Born" 15-16). Where practitioners of variations of *écriture féminine* seek to inscribe sexual difference in writing, Wittig seeks to remove it, as "woman" for her is a political category created by the heterosexual order. Language as it is currently used is examined for possible lacunae through which the lesbian body, new meanings, and unexpressed experiences can be introduced.

The space of the lacunae is developed by Trinh T. Minh-ha in her consideration of the interval and the interstice, linguistic breaches which allow for the possibility of conceptual breakthroughs. Trinh elaborates on Cixous's concept of an *écriture féminine* in describing the potential of an *innécriture*, an un-writing or inmost writing which would inhabit these intervals. Citing Marie Cardinal, she argues many women seek refuge in a "hermetic and incomprehensible language," a language which "allows nothing of the body of those who are using it to pass through. The serviceable words are without scars" (*Moon* 124). This is a "vertically imposed language" that is, language which is clear, correct, and unambiguous, where clarity serves instrumentality—language as window or medium and not as material, an act in itself (*Woman* 16). Clarity becomes a form of subjection that participates in an "ablution of language" (17)—it removes all traces of a body marked by colour, gender, and class. An awareness of the socio-historical body is proposed as an antidote to the patriarchal ablution of language while the materiality of feminine writing is stressed: "Woman's writing becomes 'organic writing,' 'nurturing-writing' (*nourricriture*), resisting separation." Trinh argues that such a writing practice seeks spaces or gaps to open up language to the body, to make it "permeable to feminine concepts" (*Moon* 136), spaces where questions about the nature of language itself can be asked. *Innécriture* approaches

the body as a hybrid matrix of the material and the cultural in order to rethink the feminine subject, weaving "into language the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender" (*Woman* 6). Through writing, women can challenge current injustice; many women, Trinh argues, see writing as "*the* place of change where the possibility of transforming social and cultural structures is offered" (*Moon* 135-6). Here she agrees with Cixous, who asserts, "Tout le monde sait qu'il existe un lieu qui n'est pas obligé économiquement, politiquement, à toutes les bassesses et tous les compromis. Qui n'est pas obligé de reproduire le système. Et c'est l'écriture" (*Jeune* 131).[9]

Yet despite this important rhetorical gesture of declaring writing a utopian space which doesn't have to reproduce the system, all of these writers recognize that language, constitutive of patriarchal thought, is the medium within which they must work. Rachel Blau DuPlessis begins her title essay of *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* with a description of a Man Ray photograph of Kiki of Montparnasse, a palimpsest of the full-bodied female figures of Ingres, in which her "solid, curved, lush back has, imposed upon it, brilliantly placed sound holes, black f-openings (f-openings!) which recall the *f* for function in mathematical symbol, force in physics, forte in music, and the abbreviation both for female, and for feminine gender in grammar. She is thereby made sonorous with cultural meanings" (157). The female body is presented as palimpsest, as laid and overlaid by patriarchal meanings; the playing of this body-mandolin becomes an extended conceit for a feminist rewriting of a body of patriarchal discourse. Here, a modern aesthetic is adapted to feminist practice as DuPlessis explores both her own writing process and the texts of H.D. and other modernists.[10] The

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[9] "Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing" (*Newly Born* 72).

[10] Modernism returns again and again in these theories of writing: Cixous wrote her doctoral dissertation on Joyce; the tradition out of which Brossard emerges is deeply engaged with modernist and postmodernist aesthetics; and Daphne Marlatt mentions that her "masters" included Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. In "Difference (em)bracing" (*Readings from the Labyrinth*), Marlatt describes how her growing feminist consciousness influenced her poetry apprenticeship. She notes that the prose poems of Robert Duncan and the essays of Charles Olson functioned as "cracks, fissures" that first opened up for her the flexible possibilities of a sentence "ungoverned by line breaks," and then led her to the writing of Gertrude Stein and H.D. (136). While it is beyond the scope of this study to trace in the

form of *The Pink Guitar* is experimental, an attempt to marry or make sympathetic modernist forms and feminist content as she sounds out the "practice of anguage. The anguish of language" (165).

The Body of the Text

Certain words began to surface as I read through these feminist texts—

> glyph hieroglyph petroglyph gloss glossolalia heteroglossia anacolutha marginalia matrix *matrice mater mētēr* mutter mothertongue material matter trace touch texture tissue

—the words forming that which they described, a kind of tissue or texture common to a feminist poetics, a term I use here to describe these writing practices developed in the 1970s and 1980s in France and North America, practices sympathetic to one another, often sharing literary techniques and formal properties, and conceiving of writing as praxis, aligned with the development of feminist consciousness. As the first study to cross the linguistic, cultural, and national borders of these experimental feminist writing practices, I seek to explore their sympathetic resonance, with particular focus on their contagion, both of one another's texts, and of a patriarchal body of language.[11] I develop the concept of

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detail it deserves the modernist antecedents to these late twentieth-century feminist writers, I will offer some detail in the footnotes, the beginnings of an archaeological excavation of their modernist roots.

[11] This is the first full-length study to examine in conjunction these experimental feminist writing practices of France, Quebec, the United States, and English Canada, practices which have previously received individual, somewhat compartmentalized attention. The exception is Susan Knutson's *Narrative in the Feminine* (2000), which offers a detailed narratological analysis of two texts by Brossard and Marlatt. Of the writers I describe here, the most extensive critical attention has focused on Hélène Cixous. Key studies include: Lynn Penrod's *Hélène Cixous* (1996), Susan Sellers's *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (1996), Morag Shiach's *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (1991), and Verena Andermatt Conley's *Hélène Cixous* (1992) and *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (1984). Anu Aneja in "The Medusa's Slip: Hélène Cixous and the Underpinnings of *Ecriture Féminine*" (1992) and Gerald Hill in "*bardés d'apotropes*: Anglo-American Responses to 'Le Rire de la Méduse'" (1992) offer surveys of the generally guarded North American responses to Cixous's concept of an *écriture féminine.*

There is a full-length study of Monique Wittig by Erica Ostrovsky, *A Constant Journey: The Fiction of Monique Wittig* (1991). Wittig is often read in opposition to Cixous; Diane Griffin Crowder offers this perspective in "Amazons and Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and

"sympathy" to describe these effects. By *sympathy*, I mean both affinity and contagion; sympathy nicely illustrates how these various practices nourish one another. The word is a compound of the Greek *syn* 'with' and *pathos* 'suffering, experience, emotion,' and is associated with a cluster of interrelated concepts, such as affinity, a close relationship between two people or objects wherein whatever affects one also affects the other; harmony in action or in thought; "emotional or intellectual accord"; the capacity to enter into the interests or the emotions of another; and "the correlation existing between bodies capable of communicating their vibrational energy to one another through some medium." Mary Ann Doane has pointed out the implications of the term in pathology, whereby a disease or disorder in one body part or one body induces the same disease or symptom in another, that is, there is contamination or contagion. As she describes it, "[s]ympathy connotes a process of contagion within the body, or between bodies, an instantaneous communication and affinity" (172).[12]

In these writing practices, I am especially interested in the status and function of the female body, and the texts I read frequently invoke the body and the trope of the body (body as text or text as body). Sympathy, then, with its historical associations with contagion and contamination of the body in medical discourse, as well as its relation to affinity and harmony, can be especially

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theories of Women's Writing" (1983). I suggest in chapter 3 that Cixous and Wittig, while declaring opposing aims for their writing, in fact have much in common in their texts.

Karen Gould describes the historical and cultural contexts of *écriture au féminin* in *Writing in the Feminine: Feminism and Experimental Writing in Quebec* (1990). She focuses on four Québécoises writers, Madeleine Gagnon, Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and France Théoret; however her study does not include any discussion of the English Canadian variation of writing in the feminine.

While Trinh T. Minh-ha has received significant attention for her work as a film-maker, there has been little critical response to her concept of the interval in relation to feminist theories of writing, or to her description of an *innécriture*. I address this critical development of the interval in chapter 4. Similarly, there is critical interest in Rachel Blau DuPlessis's poetry, but I have found little discussion of her concept of writing as feminist practice. See Cindy Moore's "New Visions of Self to Re-Visions of World: The Revolutionary Potential of Rachel Blau DuPlessis's 'For the Etruscans'" (1996) for one of the few responses to this practice.

[12] In "The Clinical Eye: Medical Discourses in the 'Woman's Film' of the 1940s" Doane uses the concept of sympathy to better understand the "pathology" of female spectatorship in a sub-genre of the woman's film. The female spectator is said to over-invest in or capitulate to the image and the story; she is subject to the effects of sympathy, a hysterical contamination by the contagious female character "who suffers from the disease of femininity" and ultimately must seek a patriarchal cure through assuming the position of the medical gaze (172). However, the association of sympathy with both affinity and contagion, and its corporeal allusions, can be a positive concept when applied to feminist textual production.

productive in explaining the interaction of these various writing practices. Affinity, the emotional bonds that are created by sharing a community of interest, is what links these feminist writing practices. Affinity can be used to describe the attraction or gravitation of particles that then maintain a chemical combination; Marlatt describes the ways in which words share affinities through assonance, alliteration, rhyme, as a kind of erotic gravitation of atomic particles, just as I am suggesting these writers and their texts gravitate towards one another. Interestingly, affinity also has a biological definition, denoting a relationship between biological groups that have some "resemblance in structural plan," suggesting a common origin; these writing practices do bear a family resemblance. Its etymological roots *ad* and *finis* mean "at the border"—borders, border crossings, contaminations of the boundaries of the *corps propre* are all significant in these practices.

Many of the writers I describe in this study share certain historical and theoretical influences, such as May '68, the nascent women's movements in both France and North America, and the subsequent bourgeoning of feminist cultural production. Through feminist journals and books there is a constant circulation of ideas, and I return to the definition of "sympathy" as "the correlation existing between bodies capable of communicating their vibrational energy to one another through some medium." The medium here is language, more specifically, feminist texts: publications by *des femmes* in Paris, feminist journals such as *Histoires d'elles* or *Québécoises deboutte!* or *Tessera*, in addition to *Signs*, which first translated Cixous for a North American audience, and *(f.)Lip*, a feminist newsletter produced on the West Coast in the late '80s, as well as individual texts such as Brossard's *L'Amèr*, Marlatt's "musing with mothertongue," and DuPlessis's *The Pink Guitar.*[13] Brossard in *La Lettre aérienne* refers to *le sens excité*, an excited sense generated by the exchange of ideas and emotions; the

[13] The Anglo-American women modernists provide us with a relevant historical example of a community of women writers who were also "sympathetic," sharing vibrational energy in the exchange of ideas through the medium of small literary journals and publications. See Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940.* I mention this particular community as Gertrude Stein and H.D. are significant influences on the writers I study here, as is Virginia Woolf.

polyvalent nature of words, and the debate generated by women about these words, will set things in motion and challenge patriarchal *sens unique* 'one-way sense.' Women's texts, words, ideas begin to ferment, resulting in the communication of "vibrational energy," a sympathetic communication of emotions and experience from one textual body to the next. For example, to read Marlatt is to read Louky Bersianik, Gail Scott, and Nicole Brossard, as well as Hélène Cixous, Rachel DuPlessis, and H.D. To read DuPlessis is to read H.D., Hélène Cixous, Nicole Brossard, and so on. Collaborative writing projects—Marlatt's work with Betsy Warland in *Two Women in a Birth*, for example, or Cixous's group publishing efforts—allow for such fermentation within the confines of a single text. Marlatt's work also crosses media: *Touch to My Tongue* is a joint publication of Marlatt's poems and the photo-collages of Cheryl Sourkes, resulting in a synaesthetic communion.

Sympathy also suggests the capacity to enter into the position—slip into the skin—of another. The ability to experience and empathize with the emotions or sufferings of other beings is stressed by Cixous and Trinh, and I address this in more detail in chapter 1, but note here that while most critical responses to Cixous have focused on pleasure and the *jouissance* of her texts, I offer an extended consideration of suffering as a crucial component of *écriture féminine*, bearing in mind that pleasure and the reverberating play of words, while critical to all of these writing practices, is always tempered with a sympathetic concern for the suffering of others. Cixous and Trinh argue that the writing of the body encourages this sympathetic capacity. The long western philosophical tradition of treating the self as pure spirit, mind, reasoning agent, can be countered by incorporating the body into the writing of fiction, where the body grounds us and in its materiality makes us vulnerable; when we begin to think of ourselves as embodied agents, we see how we are connected to a human vulnerability of the flesh, subject to mortality, ageing, emotions, and pain, all of which can allow us to develop empathy for the material effects of our intellectual systems and practices. This incorporation of the suffering body into text, the human body which insists we recognize our own fragility and mortality, can contribute to the

potential of writing as a liberating process that can record and empathize with the suffering and repression of others.

A rather different way in which the body is employed by these writing practices is as contaminant. *Sympathy* as a concept is also productive in describing this operation. To return to Doane, she connects the idea of the sympathetic transmission of disease with Foucault's observations in *The Birth of the Clinic* that femininity is associated with the pathological. As such, women are perceived as marginal yet threatening in their ability to infiltrate and contaminate the centre, the healthy male body, and by extension, the patriarchal structures of society. Texts are said to "write the body" or to be "in the feminine" is presented by their writers as part of an on-going project to subvert and ultimately undermine the patriarchal symbolic—perceived and described as a body—through contamination. The sentence-as-grammatical-unit is reconceived as a virus that infects the patriarchal text/corpus. Trinh in particular attempts to develop this concept of contagion or contamination of the symbolic by the female body. This aim of contamination is evident in the frequent imagery of disease and death: the emergence of *la morte* from the tomb (Cixous), the explicit anatomizing of the lesbian body in *Le Corps lesbien*, the rotting corpse of Dyongou Serou that contaminates the purity of the pond—a metaphor for the way in which the female body contaminates the patriarchal symbolic (Trinh).

My first aim in this dissertation is to trace the overwhelming similarities of approach in each of these writing practices, in order to demonstrate that in each there is a sympathetic feminist poetics at work, in all the ways in which I have defined *sympathy* above. This is distinct from a female poetics, for example, which would suggest an essentialist—subconscious or corporeally derived—writing practice.[14] By calling this a feminist poetics I don't mean to stamp each

[14] While I use the term *feminist poetics* to describe these writing practices, I am sensitive to the fact that Monique Wittig in particular rejected the term feminist, favouring lesbian in its place. Nicole Brossard in *La Lettre aérienne* also argues that it isn't possible to speak of a feminist writing. As writing for her is a "mode d'emploi du corps" in order to claim its status in "la matière linguistique," she can only describe her own writing practice as feminine or lesbian (71). I have used the umbrella term *feminist poetics* because it seemed to me that all of these writers engage with and are committed to feminist ideals. I am aware that this elides the lesbian specificity of their writing with a larger feminist project. Monique Wittig may also seem an unusual choice in

writing practice into a single form—there are variations—but to identify interwoven strands, to use the metaphor of weaving which appears intermittently in these texts.[15]

Common strands include a reclaiming of the body *in* language, of the female body as it has been written by patriarchal codes. Certain tropes recur: body as matrix, as palimpsest, text as tissue, and the body as text which must be rewritten and re-read. This "writing the body" often makes use of certain techniques, some of which are taken from modernist traditions. There is a claiming of blanks, white spaces, margins, and of marginal forms—the essay/*essai*, the gloss, the footnote.[16] Fiction-theory is pursued as a new form,

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relation to the other writers in that she shares with them few theoretical interests. Barthes, Derrida, and Kristeva are not intertexts for Wittig while she consciously rejects Cixous's concept of an *écriture féminine*. However I felt that it was crucial to consider Wittig's writing practice here for her interest in the ways in which the female body is textualized, that is, how the body is caught up within systems of signification.

[15] Traces of Barthes—tissue, text, texture, of Derrida, of (post)structuralist code, and of reclaimed classical myth. Philomela: "Cunningly she set up her threads on a barbarian loom and wove a scarlet design on a white ground, which pictured the wrong she had suffered" (Ovid 150).

[16] As I write, I find myself using an academic form and a language (one of clarity? of ablution?) that these feminist writing practices actively critique. And so I turn to the footnote as one of the marginal forms which might allow for what Nicole Brossard calls "spirant divergence" (105)—I use the English translation for its allusion to her spires of lesbian and feminist writing which make incursions into the terrain of patriarchally defined sense and non-sense—or what Rachel Blau DuPlessis refers to as the potential for narrative digression: "the annotation, condensing enormous cultural pressures into a tiny meaningful margin, tracking around the monumental, following traces; stepping beyond the woods (the words)..." (130). The footnote: offshoots from the body of the text like liana or roots that go underground, seeding and scattering words.

It occurs to me that the line that separates the footnote, here below, from the body of the text, above, could be the line DuPlessis conceptualizes when writing poetry, the line that divides semiotic and symbolic, the line that children just coming to language are crossing, the not-quite meaningful babble and echolalia on the verge of (non)sense; this is the lingual hinge Tostevin writes of in *Gyno-Text*. It is also the line below which English translations of French original texts will appear. Each translation, in that it loses its "texture," the complex interplay of phenotext and genotext that exceeds rational meaning, is a new text. I am indebted to the translations of other writers: Barbara Godard, Marlene Wildeman, Karen Gould. Some of the translations—of *LA* and of Tostevin's poems in *Gyno-Text*—are my own attempts, coming to French as a second language that I know imperfectly, so that the effects I describe (the shock a native speaker might register at hearing an unusual play of words or a grammatical break with convention) I cannot feel in the same visceral, tactile way. That language is a body is made most concrete for me when trying to work within a foreign language; I find how much of it is beyond my reach, how blind I feel. I even use phrases of the senses—touch, sight—to describe the sense of loss. Instead I must resort to identifying the rules and conventions of the language and then determine how they have been altered. The line separating footnote from the body of the text offers then a visual representation of this difficult crossing into a new language and a new text.

Since I constantly circle around the body in this dissertation, the footnote might also be thought of as the place of the abject, of that which is expelled from the *corps propre*, to use Julia Kristeva's term. The abject is expelled from the firm boundaries of the body in order to maintain those very

where poetics is considered as a kind of politics and process is emphasized over *telos*. Conventions of genre, grammar, and style are broken. Neologisms are coined (for example, *kath, féminaire, nourricriture,* and so on) and reverberating puns seek to outrun closure. These texts have a self-referential quality and interrogate the (post)structuralist conception of a neutral text by means of an embodied female subject who writes. Hybridity is considered as productive state and acts of contamination and transgression are valued. An archeology of the literary past seeks out sororal foundations or roots. Certain theorists are invoked—Jacques Derrida (*différance*, trace), Roland Barthes (*The Pleasure of the Text* is influential), Julia Kristeva (*Revolution in Poetic Language, Desire in Language*, the semiotic chora, genotext and phenotext, are returned to again and again)—whose texts contribute to this body of language a theoretical texture. Key questions are asked concerning the nature of language, of writing, and, most crucially, the relationship of the body to textual production.

My second concern then is to ask, what is the status and function of the female body in each writer's practice? How is the body textualized? I demonstrate throughout the dissertation that what makes this feminist poetics explicitly feminist is the deployment, the questioning, the rewriting, of the female body. Otherwise, how would such a poetics be different from any (post)modernist or avant-garde writing practice which employs similar techniques? The body provides the non-essential foundation of this feminist poetics. Of course, when Virginia Woolf suggests the possibility of an organic model for a female literary form, speculating that the "book has somehow to be adapted to the body" (78), or a theory of "writing the body" is proposed, an inevitable question arises: what is meant by the word *body*—body as physical artifact, as biological essence, as linguistic and cultural construction, as an imperceptible blending of genotype and phenotype? I will argue that the body which is being written in these practices is close in conception to Elizabeth Grosz's definition of the body as "no longer

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borders; the abject cannot be supported within the body; yet is crucial for its continued existence. The fetus, floating within the dark watery confines of the uterus, also comes to mind, as the womb as trope for text is used by many of these writers. The line separating footnote from the body proper is porous, the permeable barrier across which blood-borne nutrients and fluids are exchanged between two bodies which are distinct, yet intimately connected, not quite one or two.

understood as an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object [. . .] but as an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange" (*Volatile Bodies* 18). All of the writers I discuss here are deeply aware of the constant interchange of body and systems of signification; they are careful to distance themselves from the biological body as pure or uncontaminated source for a writing practice. As Morag Shiach has observed, the female body is not uncontaminated source so much as contested site: "Writing of the body, we fear appropriation at the point where, historically, we have been most vulnerable, and where we have been so ruthlessly placed. To evade the bodily is to reproduce a structure of oppression which has made of women's bodies their point of vulnerability and of guilt. To speak of the bodily risks a similar reproduction" (*Politics* 20). It has been therefore doubly crucial for feminist writers to acknowledge the female body as a key political site from which feminist theories of writing and feminist texts can emerge; such a contentious, vulnerable subject as the female body has been and continues to be most theoretically productive. As patriarchal legacy, it must be rewritten, from within, so to speak, as we are already these bodies. As Brossard puts it, "I killed the womb," referring to a patriarchal womb which she overwrites, creating through the writing process a lesbian body-matrix. Rachel Blau DuPlessis develops the conceit of woman as mandolin, "made sonorous with cultural meanings." The body becomes an instrument, as pink guitar which must be rebuilt from new material, reconceived, "[a]nd yet I am playing, I am playing. I am playing" (159).

In chapter 1 I describe the student-worker uprising of May '68 in Paris and its influence on the incipient women's movement. While women participated in all aspects of the events, from running off mimeographs to fighting on the barricades, they were excluded from political debate, a deeply alienating experience which led to the formation of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* and the significant feminist cultural production of the 1970s, in which I situate Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine.* I then offer a reading of her 1976 novel *LA,* in which *la morte*, the dead woman, begins her journey in the Egyptian realm of the dead. This space is read as the tomb in which Antigone has

been placed by Creon, the physical confinements of women, and the various cultural and conceptual confinements of patriarchy, out of which *la morte* is led. I discuss the variety of textual techniques used by Cixous—for example, her multiple puns on *matière*, *ma terre*, *mater*, *matrice* and so on—to give *la morte* new life, rewriting the female body as a feminist matrix. I end with a reading of *Manne aux Mandelstams aux Mandelas* to highlight the significance of suffering within Cixous's development of an *écriture féminine*.

Chapter 2 is an overview of the Québécoise writing practice known as *écriture au féminin* and its English-Canadian variant, writing in the feminine. Feminist cultural production was equally vibrant in Quebec, and I offer a glimpse of this *culture au féminin* in brief descriptions of the periodicals *Québécoises Deboutte!* and *Les Têtes de Pioche* which nourished a feminist writing practice. I then turn to detailed readings of texts by Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, and Lola Lemire Tostevin. In *L'Amèr,* Brossard explores her experience of pregnancy and motherhood as a struggle to escape from a patriarchal matrix and to rewrite it, to produce a lesbian matrix. In *La Lettre aérienne* she offers the model of a spiral to describe the way in which lesbian and feminist texts make incursions into patriarchal cultural terrain. After a brief look at significant conferences and publications which introduced English Canadian writers to *écriture au féminin*, I analyze Daphne Marlatt's "musing with mothertongue" in conjunction with her poem cycle *Touch to My Tongue* in order to explore her conception of language as a nourishing body. I end with Tostevin's poem sequence *Gyno-Text*, in which she explores the womb as signifying space, analogous to Kristeva's semiotic chora.

I return briefly in chapter 3 to May '68 and the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* because Monique Wittig participated in both. I read her novels in light of these cultural and historical movements. In *Les Guérillères* I consider the meaning of the *féminaire,* a small book which appears to contain a compilation of gynaecological information and a concordance of words in poetic discourse used to describe women. I suggest that the *féminaire* can be read as a book of *femme*/woman—analogous to the tomb in *LA* or the patriarchal matrix in *L'Amèr*—which is ultimately discarded in favour of a new lesbian text, as yet

unwritten, but which becomes Wittig's next novel, *Le Corps lesbien*. Here, I focus on Wittig's use of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and the myth of Isis and Osiris to enact an anatomy of the female body and its resurrection as a lesbian one, a resurrection which necessarily entails a violence done to the first person singular pronoun *j/e*. In my analysis of Wittig's *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* I describe the "lacunary method" by which she challenges traditional patriarchal and heterosexual semantics, and place this within the context of various feminist lexicographical projects in the 70s and 80s in the United States. I then consider the very different conceptions of writing offered by Cixous and Wittig, the one seeking to inscribe difference in writing, the other to eliminate entirely the "mark of gender"; I suggest that they still have much in common.

Chapter 4 offers an interval in which the subject of contamination is introduced. I first focus on Trinh T. Minh-ha's *innécriture*, a variation of Cixous's *écriture féminine,* but with a heightened sense of race and class and their effects on the practice of writing. Trinh presents a critique of the language of "clarity" which washes colour, ethnicity, the female body, out of language. Women are presented as the producers of cyclical impurity ("red"), an impurity which can contaminate cultural pools of accepted, unquestioned knowledge. I then describe Trinh's adaptation of the Asian tripartite conception of human consciousness: mind, heart, and *kath*. Again, the *kath* in Trinh's version is presented as a space not unlike the womb, a signifying space similar to the womb in Tostevin's *Gyno-Text*, or to Brossard's image of the womb as laboratory in *L'Amèr*. I conclude with a consideration of the sentence as virus, a contaminant that can infect and rewrite the patriarchal text from within.

In Chapter 5 I describe the new essay form developed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in *The Pink Guitar*. DuPlessis uses this form to examine the unusual predicament of the female cultural worker who finds herself both muse and artist. I outline feminist approaches to narratology to situate DuPlessis's concerns: traditional narrative forms reproduce masculine-feminine gender binaries in which the hero is coded as male and that which functions as plot-space (matrix, womb, tomb) as female. I describe the range of techniques DuPlessis associates

with writing as feminist practice, techniques which might subvert such traditional narrative forms; many of these techniques are shared by the writers discussed here. I conclude this chapter with a reading of "Writing" in DuPlessis's *Tabula Rosa*, analyzing those textual marks which contaminate or rupture the traditional lyric form.

In my conclusion I consider two models which are often cited by these writers to describe their projects: the palimpsest and the matrix. In medieval times the palimpsest was a manuscript whose original words had been scraped off in order to accommodate a new text; in these twentieth century practices, feminist scribes can be said to overwrite the patriarchal text of Woman. Poststructuralism has adopted the palimpsest as emblematic of the scene of writing. This model then is appealing, with its poststructural references to textuality. However, I suggest that the matrix as a model for a feminist poetics can supplement the more standard palimpsest in two significant ways. First, it reminds us of the preoccupation with the body in these writing practices, as its etymological origins are in the organic, and specifically in the female body: *mater* 'mother' in Latin, and in French *matrice* 'womb,' generally denoting a medium in which something develops. Second, it embodies regeneration and process, both in its biological and technological associations. While the matrix has been traditionally associated with a static formless space, coded feminine, out of which male form emerges—Plato's *chora*, for example—these writers through the deployment of a range of strategies (the sentence-as-grammatical-unit rewritten and deployed as virus) actively challenge this characterization, seeking, in the words of Nicole Brossard, to "traverser le symbole alors que j'écris" (Brossard, *L'Amèr* 14). Writing, in this model, is conceived as a complex, embodied process.

A Note on Terminology

Key terms which appear throughout this dissertation include: *écriture*, in a very specific sense; *écriture féminine*, *écriture au féminin*, writing in the feminine; feminist and feminist consciousness; patriarchy. While *écriture* requires a detailed discussion, which I provide in chapter 1, I offer brief definitions here of the others. *Ecriture féminine* is usually translated as feminine writing or "writing the body." I use this term to refer specifically to Cixous's theory, although it can generally refer to a group of French women writers who are traditionally aligned with this concept, writers such as Irigaray, Kristeva, Wittig, Leclerc, and Duras. *Ecriture au féminin* refers to the Québécoise variation of *écriture féminine* as seen in the writing of Brossard, Bersianik, Théoret, and so on. It is usually translated as "writing in the feminine."

By "feminist" I mean a descriptive term for individuals, for political and aesthetic practices, and for various forms of knowledge which assume as a basic premise the existence of a patriarchal order, and seek to analyze the effects of and to counteract this order. By "feminist consciousness" I refer to the awareness that an individual or a group develops of this patriarchal order, an awareness which necessarily leads to interventions in this order. "Patriarchy" I will broadly define as "a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political, and economic institutions" (Hum 200). I would add the symbolic order to this list. The women writers I discuss here I believe would agree with this general definition, although they might argue over what engine drives patriarchy, depending on their Marxist, psycho-analytic, postcolonial, or radical feminist leanings. All of the writers I discuss, however, resist the effects of patriarchy through an engagement with the symbolic order.

1 LA: Ecriture Féminine

— Il doit y avoir un ailleurs me dis-je. Et tout le monde sait que pour aller ailleurs il y a des passages, des indications, des «cartes» — pour une exploration, une navigation. Ce sont les livres. Tout le monde sait qu'il existe un lieu qui n'est pas obligé économiquement, politiquement, à toutes les bassesses et tous les compromis. Qui n'est pas obligé de reproduire le système. Et c'est l'écriture. S'il y a un ailleurs qui peut échapper à la répétition infernale, c'est par là, où ça s'écrit, où ça rêve, où ça invente les nouveaux mondes.

—Hélène Cixous, "Sorties" (131-2)[1]

May '68

In late May 1968 Anne Zelensky and Jacqueline Feldman set up a stand in the courtyard of the Sorbonne and began distributing this leaflet, advertising a meeting to take place on 4 June:

> You were on the barricades, the police charged you and beat you, just like the men, your comrades.
>
> You are participating in the discussions, in the committees, in the demonstrations.
>
> Girls' schools are involved, women's colleges have sometimes led the way for others, and among the 10 million strikers, women workers have had a strong role to play.
>
> Yet during these decisive days, no woman has appeared as spokesperson in the general meetings, on the radio, on the television.
>
> In the negotiations between trades unions, management and government, nobody has formally demanded equal pay for women and men workers, nobody has thought about collective services, crèches to help women in their double workday.
>
> In the immense debate that has now begun across the country, in the major reassessment of structures and values, no voice has been raised to

[1] "—There has to be somewhere else, I tell myself. And everyone knows that to go somewhere else there are routes, signs, 'maps'—for an exploration, a trip. That's what books are. Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds" (*Newly Born* 72). "Sorties" is Cixous's contribution to *La Jeune Née*.

> declare that changing relations between men also means changing relations between men and women [. . .].
>
> If you agree with all this, what are you ready to do about it? Come and discuss it with us. (Duchen, *Women's Rights* 199-200)

The meeting drew a full house, and attendees attempted to address the issues outlined above. Women were an often unacknowledged presence in all aspects of the events of that month, and yet there was no focus on issues directly affecting women, such as equal pay and daycare. And while power relations were being questioned, from worker-manager to pupil-teacher, the relation between men and women was not.[2] The male student leaders called for a rethinking of hierarchical relationships; they condemned the alienation of bourgeois capitalism, and considered new ways of establishing communities—revolutionary, antihierarchical, scornful of authority, often anarchist in intent. Their radical theory, however, was not apparent in their practice. As one woman quipped, "it takes just as long to cook a steak for a revolutionary man as it does for a bourgeois" (qtd. in Duchen, *Women's Rights* 203).

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[2] It has been documented that women were active in trade unions, political parties, and student groups, participating in the wide-spread strikes and fighting at the barricades: "Women students and workers were involved in direct confrontations with the security forces: from mounting the barricades and hurling paving-stones to launching raids upon the edifices of 'bourgeois power.' Together with the men, women were beaten and arrested—on 6 May *France-Soir* deplored the fact that '[les] jeunes filles soient sauvagement matraquées.' Some were raped in the back of riot police vans and at police stations" (Wadia 150-151). Yet thirty years after the events of May 1968, Wadia notes in her survey of the literature of May 1968 how difficult it is to trace women's presence in historical studies and memoirs: "What I had not realized [. . .] was the extent to which women had been excluded from both primary and secondary source commentaries, histories, and interpretations. Trying to find out what women had been thinking, saying and doing in May 1968 is not a straightforward exercise and one is forced to rely upon snippets of information and women's words scattered over a variety of sources. Often such information is not contained in the main body of works but lies buried within reference notes or appendices" (148). She notes there is a similar absence of women in images of the time. One exception is the poster of a woman throwing a paving-stone, an image I discuss in chapter 3. Wadia says this poster is "one of the rare ones to depict the female form" (189). I return to my interest in the potential of the footnote as a marginal form reclaimed by a feminist poetics. If to be placed in the footnotes is a defeat (women can only be found in the footnotes to history, men claim the body of the text, the primary narrative), of what value is this discredited space (a margin, a cell) that has already been conceded? I am reminded of the body in writing: historically, women have been "ruthlessly placed" within the realm of the corporeal, yet to then refuse the corporeal is to be manipulated by the oppressive structures which originally placed you there. In my Introduction I suggested that the body, because of this double-bind so eloquently expressed by Shiach, is a crucial productive space for a feminist poetics, and I suggest the footnote, within a feminist poetics, is equally productive as a marginalized form which can make incursions into the body of the text with its linear narrative. Cixous speaks of words as moles and ground mines, while Wittig describes words, particularly pronouns and neologisms, as Trojan Horses; I return to these viral conceptions of language in chapter 3.

Wadia identifies three stereotypical roles women found themselves playing, or expected to play: that of the mother, the secretary, and the sex-object. It was women who set up crèches and cafeterias, nursed the wounded, ran off leaflets (*anges de la polycopieuse*), answered telephones and made coffee. Women were seen as having an instrumental sexual function, in that sexual revolt was intimately connected to political social revolution (153). Duchen concurs, stating there was a "sexual division of revolutionary labour, which either trivialized [women's] efforts or kept them silent" (*Women's Rights* 195). Sex, she argues, was a metaphor in May for freedom and revolution, yet women's sexuality was not the issue, rather their sexual availability to the revolutionary male. A graffito at the Sorbonne: "Il faut baiser au moins une fois par nuit pour être un bon révolutionnaire" (Wadia 154). Another at the Odéon theater: "Fuck each other or they'll fuck you" (Duchen, *Women's Rights* 198).[3]

Women were seen as tools, running off mimeographs while men manned the barricades in their pursuit of a new society which did not seem to include a new conceptualization of women and their relation to men and the dominant hierarchy. As Françoise Picq describes it, the traditional gender divisions (men monopolizing the political discussions while women were expected to carry out the housekeeping tasks) were maintained within the May '68 movement (24). And yet the events of May 1968 were paradoxically a turning point for the women's movement in France as it spurred women on to a new political analysis of their situation. Duchen observes that women gained a crucial political vocabulary, while their negative experiences led them to "reject organization and hierarchy; to reject male participation; to defy the law; to recognize the need for developing feminist theory and to ground the theory in women's reality" (209). This new revolutionary spirit led to both a widespread feminist movement, dubbed by the press the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF), which actively and directly sought social change, and a complementary proliferation of cultural

[3] Rumours circulated that women who showed up at the Odéon (which had been occupied by male students) were immediately led down into the cellar where 'orgies' and 'love-ins' took place (Wadia 153).

production in the 1970s in which women sought to express themselves in the spirit of the graffiti, leaflets, posters, and spontaneous declarations of May '68.

Central to this new feminist culture were writing and publishing. Approximately a dozen feminist publishing houses were set up (Wadia 155).[4] Revolutionary feminist publications included: *Libération des femmes année zéro*, *Le Torchon Brûle* ("The Burning Rag"), *Le Quotidien des Femmes*, *Des Femmes en Mouvement*, *Histoires d'elles*, *Questions Féministes*, *Les Pétroleuses,* and *Les Cahiers du Féminisme* (Duchen, *Feminism;* Wadia, *passim*). Some of these were published as special issues of more established journals, while some had only limited print runs. For example, Duchen writes that *Le Torchon Brûle* began as a special issue of *L'Idiot International*, and was then independently published seven more times over three years. She describes its pages as shunning editorial policy, columns, rubrics and by-lines, while "on the page, drawings, pictures, handwriting and typescripts, all in many colours, jostled for space" (*Feminism* 2).

This challenge to traditional editorial practice, layout, and design can be seen on the cover of issue number 2 (December 1977) of *Histoires d'elles.* It presents a scrap-book-style collage of headlines, portions of headlines, and segments of columns taken from a variety of newspapers: "LA MORT D'UNE VIEILLE DAME," "CRIME CONTRE CRIME," "J'AI MOINS PEUR DE..." (the rest of the words are lost in the other headlines), "L'ENNUI, LA VIOLENCE ET LA MORT," "avoué le meurtre des deux jeunes femmes du Xe arrondissemen[t]." It also includes scraps of words without context: references to the theater of cruelty, to Israel, terrorism, justice, James Dean. Stamped in white letters across these black headlines and columns of newsprint, many of which are fragmented and illegible, is the title *Histoires d'elles* and the topic of the issue, "VIOLENCE," the words almost invisible against the sea of black print. Symbolically, this journal which seeks to write "histoires d'elles" presents a palimpsest of its own title and topic upon the standard typography of contemporary publications, signaling a challenge to male-dominated print media.

[4] "It is estimated that between 1975 and 1979 women writers published 150 different works with an average print-run of 5000 per title" (Wadia 155).

In addition to these feminist journals and newspapers, feminist publishing houses also sought to challenge contemporary publication standards. One of the most well known was the feminist house *des femmes,* founded by the *Psych et Po* group in 1973. Cixous began publishing with *des femmes* in 1976. Nicole Ward Jouve describes the atmosphere at the time:

> When I first got to know the Editions des femmes I thought I had landed in women's paradise [. . .] 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.'
>
> The publishing-rooms above the bookshop in the rue des Saints-Pères, and the printing-house in the wonderful rue de la Roquette [. . .] were beehives of activity. Everything was happening at once, in the same spaces: the reading of manuscripts [. . .] Kate Millet was visiting, or Nawal-el-Sarawi [sic], or a woman novelist from the Lebanon who had written about the war. *Almanach des femmes russes*, an anthology by Russian women about life in Russia, which someone had managed to smuggle into the west, was being translated. A huge petition was being drawn up for Quang-Jin, the most implacably pursued of the Gang of Four: she had just been sentenced to death. How to drum up support for Eva Forest, a Basque militant, or for the imprisoned Baader-Meinhof militants, was on the agenda. There was chaos in some ways, but also extraordinary energy, joy, militancy [. . .] Women's voices were getting louder, were being heard. They were going to change the world. (75-6)

Cixous's polemical writings—"Sorties," "Le Rire de la Méduse," "Le Sexe ou la tête?"—as well as her earliest novels which sought to practice an *écriture féminine* (*LA*, *Illa*, *Vivre l'orange*), appeared in this environment. It was a women's renaissance, a feminist cultural revolution.

Ecriture Féminine[5]

In 1968 Cixous was already teaching as a *Maître de conférence* at Nanterre, the locus of the mouvement du 22 Mars and the anarchist group identified with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a movement which led to the student uprisings in May of that year. Following these events, she was appointed *chargé de mission* to found an experimental school, the University of Paris VIII at Vincennes. Six years later

[5] In this section I discuss Hélène Cixous's specific writing practice, which I call *écriture féminine*. As noted earlier, many French women writers have been described as practicing variations of *écriture féminine*.

she created the Centre de recherches en études féminines at Paris VIII (Conley, *Hélène Cixous* xii). However, before moving to France, she had spent her childhood in Algeria, an experience which deeply influenced her approach to writing.

Hélène Cixous's father was a Sephardic Jew, her German speaking mother of Austro-Hungarian, Ashkenaze descent. She herself was born in Oran, Algeria in 1937, two years before the outbreak of the Second World War (Conley xvii). Cixous calls her positioning a strange kind of luck:

> quelques coups de dés, une rencontre entre deux trajectoires de diaspora, et au terme de ces chemins d'expulsion et de dispersion qui ponctuent, à travers les déplacements des juifs, le fonctionnement de l'Histoire occidentale je tombe, — je nais — en plein sur une scène exemplaire un modèle nu, brut, de ce fonctionnement même : j'ai appris à lire, à écrire, à hurler, à vomir, en Algérie [. . .] De ce premier spectacle, j'ai tout appris : j'ai vu comment le monde blanc («français») supérieur ploutocratique civilisé instituait sa puissance à partir du refoulement de populations soudain devenues "invisibles" comme le sont les prolétaires, les travailleurs immigrés, les minorités qui n'ont pas la bonne «couleur.» Les femmes. Invisibles en tant qu'humains. Mais bien sûr perçus en tant qu'instruments, sales, bêtes, paresseux, sournois, etc. (*Jeune* 128)[6]

Growing up seeing such colonial power exercised all around her, where Algerians, minorities, immigrants, and women were perceived as tools, and with the knowledge that only two years separated her own personal trajectory from that of six million fellow European Jews who perished in the death camps, including most of her own extended family, gave her a visceral, personal experience of oppression and injustice. She turns to writing as a means of escape, as a place "not obliged to reproduce the system," yet she elides learning to read and write with learning how to scream and to vomit. Writing becomes a way of expressing her visceral rage.

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[6] "A couple of roles of the dice, a meeting between two trajectories of the diaspora, and, at the end of these routes of expulsion and dispersion that mark the functioning of western History through the displacements of Jews, I fall.—I am born—right in the middle of a scene that is the perfect example, the naked model, the raw idea of this very process: I learned to read, to write, to scream, and to vomit in Algeria [. . .] I learned everything from this first spectacle: I saw how the white (French), superior, plutocratic, civilized world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become 'invisible,' like proletarians, immigrant workers, minorities who are not the right 'color.' Women. Invisible as humans. But, of course, perceived as tools—dirty, stupid, lazy, underhanded, etc" (*Newly Born* 70).

Cixous's concept of an *écriture féminine* is intimately bound up in the extensions of the term *écriture* by French poststructuralism. The first four entries of the *Petit Robert* gloss *écriture*, as: "1. Représentation de la parole et de la pensée par des signes [. . .]. 2. Type de caractères adopté dans tel ou tel système d'écriture [. . .]. 3. Manière personnelle dont on trace les caractères en écrivant; ensemble des caractères ainsi tracés [. . .]. 4. *Littér.* Manière d'écrire, de réaliser l'acte d'écrire [. . .]." The first definition, "representation of speech and thought by means of signs," suggests the general concept of *écriture* as a means by which one transcribes the spoken word. Examples given include *écriture pictographique, idéographique, secrète, chiffrée* (i.e. Braille). The second definition refers to *écriture* as denoting a specific script, such as *écriture égyptienne*. The third sense is best translated as "handwriting." The fourth definition refers to artistic styles of writing. All of these definitions contribute to the varied texture of the term, and at certain times it is clear that when Cixous, for example, uses the term *écriture*, she means the first, garden-variety kind of writing: a process of transcribing speech and thoughts. But by coining the term *écriture féminine* she is also responding to the ways in which Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have extended the concept of *écriture*.

Barthes, in *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture* (1953), uses *écriture* in opposition to *littérature*, where *littérature* carries overt grammatical markers such as the third person narrative and the *passé simple* (Hawthorn 96).[7] And just as *écriture* is opposed to *littérature*, other oppositions are developed: text/work and *scriptible/lisible* (the "writerly" versus the "readerly" text). This structuralist approach to language and *écriture* privileges a vast, extended system by which a text is "written." Abrams defines *écriture*, then, as a "social institution" in which the author "is regarded as an intermediary in whom the action of writing precipitates the elements and codes of the pre-existing linguistic and literary system into a particular text" (316). By extension, he argues, the world itself comes to be seen and read as text, a network of signs whose meanings are the

[7] Hawthorn cites Ann Banfield on what *écriture* might mean to an English speaker, as English does not employ such overt grammatical markers as the *passé simple*. She writes that *écriture* in English is "characterized by absence, an absence of the marks of literature, of human agency" (Hawthorn 96).

result of a complex interaction of cultural codes and ideologies shared by a given community (317). Language is understood as a structure governing our thought processes and access to reality.

Derrida questions the stability of this structure, which presumes some stable centre existing outside of the structure and seeking to limit the play of meaning. *Ecriture* describes the means by which this structure is destabilized, called into question, undermined. *Ecriture* is presented in *Of Grammatology* as the "common root of writing and speech" (Hawthorn 96), that is, a precondition of language prior to speech (Norris 28). It is offered as an alternative to logocentrism. Norris defines *écriture* as "free play" and "the endless displacement of meaning" which escapes conscious mastery (28-29). Transcendent reference is denied, as are other origins outside of the system which seek to anchor it: *logos*, reason, God, the originating Father and author.

This association of a logocentric order with paternity and filiation, with a line of descent in which power of the *logos* is passed father to son, is critiqued by Derrida in his use of the term *phallogocentrism.*[8] Cixous develops these ideas in *La Jeune Née*, where she begins by listing a series of binaries, such as "Activité/passivité, Soleil/Lune, Culture/Nature [. . .] Logos/Pathos" (115). Onto these dichotomies[9] is mapped:

Homme
Femme

She suggests, drawing upon both Derrida's phallogocentric critique and Hegel's positing of a master/slave dialectic ("Maître/esclave Violence. Répression" [117]), that all thought in Western philosophy works through such binary opposition, and

[8] The neologism appears in Derrida's "Le Facteur de la Vérité," in which he critiques Lacan's seminar on Edgar Allen Poe's "The Purloined Letter." Derrida asserts "logocentrism's phallocentric, male dominant, patriarchal cast of mind about the authority and origins of meaning" (Makaryk 584).

[9] A *dichotomy* is a division of two generally mutually exclusive or even contradictory groups or entities (Merriam Webster). Grosz offers a feminist analysis of the functioning of dichotomies within a patriarchal framework, suggesting that given a dichotomy A and not-A, one term of the dichotomy (not-A) is always defined purely in relation to the primary term (A). Not-A lacks any positive status or independent boundaries, only those which serve to define the dominant term: "Dichotomies are inherently non-reversible, non-reciprocal hierarchies, and thus describe systems of domination" (*Sexual Subversions* xvi).

asks whether the opposition Male/Female is key to our understanding of the subsequent hierarchization of the binary: "Le philosophique se construit à partir de l'abaissement de la femme. Subordination du féminin à l'ordre masculin qui apparaît comme la condition du fonctionnement de la machine" (118-119).[10] *Logos* is aligned with man and *écriture* with woman. *Ecriture* for Cixous is the process or "textual condition" (Makaryk 584) that can resist logocentrism, and, by extension, the phallogocentric order, undermining its foundations: "Or nous vivons justement cette époque où l'assise conceptuelle d'une culture millénaire est en train d'être sapée par des millions d'une espèce de taupe encore jamais reconnue" (119).[11] *Différance*[12] is used metaphorically to intervene in the master/slave relationship, where difference allows each term of the binary male/female to exist in its own right. Neither side of the binary is privileged, while there is the possibility of a third or fourth term, and so on (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* xvii).

Ecriture, in the Derridean sense, contains according to Cixous the possibility of change from within the very system which oppresses, by way of an attack on its foundations (women writers as moles). *Différance* aligned with difference allows us to conceptualize a system beyond hierarchized binaries, in which the second and third term and so on, are defined on their own terms, and in relation to one another, not only in a bound connection to a single master term which nullifies the subservient one. For Cixous, feminine writing, the "new insurgent" writing (*écriture féminine*) becomes an "anti-logos weapon" ("Rire" 250) by which women reject a marked writing and the male possession of language: "To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process" (250).

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[10] "Philosophy is constructed on the premise of woman's abasement. Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order, which gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's functioning" (*Newly Born* 65).

[11] "We are living in an age where the conceptual foundation of an ancient culture is in the process of being undermined by millions of a species of mole (Topoi, ground mines) never before known" (*Newly Born* 65).

[12] A "perpetual elusiveness or deferredness of meaning—celebrates what is for Derrida the essence of écriture and the opposite of, and alternative to, logocentrism or phonocentrism" (Makaryk 584).

This freeing potential of writing in the philosophical, Derridean sense is mirrored in Cixous's conception of writing as utopian: it can envision new political and social systems, new worlds. She comes to this belief from her childhood in Algeria where she came to identify with "[l]es condamnés de l'histoire, les exilés, les colonisés, les brûlés" (*Jeune* 131).[13] Books and writing provide her with an escape to other worlds which aren't complicit with the one that surrounds her; in the epigraph to this chapter, Cixous observes that writing is the one place "not obliged to reproduce the system." Writing, then, is for Cixous a political response, a reaction against the oppression she experiences as a woman and a Jew, and which she sees all around her in the colonial framework of her childhood.

In *La Jeune Née* and "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous distinguishes, however, between at least two different kinds of writing—a "marked writing" ("Rire" 249) and a "*new insurgent* writing" (250). These two kinds of writing can be understood within the political and psychoanalytic climate of Paris in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and specifically of Jacques Lacan's Law of the Father. Cixous's interest in two distinct libidinal economies, that of the proper and of the gift, would seem to correspond, respectively, to the marked phallocentric writing and a writing which is differently marked, the new insurgent or feminine writing—*écriture féminine*.

Cixous characterizes a masculine libidinal economy as one of the *propre*, or selfsame, a "term suggesting propriety, property, and homogeneity" (Shiach *Politics* 16). Cixous identifies this masculine economy with Hegel, in which the subject goes out into the other only in order to come back to itself (*Jeune* 144). Moi explains how the "insistence on the proper, on a proper return, leads to the masculine obsession with classification, systematization, and hierarchization" (111). This Empire of the Selfsame is contrasted strategically with the idea of the gift and an economy of giving. Shiach traces Cixous's use of the gift to the work of Marcel Mauss, and the subsequent development of his ideas by George Bataille and Jacques Derrida (*Politics* 21). Moi sees Cixous's use of the gift as

[13] "History's condemned, the exiled, colonized, and burned" (*Newly Born* 72).

corresponding to Derrida's concept of *écriture*: "the feminine/female libidinal economy is open to difference, willing to be 'traversed by the other', characterized by spontaneous generosity [. . .]" (113). A feminine writing, as Cixous calls for it, does not seek a return. Rather, it spends. Shiach writes: "It would not need to return to the security of fixed categories, of stable identity. It would *dépense*: a pun suggesting both the undoing of thought and a liberal spending of energies. It would be on the side of excess" (*Politics* 22).

I suggested in my introduction that sympathy, expressed as "the capacity to enter into the interests or the emotions of another," is a key concept for these writing practices, in particular for Cixous and Trinh. "Writing the body" is proposed as a way of remembering that intellectual systems have a material base; we are constantly reminded of our own vulnerability and of the vulnerability of those around us. Cixous writes in her dedication to *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas* that the novel is an attempt at compassion, regardless of its failures. She seeks, through the imaginative potential of writing, to understand the position of one who suffers, attempting to develop the liberating possibilities of a writing practice that records and empathizes with the suffering and oppression of others. It offers us a conception of poetic writing as embodied, as a material practice, and as a kind of making, which can help to stave off the world's darkness.[14]

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[14] Cixous privileges the poetic as a vehicle for philosophical and political thought. In this she follows Heidegger, who writes, "The bad and thus muddled danger/is philosophizing" (8) and, "The poetic character of thinking is/still veiled over [. . .]. But poetry that thinks is in truth/the topology of Being" (12). *Poiesis* is a "kind of building" (215) that goes beyond *colere* (the cultivating of something which grows out of itself) and *aedificare* (the construction of something which cannot come into being independently), in that it provides the very meaning or ground for such building. What Heidegger seems to suggest here is that *poiesis* is central to existence: "Poetry is what really lets us dwell. But through what do we attain to a dwelling place? Through building. Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building" (215). We dwell in language, which yields us access to the world. Heidegger's translator, Albert Hofstadter, interprets Heidegger to mean that without poetry humans would be "vicious automata of self-will" (xv). *Poiesis* is contrasted with *techne*, technology and the status of the modern world in which humans have become means, mere tools for human production and the imposition of their will upon the world: "Night is falling. Ever since the 'united three'—Herakles, Dionysus, and Christ—have left the world, the evening of the world's age has been declining toward its night. The world's night is spreading its darkness" (91). Heidegger catalogues the aspects of this darkness: a mode of self-assertion in which all is dominated; the "earth and its atmosphere become raw material. Man becomes human material" (111); living beings are "technically objectivated in stock-breeding and exploitation" while the "attack of atomic physics on the phenomena of living matter as such is in

Writing, in Cixous's conception, admits there is an-other: "Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me—the other that I am and am not" (*Newly Born* 86); she aligns this with the experience of childbirth, in which a woman becomes receptive during the gestation of the fetus to the present of another within; this space of time might also be thought of as an interval, a space that opens up to new possibilities. Writing as the letting in of another is described as an unending process which places the writer in a vulnerable position, fearing loss and a going away, a going beyond oneself. The writer attempts to think "what is not-the-same" (86), to hold both self and other within the same space or interval. This is a time when the writer may lose herself, and it is this loss which makes her receptive to the other: "when you become the panicky movement of getting lost, then, that's when, where you are woven weft, flesh that lets strangeness come through, defenseless being, without resistance, without batten, without skin, inundated by otherness" (*Coming* 38-9).

While Cixous has stressed that a practice of *écriture féminine* cannot be defined, the overarching aim of such a practice is to inscribe difference in writing, where difference is understood to be culturally determined—and if it is culturally determined, it can be reconceptualized. Techniques used to achieve this end may vary from writer to writer, therefore the formal characteristics I describe here are specific to Cixous's own writing practice. These characteristics have been variously identified as: a reworking of mythical and historical sources; a repetitive, fluid, and sometimes lyrical style, which is connected to her focus on voice and its traces in writing; a quality of excess (of body, of words, of text); and a self-conscious recognition of the actual process of writing, where language is seen as a material form and writing as a process intimately connected to the body—the body is acknowledged as both present in and contributing to the text. [15] Each of these characteristics contribute to a densely textured poetic writing, each

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full swing" (112); life yields to "technical production." Echoing Hölderlin he asks, "What are poets for in a destitute time?" (91). He answers, "To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods" (94).

[15] These characteristics of Cixous's writing have been observed by critics such as Sellers, Shiach, Conley, and Moi. I don't think of this poetics as prescriptive, but rather as descriptive, specific to Cixous and then adapted or developed in tandem, independently, by other writers.

has a strategic purpose, and all play on the underlying philosophical and political aspects of *écriture féminine*.

I begin with her revision of myth. Cixous has analyzed and rewritten the stories of a range of mythic figures in her books. Electra, Clytemnestra, and Medea are discussed in *La Jeune Née*. Demeter and Persephone, a mother and daughter who embody the cycles of sterility and fertility, death and rebirth, are the subjects of *Illa*. (They are also recast as lesbian lovers in Daphne Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue*. The underworld as womb-tomb plays a significant role in many of these writing practices, and I return to this in my Conclusion.) Prometheus becomes Promethea in *The Book of Promethea*, the heroine who snatches fire, creation, language, from the hands of the (male) gods. Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam are imagined as Isis and Osiris in Cixous's *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas*.[16]

In "Rire de la Méduse" Cixous presents the gorgons as productively disruptive influences. Traditionally they are depicted as "three monstrous sisters with hissing serpents instead of hair, boar's tusks instead of teeth, hands of brass and wings of gold" (Chevalier 446). Medusa, Eryale, and Stheno are thought to represent perverted spiritual, sexual, and social drives respectively, embodied in their grotesque appearances (455). Medusa, most infamous of the gorgons, is the mortal sister of Eryale and Stheno; her gaze turns men to stone. Gorgons were popular in Archaic art, represented as "women with open mouth and dangerous teeth" although these images by the time of the fifth century had lost their grotesque aspects, having been transformed into beautiful female images (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 643). The Gorgon's grotesque appearance might be related to the features of an Archaic warrior's fury: "fearful looks, gaping grin, gnashing of

[16] Why does Cixous place such an emphasis on myth? She is certainly influenced by James Joyce, the subject of her doctoral dissertation. His use of myth to structure *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, as well as the textual strategies he uses to disrupt standard expectations of meaning and narrative closure, are techniques deliberately adopted by Cixous to challenge phallogocentrism. Mythology encodes the hierarchized gender binary Cixous outlines in "Sorties." To rewrite these myths allows Cixous to intervene in the symbolic production of this standard binary, a project begun by Simone de Beauvoir in her analysis of the "Myth of Woman" in *The Second Sex*: "A myth always implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears toward a sky of transcendence. Women do not set themselves up as Subject and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men" (142-3).

teeth, violent war cry" (643). Cixous transforms this grotesque look of intimidating fury and gnashing teeth into the woman warrior who opens her mouth and laughs in the face of an opposition which would seek to subdue her. She seeks to claim her own image in denying the dichotomy of woman as inferior mirror image that turns men to stone. Paul Diel suggests the Medusa "symbolizes the deformed image of the ego" (qtd. in Chevalier 447), which could be interpreted as the "not-A" of the dichotomous relationship of "A, not-A" which admits no third term and deprecates the second term as lacking the essence of the first—woman as deformed man.

Beyond this refashioning of mythic sources, *écriture féminine* embraces language as material, corporeal, and excessive. Cixous's maternal tongue is German, which she remembers as a guttural, spoken, sing-song language. She suggests that this half-remembered maternal voice lends its rhythms—here there may be some connection to Kristeva's presymbolic, gestural, rhythmic semiotic—to her own writing:

> *écriture et voix* se tressent, se trament et en s'échangeant, continuité de l'écriture/rythme de la voix, se *coupent* le souffle, font haleter le texte ou le composent de suspens, de silences, l'aphonisent ou le déchirent de cris.
>
> D'une certaine manière l'écriture féminine ne cesse de résonner du déchirement qu'est pour la femme la prise de la parole orale [. . .]. (*Jeune* 170)[17]

She alludes to Lacan's disputed theory of difficulties women have in their entry into the symbolic: silences, gasps, loss of voice, cries, where speech is a wrenching process—all of which are often analyzed and claimed by women writing in the 1970s.[18] And just as voice and the rhythms of speech influence her writing, language itself is conceived of as material. Writing is a material process, which requires bodily movement. Words spoken involve breath and vibration.

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[17] "*writing* and *voice* are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, making the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries. In a way, feminine writing never stops reverberating from the wrench that the acquisition of speech, speaking out loud is for her..." (*Newly Born* 92).

[18] Toril Moi criticizes Cixous for her emphasis on voice, as she feels this negates a Derridean metaphysics of anti-presence by privileging the voice of the mother as a source. She argues that Cixous in her use of the voice can be aligned with Kristeva, whose semiotic *chora* is cut up by syntax (the symbolic) into chronological time (114).

The writer holds the pen in her hand or types at the computer; fingers, tendons, muscles, wrapped around bone, enclosed in skin, produce letters, whether in digital form or as traces of ink. Eyes guide the movements, follow the lines as they appear on the page. There is a self-conscious attention to this in Cixous's writing, as in the thematic focus on corporeality, sexuality, and, especially in her later writings, on the vulnerability of the flesh. It is clear that Cixous is considering the suffering body as early as 1979 in *Vivre l'orange*, where she alternates between a lyrical celebration of the Brazilian author Clarice Lispector, and concern for the plight of women participating in the Iranian revolution. Catherine MacGillivray has noted a shift in Cixous's writing from a poetics of pleasure to a poetics of suffering, most notably in *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas.*

Capitalist practices which regulate publication and distribution of texts (*la machine*) are touched upon. She asks, what has stopped women from writing? One of her answers is: "the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs [. . .]" ("Rire" 247). No systematic or deep analysis of this machinery is carried out, as such a systematic analysis is not her aim. She was, however, involved with a feminist publishing house which attempted to infiltrate this machinery. She published off and on with *des femmes*, the publishing house run out of the offices of *Psych et Po* in Paris. And in line with her delineation of a libidinal economy of the gift, there is an excess in her own literary production: her novels flood the market: "Ecrire, c'est toujours en cassant la valeur d'échange qui maintient la parole sur son rail, faire à la surabondance, à l'inutile, leur part sauvage" (*Jeune* 171).[19] Conley points out that there is an overabundance of Cixous's own textual production which defies mastery—it isn't possible to exhaustively survey her texts as there is always each year a new text which alters our relationship to the rest of Cixous's excessive corpus. This excess is also linked with the excessive nature of language which

[19] "To write is always to make allowances for superabundance and uselessness while slashing the exchange value that keeps the spoken word on its track" (*Jeune* 93).

always says more than one means, through *différance*, through metaphors, through *jeux de mots*.

LA

A reading of one of Cixous's earliest fictional texts reveals in *écriture féminine* not a prediscursive conception of the female body, but rather the body thought of as a cultural artifact which can be rewritten, reconstructed through language. *LA* (1976) is an important text in the writing corpus of Cixous in that it creates empowering counter-myths for women, myths which embrace female sexuality and the feminine body, theorizing this mediated corporeal locus from which women may write.[20]

LA begins with a section entitled "Le livre des mortes"—"The Book of the Dead Women." A woman awakens in the realm of the dead, which in ancient Egypt was the site of the necropolises along the edge of the western desert, "characterized by the darkness of the tombs, from which one so readily 'comes forth by day' to see the sun" (Morenz 207). Budge identifies the realm of the dead as a dark and gloomy space filled with fire pits and "hellish monsters" and crisscrossed with tracks through which the disembodied soul would be unable to navigate without the aid of some friendly being: "Everywhere was thick darkness" (136). Here is where *la morte*, the dead woman, first awakens. This space (*là*) can be read as a symbolic, mythological space, a representation of the underworld where women have been placed in myth and intellectual history. It is also the tomb in which Antigone is placed for defying patriarchal law.[21] In Sophocles's version of the story, Creon has Antigone placed alive in a hollowed cave. She speaks of being taken by Death to the shore of the underground river, to the

[20] I am indebted to Lynn Kettler Penrod and Morag Shiach for their interpretations of *LA*, in particular to Penrod for her reading of *là*, the space within which the dead woman awakens, as a womb-tomb. Susan Knutson indirectly contributes to my reading in her description of Nicole Brossard's *L'Amèr* as the overwriting of a patriarchal matrix in order to construct a new lesbian text. I suggest that a similar reading is possible of *LA*.

[21] Penrod argues there is a reference in *LA* to Derrida's reading, in *Glas*, of Hegel's *Ethics*, and in particular, Hegel's treatment of Antigone and kinship.

"fresh-made prison-tomb/Alive to the place of corpses, an alien still,/never at home with the living nor with the dead" (l.845-851). Sentenced by her uncle, the patriarch whose law she has defied, she appeals to the citizens, the "city of wealthy men," to witness her burial. She is neither living nor dead, rather inhabits a liminal space, a prison-tomb, which can be read as the physical and symbolic confinement of women in patriarchal culture: purdah, the veil, heterosexual union, pregnancy, and motherhood—i.e. confinement within the physical range, but also those narratives in legend and myth which confine women within a symbolic function. This liminal space can also be productively read as the female body within patriarchy, as it is constructed within the patriarchal symbolic, neither living nor dead, entombed, among corpses but not yet one. The underworld presented in "Le livre des mortes" is the Egyptian realm of the dead. This realm is located at the edge of the city and the kingdom; it is a gloomy scrub desert without roads. Onto this place of thick darkness is mapped the physical and symbolic confinement of women in patriarchy. More specifically, this realm which *la morte* will explore and attempt to leave is the prison-tomb, the female body as it has been constructed or placed in patriarchy.

The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* forms a significant intertext for *LA*. It consists of a collection of spells and charms which accompanied the dead into the afterlife.[22] Authorship is ascribed to Thoth, the god of scribes and "lord of the word of God" (Morenz 209). Isis, the sister-consort of Osiris, has also been assigned authorship (336). Thoth represented "the divine intelligence, which at creation uttered the words that when spoken turned into the objects of the material world" (Budge 183). The Egyptian title given this collection of sacred words and spells was *peri em hru* 'coming forth by day' (Renouf 181), which has been translated as: "manifested in the light", "coming forth from the day," "coming forth by day," "la manifestation au jour," and "la manifestation à la lumière" (Budge 28). (The third section of *LA* is titled "La sortie de la langue vers la lumière du jour"). Selections would be made from the many available chapters

[22] There are three main sources: the *Pyramid Texts*, which appeared on the walls and on the sarcophagi of the Pharaohs' pyramid tombs; the *Coffin Texts*, which were found inside the coffins of wealthy private citizens; and various papyri scrolls which were interred with mummies. The aggregate of these various texts are known as *The Book of the Dead.*

and transferred to a papyrus scroll by a scribe; the scroll would be placed on the mummy or wrapped around it or even placed in its mouth (Morenz 209).

The book of the *peri em hru* would typically include chapters on the giving of a mouth to the deceased, on the opening of the mouth, on bringing words of magical power to the deceased, on formulas which would allow for the deceased to transform into the turtle-dove, the serpent Sata, the bird Bennu, the crocodile Sebek, the god Ptah, a golden hawk, a soul, a lotus-flower, a heron (Renouf 189). The deceased has "the range of the entire universe in every shape and form that he desires" (189). There were chapters for repelling crocodiles which might try to steal the deceased's magical words (words, the ancient Egyptians believed, were concrete objects which could be stolen), for repelling serpents and worms which might eat the deceased, for receiving air in the underworld, for coming forth by day, for opening the tomb, for preserving the heart from putrefaction. Other chapters offer prayers for an ink jar and a palette, describe how to bring a boat to the underworld, and explain the use of amulets, such as a tet of amethyst representing the uterus and vagina of Isis, to be placed on the neck of the deceased (Budge *passim*). In the realm of the dead, the deceased is reunited with that which has been taken away from him: his *ka*, or double, is reunited with his material body and the "use of his mouth, hands, and other limbs are given to him" (196). The spells in the *peri em hru* ensure that this newly animated body is protected against the many dangers of the afterlife such as "gigantic and venomous serpents, gods with names significant of death and destruction, waters and atmospheres of flames" (197). This body does not suffer corruption or die the second death (196). The safeguarding and preservation of the body was essential to the ancient Egyptians because "the dogma of Osiris taught that from it would spring the translucent, transparent, immaterial, refulgent and glorious envelope in which the Spirit-soul of the deceased would take up its abode with all his mental and spiritual attributes" (Budge 5).

The aim of the dead upon arriving in the underworld was to be reacquainted with those things which were taken away by death: the senses,

speech, control of one's limbs. "His soul, his *ka*, and his shadow are given back to him" (Renouf 196). Cixous represents *la morte* as cut off from all sensations:

> Son corps inodore : une fleur séchée. Sur les joues pâles, les touches d'un fard éclatent. Toute droite, et mince, étroitement emmaillotée. Le corps qui ne peut pas périr. Une peau de papier japon. Aile de papilles. Comme une vierge à sacrifier. En Passion dans un temple. Un amour qui voudrait crier, retenu. Sa chair rappelle le sang, se souvient des bouffées de feu, de parfums des milliers de goûts différents qu'ont eus les choses. Sait maintenant, sent maintenant, après. N'a plus une larme. N'arrive pas à se rappeler. A elle.
>
> Elle voudrait bien se lever. Être celle qui se lève d'elle-même, malgré sa faiblesse, l'épuisement du corps vidé d'organes. Trop propre. Être le chat divin. La nouvelle vierge. Une vie.
>
> « Par ici! viens! » Une brise lui baise l'oreille droite, évente son visage de papier cendré. S'insuffle dans les narines si longtemps délaissées. Cloisons cassantes. (34)[23]

The body of the mummy has the texture of Japanese paper and wings of an emergent butterfly, fragile, dry. But this papery membrane can be written on, in the way that portions of the *Book of the Dead* might be written on slips of papyrus and placed in the mouth of the mummy or used to wrap around the body. Similarly the book *LA* itself is a body of paper which constitutes a new body. In this reconstruction of the body in the underworld, depicted by Cixous as a dream world, there is the possibility for constructing a female body based on a new conception of woman, beyond the prison-tomb of patriarchy. In this first section of the novel re-acquaintance with this possible body begins. "Dans un coin il y a de tout pour faire une femme" (11).[24] The new body is discovered sensually, piece by piece, in the same way the dead would regain a mouth, the use of one's limbs, of scent and of taste, through recitation of the spells written in the *Book of the Dead*: "Glissant sans tomber, senti comme une longue langue à peine humide qui

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[23] "Her odourless body: a dried flower. On the pale cheeks traces of brilliant rouge. Upright and slim, tightly swathed. The body which cannot perish. Skin of Japanese paper. Pappilose wing. Like a sacrificial virgin. In Passion in a temple. A love that would cry out, held back. Her flesh recalls the blood, remembers the gusts of fire, the perfumes of thousands of different tastes which things once had. Knows now, tastes now, after. Hasn't a single tear. Can't recall herself. To herself.

She would like very much to get up. To be she who raises herself, despite her weakness, the exhaustion of the body emptied of organs. Too clean. To be the divine cat. The new virgin. A life.

'This way! Come!' A breeze kisses her right ear, fans her face of ashen paper. Breathes life into the nostrils so long neglected. Brittle membranes." Translations of *LA* are my own unless otherwise noted.

[24] "In a corner there is everything needed to make a woman."

parcourt ton dos [. . .]" (11).[25] The body is experienced sensually as if by a *langue*, a tongue which runs along the small of the back, and metonymically by language (*langue* 'tongue, language'), so that by extension it is the language being written in *LA* which "licks" the new body into existence, traces out its form, its limits.

This underworld is experienced by *la morte* as a dream-like sequence, a voyage through constantly shifting scenes and overwhelming sensations. There is the touch of silk, light which shines from the *lunules* of the dead woman's fingertips, and doors which are also lips and mouths: "les lèvres fortes d'un sexe de déesse" (30).[26] Instructions appear from time to time, studded in the fluid, disorienting text. For example: "Récite pendant ce temps de délivrance la formule qui double sa vigueur et la rend plus légère à elle-même au-dessus d'un dessin exécuté sur du papier vierge sur lequel tu auras représenté les parties encore cachées de son corps" (31).[27] A small poem follows. The still-hidden parts of the body are to be represented on a piece of virgin paper; this becomes a metaphor for *écriture féminine* which seeks to envision a newly born body. The formula is meant to increase the vigor and lighten the heavy body of *la morte* which is conceived of and weighted down by patriarchal discourse.

In a text which is so disorienting and fluid, filled with dream-like sequences through which *la morte* voyages, the density of the language resists narration. Conley, as I've noted above, sees this density as a way in which Cixous "militates against bourgeois commodity-art and any ideology connected to it" (63). Similarly, Cixous's many texts (over thirty) flood the market and resist a critical ordering or assimilation by scholars. The shattering of the Cartesian *cogito* mentioned by Shiach is experienced in the reading of *LA* as the reader is disoriented in the text's flux and finds it difficult to associate with either *je* or *elle*, as the pronouns shift, from scene to scene, sentence to sentence, even within sentences. The prison-tomb in this first section is both the symbolic underworld

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[25] "Sliding without falling, felt like a long barely moist tongue that runs across your back [. . .]".
[26] "The strong lips of a goddess's sex."
[27] "Recite during this time of deliverance the formula to double her vigour and leave her lighter over a drawing executed on virgin paper on which you have represented the still-hidden parts of her body."

where woman has been placed in myth and history, and the female body constructed by this symbolic underworld. It can be read as a patriarchal matrix. Cixous plays with the term throughout. For example: "J'ai ma matrice! En vérité c'est une plante sans racines une anémone à mille visages une organe des horizons mystérieux. Ma fibre frêle, intime à mes corps en chacune de leurs parties." (116).[28] Through a chain of word associations matrix is aligned with *matière, ma Terre, mère, mer, mammifère, Madeira* (145-7). The text is conceived as texture or fibre, a cloth without centre; the womb/matrix is characterized as diffuse and in a state of constant metamorphosis. The entire book could be seen as an attempt, through writing (*écriture* in the Derridean sense), to construct a new feminist matrix, a resonating chain of words, images, and metaphors which claim and describe the female body, and yet never entirely succeed, in keeping with the nature of *écriture*. The body is no longer a static definition or concept, rather it is in the continual process of being written.

> Impossible d'arrêter dans la Matière l'enchaînement et le déchaînement des transformations de ses mots, de ses morceaux, de ses pièces et appartements, de ses locaux et localités, de ses espaces bruts et bâtis, de ses demeures naturelles et culturelles, en d'autres corps, d'autres maisons, lieux d'habitation, fourneaux, foyers, bateaux, et autres productions également prodigues, synthétiques, mystérieuses, et grosses de significations maternelles et de virtualités textuelles.
>
> Ses mélanges, glissements, traductions, représentations, concoctions, symbolisations, substitutions, son incessant travail guidé par aucune science, mené sang battant [. . .]. (145-6)[29]

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[28] "I have my womb [*matrice*]! In truth it is a plant without roots an anemone with a thousand faces an organ of mysterious horizons. My frail fibre, intimate to my bodies in each of their parts." I discuss the etymology of the words *matrix* and *matrice* in my Conclusion. *Matrice* is the equivalent of *womb*, but carries many of the formal associations (matrix as typographical mold and so on) of the English *matrix*.

[29] "Impossible to stop in Matter [*Matière*] the leashing and unleashing of transformations of her words, of her passages, of her rooms and apartments, of her locales and localities, of her wild and developed spaces, of her natural and cultural dwellings, in other bodies, other houses, places of habitation, furnaces, hearths, boats, and other works equally extravagant, synthetic, mysterious, and heavy with maternal meanings and textual virtualities.

Her mélanges, glidings, translations, representations, concoctions, symbolizations, substitutions, her unceasing work guided by no science, led by beating blood..." For the French, *déchaînement* 'outburst, explosion' and *enchaînement* 'linking, spiraling, a sequence of movements' I've made do with "leashing and unleashing" to suggest both the concept of linkage and of an outburst (as in, to unleash a flood of words). *Matter* shares an etymological origin with *matière* and so retains many of the resonating connections (the Latin *mater* 'mother,' maternal, material, matrix) but loses others (*ma terre* 'my earth').

As she writes, it is impossible to stop or fix the constant combination and recombination of words and meanings which are unleashed: "ses mélanges, glissements, traductions, représentations, concoctions, symbolisations, substitutions, son incessant travail." This is represented metaphorically by the transformations of *la Morte* into heron, lotus, the crocodile Sebek, a golden hawk, the god Ptah, and so on. The elision of matrix with material (*matière*) emphasizes the material aspect of language, of the text of *LA*, composed of ink, woven fibres, pulp, glue, and constructed by Cixous's hand, just as the references to the *Book of the Dead* remind us that the Egyptians thought of words as concrete objects with great power. Susan Handelman, who outlines in her book *The Slayers of Moses* the rabbinical conception of words and text as influential for literary theorists such as Derrida, points out that in the Hebrew tradition, the word is not conceived merely as arbitrary, conventional designation, but bears some "specific character or essence of its respective reality" (32). *Davar* means not only 'word' and 'thing,' but also "*action, efficacious fact, event, matter, process.* The *word of God* was more than the act of saying; it was a creative force, an instrument capable of enacting realities, a concentration of power—and in this sense a *thing*" (32).[30] This is contrasted with the Greek conception of words as a veil through which one passes in order to reach an extratextual reality, a realm of ideas. The *Torah* precedes the universe; God reads out of the text of the *Torah* as if reading from a blueprint in order to create the world. Cixous: "I am already text [. . .] Vision: my breast as the Tabernacle. Open. My lungs like the scrolls of the Torah" ("Coming" 52). Language is generated in this body-matrix that is aligned with mother, sea, (*mère, mer*), and uterus, and claimed as text or *Torah*, as a feminist space, in culture, being rewritten and reconstructed. This underworld, a matrix-tomb in which women have traditionally, culturally, been placed, is translated into a place of birth, a matrix-womb out of which the feminist writer will emerge (Penrod

[30] Cixous, in "Coming to Writing," describes the reactions she experienced when young to her unusual name: "With such a name, how could one not have been concerned with letters? Not have sharp ears? Not have understood that a body is always a substance for inscription? That the flesh writes and is given to be read; and to be written" (*Coming* 26).

72).[31] In the following section of *LA*, "La sortie de la langue vers la lumière du jour," Cixous begins to rename and claim the female body, first with the rhetorical gesture of throwing off the phallogocentric language which has entombed her: "En vérité la langue invisible qui m'avait enveloppée naguère et qui commandait mes pas, je l'ai arrachée, la vieille langue noueuse, qui me gainait le souffle, je l'ai enlevée" (108).[32] This *langue* is like a cloak which has covered her body and smothered her breath. Once thrown off, she articulates the parts and pleasures of the female body in the most well-known passage of the book:

> Je veux *nuque*. Je veux col. Je veux cul. Je n'ai pas peur. Je veux peur. Je veux : veux. Je veux vœu aussi. Je veux tout. Je veux joue je veux joues, je veux tout joue. J'ai une langue. Je veux que ma langue jouisse [. . .] Je veux qu'elle pleuve, qu'elle flûte, qu'elle grêle, que ses sons fondent et résonnent à travers tout le corps [. . .].
>
> Voici : quand elle force les digues et que les noms des lieux captifs sont libres, et la moitié du monde sort en toute lumière; de même nos mers montent se coucher dans le lit d'en haut, et leurs poissons parmi les étoiles je les vois scintiller et se vivre des substances célestes.
>
> Je veux *vulve*. Qu'elle prononce mes noms, et j'ai! Qu'elle me lise le livre de mes parties, et moi-même je m'avance avec le livre de mon corps dans ma bouche, et dans ma bouche je contiens le volume qu'elle œuvre pour moi. Si les paroles suivantes sortent de ma bouche, je pourrai voir mes deux corps dans la pleine lumière, je pourrai parcourir ma Terre en me mêlant à mes vivants, mes puissances corporelles ne subiront aucune éclipse, éternellement, et tout ce qu'elle prononce est fait beau du point de vue de ma langue : « Vulve! » Et hors de l'obscurité où végétait ma bouche divine lumineuse se lève la nouvelle astre. Et j'ai ma vulve! En vérité ma bouche et ma langue, voilà mes yeux pour vivifier mes recoins stagnants. J'ai ma vulve!
>
> Je veux *vagin* [. . .] Je veux que ma langue m'ivagine." (109-110)[33]

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[31] For example, in the *Timaeus*, Plato describes the *chora*, female matter or nurse of becoming, into which the male forms are imprinted. In narratology, J. Lotman observes that the male hero traditionally enters into and travels through a matrix, a dark, enclosed, female space. See de Lauretis and Knutson. This space is here being reclaimed.

[32] "In truth, the invisible tongue which had enveloped me of late, and which commanded my steps, I threw it off, the old wizened tongue, which stifled my breath, I took it off."

[33] "I want nape. I want neck. I want ass. I am not afraid. I want fear. I want: want. I also want a vow [*veux* 'want' and *voeu* 'vow']. I want it all. I want cheek I want cheeks, I want all cheek [pun on *jouer* 'to play']. I have a tongue [*langue*]. I want my tongue to come [*jouisse*]. I want her to rain, to flute, to hail, that her sounds melt and resonate throughout the body [. . .]

Here: when she forces the breakwaters and the names of the captive places are free, and half the world enters the light; likewise our seas [*mers*, pun on *mères* 'mothers'] rise to sleep in the bed on high, and their fishes among the stars I see them shimmer and live amongst the celestial matter.

I want vulva. Let her pronounce my names, and I have! Let her read me the book of my parts, and myself I advance with the book of my body in my mouth, and in my mouth I hold the volume that she opens [*oeuvre* 'work'] for me. If the following words come out of my mouth, I will be able

This passage becomes for Cixous a first gesture towards a freeing of language. By naming again and again aspects of the female body which have been denigrated or placed in obscurity within patriarchal culture, she claims them as her own, bringing them out into the full light of day. She can now freely explore *ma Terre* (my earth, a pun on matter, and mater or mother) which is her body, the female body, as it is being rewritten by her. *Elle* in this passage can be read as *la langue*, that is, both tongue and language, as well as *la Morte* and the reader of the text. Both writer and reader are participating in the creation of a new feminist text, the "livre de mes partes." This has resonance with the ceremony of the opening of the mouth in Egyptian funeral customs, a ceremony which is depicted in the *Book of the Dead.* The mouth is the opening through which breath and words come. Symbolically, this opening of the mouth was meant to animate the corpse (Shorter 56). In the context of *LA*, the opening of the mouth is analogous to the search for a new langue, an *écriture féminine*, which will bring the corpse—the woman in patriarchal culture placed in the matrix-tomb—to life.[34]

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to see my two bodies in full light, I will be able to run across my earth [*ma Terre*, pun on *matière*] mingling with my living, my corporeal powers will not submit to an eclipse, eternally, and everything that she says is done well from the point of view of my tongue [*langue*]: 'Vulva!' And out of the darkness where my divine luminous mouth was vegetating arises the new star. And I have my vulva! In truth my mouth and my tongue [*langue*], here are my eyes to make live my stagnant corners. I have my vulva!

I want *vagina* [. . .] I want my tongue [*langue*] to invaginate me" (My translation with reference to Conley and Penrod.)

In my translation I resort to the inclusion of square brackets to indicate certain puns and words which are meant to function in multiple ways. In her translation of *L'Amèr*, a text which also plays on the same resonating chain of words associated with *matrice* and *mer/mère*, Barbara Godard makes use of a typographical innovation to indicate the play of meaning. For the title, *L'Amèr* 'bitter,' also a homonym of *la mer* 'sea' and *la mère* 'mother,' Godard clusters fragments of words around an oversized capital 'S'. The title can then be alternately read as "These our mothers" and "The Sour Mothers." The opening pages also bear the variations: "The Sea Our Mother," "Sea (S)mothers," and "(S)our Mothers."

[34] In "Sexual Linguistics" Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the womb can be aligned with the mouth, both as birthplace of the word. Logos is born of woman, implying that women need not experience a fundamental alienation from language. Cixous appears to suggest a similar formulation in her emphasis on the opening of the mouth which can animate the corpse of *la morte*. The dead woman lying with the womb-tomb is reanimated through the opening of the mouth (an upper womb), what I have described as a transfer from a patriarchal to a feminist matrix. Cixous also shares with Gilbert and Gubar the imagery of a woman writer, whether nineteenth or twentieth century, dancing or laughing her way out of a patriarchal enclosure. Brossard, Trinh, and DuPlessis, while they also express some hope that it is possible to escape such enclosure, use imagery on a smaller, less rhetorically ambitious scale, the imagery of intervals and interstices, of gaps and crevices that will allow for small conceptual leaps.

Cixous in her texts seeks the corporeal traces in words: in her constant play on *langue* as language and tongue; in her deliberately provocative use of words to describe the female body; in her reading of the body as text; and in her emphasis on language as a matrix, a resonating web of language, by which she acknowledges the complex way in which the biological, material body is inextricably caught up in human systems of signification. As she records, "j'ai appris à lire, à écrire, à hurler, à vomir, en Algérie." She places writing and reading on the same level as the body, as the screaming and vomiting precipitated by the violence she witnessed growing up in Algeria.

Catherine MacGillivray notes that in Cixous's *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas* a "new poetic praxis" is at work. She identifies a shift that has taken place in Cixous's writing practice from a focus on the poetic element of writing with its political aspects always present but subsidiary, to the political element which is now informed by poetic readings and explorations.[35] I finish this chapter with a reading of *Manna*, which may seem like an unusual detour, for at first glance, this is a novel which does not explicitly focus on the female body, but on two male historical figures, Nelson Mandela and the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. Each are presented as suffering bodies, standing in for their people, the blacks under the repressive South African system of apartheid and Russians under the equally brutal reign of Stalin. I include this reading for the belief in the radical power of words that suffuses this novel, a belief first expressed in Cixous's writing with an emphasis on that which is most personal, her own body and the oppression of women within a patriarchal structure, but is in her later writing extended to different aspects of political suffering far from her own specific

[35] "Toward the beginning of [the 1980s], Cixous insisted on the radically revolutionary force of the materiality of poetic language itself, and on the political gesture inherently made by every poetical text [. . .] later she began to explore the poetry and the semiology of politics, the ways in which free poetic thought and political freedom feed one another, and in which certain political gestures pay homage to poetical ways of reading the world and to the poetry of existence" (MacGillivray xvii). This mutual nourishment of poetry and politics can be seen as early as *Vivre l'orange/To live the Orange*, published in 1979, and is most systematically documented in *Manna*, which explores specific examples of political gestures interpreted as poetry and poetry interpreted as political activity, where a poem can be described as a "monstrous document" and the writing of it as a "terrorist act".

experience; I refer again to her belief in what I have called the sympathetic potential of writing, of the ability to open up to the other, to be within another in suffering.

In *Manna*, written over a decade after *LA*, Cixous returns to the myth of Isis recovering the scattered body parts of the mutilated Osiris. A narrative of the lives of Osip Mandelstam, the Russian poet, his wife, Nadezhda, and his friend, the poet Anna Akhmatova, is interwoven with that of the Mandelas in South Africa. Questions that her novel raises include: What is the role of poetry under oppressive regimes? How is it that language evades the authorities no matter how many rules and regulations are imposed, or how much barbed wire is laid down? Is there even a place for poetry and poetic language in a labour camp, a concentration camp, in a township where people are dying of malnutrition and military aggression? And how does one represent the suffering body, the suffering individual, flesh as consciousness, in writing, from a position outside of that flesh? Her answer, pursued throughout the novel, is that where words have been smashed, shattered, in the world's darkest hours, there the poem—poetic language as a kind of making or reinventing of the world—is most needed. Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* defines 'making' as an act of imagining extended into the external world with a material or verbal artifact as outcome (177). Here is the rabbinical conception of word and text where the word is a creative force capable of enacting reality. Cixous invokes ash, pieces of paper, barbed wire, all as objects to be reinvented, inscribed with words as witness to suffering; unlike the world of concrete and barbed wire however words, like viruses, mutate and slip out of confinement: "On n'a jamais vu autant de frontières dedans un pays, autant de haies, de barreaux, de barrières, de palissades, de barbelés, autant de douanes, et de nons" (174).[36] Poems are like rivers, which can't be stopped by barriers, apartheid regulations, or barbed wires. Similarly she shows how the writing of letters allowed the Mandelas to transgress imposed borders: "Un seul de leurs corps est captif. L'autre, le corps poétique, laisse loin au-dessous de lui les

[36] "One has never seen so many borders inside a country, so many hedges, bars, barriers, palisades, barbed wires, so many customhouses, and no's" (125). All translations of *Manne* are by Catherine MacGillivray.

murailles fichées en bas. En vain la citadelle lève ses bras de pierre pour essayer d'attrapper leurs envols" (252).[37] Every line of Mandelstam's poetry is scrutinized, and he would often say, "'Poetry is respected only in this country—people are killed for it. There's no place where more people are killed for it'" (qtd. in Mandelstam 159). He also once remarked to Anna Akhmatova: "'Poetry is power.'" Nadezhda continues: "For them [the persecutors of Akhmatova and Mandelstam] power was expressed in guns, agencies of repression, the distribution of everything—including fame—by coupons [. . .] But M. stubbornly maintained that if they killed people for poetry, then they must fear and respect it—in other words, that it too was a power in the land" (170).

For an atypically coarse, blatantly critical poem about Stalin, Mandelstam is arrested and brought to the Lubianka, headquarters of the secret police in Moscow, for interrogation. His interrogator, a man called Christophorovich, is a "literature specialist." He refers to the poem as a "monstrous document" and to the writing of it as a "terrorist act" (83). Why was so much attention placed on the scribblings of a poet? Mandelstam once came home to Nadezhda in 1922 and

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[37] "Only one of their bodies is captive. The other, their poetic body, leaves far beneath itself the walls fixed down below. In vain the citadel raises its arms of stone to try and catch their flight" (183). Winnie Mandela notes in her autobiography that Nelson Mandela would resort to metaphor in his letters. When he first went to serve his life sentence on Robben Island he was allowed, as a political prisoner, to write one letter every six months, of no more than 500 words. And he could only write about personal and family matters (Mandela 93). But Winnie Mandela describes one letter in which he wrote about a tomato plant:

> He described the beauty of that tomato plant, how it grew and grew, how he was able to give it life because he nursed it, and how he inadvertently injured it, and his feelings when it died. He pulled it out from the soil and washed those roots and thought of the life that might have been. He is unable to write to me politically. Out of letters like that, you can sort of get how he feels about certain things. One could equate that with a beautifully growing child in a political situation like this, where you as a parent are able to give it whatever you can, to nurse that life, to bring it to that particular age, and then it gets mowed down by circumstances not of your making [. . .] One could equate this, for instance, with the mowing down of those hundreds of children in 1976. If he had written to me about that, I wouldn't have got the letter (85-86).

She is suggesting that this discussion of a tomato plant is a reference to the Soweto uprising. This letter did slip past the censors. The poetic body flies over the walls of the citadel.

Other bans placed on Winnie Mandela illustrate the South African regime's fear of the power printed words bear. Many of the court cases against her, for example, involved "hair-splitting sophistry and the consultation of a whole range of dictionaries to interpret in which context a 'visitor,' a 'gathering,' or a conversation is deemed to be 'legal' or 'illegal'" (108). Included under her banning order, she was prohibited from writing, printing, publishing, or disseminating various kinds of documents, including books, pamphlets, records, lists, placards, drawings, photographs, and pictures.

said to her, "'It turns out we are part of the superstructure'" (258). Nadezhda continues, "It was then that culture was assigned to the superstructure, and the consequences were not slow in making themselves felt" (258).

Just as the Mandelas were not allowed to publish, a similar 'ban' was placed on Osip Mandelstam both during his exile and after his death. His literary remains are scattered across the earth. In *Manna*, Cixous returns to the Egyptian mythology she invokes in *LA* and presents Nadezhda Mandelstam as an Isis to Osip's Osiris. Isis, his sister-wife, the Mother goddess of civilization and fertility, travels over the world to collect his scattered body parts, and founds a shrine at each spot. Once Osip has died, Cixous writes, "Les poèmes étaient dehors. Un coup de pierre et il est mort. Elle s'est mise à courir deça et delà, sifflant et roucoulant pour essayer de les rappeler, les oiseaux" (268).[38] In this novel, birds are poems. The birds/poems have scattered across the land and Nadezhda ('Hope') as Isis ("she who weeps") runs to collect them. The poems have become the very flesh of Osip-Osiris, dismembered and scattered around the world. Cixous calls Osip "un Osiris de papier granuleux et aéré, que nul ne pouvait plus tuer." (268).[39] The entire world is imprinted with Osip's sentience, with his vision, including his political vision, as his words and poems, invoked here as animal herds, worms, caresses, are scattered throughout the land. Through writing, words as material artifacts, he reinvents the world, and these words bear witness. "Et à force de relire le journal de la terre et des pierres, elle naguère citadine des cités et lectrice de livres imprimés, elle finit par reconstituer presque toute l'œuvre de Mandelstam" (335)."[40]

Nadezhda managed to preserve most of Osip Mandelstam's writing: by filling shopping baskets with wads of manuscripts and carrying them bit by bit out of the house, by making copies of manuscripts and distributing them amongst her friends (who couldn't always be trusted, as some would burn the manuscripts in a

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[38] "The poems were outside. One stone's blow and he's dead. She began to run here and there, whistling and crowing to try to call them back, the birds" (196).
[39] "paper Osiris, granular and airy, who couldn't still be killed." (249).
[40] "And by dint of rereading the newspaper of the earth and stones, she erstwhile townswoman of towns and reader of printed books, she ends up reconstituting almost all of Mandelstam's *œuvre*" (249).

panic), by sewing them into cushions and hiding them in saucepans and shoes and tea tins, by interleaving poems in the notes for the dissertation she was preparing on linguistics. His poems are literally invested in the material world. But she also observes that after their exile in Voronezh it was clear the police were becoming better at searching for hidden documents. "The idyllic era of cushions was at an end—and I remembered all too vividly how the feathers had flown from Jewish cushions during Denikin's pogroms in Kiev" (271). It was her "battle with the forces of destruction" (268). She began to realize that human life was "getting cheaper all the time" (271) and so the human memory was no longer the safest place to store a poem. Nevertheless, she memorized much of his work, and constantly repeated it to herself for over twenty years, long after his death. When she worked as a textile worker she would spend, she writes, "my eight hours of night work not only spinning yarn but also memorizing verse" (343). In a similar way, Winnie Mandela learnt of her husband's health from medical reports, by which she pieced together his day-to-day life: "It was the first time I heard what my husband eats, from prison records!" Cixous writes: "Isis est paralysée, des oiseaux lui ramènent Osiris par fragments, sans aucune vision d'ensemble. Elle a maintenant un pied, le droit manque, la poitrine respire mais pas le ventre. En attendant le tout elle adore la partie" (318).[41] Again, the birds (poems) help her to

[41] "Isis is paralyzed, birds bring Osiris back to her in fragments, without any vision of the whole. Now she has a foot, the right one is missing, the chest is breathing but not the belly. Waiting for the whole she adores the part." (236). In my research for this chapter I read Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir *Hope Against Hope*. Her fears for the survival of Osip's poems and her life's work of memorizing them is described in chapter 73, "The Textile Workers." She takes the night shift so that she can go to Moscow by day to queue at the prison for information on her husband. By night she recites his poems and spins yarn; I can't help but think of Penelope. A phrase by Roland Barthes also comes to mind: "A work is held in the hand, a text in language," an eloquent structuralist formulation, relevant to these writing practices I describe. Yet to take Barthes most literally, to deliberately misread him (a feminist gloss on the structuralist project, the constant reminder of embodiment), Nadezhda is confronted by poetry in hand, the material presence and destruction of poems, and so must work at their survival. She is confronted by the fact that texts must have a material presence if they will survive. I was especially struck by one small detail included in this chapter, and it seems appropriate to mention it here in a footnote, the "tiny meaningful margin" described by DuPlessis, as if a visual allusion to the scraps and fragments of Osip's poems, the corpus/corpse of Osiris, that litter the earth. Of her time in the factory she writes:

> The prison trains generally passed through at night, and in the mornings the workers from the textile factory would always look carefully as they crossed the tracks to see whether there were any notes written on scraps of paper—sometimes prisoners managed to throw them out. Anybody who found such a

reconstitute her husband's poet-flesh. In this way, there is a resurrection through language which follows upon the crucifixion of the flesh. Words allow us to bear witness, and, to a certain extent, to bear suffering after the fact. Nadezhda writes: "[. . .] poetry is a law to itself: it is impossible to bury it alive and even a powerful propaganda machinery such as ours cannot prevent it from living on. 'I am easy in my mind now,' Akhmatova said to me in the sixties. 'We have seen how durable poetry is'" (222). She also notes, "The new awakening is accompanied by the copying out and reading of poetry, which thus plays its part in setting things in motion again and reviving thought. The keepers of the flame hid in darkened corners, but the flame did not go out. It is there for all to see" (333).

Mandelstam was arrested for the second and final time on 1 May 1938. The family received only one letter from him, sent from Vladivostok, Directorate for North-Eastern Corrective Labor Camps, Barracks No.11. He wrote that he had been given five years for c.r.a.—counter-revolutionary activity. Nadezhda immediately sent a package to him there, but the officials returned it to her and told her that he was dead. His official date of death is 27 December 1938. Nadezhda receives one final, apocryphal, account of Mandelstam in the camps. Again, there is a connection of food with words. She is told that someone saw Mandelstam in a prisoner's loft, reciting poetry by the light of a flickering candle. As he recites his poems, the criminals offer him bread and food from a tin, food which no one receives enough of in the camps. The prisoners exchange food for words, for poems.

Cixous ends her book with a comment on the subversiveness and flexibility of poetic language: "Qui voudrait arrêter Mandelstam devrait arrêter tous les M tous les A tous les N tous les D tous les E tous les L tous les S tous les T et tous les arthropodes soit plus de la moitié du règne animal tout entier, et lucioles et éphémères et vingt mille espèces d'oiseaux, sans compter l'inarrêtable

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note put it in an envelope and mailed it. In this way the relatives of prisoners sometimes received news. (345)

A description of Nadezhda's loving reconstruction of Osip's *corpus* is placed next to a recollection she has of notes thrown out of the prison trains; writing becomes a process of collecting the shards and fragments which can reach across or through hegemonic structures.

harmonie de toutes les musiques" (331).[42] In juxtaposing the letters of Mandela's name with fireflies and mayflies, the unarrestable harmonies, words are exchanged with the world, and reference is made to movement, to an unending, sliding chain of signifiers across signifieds which can exceed any meaning imposed by the censors. Scarry emphasizes the significance of *making* in defying torture, as torture is the ultimate shattering of language. Artifacts hold and extend our sentience, just as words are material objects or constructed things which in turn help us to create the world: fireflies, mayflies, harmonies, all the Arthropoda. The word is conceived as "*action, efficacious fact, event, matter, process*" (Handelman 32); suffering is carried over into words. Cixous writes of her poetics:

> We must go to Auschwitz or to what remains of the Cambodian charnelhouses [. . .] But this is without language, obviously it is done in silence, and it isn't art. Once there is art, of whatever kind, there is transposition, there is metaphor, and language is already metaphor [. . .] the word placing itself on that which would otherwise be only silence and death. (qtd. in MacGillivray l)

Poetic writing remakes the world, becomes a foundation for dwelling, witnesses where there would be silence, staves off the world's darkness. In Cixous's feminist poetics, words themselves are treated as concrete objects, each with a shape and a texture, with the power to harm or to create new worlds. In the following chapters I describe the writing practices of women who share this belief and respond in some way to Cixous's vision of writing as a process which can open up a new space, *là*, in which conceptual bodies and bodies of language can be reconfigured.

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[42] "Whoever wants to arrest Mandelstam will have to arrest all the M's all the A's all the N's all the D's all the E's all the L's all the S's all the T's and all the Arthropoda, or more than half the entire animal kingdom, and fireflies and mayflies and twenty thousand species of birds, without counting the unarrestable harmony of all musics" (246).

2 Spiral(e): Ecriture au féminin/Writing in the Feminine

C'est à partir de notre humanité que tout commence, que commence la première spire de la spirale d'une culture au féminin, spirale d'une culture au féminin dont chaque spire devrait constituer la spirale d'une civilisation à laquelle rien ne nous eut préparées sinon que l'éclat du cercle occasionnant la toute première spire.

—Nicole Brossard, *La Lettre aérienne* (99)[1]

A cartoon appears in the first volume of *Québécoises deboutte!* (November 1972) in which a pregnant woman lies supine, her mouth gagged, while four miniaturized male figures stand across the swelling mound of her belly: a doctor, a judge, a clergyman, and then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. The caption reads: "Le corps de la femme n'appartient qu'à la femme, mais le foetus appartient à la société"—this was Trudeau's statement regarding the Liberal party's position against abortion legislation. "The body of the woman belongs to the woman," he declares, perched atop the summit of a woman's body, "but the fetus belongs to society." Here the female body is subject to patriarchal definition and represented as the underpinning or support for an overarching patriarchal edifice, in this case, the legislature, the legal system, the medical community, and the Catholic church. A similar structural argument is made in a cartoon which appears in the July-August 1973 issue. A figure with a cross around his neck and a halo above his head stands in for both the Pope and Cardinal Spellman: with his left hand he makes the Peace sign and waves at two airplanes, with his right he holds out a gun which reads "droit à la vie," while with a third arm he holds a pot boiling over with bodies. The religious man directs and defines the lives of women, the means

[1] "Where our humanity begins, everything begins: there where the first spire of the spiral of female culture begins, spiral of female culture where each spire would be a constituent part of a civilization spiral—for which nothing has prepared us if not the shattering of the circle provoking the very first spire" (*The Aerial Letter* 113).

of production and reproduction for a militaristic society: women bear and nurture infants who, when fully grown, form either fodder for the military as sanctioned by the Pope, or financial support through work in the factories, both of which are poured into the U.S. efforts in Vietnam. An essential contradiction is made apparent: the right to life, that is, an anti-abortion stance advanced by the Catholic church, is contradicted by the Cardinal's blessing of the Vietnam war which results in carnage and death. As the caption asks, "When we know that Pope Pius XII blessed Hitler in 1939 while Cardinal Spellman blessed airplanes leaving to drop bombs on Vietnam, one must ask of what 'right to life' does the Church and the State speak? Is it that a Jew or a Vietnamese is worth less than a western fetus?" As with the previous cartoon, women are presented as forming the reproductive matrix, upon which the patriarchal system—the government, the legal structure, the church—is founded.[2]

Québécoises deboutte!, as the Clio collective notes, signaled the emergence of a feminist press in Quebec and a newly born *culture au féminin.*[3]

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[2] In *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole,* Louky Bersianik encourages this supine woman to arise:

> Vous n'en avez pas assez, Caryatides, de supporter le discours masculin, les institutions mâles, la jouissance phallique et divine? Vous n'avez pas envie d'exister? Descendez de l'Érechthéion. Descendez de cette érection pétrifiée, archéologique, loin du corps, dont vous supportez la démence meurtrière et paranoïaque. Vous n'avez pas envie de réintégrer votre corps à vous, de vous réincarner, de retourner à la chair, de retrouver votre PEAU et ses deux millions de cavernes de jouissance? (206-7)

("Caryatids, aren't you fed up with supporting masculine discourse, male institutions, phallic and divine *jouissance*? Don't you desire to live? Come down from the Erechtheion. Come down from this petrified erection, archeological, far from the body, by which you support the murdering and paranoid insanity. Don't you desire to reclaim your own body, to reincarnate yourself, to return to the flesh, to find your SKIN and its two million caves of *jouissance*?" My translation). Six caryatids—weight-bearing columns that bear a feminine form—support the Porch of the Maidens, which is attached to the Erechtheion, a temple on the Acropolis said to rest on the traditional site of a contest between Poseidon and Athena for control of Athens, and named after the legendary Athenian hero Erechtheus. These caryatids "have enough rigidity to suggest the structural column and just the degree of flexibility necessary to suggest the living body. The compromise is superbly executed" (Gardener 161-2). Similarly, women have been expected to show a 'feminine' style and grace, and yet as economic, material, physical support, to carry structurally heavy loads. In *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole,* these caryatids come to life and walk away, leaving the Erechtheion to collapse under its own weight. Besides the Porch of the Maidens, an earlier structure, the Treasury of the Siphnions at Delphi, is also supported by caryatids. Temple and treasury—Greek 'superstructures'—are both made possible by the female base; slave labour provides the necessary freedom for the citizens to live the life of the mind.

[3] *Québécoises deboutte!,* a publication of the Centre des femmes, ran from 1972 through 1974, with a circulation of between 1000 and 1500 (O'Leary, Tome 2, 10). It is one of the earliest

Véronique O'Leary and Louise Toupin describe the atmosphere in which the journal was prepared as warm and affectionate, generating great enthusiasm and energy as they participated in its production, from the initial writing to folding the printed sheets into the small hours of the night: "C'est sans doute ce que d'autres féministes ont connu par la suite, en fabriquant *Les Têtes de Pioche, Des luttes et des rires de femme, La Vie en Rose,* etc. Chaque sortie de numéro est la naissance d'un enfant désiré, avec ses bonheurs et ses déceptions [. . .] C'est la magie de l'écriture et de l'imprimerie au service des féministes" (Tome 1, 9-10). This is the same atmosphere Nicole Ward Jouve describes at the Parisian publishing house *des femmes,* an atmosphere of energy, excitement, and exhilaration generated by the nascent feminist movement.[4] The same was true of the *Têtes de Pioche* collective.[5] One member described her experiences as "enrichissantes et bouleversantes à la fois, essoufflantes ou exaltantes, blessantes et gratifiantes" (St. Jean 7). And as with French feminist publications such as *Histoires d'elles*, there is some experimentation with textual collage. In the December 1972 issue of *Québécoises deboutte!* an article entitled "La Récupération du Féminisme" creates a collage of headlines from the popular press which attempt to co-opt the feminist movement by capturing the image of the "liberated" woman. The mainstream press is literally cut up in order to analyze the absorption of the feminist

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examples in Quebec of the new feminist textual production of the 1970s that gave rise to a *culture au féminin.* Other important publications included the *revue du Réseau d'action et d'information pour les femmes* (1973); *Communiqu'elles,* a publication of the Centre de références et d'information des femmes de Montréal (1973); *Les Têtes de Pioche,* which ran from 1976 through 1979 under a radical feminist collective that included Nicole Brossard and France Théoret, both associated with *écriture au féminin*; *Des rires et des luttes de femmes* (1978-1981); *La gazette des femmes* (1979); and *La vie en rose* (1982-1988), billed as "le magazine féministe d'actualité," and which reached a circulation of 25 000 (Clio collective, *Histoires des femmes au Québec, passim.*) In addition, the feminist press *Les Editions du Remue-ménage* published its first book, *Môman travaille pas, a trop d'ouvrage* on 8 March 1976, five days after the launch of *Les Têtes de Pioche.*

[4] Susan Brownmiller's *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* offers some personal recollections of experiments with feminist magazine and newspaper production in the United States; it mirrors the kinds of experiences of women in France and Quebec.

[5] The first issue of *Les Têtes de Pioche* ("The Hard Heads") appeared in March 1976 and ran for a total of 23 issues, through June 1979. The Clio collective identifies it as marking "l'émergence du radicalisme dans les revendications féministes: elle illustre la volonté des militantes de transformer leur combat en lutte autonome et de ne plus être à la solde d'une certaine gauche marxiste" (577). Here is a repetition of the experience of women radicals in Paris during the student uprising of May '68. The original collective consisted of Nicole Brossard, Michèle Jean, Agathe Martin, Eliette Rious, Martine Ross, and France Théoret. Over the course of its run, twelve women were at one time or another members of this collective (*Têtes* 7).

movement into popular culture, a move which effectively neutralizes the revolutionary force of feminism. The collage is followed by written analysis: "Il est important pour le système en place de récupérer un mouvement tel le féminisme, car le féminisme menace ses fondements mêmes" (Tome 2, 40). As women provide capitalist society with its very foundation, feminism threatens to undermine the status quo. Dismantling the symbolic foundations of this edifice is at the heart of *écriture au féminin.*

Ecriture au féminin

As a writing practice concerned with the material and symbolic status of women, *écriture au féminin* lies at the crossroads of American feminism, French feminist theory, and poststructuralism. The book advertisements and reviews in the pages of *Les Têtes de Pioche* register this lively and sympathetic exchange. Titles advertised include new releases from *des femmes*; Claudine Hermann's *Les Voleuses de Langues; Histoire du M.L.F.* by Anne Tristan, Annie de Pisan, and Carmen-Lévy; *Dire nos sexualités* by Xavière Gauthier; Luce Irigaray's *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un;* a translation of Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*; *La Jeune née* by Hélène Cixous and Cathérine Clément (advertised in the very first issue); and *La Venue à l'écriture* by Hélène Cixous, Madeleine Gagnon, and Annie Leclerc; as well as titles by the Québécoises writers France Théoret (*Bloody Mary*), Yoland Villemaire (*Que du stage blood*) and Nicole Brossard (*L'amèr, ou le chapitre effrité*). Woolf's *Three Guineas* is reviewed, as is *Some American Feminists*, a film by Luce Guilbeault and Nicole Brossard, featuring interviews with Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, and Ti-Grace Atkinson.

The Québécoise writers listed in these pages—Madeleine Gagnon, France Théoret, Yoland Villemaire, and Nicole Brossard—have all been associated with *écriture au féminin*, as have Louky Bersianik and Jovette Marchessault, among many others. Bilingual writers such as Gail Scott and Lola Lemire Tostevin, and English-Canadian writers such as Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland, all of whom marry textual experimentation with a feminist consciousness, have also

been associated with a writing in the feminine, and I trace below the influence of *écriture au féminin* on Anglophone writers. As with chapter 1, where I limited my discussion of *écriture féminine* to specific texts by Cixous, in this chapter I prefer to concentrate on individual writers: Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, and Lola Lemire Tostevin.[6]

It is possible however to identify some general characteristics of an *écriture au féminin*, which seeks to undermine the patriarchal foundation through a breaking of the sentence-as-interdiction: there is a mixing of genres, where creative prose merges with feminist theory to challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries, a rewriting of myth, and analysis of the classical and philosophical foundations of the oppression of women. Experimental textual techniques—a breaking of the sentence-as-grammatical-unit—express a growing feminist consciousness, and I discuss the strategies of Brossard, Marlatt, and Tostevin below. Crucial to many writers in the feminine is a reconsideration of the body, an interest signaled by the experimental feminist press at the time.[7] This sensitivity to the various forms of oppression has been attributed to the Québécois experience of oppression within English Canada. According to Diane Lamoureux, the body was taken as symbol of the national territory which needed liberation. Analogously, Québécoise feminists saw the female body as an oppressed territory, and fought for its liberation in terms of the right to abortion, a critique of the medicalized and normalized female body, and of the view of women's bodies as "factories" for the production of children (107). At the same time that the "mutilated" female body was decried, the female body was newly discovered as a site of renewal for feminist culture ("une culture féminine/féministe"); Lamoureux argues this renewal, the construction of a new identity, took place "au cœur de

[6] See Karen Gould's *Writing in the Feminine* for a detailed discussion of the historical and social influences that contributed to the development of *écriture au féminin*, as well as a survey of the work of four of its practitioners: Madeleine Gagnon, Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, and France Théoret. Gould also acknowledges the impossibility (perhaps the undesirability?) of an exhaustive survey of *écriture au féminin*.

[7] *Québécoises deboutte!* devotes space to anatomical diagrams of male and female reproductive organs. Volume 1 Number 8 (Septembre 1973) includes a detailed discussion of the menstrual cycle as well as a description of a gynecological exam and the use of a speculum.

l'écriture féministe qui tente de développer une culture au féminin, culture qui prendrait racine dans le corps" (109).

Nicole Brossard contributes to this on-going discussion with "La vie privée est politique" (*Les Têtes de Pioche* Vol.1 No.2 April 1976) in which she writes:

> La vie privée, c'est la vie du corps qui mange, qui dort, qui coïte, qui défèque, qui sue, qui touche, qui souffle, qui jouit. C'est l'histoire cachée du corps retranché derrière les murs de la maison familiale, de santé, ou de réforme. La vie privée, c'est quand on se dispute, qu'on en vient aux coups; qu'on s'est fait violer, qu'on bat ses enfants, qu'on fait l'amour, qu'on étouffe de bonheur [. . .] C'est l'histoire cachée des femmes. C'est l'histoire que les hommes taisent. Ce que l'on nomme «vie privée,» c'est essentiellement la relation que nous entretenons avec nos corps et ceux des autres. Si pour moi, cette relation est politique, c'est qu'en dehors de la maison cette relation se continue, mais cette fois-ci, médiatisée par des valeurs sociales qui semblent retirer au corps le droit de se manifester. (21)[8]

She identifies a corporeal continuum that extends from the private through the public realm. It has been culturally unacceptable to acknowledge this body in the public realm, she writes, and in denying this body we deny our subjectivity. Subjectivity is the projection of this body into the public realm, whether the body works, loves, or struggles against the powers which use this body as instrument for its own ends. She points out that all work is essentially work of the body, and has traditionally been the domain of women, whether giving birth, washing and bathing children, or feeding the family. A man's work might be to go to war, or to the factory, but it is often his mother or wife who is caretaker of his body. She provides cooked meals, cleans clothes, cares for sicknesses, and so on. Brossard notes that the story of the body is essential to the survival of the species, arguing that this is a story never written because women have never had the time.

[8] "Personal life is the life of a body that eats, sleeps, has orgasms, defecates, sweats, touches, breathes, a body that knows pleasure (*qui jouit*). It's the hidden story of the body suppressed behind the walls of the family home, the clinic, or the reform school. Personal life is when we argue, when we come to blows; when we have been violated, when we beat our kids, when we make love, when we choke from happiness [. . .] It's the hidden story of women. It's the story that men suppress. What we call 'personal life' (*vie privée*) is essentially the relationship we maintain with our bodies and with those of others. If, for myself, this relationship is political, it's because outside the house, this relationship continues, but this time mediated by social values which seem to withdraw the body's right to assert itself" (Gould's translation 30-31).

Working women with families, she argues, serve the "capitalist phallocracy" twice, once with their underpaid work in the public sphere, and yet again with the work of the body they do at home. The body is the "histoire cachée des femmes. C'est l'histoire que les hommes taisent" (21).

L'Amèr

Nicole Brossard begins her feminist manifesto *L'Amèr, ou, le chapitre effrité* (*These our mothers, or, The disintegrating chapter*) with these words:

> J'ai tué le ventre. Moi ma vie en été la lune. Moi ma mort. Trente ans me séparent de la vie, trente de la mort. Ma mère, ma fille. Mamelle, une seule vie, la mienne. Réseau clandestin de reproduction. Matrice et matière anonymes [. . .] Internement par la matrice. (19)[9]

A few pages later she returns to the image of the matrix:

> S'il n'était lesbien, ce texte n'aurait point de sens. Tout à la fois matrice, matière et production. Rapport à. Il constitue le seul relais plausible pour me sortir du ventre de ma mère patriarcale. Distancer d'elle suffisamment mon regard pour la voir apparaître autrement que fragmentée dans ses parties métaphoriques. Traverser le symbole alors que j'écris [. . .]. (22)[10]

The term *matrix* is used in *L'Amèr* as a trope for the female body, the pregnant body, the mother, Woman, all as these concepts are symbolically fixed by patriarchy, as well as for the field of language itself, saturated with patriarchal ideology. This can be thought of as the patriarchal matrix—a body of patriarchal thought and theory, as well as the linguistic-ideological field which sustains it. Writing then for Brossard becomes a way to challenge this prison-like matrix. The text of *L'Amèr* is conceived as a liberating, feminist-lesbian matrix, actively

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[9] "I killed the womb. *My* life in summer the moon. *My* death. Thirty years separate me from life, thirty from death. My mother, my daughter. Mamma, Mam*elle*, Mamilla, a single life, mine. Clandestine system of reproduction. Anonymous matrix and matter [. . .] Interned by the matrix..." (13). All translations of *L'Amèr* are by Barbara Godard, *These Our Mothers*.

[10] "If it weren't lesbian, this text would make no sense at all. Matrix, matter and production, all at once. In relation to. It constitutes the only plausible system to get me out of the belly of my patriarchal mother. And of distancing my eye from her enough so as to see her in a different way, not fragmented into her metaphoric parts. Crossing through the symbol while I am writing [. . .]" (16).

constructed through writing. Susan Knutson, in *Narrative in the Feminine* (2000), has commented: "In this angrily rewritten birth ur-narrative, the text itself is a lesbian matrix/mother which enables the writer to access full subjectivity, freeing herself from the patriarchal matrix through a rigorous deconditioning. The lesbian matrix is also the means through which Brossard is able to dislodge the patriarchal generic and its symbols..." (47). This is indicated by the opening declaration of *L'Amèr*, "J'ai tué le ventre"—"I killed the womb." The womb here is metonym for a woman's body and its reproductive capacity. This body is fixed within a patriarchal symbolic grid. Writing allows Brossard to reclaim the womb as a lesbian matrix, site of a new lesbian symbolic production: "N'entre plus qui veut dans le laboratoire s'il n'est sujet à transformation. J'ai tué le ventre et fait éclater la mer. En elle, sous l'horizon se pratique une alchimie, une prose de negociation" (20).[11] The text itself of *L'Amèr* becomes this laboratory-womb where an alchemical transformation is worked: crossing through the symbol, reclaiming the *laboratoire*. The word *laboratory* suggests the male-dominated medical and gynecological profession, women's bodies as sites of experiments, as objects of a male discourse; Brossard, in describing a girl's coming to language in the Lacanian model, will later describe the "laboratory of language," yet without the final silent *e*, as if to suggest that women are excluded from this symbolic realm. To claim the womb-matrix then as a lesbian *laboratoire* carries both positive and negative, even paradoxical associations, perhaps resolved by the image of a palimpsest, where one *laboratoir* is overwritten by another *laboratoire*, by means of the resonating *l'amèr (la mer, la mèr, la mère)*, a "prose of negotiation."

How does Brossard attempt to *traverser le symbole*, cross through the symbol? Her text is difficult, densely written, often confusing; it does not lend itself to an easy or clear narrative. We learn a little about the writer. She is "thirty years between life and death," a daughter and a mother. She has a lesbian lover. We are given glimpses of her private life in the first section of the book: "Un sexe

[11] "Now none may enter the laboratory unless he is transformable. I have killed the womb and exploded the Sea/our mother. Below the horizon in there alchemy, a prose of negotiation, is practiced" (14)

noir, un sexe blanc. L'un que je caresse, l'autre que je lave. La cyprine, l'urine. La jouissance et le travail comme versants d'une même unité" (19).[12] The three of them dance to Edith Piaf on a Sunday morning. Brossard describes her daily routine with her daughter:

> Tous les matins, on m'appelle maman. Je me lève. Je l'embrasse et je lui prépare son déjeuner. Nous nous quittons pour la journée. Parce qu'il faut que j'écrive ce livre. Comme pour nous vider d'un rapport symbolique ou pour le mettre à exécution: fille-mère lesbiennes. Mais nous n'avons pas encore acquis notre autonomie mutuelle. Sa route est jonchée d'objets qui ne sont pas à sa hauteur. J'ouvre la porte du réfrigérateur. J'ouvre les tiroirs. Je fais cuire les aliments. Mon temps est fragmenté par ces mêmes objets. Je suis collée à la matière. Les choses sont ce que je touche. Je ne peux ni les rêver ni en évaluer la valeur d'échange. Tout comme moi, elles servent à me maintenir en vie ainsi que l'enfant. «Je les polis sans cesse comme de beaux os.» (26)[13]

I begin then with this materiality. She is "stuck to matter," as the daily needs of her daughter remind her. She underscores this in the opening paragraph: "Ma mère, ma fille. Mamelle, une seule vie, la mienne. Réseau clandestin de reproduction. Matrice et matière anonymes" (19).[14] *Mamelle* is a zoological term for "teat, udder, dug," also used in the phrase *à la mamelle* (the baby sucks/feeds "at the breast") and, pejoratively, for "breast." Embedded in the word is the female pronoun *elle*, as well as the first syllable of *maman* 'mother,' and *mamelon*, an anatomical term for "nipple," which seems to emphasize, placed among the words mother, daughter, and mine, the biological function of a mother as producer of milk. The English translator of this text (Godard) thus resorts to translating *Mamelle* as: "Mamma, Mam*elle*, Mamilla..." *Matrice* and *matière* are etymologically linked, coming from the Latin for mother. These connections are continued in the title *L'Amèr—la mer* 'the sea,' *la mère* 'mother,' *amer* and *amère*

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[12] "One black sex, one white sex. One I caress, the other I wash. Cyprine juices, urine. Orgasm and labour as two sides of the same entity."

[13] "Every morning I am called Mommy. I get up. I kiss her and I get her breakfast ready. We separate for the day. Because I have to write this book. As if to rid ourselves of a symbolic relationship or to begin to execute it: daughter-mother lesbians. But we still haven't got our mutual autonomy. Her way is littered with objects she cannot reach. I open the refrigerator door. I open the drawers. I cook the food. My time is fragmented by these objects. I am stuck to matter. Things are what I touch. I can neither dream them nor estimate their exchange value. Just like me, things are useful to keep me as well as the child alive. 'I polish them unceasingly like fine bones'" (20).

[14] "My mother, my daughter. Mamma, Mam*elle*, Mamilla, a single life, mine. Clandestine system of reproduction. Anonymous matrix and matter" (13).

'bitter' (but again, the final, silent *e* removed), as if language itself/milk from the mother's breast tastes bitter to her tongue. The title of the first section of the text is *L'a mèr*. Again, this suggests "the sea" to the ear, but to the eye there is a violence done to the words: *la*, the feminine definite article, has been split in half by the apostrophe, while the castrated "mother" is also present. The silent *e* is actually removed, not just in sound but in text. The English translator resorts to typographical manipulation to capture this instability in the title: these our mothers, our sour mothers, the sea our mother, all built around a large capital *S*.[15]

Brossard also "crosses through the symbol" by suggesting a certain element of hesitation, of indeterminateness and incompleteness in her text, through beginning a paragraph in mid sentence, writing sentences without a standard S-V-O, and using ellipses. Consider:

> Les mesures de guerre. Internement par la matrice. Le corps de ... comme un maillon perdu, retrouvé dans l'eau. Leur industrie de fantasmes lui a fait perdre le sens de la réalité. Le corps de ... pourrit. Il en récupère le fantasme. Corps recyclé. (19)[16]

It's as if the body of a woman, of the woman writer, slips between the words, lost each time, then is found again, but lost, rots—the body is "recycled." She can't claim it as her own, as it is fodder for a male "industry of fantasies." Indeterminacy is also suggested by the text's hesitation between poetry and prose. While the typographical layout is reminiscent of poetry, the sentences appear at first glance to be written in prose, divided into sentences and paragraphs, although some pages are marked by only a single sentence, or a single paragraph. The spareness of the typographical setting seems to allow for active participation by the reader, providing a space for thought and revision. To continue with the trope of a lesbian matrix, the white spaces can be read as a newly conceived chora or

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[15] I pay some attention here to the English translation because translation as trope for women's writing is significant in Brossard's later work. See, for example, *Le Désert mauve*. She also participated in translation projects with Marlatt. *L'Amèr,* with all of its resonant associations is physically different from the English words used to translate it, both in terms of typography and sound. Godard's translation of *L'Amèr* becomes literally a new text.

[16] "War measures. Interned by the matrix. The body of ... like a missing link, found again in the water. Their industry of fantasies made her lose her sense of reality. The body of ... rots. He retrieves the phantasm for his own ends. Recycled body" (13).

generating matrix within which the new writing, and the new symbolic mother, is born.

Repetition is also a significant technique.[17] In the section titled *L'Acte de l'œil*—Act of the Eye, Brossard explores the violence of the male gaze while contrasting this with other ways of seeing. At the top of each of the first ten pages a heading appears which builds on the previous one, so that our eye traces *L'Acte de l'œil* to *L'Acte violent de l'œil* to *L'Acte violent de l'œil au* through *L'Acte violent de l'œil au mauve épris* and so on (The Act of the Eye, The Violent Act of the Eye, The Violent Act of the Eye on Enamoured Purple...). This is followed by variations on the word *figure.* Each page contains a different variation of the word as its heading. Each page wears a different "face." For example, *Figure, Défigurer, Prise au figuré, La figurine*, where *figure* can mean both "face" and "figure," i.e. illustration, picture, geometrical figure, diagram. *Prise au figuré* means to take figuratively, *figurer* can mean to represent, to appear, while *se figurer* is to imagine. We move from exploration of the eye and the violent act of the eye, to what the eye perceives: the face, the figure, the form, the text itself as figurative form, and the figurine, by which Brossard means the Venus of Willendorf and votive clay idols of this genre, noted for emphasizing the female reproductive function. She challenges this figurine/figure of woman, the woman as reproductive mother; each successive page stretches our understanding of the uses and abuses of the word, its root and its variations.

An adaptation of avant-garde literary technique for lesbian-feminist aims is the way in which Brossard seeks to "kill the womb" and become the "symbolic mother," that is, a woman who enters into and claims space within the symbolic terrain. In the opening section of *L'Amèr* she distinguishes between the reproductive mother, that is, woman as frozen by patriarchal discourse within the biological function, and the symbolic mother, the woman who writes. Her observations on woman as factory, as site of reproduction echo the political cartoon I describe at the beginning of this chapter, of four men perched atop the

[17] Gertrude Stein's use of repetition, for example her "Sentences" in *How to Write*, could be productively explored in relation to Brossard's texts. In "Lesbienne d'écriture" Brossard credits Stein and Djuna Barnes, among others, as contributing a "substantial preface" to an as yet unpublished book of lesbian writing (*Lettre aérienne* 127).

stomach of a pregnant woman, declaring that while the woman's body belongs to herself, the fetus belongs to them:

> Le seul produit dont la mère dispose comme mode d'échange demeure son enfant. Sa seule entreprise: cinquante pour cent de la matière première (l'ovule), gestation (l'utérus comme outil, instrument), production (l'accouchement), mise en marché (sa force de travail: bras, jambes, stress) [. . .]. (27)[18]

She argues throughout that patriarchy has claimed this factory, both literally in terms of the material product of gestation and pregnancy, and figuratively, as it is the symbolic field that defines and propagates this maternal function. Her solution is to renounce this function, at least within the symbolic field. "Toute femme ne peut profiter que dans la mesure où elle devient mère symbolique. C'est alors qu'elle a cessé d'enfanter" (27)—"Each woman can profit only to the extent that she becomes symbolic mother. That is when she stopped bearing children" (21).[19] There is first a renunciation, and when the symbolic field has been challenged, a rewriting of it: "J'ai tué le ventre et je l'écris" (27)—"I have murdered the womb and I am writing it" (21). Renunciation of the patriarchal matrix is followed by the slow, laborious process of revision and rewriting, a process which must necessarily be communal—a shared labour. *L'Amèr* ends with this expression of hope: "Je veux *en effet* voir s'organiser la forme des femmes dans la trajectoire de l'espèce" (109)—"I want to see *in fact* the form of women organizing in the trajectory of the species" (101). Words are like seeds, bearing within them the hope of an unfurling, a spiral formed by political movement, from which women can emerge in the trajectory of the species.

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[18] "The only product a mother can use as a medium of exchange is her child. Her only enterprise: 50% of the primary matter (ovum), gestation (the uterus as tool, instrument), production (giving birth), marketing (her labouring strength: arms, legs, bearing down) [. . .]" (21).

[19] Gould reads this as an actual rejection of reproduction (77). Shirley Neuman argues that Brossard is making "a statement about women's relationship to cultural symbols and to the symbolic" (398). My own impression is that there is in the text of *L'Amèr* a tension between these two positions. Brossard wavers between expressing a rejection of biological reproduction and recognizing that it is the reproduction of narratives about these biological processes that must be reimagined.

Spirale

In the section of *L'Amèr* entitled "L'Acte de l'oeil," each page also carries a quotation which makes some reference to the eye, by writers such as Luce Irigaray, Virginia Woolf, Monique Wittig, Sande Zeig, and France Théoret. Combined with the successively unfolding headings, where one new word is added to each page (The Act of the Eye, The Violent Act of the Eye, The Violent Act of the Eye on Enamoured Purple...), there is a sense of an unfolding of the text out of its own pages and into the texts of these other writers, a sense of women "in movement". This idea of a progressive unfolding, of a sympathetic movement generated by the writings of women, is central to Brossard's use of a spiral to model how feminist and lesbian literary production might enter and transform the male symbolic field, a model most systematically outlined in her essay "De radical à intégrales" (collected in *La Lettre aérienne*). The radical of her title is the patriarchal semantic root, a root shorn of all grammatical inflections of gender, and which functions as an allegedly "neutral" base for the production of meaning. The social and cultural position of women ("rooted in foreign semantic earth" 105) is such that they are said to speak with an accent, that is, to make an ambiguous use of words to signal alienation or ambivalence. This accent can result in "a spirant divergence" (105), those unforeseen felicities and serendipitous divergences from the norm:

> Ce qui caractérise les personnes qui ont un accent, c'est qu'elles déforment les sons et que par conséquent elles risquent chaque fois qu'elles s'expriment en langue étrangère de créer des malentendus, des équivoques, voire même du non-sens. De plus, elles risquent de mettre l'accent, c'est-à-dire d'amplifier là où, en principe, il n'y a pas lieu de le faire, là où ça ne se fait pas. (92)[20]

She provides the example of the phrases "Elle est comme on nomme" and "Elle est comme un homme" (She is as named/She is like a man), easily confused by

[20] "What characterizes people who have an accent is that they distort sounds, and consequently each time they speak a foreign language they may create misunderstandings, ambiguities, even non-sense. As well, they may very well accentuate, that is, emphasize, what in principle is out of place, what theoretically is not done" (107). All translations of *La Lettre aérienne* are by Marlene Wildeman.

the ear, and if mispronounced, producing radically different meanings. Brossard seeks to create similar breaks or ruptures in the smooth flow of communication through her textual experimentation in *L'Amèr.* The puns, homonyms, manipulations of roots/radicals, and the displacing of accent (the presence or absence of the silent *e*, elimination of the *è/o* in *mère*/m'ther, the incorrect placement of an apostrophe—*l'a mer*), all serve to dismantle the apparent seamlessness of the patriarchal semantic root by creating breaks in the text. In her model, *sens unique* (one-way sense) is shattered by this accented language of polyvalence:

> 1. L'éclat du sens unique
> * briser l'homme comme universel
> ** rompre le cercle de la féminité
> 2. Produire une vacance, soit un espace mental qui peu à peu sera investi de nos subjectivités, constituant ainsi un territoire imaginaire à partir duquel nos énergies pourront prendre forme. (96)[21]

She provides a diagram of this process, making specific reference to historical milestones in women's cultural production. First, she contrasts the closed, bounded circle of sense (this is the patriarchal semantic root, shorn of all grammatical markers), with non-sense, that which exists outside the circle, defined as such by the male culture: madness, hysteria, schizophrenia, delirium. This first stage is labeled "Women's invisibility" and "The great darkness."

Invisibility is followed by the development of "new sense within sense," characterized by early feminist texts such as *Three Guineas* and *The Second Sex.* These early texts represent the first seams or spires appearing in the apparent seamlessness of the patriarchal root, spires which soon connect through a process of excitation with other women in movement, in this case, women of the second wave. Brossard has called this "spirant divergence:" the spire of new sense first appears within the circle of one-way sense, still completely contained by it, but

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[21] "1. Exploding one-way sense
shattering the concept of man as universal
interrupting the circle of femininity
2. Producing a void, a mental space which, little by little, will become invested with our subjectivities, thus constituting an imaginary territory, where our energies will begin to be able to take form" (111).

seeking to move beyond its confines. Brossard identifies the work of this spiral verging towards the boundaries as the various forms of feminism coalescing, in sympathetic affinity, to the point where we see a breaking through of the circle, out into the zone of non-sense. The dotted line of the emerging spiral represents "[s]ense *renewed*, through excursions into and explorations of non-sense." The spiral of literary production expands ever further outward into the territory of what has been previously male-defined as non-sense, madness, and delirium, with a resultant challenging of the very categories of sense and non-sense.

Brossard's model of the spiral, first presented at the Université de Montréal for a conference called "L'émergence d'une culture au féminin" in 1982, bears a resemblance to Edwin Ardener's model of the wild zone, which was adapted by Elaine Showalter in 1981 to describe women's literary production. I will return to these models in my Conclusion and so I briefly outline them here.

In "Belief and the Problem of Women," Edwin Ardener argues that when a society is largely defined by its men, some features of women or other marginal groups will often not fit into their definition.[22] The result is that such anomalies are experienced as belonging to 'the wild,' what Brossard calls "non-sense." By 'wild' or 'nature' he refers to that which is perceived as being non-social by the dominant group, that is, the wild offers "a useful set of topographical differentia for the 'non-social'" (23). When Shirley Ardener expands upon this model of dominant and muted groups, she observes that a dominant group and its model of the world may have an overdetermining effect on the society as a whole, an effect which "may impede the free expression of alternative models of their world which subordinate groups may possess, and perhaps may even inhibit the very generation of such models" (*Perceiving* xii). The result is that these subordinate

[22] Ardener developed this model to account for certain rituals practiced by the Bakweri people of Cameroon, who live in a strip of land that lies between the 13 000 foot Cameroon Mountains and the rocky sea coast. While men stay within farms tending the livestock, the women daily go beyond these fenced enclosures in order to collect firewood and to farm the staple crop Xanthosoma (cocoyam). The Bakweri women are symbolically associated with the "wild" and are the ones who leave the enclosed farms where the men tend the livestock in order to farm cocoyams and collect firewood. Ardener describes the women as returning to the enclosures in the evening, loaded down with firewood and streaming with rain, shouting at their husbands about the *wanga* 'bush,' 'forest.' From this anthropological observation of the Bakweri Ardener developed a model of dominant and muted groups in order to explain how women or other marginal and minority groups are relegated to the wild within male-determined models of society.

groups must resort to expressing their own perception of the world *through* the dominant model. The resultant poor fit between the dominant model and the subordinate group's adapted model may leave members of the subordinate group "relatively more 'inarticulate' when expressing themselves through the idiom of the dominant group, and silent on matters of special concern to them for which no accommodation has been made in it" (xii). Nevertheless, she argues, it is sometimes possible for muted groups to make important "transformation" links between their own "perceptual structures" and the dominant ideology (xv). This is reminiscent of Brossard's suggestion that women may speak with an 'accent' which leads to a polyvalent explosion of *sens unique.* It is important to note that the Ardeners' model does not imply that to be muted is to be silent, rather, the muted group members may have to resort to a recoding of their thoughts within the dominant language or even attempt to generate new linguistic tools.

Elaine Showalter adapted the Ardeners' model in her 1981 essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." She identifies four models of difference upon which theories of women's writing were being based at the time: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Beginning with the biological, each model of difference she argued evolved from and built upon the previous model, culminating in the model which Showalter herself supports, the cultural model of difference. The cultural model is said to incorporate "ideas about women's body, language, psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur" (259). She focusses on the overlap between the realms of the muted and dominant groups, translating this overlap into literary terms as a "double-voiced discourse" or a "palimpsest," where both the dominant and the muted group's stories can be read in tandem. Brossard also intimates a palimpsestic model in stage 6 of her spiral. Yet for her, the "wild zone," or zone of non-sense, forms a crucial component in the ultimate transformation of the symbolic field. In *L'Amèr* this is described as a gradual transformation of a patriarchal matrix into a feminist textual matrix. Brossard's spiral of women's literary production ultimately seeks to overwrite the bounded circle of patriarchal "sense." Where Showalter's model seems somewhat static, Brossard's represents movement,

movement into the "wild zone" of "non-sense," not a zone of fantasy or playful abstraction so much as a zone of "new sense" which is achieved only with great labour. [23]

Tessera

The cover of the program for the *Women and Words* conference[24] held in Vancouver in the summer of 1983 is a black and white collage of typewritten texts pasted together to suggest the form of a woman sitting at a typewriter, her hands raised above its keys. She seems to emerge out of the type and yet is made of the same fabric which she reworks; she could be said to be writing herself, typing out the letters that form the text of her body. Other conferences in the 1980s which explored this relationship of women to writing, to words, while facilitating English feminist access to Québécoise theory and experimental texts, included the *Dialogue* conference, organized by Barbara Godard at York University in 1981 and *Le discours féminin dans la littérature postmoderne du Québec*, held at the University of Western Ontario, 2-5 November 1989.[25] Daphne Marlatt writes, with regard to the University of Western Ontario conference, that "it's so clear that for Québec, Anglo-Can. feminist writing doesn't exist [. . .] so,

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[23] The footnote as wild zone. Showalter writes:

> For some feminist critics, the wild zone, or 'female space,' must be the address of a genuinely women-centred criticism, theory, and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak. French feminist critics would like to make the wild zone the theoretical base for the revolutionary women's language, the language of everything that is repressed, and for the revolutionary women's writing in white ink. It is the dark continent in which Cixous's laughing Medusa and Wittig's *guérillères* reside. Through voluntary entry into the wild zone, other feminist critics tell us, a woman can write her way out of the 'cramped confines of patriarchal space.' (262-3)

She too quickly dismisses the theoretical potential of a conceptual wild zone (the spaces opened up by the textual breaks or ruptures in *L'Amèr*), along with the women's separate sphere of the 19th century, female subcultures, *écriture féminine*, radical American feminist ecological-matriarchal invocations, and fictional Amazonian utopias that inhabit the borders of the wild zone. These are all described as "fantasies of an idyllic enclave" (263) and a "playful abstraction" (263).

[24] *Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots*, 30 June—3 July 1983, Vancouver, B.C.

[25] Conference proceedings for the *Dialogue* conference are collected in *Gynocritics/La Gynocritique* (Barbara Godard, ed), those for *Women and Words* have been published as *In the Feminine* (Ann Dybikowski et al, eds).

it's *one-way* influence, French to English, for those of us excited by what's been going on in Québec—an influence experienced here in the West as only a strange marginalization [. . .]" (*Readings from the Labyrinth* 140-141).

Barbara Godard also notes that the opportunities for Quebec and English critics and writers to meet was "minimal" (*Collaboration* 263) as there were such long stretches of time between conferences. It was this absence of dialogue which led to the recognition of the need to create a written record (263). The journal *Tessera*, first conceived at the Dialogue Conference in 1981, became a significant forum for writing in the feminine.[26] Its collective originally included Barbara Godard, Gail Scott, Daphne Marlatt, and Kathy Mezei. The first four issues were brought out as special issues of established journals: *Room of One's Own*, *La nouvelle barre du jour*, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, and *CV2* (14). Kathy Mezei describes the *Tessera* collective as having two "radical objectives," first, to publish writing in the feminine and feminist literary theory that would function as a challenge to the "images of woman" vein of criticism common in Canada at the time and second, to offer the writings of a mélange of English-Canadian and Québécoise feminists (15).

The writing published in *Tessera* worked at several boundaries: French-English, fiction-theory, personal-political, writer-critic. Articles published in *Tessera*'s first ten years are feminist, often intimate, committed, experimental in form. There are pieces by writers such as Madeleine Gagnon, Daphne Marlatt, and Lola Lemire Tostevin, as well as by critics such as Lorraine Weir and Valerie Raoul of the University of British Columbia and Smaro Kamboureli of the University of Victoria. Visual collages and experimental photography also appear.

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[26] *(f.)Lip: a newsletter of feminist innovative writing*, variously edited by Betsy Warland, Sandy Frances Duncan, Angela Hryniuck, Jeannie Lockrie, and Erica Hendry, appeared later, running from March 1987 through 1990 (Vol.3 no.3/4). Contributors included Louise Cotnoir, Daphne Marlatt, Gail Scott, Erin Mouré, Louise Dupré, among many others. In their first (f.)Lip-e-torial, (Vol.1 no.1), the editors describe *(f.)Lip* as a spiral, beginning with the work of women writers they know and branching out to feature Quebec feminist writers in translation in addition to guest writers from other countries (1). Betsy Warland, in an encore issue of *(f.)Lip* in *The Capilano Review* (Winter 2001), defines its intent as "(f.), feminine gender + Lip. The lip in the (f.)eminine unbuttoned + writing-in-its-gender unleashed in form, content, and language." She also notes that work on the encore issue provoked excitement, but also "sadness about how attenuated the feminist literary movement has become."

One example[27] is a piece by jam. ismail called "Diction Air"[28] that subverts the dictionary form through an expansion of its eclectic possibilities. It is patchwork, fragmentary, whimsical; entries variously contain a fragment of a photocopy from a book on Chinese characters with words and punctuation she didn't want whited out; a letter to a friend; puns—*patriarchly* is defined as "giving herself heirs"; her influences, words "cited" and "incited"—Cixous, Dorothy Richardson, among others. In her afterword she points out the dictionary form is one of

$$\frac{\text{absurdity}}{\text{utility}}$$

a notation that visually represents the kind of border-work done in *Tessera*, in which writers interrogate the line between the semiotic and the symbolic, the genotext and the phenotext, fiction and theory. Translation projects, writing at the borders of French and English, were undertaken, such as the collaborative efforts of Marlatt and Brossard. Godard, translator of many Québécoise texts, observes that the translator must act as "code-switcher, as go-between, culture-broker and potential traitor. Shape-shifters bringing about change. For the boundaries are where the movement is" (Godard, *Collaboration* 267).[29]

The unifying thread in the articles in *Tessera* is their focus on writing that works on language and questions the relationship of a woman writer to this signifying system. They include on-going debate over the nature, the practice, and

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[27] This is one of my favourites, in particular for "the lines of a page of dictionary often remind me of the lines of dust that never get into the pan, they stay on the floor. there are times i feel small dense print (especially the 13 volume *oxford dictionary*) as an arrangement of dust" (101). Footnotes as lines of dust, in their persistance and proliferation. Does she express here also a sense of exhaustion—*too many words, too much?* The 1980s saw significant feminist work on the dictionary form (seeking out new life in old roots; fashioned out of dust, the *matière* as matrix generating words). I describe several experiments in feminist lexicography in chapter 3.

[28] Reprinted in *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from* Tessera (96-102).

[29] See, for example, "Vers-ions Con-verse: A Sequence of Translations" (*Collaboration* 153-161) in which each member of the editorial board attempts a translation of a poem by Lola Lemire Tostevin and then follows this with a commentary. Pamela Banting has also done extensive work on translation poetics. In "The Reorganization of the Body: Daphne Marlatt's 'musing with mothertongue'" she analyzes the way in which the body is "reorganized" by a body of language: "When body and text as two material substances or tissues are invited to attract, metaphorize, and translate one another, different textual practices are initiated, and different bodies constructed" (221-222).

the accessibility, of writing in the feminine.[30] The pages of *Tessera* provided a space for cross-country, cross-boundary dialogue: "Such a textual matrix would generate a field of discourse to produce new perspectives, new textual forms, new ways of writing." (Godard 264).

"musing with mothertongue"

Daphne Marlatt wrote "musing with mothertongue" in tandem with the poem cycle *Touch to My Tongue* while she was writer-in-residence at the University of Manitoba in the fall of 1982. She explains that this was "a time of transition for me as i tried to integrate my feminist reading with a largely male-mentored postmodernist poetic, at the same time coming out as a lesbian in my life as well as in my writing" (*Readings from the Labyrinth* 1).[31] The essay was first presented at the *Women and Words* conference in 1983 and later published in *Tessera*. She writes that she was in the process of rethinking her "relationship to language as a woman writer" (9), a process that began at the *Dialogue* Conference where she first met the Québécoise writers Louky Bersianik and Nicole Brossard, among others.

In this short, speculative essay, Marlatt describes language in corporeal, maternal terms, "the beginning: language, a living body we enter at birth, sustains and contains us" (9). She cites instances of how language begins for us as a sea of

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[30] See Lorraine Weir, "'Wholeness, Harmony, Radiance' and Women's Writing," and Valerie Raoul, "Is Feminist Theory Anti-Feminist?" (both reprinted in *Collaboration*).

[31] Marlatt uses the lower case *i* in lieu of *I* to indicate the first person pronoun. She observes in "Difference (em)bracing" (*Readings from the Labyrinth*) that this typography functions as shorthand notation for the unease she feels with asserting a unified or monolithic identity that is in fact "full of holes a wind blows through" (138). The lower-case *i* allows her to indicate that in language she marks both determined and indefinite identities. Trinh: "For writing [. . .] is an ongoing practice that may be said to be concerned, not with inserting a 'me' into language, but with creating an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires" (*Woman* 35). The self (or Author) as unitary concept is displaced by a multiply-defined subject. This permeability also suggests the sympathetic ability to inhabit the position of the other. Trinh also switches between the *i/I* in her writing, for reasons that I discuss in chapter 4, as does DuPlessis. DuPlessis seems to use the lower case *i* to indicate her sense of alienation from a patriarchal language, see chapter 5. It is Wittig, however, who does the most extensive work on the French first-person singular pronoun *je*, a project which is described in the following chapter.

sound in which we are bathed. For example, babies imitate the pitch patterns of their mothertongue while nursery rhymes and skipping songs are first learned without conscious awareness of their meaning, a meaning which is embedded in the rhythm, rhyme, and sound of words (10). Poetry also plays with this intimate relation between meaning and sound, so that sound patterns resonate and words "nudge each other into utterance" (10). She speaks of an erotic attraction of words, a pulling towards one another, playing on *liking* and its root, the Old English *lic* 'body:' "like the atomic particles of our bodies, phonemes and syllables gravitate toward each other. they attract each other in movements we call assonance, euphony, alliteration, rhyme" (10). The logic of a linear syntax is replaced by this erotic gravitation. I return again to the concept of sympathy, the "correlation existing between bodies capable of communicating their vibrational energy to one another through some medium." As with Cixous and Brossard, words for Marlatt share a vibrational energy, where individual words function as cells within the medium of a body. Metaphors to describe this process are explored, where language becomes both matter and mother. Words such as *sense*, *sentence*, *to mouth*, *mothertongue*, *to intimate*, are all read for their corporeal traces: the senses, to feel, to place my mouth upon, the tongue with which I can taste or touch, the intimacy of the body. The writer is embraced by this language which in itself is conceived as a living, evolving entity:

> certain words (dandelion sparks) seed themselves back to original and originally related meanings. this is a field where words mutually attract each other, fused by connection, enthused (inspired) into variation (puns, word play, rhyme at all levels), fertile in proliferation (offspring, rooting back to *al-*, seed syllable to grow, and leafing forward into *alma*, nourishing, a woman's given name, soul, inhabitant)

> inhabitant of language, not master, not even mistress, this new woman writer (Alma, say) in having is had, is held by it, what she is given to say. in giving it away is given herself, on that double edge where she has always lived, between the already spoken and the unspeakable, sense and non-sense. only now she writes it, risking nonsense, chaotic language leafings, unspeakable breaches of usage, intuitive leaps. inside language she leaps for joy, shoving out the walls of taboo and propriety, kicking syntax, discovering life in old roots. (13)

In this she follows Nicole Brossard who urges women writers to take the patriarchal root or radical of a word (shorn of feminine inflections and perceived as neutral) and resuscitate it. The breaches of usage Marlatt describes—the result of serendipitous assonances, rhymes, allusions, puns—are analogous to Brossard's description of the polyvalent explosion of sense by one speaking with an accent, the emerging spires. This is the beginning of an excavation of the patriarchal semantic root and an expansion of the boundaries of the circumscribed "already spoken."

The poem cycle *Touch to My Tongue* is printed on 8 by 9 inch pages, the fourteen prose-poems interspersed with six black and white collages by the artist Cheryl Sourkes from her work "Memory Room."[32] A copy of Marlatt's essay "musing with mothertongue" appears at the end of the cycle. The poems are prefaced by epigraphs drawn from H.D.'s *Notes on Thought and Vision*—"The brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important"—and from Louise Cotnoir's "S'écrire avec, dans et contre le langage." These direct how we might read the poems which follow, as written "with, in, and against language." That Marlatt intends to employ the trope of womb as site of textual production is suggested both by the reference to H.D.'s "jellyfish consciousness" and her extensive allusion throughout to the Demeter-Persephone myth.[33]

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[32] These collages are perhaps best described as palimpsested images. Letters, runes, symbols, and figures from the prehistoric to the classical figure of Grammatica are superimposed on photographs printed in negative. Sourkes describes her work as an attempt to revalue the feminine, choosing to focus on the oneiric over the rational. Her references to writing, memory, dreams, and palimpsests, bring to mind Freud's model of the "mystic writing pad" to describe the ways in which memory is laid down, as well as Derrida's reading of the palimpsest as the "scene of writing." I only make a brief note of this here, but I return to the palimpsest as a model for writing in the feminine in my Conclusion. While Sourkes and Marlatt don't mention their choice to publish together in this volume, it suggests a sympathetic presentation, whereby each can be read as a gloss on the other. Marlatt's poems also defy a linear logic. They multiply dream-like images and play with the roots of language, just as Sourkes' palimpsests, with titles such as "Occulis Imaginationis" and "Human Image on a Memory Locus," juxtapose present-day photographs with the most ancient of human writing systems. Both Marlatt and Sourkes are engaged in an archaeology of the feminine, however *feminine* is defined.

[33] In *Notes on Thought and Vision* H.D. describes three manifestations of life, which she first names body, mind, and overmind, and later amends to subconscious-mind, conscious-mind, and over-conscious mind. In suggesting three terms here and often blurring the parameters of these terms, she intervenes in the traditional mind-body binary; this is striking in its similarities with Trinh's development of the three-part Asian conception of the human as bearing three centres, the *oth*, *path*, and *kath*, and I will return to this model in chapter 4. The overmind, or over-conscious mind, is visualized by H.D. as a fluid, transparent cap that surrounds the head and descends over

The poems are love poems, describing Marlatt's relationship with the poet Betsy Warland. Marlatt describes their separation during her residency in Winnipeg, followed by their reunion on the coast, and an illness and operation undergone by Warland. Their relationship is recast in the myth of Persephone and Demeter, now lesbian lovers seeking to emerge out of the darkness of their separation as well as the underground of a language and a poetic tradition which cannot adequately describe their experience as women and as lesbians; the poems express a yearning for the light of a new language.

In the poem "hidden ground," Marlatt writes of the lovers as not inhabiting a *terra firma*, rather, "that other, lowlying moist and undefined, hidden ground, wild and running everywhere along the outer edges" (27). This hidden ground can be read as the womb (a signifying space for a new lesbian-feminist textual production), as wild zone (to return to the Ardeners' conception of women's relationship to a dominant patriarchal culture, or more specifically here, of the lesbian lovers' relationship to a heterosexual culture), and as a zone of non-sense into which these prose-poems make incursions (Brossard's spiral), each poem as a spire that contributes to the spiraling outward movement into the wild. Language and body are elided: "that tongue our bodies utter, woman tongue, speaking in and of and for each other" (27). *Tongue* is used to describe cunnilingus, as well as language, so that the corporeal trace is emphasized, as it is in the title to this poem-cycle, which comes from the poem "in the dark of the coast." Here she refers to her lover's skin and "its answering touch to my tongue," a phrase which

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the forehead and eyes; it is compared to a "sea-plant, jelly-fish or anemone" (19). From this cap extend long feelers or tentacles throughout her body, analogous to the nervous system of a brain, yet in the case of the overmind, the feelers are composed of the same amorphous thinking substance, suggesting a diffusion of consciousness. While H.D. says she first envisioned this jellyfish consciousness as being focused around her head, she later felt it was located in "the love-region of the body or placed like a foetus in the body" (19); she expressly links this overmind to artistic production.

This diffuse consciousness is echoed in *Touch to My Tongue* in the images of houses as watery caves, of the fountain outside the Vancouver Planetarium, of the Fraser River, of a "country of sea" (20) where the rippling grasses imitate the waves of the ocean, of the prairie as a prehistoric ocean, this last in the poem "prairie" which imagines Persephone caught, along with the dinosaurs grazing at the edge of Bearpaw Sea, in a flashflood, their bones scattered in a whirlpool formation. The earth here is imagined as a watery womb opening "to let love in, let loose a flood, and fold again" (26). Demeter or De-meter, earth mother, is glossed by Marlatt as earth/womb where Persephone her daughter becomes a seed, a sprout (citing Bachofen, who notes that Demeter is "every woman's womb" 36). What is engendered is a new body of language.

is reminiscent of Cixous's use of the word *langue*, the tongue tracing the contours of the spine of *la morte*, licking/speaking her back to life. Marlatt caresses her beloved with words. A more violent version of this will be seen in Wittig's anatomizing of her beloved in *Le Corps lesbien.*

The poem "kore" makes explicit the Persephone-Demeter relationship:

> **kore**
>
> no one wears yellow like you excessive and radiant storehouse of sun, skin smooth as fruit but thin, leaking light. (i am climbing toward you out of the hidden.) no one shines like you, so that even your lashes flicker light, amber over blue (*amba*, amorous Demeter, you with the fire in your hand, i am coming to you). no one my tongue burrows in, whose wild flesh opens wet, tongue seeks its nest, amative and nurturing. (here i am you) lips work towards undoing (*dhei*, female, sucking and suckling, fecund) spurt/ spirit opening in the dark of earth, *yu!* cry jubilant excess, your fruiting body bloom we issue into the light of, sweet, successive flesh... (23)

In "kore" the writer casts herself as the daughter climbing out of the darkness towards the mother-sun, "skin smooth as fruit but thin, leaking light." The descriptions of an erotic exploration of the lover's body—"wild flesh opens wet," "lips work towards undoing"—can also be read as an exploration of the erotic nature of language, the atomic attraction of phonemes and syllables. As I've mentioned, Marlatt glosses Demeter as earth mother and womb, Persephone as seed (36); language is a mothertongue into which we are born and which bears us, she has written, entering into her lover as into this sea of sound, a word in an ocean of language. In her Notes to this poem cycle, *dhei* 'suckle' is glossed as the Indo-European root of *female*, from which come *fetus* (that which sucks), *fellatio* 'sucking,' and *felix* (fruitful) (36). Again, here is Brossard's injunction to search out and revitalize the roots, the radicals of language. Throughout these poems, the corporeal roots of words are sought out. "in the dark of the coast" describes the lovers' reunion, the lover's skin, "its smell, its answering touch to my tongue./fondant, font, found, all that melts, pours. the dark rain of our being together at last" (30). The tongue caresses both the body and words into being. Language is undone and melting, "fondant, font, found," the alliteration and mutating vowels bearing traces of a fountain, a watery source, and suggesting syllables melting, hot metal poured into type. Again, these poems bear a

resemblance to Cixous's use of long, lyrical, unpunctuated sentences, the elaborate puns seeded throughout allowing for a fluid metamorphosis of words. Sentences are dilated with successive commas, each opening up to a new phrase, a cascade of related sounds and words which seek to break the old sentence by entering into (non)sense.

This movement from sense into new sense, as described by Brossard, is traced out in "coming up from underground," the penultimate poem of the cycle:

> **coming up from underground**
>
> out of the shadows of your being, so sick and still a shade under it, your eye looks out at me, grave and light at once, smiling recognition. draw close, i am so glad to see you, bleak colour of your iris gone blue, that blue of a clear sky, *belo*, bright, Beltane, 'bright-fire.' draw me in, light a new flame after your sudden descent into the dark. draw me close so i see only light your eye a full moon rides, *bleikr* in the old tongue, shining, white, ascent above horizon fringed with black reed, horsetail, primitive flicker on the rim of eons ascending this white channel we wander in, a plain of 'wild beestes' felt at the periphery of vision, fear and paranoia ready to spring—beyond the mind or out of it they say, though "defended...with apparent logic." in this landscape we are undefended in the white path of our being, lunar and pulled beyond reason. *bleikr*, shining white, radiant healing in various bright colours, *blanda*, to mingle and blend: the blaze of light we are, spiralling. (31)

The lover in her sickness is now cast as Persephone, the writer seeking to draw her out of the darkness, "out of the shadows of your being." The poem is seeded with Marlatt's exploration of the derivations of the word *bleak*: *belo*, *bleikr*, *blanda*, words which draw the lovers out, towards each other and into "the blaze of light we are, spiralling." In her notes Marlatt traces *bleak* from Old Norse *bleikja* 'white colour,' having various meanings such as shine, flash, burn, shining white, bright colours, etc (36-7)—while in "healing," the final poem of the cycle, the word *gall* (the lover has had an operation to remove the gallbladder) is traced to the Indo-European *ghel-* 'to shine': "spawning words for colours, bright materials and bile or gall in a range from Germanic *gelwaz* (yellow) to Greek *khole* (bile, from which we get melancholy) to Germanic *gladaz* (from which we get glad), *glasam* (glass, glaze), Middle Dutch *glisteren* (shine), Old English *gleo* (glee)" (37). She uses radicals as does Brossard, teasing out a multiplicity of meanings, so that *bleak* and *gall*, words we might normally associate with darkness, bitterness, despair, are, through this resonating chain that extends from

its ancient roots, led to a place of light, to *shining* and *glee*, words that illuminate the darkness of the womb/tomb from which Persephone must emerge, just as *la morte* comes to the light of day. The brightness of the lover, of blue eyes, stars, amber, moon, "i call you up, a tiny point of light" (20), are sown through-out the poem cycle, these luminous seeds unfurling in the darkness of the linear sense of a patriarchal culture the lovers find themselves within. Sense, as Marlatt points out in "musing with mothertongue," is one of the words used to describe language which bears a corporeal meaning: sense as in to feel and to gather information through the senses—eyes hands lips.

Gyno-Text

Gyno-Text can be read as a gloss on both Marlatt's "musing with mothertongue" and Julia Kristeva's theory of the *chora.* Tostevin mentions in her afterword the significance of Kristeva's thought on these spare, intimate poems; she situates *Gyno-Text* at the threshold of the semiotic and the symbolic, the genotext and the phenotext, and so I briefly outline Kristeva's work on the semiotic chora here.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva takes Plato's concept of the formless *chora*, the nursemaid of becoming, and uses it as a provisional model to articulate her theory of the semiotic process or modality.[34] She describes the semiotic *chora* in this way:

> We borrow the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation, lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition, and gives rise to a geometry. Although our theoretical description of the *chora* is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse—all

[34] Kristeva makes the distinction between *la sémiotique* 'semiotics' and *le sémiotique* 'the semiotic,' a modality that interacts with the symbolic (closely aligned with Lacan's concept of the symbolic). The semiotic and the symbolic constitute the signifying process; they are "inseparable" and determine in the dialectic between them which kind of discourse is produced, such as narrative, poetry, theory, and so on (*Revolution* 24).

> discourse—moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. (25-6)

She follows Plato in that she describes the *chora* as provisional and indeterminate, which must be inferred for it "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" and therefore "can never be definitively posited" (26). The chora, she argues, is not a position, a sign, a signifier. Neither is it a space or a receptacle so much as an "essentially mobile and provisional articulation" (25). Reminiscent of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the child's acquisition of language, the *chora* is the site of pre-Oedipal primary and archaic processes (Moi 161; Macey 61), mainly the anal and oral drives, which "connect and orient the body to the mother" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 27). Kristeva writes that the *chora* is the "psychosomatic modality of the signifying process" (28) which establishes connections between vocal, gestural, rhythmic processes, the drives, and "family protagonists" (29). The key mediating figure in this social ordering of the *chora* is the mother—the mother's body orients and structures the drives; "the mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death" (27-28). In terms of the subject's development, Macey states that the *chora* is the subject's point of origin, "[t]o the extent that it is a space that allows the child to separate itself from the mother [. . .] to the extent that it is a receptacle that threatens the child with a suffocating enclosure, it is also the site of the subject's negation" (61).

Although Kristeva specifies that the *chora* is not so much a receptacle or space as an articulation or process, Plato's imagining of the *chora* as nourishing receptacle or womb is echoed by Kristeva in her continuing alignment of this *chora*/womb with the maternal.[35] The semiotic and the symbolic realms are mediated by a thetic phase, a threshold between the mother's body and the father's language. The mother occupies the "place of alterity;" she is a substitute for "all

[35] She refers to Mallarmé's discussion in "The Mystery in Literature" of what she sees as semiotic rhythm: "Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax" (*Revolution* 24). The feminine is aligned with that space which is enigmatic and pre-symbolic, subject only to syntax which, according to Lacan's law of the father, will repress this space with the advent of language.

narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications; she is, in other words, the phallus" (*Revolution* 47). This thetic phase is precipitated by the mirror stage and the threat of castration (46), both of which propel the subject into the symbolic. Once the subject has entered the symbolic realm, the semiotic is necessarily suppressed and can therefore only ever be theoretically provisional. The semiotic *chora* only appears where the symbolic breaks down; it appears in the gaps, fissures, silences, and in the materiality of the text (68).

Kristeva introduces the terms *genotext* and *phenotext* to describe the functioning of the semiotic and symbolic modalities in texts. The *genotext* includes both semiotic processes—drives, division of the body, pre-Oedipal relations with parents—and the advent of the symbolic, which is the threshold mediated by the maternal body, the emergence of the subject and object as well as the beginnings of "semantic and categorial fields" (86). The *phenotext* is language which seeks to communicate in the linguistic sense of competence and performance (87). It obeys the general rules of communication and assumes a subject who speaks and object to whom one speaks (87). Roudiez in his introduction to *Revolution in Poetic Language* suggests the metaphor of a text as texture, where semiotic and symbolic threads are interwoven. A preponderance of semiotic threads will indicate the presence of the genotext and poetic language, while on the other extreme, a mathematical proof, or pure communication, might be described as almost "pure phenotext" (5). He observes that the presence of the genotext is often signalled by the material quality of words—notable assonance, rhyme, alliteration—regardless of their meaningful content (6). This is the point Marlatt makes when she observes that we first learn and respond to skipping songs and nursery rhymes without understanding their meaning. These material aspects, the genotext, allow the text to signify in excess, beyond the literal meaning of words.

The genotext, then, writes Tostevin in her afterword, operates at a level "which doesn't necessarily reflect normal structures but generates elements of language in process. A language rooted in something beyond language. A sprouting which develops slowly as a seed instead of sentence." Tostevin says she

conceived of *Gyno-Text* "[a]t the ridge where becoming of subject is affirmed and developed through process." The poems of *Gyno-Text* are short, no more than a dozen words or so in each poem, one-word per line. The pages of the small publication are unnumbered, with poems printed on both recto and verso, one poem per page. Several poems are in French, appearing without translation. The thin lines of words suggest strands of DNA, the emergent primitive streak, the embryonic spine, as well as this ridge of becoming, a point perhaps where the genotext and the phenotext meet and overlap.[36]

These poems inhabit the soundscape of a language not quite yet meaning-full, the realm inhabited by small children which Marlatt describes in "musing with mothertongue." The embryonic and fetal development leading to birth (into form, into body, into meaning, into language as body) in the final poem is echoed in this coming to language, embedded in the proto-language of the poems: rhythms and rhymes, assonance, aural allusions that resound throughout the text, from poem to poem. The emphasis placed by Tostevin on assonance and rhyme enacts Brossard's concept of polyvalence: the "continuous onslaught of words going off in all directions," the unfurling of the seed within its soil, of the embryo within the womb, of divergent meanings within the patriarchal sentence. Tostevin cautions her readers however, that these poems "are not about the mystification or sacred calling of motherhood defined as duty or end-in-itself but as source of generative creative power and strength. Not about generation as chronology but as signifying space, both corporeal and mental. Writing which differs in space and defers time." A reference is made here to the Derridean concept of *différance*, of difference and deferral, to the constant displacement of meaning and a refusal of origins. Yet there is an interesting tension in Tostevin's choice of womb as signifying space, where poems unfurl around the seed of human origin. DNA, deoxyribonucleic acid, can be read as text, and words as viruses, constantly mutating and transforming themselves as they are translated from French into English and back again, from one body of language to the next. Again, as with Cixous's use of the realm of the dead as a symbolic womb out of which the new

[36] Oocyte, zygote, blastocyst, embryo, fetus; the lettered chains of DNA take form (prennent corps).

writing woman emerges, with Brossard's declaration, "J'ai tué le ventre et je l'écris," and with Marlatt's invocation of H.D. at the opening to *Touch to My Tongue*, Tostevin reclaims the womb as textual matrix, a signifying space within which emerges a ridge of becoming.[37]

sens
et
sang
prennent
corps

prêtent
l'oreille
au texte
qui
s'organise[38]

fluttering
flinch
inch
by
inch
into
invisible
vise[39]

These are the tenth and eleventh poems of the series. The literal meaning of the words suggests an emergent body/text ("*sens et sang prennet corps*"); language is flagged as embodied by the elision of *sens* and *sang/blood* and *meaning*, a connection emphasized by the assonance of the long *ā* in the centre of each word. Yet this process of a text forming itself, of taking on a body, is fraught with difficulty and struggle. Unlimited meaning is squeezed into the tight form of first word, then line. Many of the words in these poems are of one syllable, with only a single word or at most two placed per line, as if there is no more room—a visual allusion to the birth canal. A tortuous birthing progression "inch by inch" is hinted at: *fl* progressing slowly from *fluttering* to *flinch*, from which the *inch* emerges, *in* passing from "*in*ch *in*to *in*visible vise." Breathing room is offered through the process of deferral, through the chains of visual and aural allusions that cross over between pages and poems. The *vis* in *invisible*, echoed visually but

[37] Cixous and Brossard are both cited by Tostevin as influences, among others.
[38] "sense and blood take form lend an ear to the forming text." This is my translation. The genotext of the French version has been sacrificed. Marlatt speaks of an "aura" that surrounds a text. See her letter to Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood in *Readings from the Labyrinth* (68). The assonance heard in *corps* and the first syllable of *s'organise* is lost, as is the word *corps* 'body': *prendre corps* means to take shape, as does the phrase *prendre forme* 'to take or assume a form.' I chose to replicate the assonance on either side of the caesura with the words *form* and *forming*. The word *sens* however translates well into *sense*, as well as echoing its sound: both the English and French words bear two related meanings, sense, as in *to sense* or *the senses*, and *meaning*.
[39] I've chosen to present the poems side by side as they appear in the original publication, one on the left-hand page, one on the right, as there are visual as well as aural resonances.

not aurally in *vise*, and its subsequent sense of a tightening grip or vise, is alleviated by the eye's movement back from *ise* to *s'organise* on the left-hand side of the page, with a resultant shift in pronunciation of the *i*.

Sounds proliferate as the poems progress:

uterine
tattoo
your
indelible
code
tapped
against
your
small
cell
wall

&
belly
bells
in
abdominal
dome

wells
inside
out

Tapping, embodied in the language of t's and d's, echoes the earlier "tympa tym panic of a heart some w/here." The words must be spoken to supplement the visual text. The tapping of the indelible code gives way to bells, followed, in the next few poems by *ronronnement*, echoed in *rond* and *arrondit*—"arrondit le ventre au verbe"—"to round off the womb to the Word," another reference to the uterus as signifying space. In Christian theology, Mary is impregnated through the ear (to access a crucial part of the genotext these poems must be read aloud, received aurally) by the word of God. In this way, word becomes flesh.[40] Impregnation is also suggested in the poem: "Out of O into the narrow bare but for this foreign marrow." *O* here is reminiscent of Wittig's *O* in *Les Guérillères*, *O* for oocyte, ovum, a cypher, the birth canal, the egg into which sperm enters, the empty word or ear into which meaning is poured, giving birth to a body of language. In an earlier poem we read: "ridge gives rise to gut tied tongue tugs the lingual hinge." The lingual hinge can be read as the ridge of becoming, both corporeal (the primitive streak, the spine) and linguistic, the generation of the

[40] Susan Handelman notes a distinction between the visual and the verbal in Greek and Hebrew religions: while the Greek gods manifest themselves visually, the Jewish god speaks. She also observes that the word made flesh is a literalization of metaphor. The Greek conception of language is literally embodied in Christ; the shadow word, the veil, is discarded for the thing itself, the fulfillment of the word whereby the text is supplanted. This literalization of metaphor shuts down its signifying potential (32). A feminist poetics seeks the opposite, for to supplant the text with the female body would be an essentializing move.

subject by means of a crossing over from the semiotic into the symbolic. Visual allusions appear within this line of the French *linge* 'linen' (fabric, texture), and, transposed, *ligne* 'line,' the ridge around which words coalesce, where genotext and phenotext merge to form the texture of language.

In the final two poems, a birth is announced:

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

vagin
vagir
enfin

Just as *sens* and *sang* are elided, the rhythmic expulsion of the emergent fetus by the taut uterine muscles is aligned with the expansive potential of the alphabet, A to Z. The text moves from *mute* to a cry—*vagir*—the wail of a child being born in the penultimate word, *vagir* echoed visually and aurally by *vagin* 'vagina,' through which the child has journeyed. Marlatt: "the beginning: language, a living body we enter at birth [. . .]."

This extended poststructural metaphor of text as tissue, language as a kind of skin, the body as text and text as a cultural body, is intimately woven throughout the practice of *écriture au féminin*, both French and English versions. From tissue to text, the organic matter of a plant or animal composed of cells and intercellular substance and the body of printed or written matter on a page—both incorporate the sense of texture, from Latin *texere* 'to weave,' a body or a page composed of closely interwoven elements. *Tissue*, *text*, and *texture* are all etymologically connected to the Greek *techne* 'art, craft, skill,' *tektōn* 'builder, carpenter,' Latin *texere* 'to weave,' and Sanskrit *taksati* 'he fashions.' This network of related terms emphasizes the way in which the text is a material artifact,

constructed through art and skill in the manner of a carefully woven fabric or tapestry and, as Roudiez points out, able to evoke the image of the semiotic and symbolic modalities which combine in order to produce signification.[41] Within Kristeva's model, the image of interwoven filaments can point to the multiple contexts and intertexts which come together to form the text. The idea that tissue, as well as text, come from roots meaning to weave or to fashion also suggests that the human body, as with the text, is not merely acultural biological matter, but material which is fashioned, woven together by often conflicting legal, medical, poetic, philosophical, and social discourses. This is the point where the women writers described in this chapter have made significant interventions in the metaphor, seeking to apply it to a rethinking of the female body beyond its traditional status as mute biological matter. "J"ai tué le ventre et je l'écris." Tostevin echoes Brossard when she asserts that the womb is "signifying space, both corporeal and mental."

Beyond the etymological cluster that locates the text as tissue and texture (and Roudiez cautions against conceiving of text as a static object but rather as an on-going process), in these first two chapters I have explored how text, especially in the context of *écriture au féminin*, can be thought of as matrix. Of course, matrix glossed as site of organic regeneration complements the tissue-text-texture cluster and I return to this model in my Conclusion. Brossard described her text *L'Amèr* as a lesbian matrix: "S'il n'était lesbien, ce texte n'aurait point de sens. Tout à la fois matrice, matière et production" (14). She explores metaphors of the womb as factory, as laboratory, as matrix, as signifying space. Godard described *Tessera* as a "textual matrix" which could generate new textual forms and ways of writing (264). Marlatt, in an essay called "Narrative in Language Circuits" (reproduced in *Readings from the Labyrinth*) uses the image of a matrix to describe her conception of language: "generative, language as matrix surrounds us (hands up! fingering those synaptic points where word transmits word, phrase, a whole idea rooted in a syllable, phoneme), a tissue of poetic words, say, each of

[41] Again, the similarity of the rabbinical and poststructuralist conceptions of language is evident. Handelman points out that the Mishnah, the code of Jewish oral law, is divided into six orders, each of which were divided into tractates called *massichtot*, a word derived from *massechta* "the loom on which cloth is woven" (45).

them 'polyvalent and multi-determined' (Kristeva 65)" (54). Matrix is used in these instances to emphasize sympathetic multiple connections between words and texts, so that writing becomes a polyvalent process seeking to explode the one-way sense that Brossard describes in *La Lettre aérienne*. Texts seek to subvert the closed circle or patriarchal matrix through a rewriting which takes place within its very foundations: writing through the symbol.

3 Elles: Lesbian/Political Writing

In the Latin Quarter, the women students, studious and frivolous alike, have been transformed into guerrilla fighters.

—Nicole Bernheim, reporting in *Le Monde,* 28 June 1968[1]

Les femmes ont été la piétaille de toutes les révolutions; elles en ont aussi été les dupes parce qu'elles ont fait les révolutions des autres...

— "Pourquoi F.M.A.", June 1968[2]

A poster from May '68 shows a young woman dressed in black pants, gloves, and jacket, standing in front of one of the semi-circular tree grilles that the students used to construct barricades during the running street battles of that month. She has just thrown a *pavé*, a paving stone. The text reads, "La beauté est dans la rue." The woman protestor, an embodiment of beauty and poetry—a graffito from the events declared "La poésie est dans la rue"—becomes a symbol for the revolution, for an overturning of conventional ideas and language, and an embracing of sexual liberation. As I outlined in chapter 1, women were involved in all aspects of the events of May '68, from organizing crèches to fighting on the barricades. Yet in practice, they were frequently ignored and silenced by the male student radicals, regarded merely as instrument—useful in the office, in the kitchen, in bed—or as symbol: "La beauté est dans la rue."

Women radicals at the time, such as Anne Zelensky and Jacqueline Feldman who set up their stand in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, realized that they were being systematically excluded from an agenda which called for a revolutionary dismantling of the bourgeois foundations of French society. Despite heady talk of the destruction of the old hierarchical system, women were still

[1] Quoted in Duchen, *Women's Rights* 194.
[2] From a document produced by the group Féminisme-Marxisme-Action (Delphy, "Les Origines" 141).

expected to provide domestic services. As the group Féminisme-Marxisme-Action observed, women were the foot soldiers of every revolution, but these were always other people's revolutions.

Monique Wittig was one of the foot soldiers who participated in the uprising of students and workers in May 1968. She also "quickly realized that the radical men leading the revolt were not inclined to share the limelight with women" (Crowder, "Monique Wittig" 524) and became an active participant in the radical women's groups that emerged out of the May '68 desire for revolutionary change. Françoise Picq observes that the French women's movement had a "small militant and sectarian group structure" (24). Groups that came into existence after May '68 included the all-women Féminisme-Marxisme-Action, to which belonged Christine Delphy and Jacqueline Feldman. A group called "Nous sommes en marche" ("We're on our way") met "every evening at the University of Paris at Censier [. . .] in May '68 until the building was closed by the police" (Duchen *Women's Rights* 209). The group Psych et Po included the controversial Antoinette Fouque, who would later found *des femmes.* Other groups included "les oreilles vertes" and the "groupe du jeudi," a women's consciousness-raising group (Duchen *passim*). These ad hoc groups, often unaware of each other's existence, eventually came to be known as the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF).

According to Christine Delphy, there were four specific events which led to the public recognition of the MLF under this name: the appearance of an article entitled "Combat pour la libération de la femme" in *L'idiot International* in May 1970; a demonstration at the University of Vincennes on the 21st May 1970, in which banners and posters appeared for the first time bearing the words "Libération des femmes, Année Zéro"; a demonstration at the Arc de Triomphe on the 20th August 1970 in which women laid a wreath on the unknown soldier's tomb for his unknown wife; and the publication of a special edition of *Partisans* called "Libération des femmes, Année Zéro" in November 1970 (Delphy, "Les Origines" 138). Delphy records that in September 1969, eight women, including Monique Wittig and her sister Gille Wittig, Antoinette Fouque, and two American

women, met on a regular basis. Disagreements within the group led to a split. The Wittigs wanted to expand the group, while Fouque and others wanted to keep it private until they had elaborated a comprehensive theory of women's oppression. Monique wrote an article, "Pour un mouvement de libération des femmes" which was published by *L'idiot International* and signed by Monique and Gille Wittig, Marcia Rothenburg and Margaret Stephenson; they then met up with women at Vincennes who were organizing the demonstration mentioned above. Delphy recalls that Wittig was also present along with eight others including Delphy herself and Anne Zelensky of FMA at the symbolic action at the Arc de Triomphe. All nine women were arrested and taken to the "commissariat du huitième arrondissement." The next day the headlines announced the birth of the MLF (143).[3]

I return to the observation made in *Le Monde*, 28 June 1968, that women had been "transformed into guerrilla fighters." May '68 for a time brought hope of revolutionary change in French society; the desire to dismantle the foundations of the old French culture and to start anew was expressed in the raging street battles, in the mass strikes and demonstrations that swept the country. Mavis Gallant has described in her *Paris Notebooks* a siege-like atmosphere: citizens were dependent on telephone and radio to gather news, they stockpiled groceries, and the entire city shut down while thousands of students and workers swept through the streets in massive demonstrations. The roots of a radical women's movement were also forged in this revolutionary spirit. Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969) captures this spirit of women warriors on the streets of Paris attacking the foundations of a patriarchal order and prefigures the radical actions of the nascent MLF. The word *guérillères* carries traces of *le guerillero* 'guerrilla', *la guérilla* 'guerrilla warfare' and *guerrière* 'warrior,' 'Amazon'. These new warriors would overthrow the old regime, both through action, in the streets, and through the forging of a new language and a new definition of a society of women: "Libération des femmes: Année Zéro."

[3] In the 1970s, Wittig was also a founding member of the Petites Marguérites, the Gouines rouges (the first lesbian group in Paris, 1972), and the Féministes révolutionnaires (Crowder, "Monique Wittig" 525).

Lesbian/Political Writing

> Elles disent qu'il n'y a pas de réalité avant que les mots les règles les règlements lui aient donné forme. Elles disent qu'en ce qui les concerne tout est à faire à partir d'éléments embryonnaires. Elles disent qu'en premier lieu le vocabulaire de toutes les langues est à examiner, à modifier, à bouleverser de fond en comble, que chaque mot doit être passé au crible. (*Les Guérillères* 192)[4]

Wittig presents here a feminist variation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity;[5] she asserts that language determines or in some significant manner influences our perception of reality, and that this language has been controlled by men, who create the rules and regulations. She offers an argument similar to one which Dale Spender made ten years later in *Man-Made Language*: that women have been both silenced—"the men have bawled shouted with all their might to reduce you to silence [. . .]" (114)—and alienated from language: "[The women] say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated" (114).[6] Her attempts to counteract this alienation and construct a new lesbian *langage* by means of a political or lesbian writing, are carried out in *Les Guérillères* (1969), *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), and *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976).

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[4] "They say that there is no reality before it has been given shape by words rules regulations. They say that in what concerns them everything has to be remade starting from basic principles. They say that in the first place the vocabulary of every language is to be examined, modified, turned upside down, that every word must be screened" (*Les Guérillères* 134).

[5] Sapir wrote, "Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so often naively assumed, but is also a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience" ("Conceptual" 128).

[6] In her 1980 best-seller *Man Made Language*, Dale Spender argued that the English language "has been literally man made and that it is still primarily under male control" (12), that while men have a partial male view of the world they control most of the resources (she cites UN statistics from 1980 that men own 99% of the world's resources) and therefore can impose this partial view on women. She extended her thesis to all Indo-European languages. See Deborah Cameron's *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* for a survey of feminist linguistic models that posit women's alienation from language.

The terms lesbian writing and political writing were offered by Wittig herself.[7] Diane Crowder suggests that lesbian writing is a direct challenge to *écriture féminine*, which some have felt perpetuates the concept of a female essence which is expressed in the writing style of a woman.[8] Crowder explains that the terms 'lesbian writing' and 'political writing' "express a consciousness of the subversion inherent in a culture that abolishes the androcentric structure of sexual difference" ("Amazons" 119). The culture to which she refers is lesbian culture; according to Wittig, women can no longer be thought of as a "natural group," rather, as a class which must fight for its own disappearance ("One is not Born" 14). The concept *woman* is only possible within the framework of a heterosexual and therefore sexist, masculinist ideology, while the concept 'lesbian' is already free of such ideology. She identifies lesbianism as existing outside the categories of man and woman, arguing that lesbians are not women as they are not economically or ideologically implicated in the heterosexual order (20). Lesbian writing then is the process of seeking to claim in language a subject position outside of the hierarchical class categories of man and woman.

Formal characteristics of this lesbian writing include "the use of the present tense to abolish time distinctions; the passive voice; a concrete vocabulary; repetition; multiplication of the female subject; the transformation of intransitive into transitive verbs; and the elimination of grammatical forms preempted by the masculine gender" (Crowder, "Amazons" 129-130).[9] Beyond these stylistic and grammatical innovations, three major elements can be identified as integral to a lesbian or political writing project. First, writing is conceived as a violent act for the female subject, a violence which I consider in

[7] She proposed these terms in conversation with Diane Griffin Crowder, 23 June 1982 (Crowder, "Amazons" 119).

[8] The *Questions féministes* collective, which included Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig, offered one of the earliest criticisms of the emphasis *écriture féminine* places on the body. See "Variations on Common Themes" in Issue 1 of *Questions féministes* (November 1977). North American feminists in the 1980s had similar concerns. Anu Aneja in "The Medusa's Slip" sums up these criticisms of an "essentializing praxis" at work in Cixous. Aneja identifies Con Davis, Wenzel, Adams, Brown, and Stanton as cautioning "against the use of the female body as a central metaphor" (18).

[9] Crowder compiles this list from Marthe Rosenfeld's "Linguistic Experimentation in Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*," MLA Convention, New York, December 1978. She also cites other critics who have documented Wittig's linguistic innovations such as Susan Wolfe, Erika Ostrovsky, and Winifred Woodhull.

more detail in my analysis of *Le Corps lesbien,* below. Second, Wittig refuses any metaphorization or compartmentalization of the female body. The aim of lesbian writing is to reclaim the female body as integral whole. To this end, Wittig makes extensive use of parataxis. Words, which Wittig has described as a raw material like clay, material and sensual, are arranged in lists throughout her novels. There are lists of flowers, scents, sensations, bodies, names, their presence in capital letters or in long unpunctuated sentences seeming to declare their material and integral nature, like tiles forming a luxurious word mosaic: "OURIKA AKAZOMÉ CYPRIS LÉONTINE ANGÉLIQUE LIA RODOGUNE JASMINE KALI SIVAN-KI [. . .]" (*Les Guérillères* 113) or "Il y a des entassements d'oranges oranges d'ananas ocres de mandarines de noix de mangues vertes et roses de brugnons bleus de pêches vertes et roses d'abricots jaune orange. Il y a des pastèques des papayes des avocats des melons d'eau des amandes vertes des nèfles [. . .]" (13) or "DORSAUX LES ILIAQUES LES RONDS LES CARRÉS LES TRIANGULAIRES LES PYRAMIDAUX LES ABDOMINAUX LES FESSIERS LES BICEPS LES TRICEPS LES TENDONS D'ACHILLEA [. . .]" (*Corps lesbien* 112).[10] Not one but every part of the *corps lesbien* is named in Wittig's search for an integral whole.

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[10] "There are piles of orange oranges ochre pineapples mandarines walnuts green and pink mangos blue nectarines green and pink peaches orange-yellow apricots. There are melons water-melons paw-paws avocados green almonds medlars [. . .]" (*Les Guérillères* 11) and "THE DORSALS THE ILIACS THE TERES THE QUADRATI THE TRIANGULAR THE PYRAMIDALS THE ABDOMINALS THE GLUTEALS THE BICEPS THE TRICEPS THE TENDONS OF ACHILLEA [. . .]" (*Lesbian Body* 101). When I read the list of fruits in English, and then compare it with the French, I see that each word has a palpable shape created by the combination of letters, and an "aura"—Marlatt writes that it "resonates off the denotative body of the text" (*Readings* 68), by which I think she must mean the associations some words accumulate for us, by appearing in other formations, by being near-homonyms with other words, by their evocations of colours or scents or sounds (a kind of synaesthesia at work), what Kristeva might call the genotext. This undergoes a metamorphosis as the passage is translated from French into English, and by extension so too does the phenotext, if only in a minor way. The difference in aura of the words *ananas* and pineapple is striking to me, the word *pineapple* evoking in its spiky *p*s and *l*s the rough texture of the pineapple's skin, something that the smooth, repetitive *a*s and *n*s of the French word can't carry. The translator in the case of *papayes*, although *papaya* would have been the closest word that might preserve some of the original aura, chose *paw-paw* instead, perhaps for the resonance the word has for him. He also changed the word order slightly—was this to recreate the alliteration found in the opening two words of the French sentence? In the list of fruits, the French version has an aural advantage in that the repetition of the indefinite articles *de, des* creates a rhythm. Yet the English version has a visual advantage in that the absence of the indefinite articles places the names of the fruits side by side in an unbroken chain. This contributes to the look I have suggested, of a mosaic, each word a small shining tile.

The third element that characterizes lesbian writing is Wittig's deployment of words and literary forms as "war machines." Key words in her texts function in the manner of a Trojan Horse "always produced in hostile territory" (69), with the aim of subverting the dominant culture. Examples would be her dissection and reassembly of certain words such as *Guérillères*, *j/e*, *féminaire*, or her manipulation of conventional forms such as the epic in *Les Guérillères* and the Song of Songs in *Le Corps lesbien*. She explicitly distances herself from "*écriture féminine* and committed literature" ("Trojan Horse" 68), arguing that these generate forms that are not war machines but myths in the Barthesian sense, myths that reproduce the dominant ideology. Rather, words must "shock," a writer must "take every word and despoil it of its everyday meaning in order to be able to work with words, on words" (72). For example, *elles*, the female plural pronoun that is normally subsumed in French by the masculine *ils,* was the pronoun Wittig attempted to reclaim in *Les Guérillères.* Her goal was to saturate the first two-thirds of the novel with the pronoun *elles* in order to present it as the universal point of view. When *ils* finally appears towards the end of the book, it is meant to shock in its particularity, robbed of its previously universal character[11] ("Mark of Gender" 84-5). In this way Wittig attempts to claim a universal position for the lesbian subject, a position formerly claimed by *ils.*

Wittig's ultimate goal is to eliminate the mark of gender in language, a mark generated through the personal pronoun. This explains her extensive work on personal pronouns throughout her novels: *on* in *L'Opoponax*, *elles* in *Les Guérillères*, and *j/e* in *Le Corps lesbien*, along with the possessives *m/a, m/on, m/es.* Personal pronouns, "the pathways and the means of entrance into language" (Wittig 78) are significant because they identify subject and object positions in language; they are the means by which subjectivity is called into being. Wittig

[11] This effect is lost in the English translation. *Elles*, the feminine plural pronoun, is always translated as either *they* or *the women.* In the case of the English pronoun *they*, Wittig argues that while it claims a universality, it still marks a male subject position. This position is made explicit by the French *ils* which is almost always used unless referring to a group consisting solely of women. The only English-language book I am aware of that attempts an experiment similar to the one Wittig carries out in *Les Guérillères* is Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time.* In her utopian community of Mattapoisett, the word *per* is used as both direct and indirect male and female pronoun. *Per* disorients a native English speaker; it is not always apparent if a character is speaking of a man or a woman.

argues that through these pronouns an entire constellation of gender effects are triggered. *Je* as an abstract and universal subject has been appropriated by men; women as a result have to enter language in a "crablike way, particularizing themselves and apologizing profusely" ("Mark of Gender" 81). She wishes to claim this universal category for the lesbian subject, previously confined within the particular: "To destroy the categories of sex in politics and in philosophy, to destroy gender in language (at least to modify its use) is therefore part of my work in writing, as a writer. An important part, since a modification as central as this cannot happen without a transformation of language as a whole" (81).

Elles disent...

Early in Monique Wittig's mock epic of a lesbian overthrow of the patriarchal order, it is noted that *elles*, the women warriors, carry small books called *féminaires*:

> Quand il est feuilleté, le féminaire présente de nombreuses pages blanches sur lesquelles elles écrivent de temps à autre. Pour l'essentiel, il comprend des pages avec des mots imprimés en caractères majuscules dont le nombre est variable. Quelquefois il y en a un seulement ou bien la page peut en être remplie. Le plus souvent ils sont isolés au milieu de la page, bien espacés noirs sur fond blanc ou bien blancs sur fond noir. (17-18)[12]

The typography and spacing in the *féminaires* resemble that in *Les Guérillères* itself. Short, cryptic paragraphs stud the white pages. Three pages are filled with only a thick black O. Blocks of women's names printed in large capital letters, "well spaced black on a white background," are interspersed throughout, loosely weaving together a narrative of women's revolt against the old order. The description of the *féminaires* also indicates that while sections have already been written (later, it is asserted that men are the ones who write, who have controlled

[12] "When it is leafed through the feminary presents numerous blank pages in which they write from time to time. Essentially, it consists of pages with words printed in a varying number of capital letters. There may be only one or the pages may be full of them. Usually they are isolated at the centre of the page, well spaced black on a white background or else white on a black background" (15).

language, who have authored the histories and defined the symbols) the women write in these books "from time to time," as if annotating the patriarchal text, filling in and thus claiming the blank spaces and pages, the lacunae.[13]

We learn that the *féminaires* include textbook, anatomical descriptions of the female body, as well as obscure and ancient terms and metaphors for this body within the old patriarchal order. A detailed anatomy of the clitoris is provided (22-23), a typology of the labia minora (said to resemble a lily, a half-moon, butterfly's wings), as well as lists of metaphors by which the clitoris, vulva, labia majora and minora, and vaginal secretions have been classified. For example, the clitoris is a cherrystone, a shelled sesame, an almond, a dart; vaginal secretions are like "iodized salt water;" vulvas are suns with rays emanating, birds such as "doves, starlings, bengalis, nightingales, finches, swallows" (44), "traps vices pincers" as well as "apricots pomegranates figs roses pinks peonies marguerites. They say these comparisons may be recited like a litany" (32). Poetic incantation

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[13] The *féminaires* have an antecedent in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). DuPlessis has noted that this novel was crucial for the development of her own feminist consciousness: "Frankly, it was *The Golden Notebook* [. . .] Which pierced my heart with its two-headed arrow" (*Pink* 2). Lessing has been less pleased with this feminist interpretation of her novel. In her preface to the 1972 edition she laments that "the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war" (8). She says she intended rather to present an artist who had an artistic block as the result of "the disparity between the overwhelming problems of war, famine, poverty, and the tiny individual who was trying to mirror them. But what was intolerable, what really could not be borne any longer, was this monstrously isolated, monstrously narcissistic, pedestalled paragon" (12). She wanted to explore the problem of "subjectivity" which had been raised by Russian social literary criticism (12).

The writer Anna Wulf compartmentalizes her life into four distinct notebooks—black, red, yellow, and blue. Each one addresses and dissects one aspect of her life. The red notebook, for example, deals with her political life, namely her experience in the British Communist Party. The blue notebook is described as a diary and records her personal life. Lessing, through Wulf, comes to the realization that this division is false: "nothing is personal" (13). DuPlessis praises *The Golden Notebook* for this passionate subjectivity. She admires it for its complex, antiphonal structure which attempts to explore and ultimately connect the fragmented pieces of Anna Wulf's life into some cohesive whole (*Pink* 8).

Wittig also chooses to present women writing in small notebooks, notebooks which, as with the multi-coloured notebooks of Anna Wulf, will be discarded in favour of a new textual body which articulates the lesbian body in its entirety. By wholeness, however, is not meant the synthesis of discrete parts into some homogenizing entity. This is why DuPlessis insists upon models for a form which would accommodate such discrete and heterogeneous components—the patchwork quilt, the hold-all—just as Wittig employs the list to indicate a similar interactive yet heterogeneous constellation of parts.

merges with religious invocation, suggesting the ways in which women have been metaphorized and circumscribed by these institutions.[14]

At first glance, the *féminaires* appear to be some compilation of medical, gynaecological textbooks, as well as a concordance of terms for female organs in poetic and mythical works. Ostrovsky has pointed out the word *féminaire* hints at *bestiaire*, "those pseudo-scientific works of the past that described strange, exotic, fabulous beasts" (55). Women, in their habits, behaviours, and colourings are presented as specimens for speculation and textual annotation in the *féminaires*, a fabulous text of *femme* penned by medical, juridical, religious, and poetic discourse. Yet the attention which the women pay to the metaphors, to the lists, and their occasional annotations of these books, suggest that the *féminaires* can also be read as a text already being rewritten by women seeking to reclaim the body from patriarchal discourse. As such the *féminaires* serve an important function, a first step in excavation of the female body. The *féminaires*, as text of woman, are being read and annotated by the women warriors.

Ultimately the *féminaires*, outdated and useless, are heaped up in squares and burned, in order to "avoid being encumbered with useless knowledge" (49). This burning of the *féminaires* marks a refusal of this text of woman and a desire for a *tabula rasa*, a clean sweep. Symbols formerly necessary are discarded (58); hyperbole and metaphors are rejected as are typologies, chronologies, litanies and imprecations of the female body (66), which is now to be perceived in its entirety, its integrity. Instead, the women need to start from ground zero (O): "invent terms that describe themselves without conventional references to herbals and bestiaries" (53). In this, Wittig anticipates the slogan of the MLF, "Libération des femmes: Année Zéro," which will be used on banners and posters in the march at the University of Vincennes 21 May 1970 and on the cover of a special issue of *Partisans* in November 1970. As in May '68, a destruction of the old order is called for. The overarching narrative action of *Les Guérillères* suggests just such a destructive clearing away, depicted as a battle, the women-amazons marching to war. Men who have written or contributed to the *féminaire*, this text of woman,

[14] The litany of terms and sayings about *Femme* can also be read as an assembly of the archive, in Foucault's sense, where "Woman" is understood as discursive formation.

are punished in a particularly gruesome and literal manner: their skins are tanned and dried in the sun, some exhibited with labels "that record the name of their former proprietors or that recall their most striking catchphrases" (110). Having named and possessed women in their texts, these male authors are now made into texts themselves, their own words written on their skin, the subject of much amusement, discussion, and exegesis amongst the women. The violence of the image is deliberate. Wittig perceives the symbolic as a male realm within which women as symbols and signs have been violated and from which women have been expelled, as Eve was expelled from Eden for tasting fruit from the tree of knowledge:

> Elles disent, le langage que tu parles t'empoisonne la glotte la langue le palais les lèvres. Elles disent le langage que tu parles est fait de mots qui te tuent. Elles disent, le langage que tu parles est fait de signes qui à proprement parler désignent ce qu'ils se sont appropriés. Ce sur quoi ils n'ont pas mis la main, ce sur quoi ils n'ont pas fondu comme des rapaces aux yeux multiples, cela n'apparaît pas dans le langage que tu parles. Cela se manifeste juste dans l'intervalle que les maîtres n'ont pas pu combler avec leurs mots de propriétaires et de possesseurs, cela peut se chercher dans la lacune, dans tout ce qui n'est pas la continuité de leurs discours, dans le zéro, le O, le cercle parfait que tu inventes pour les emprisonner et pour les vaincre. (162-164)[15]

Women are alienated from this "man-made language" and effectively silenced. This silencing is presented as a violence done against women: with this language men have bawled and shouted at, poisoned, killed women, men are presented as possessors, proprietors, and birds of prey. A clean break from "the last bond that binds them to a dead culture" (72), a retreat to ground zero, is called for. Books, as with the *féminaires*, are to be burned. Damaging symbols and metaphors which emphasize a fragmented as opposed to a whole, integral body must be discarded

[15] "The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated. Whatever they have not laid hands on, whatever they have not pounced on like many-eyed birds of prey, does not appear in the language you speak. This is apparent precisely in the intervals that your masters have not been able to fill with their words of proprietors and possessors, this can be found in the gaps, in all that which is not a continuation of their discourse, in the zero, the O, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow them" (114).

while new terms are to be invented. This two-fold program can be traced in Wittig's deployment of O: circle (O), zero, ring, sphere, the letter *O*, cipher, null.

The O is first explored for its traditional definition of the female body—as symbol of female genitalia ("the vulval ring"), that is, O as fragment, lack, absence. As already mentioned, the *féminaires* give "pride of place to the symbols of the circle, the circumference, the ring, the O, the zero, the sphere" (45), and they describe the vulva in terms of rings, circles, ovals, and ellipses (48). Early on this symbolism is rejected: "They do not say that vulvas with their elliptical shape are to be compared to suns, planets [. . .] that the vulva is the primal form [. . .]" (61). O as vulval ring and other types of hyperboles are discarded in favour of O as symbol of integrity and wholeness:

> Elles disent qu'elles appréhendent leurs corps dans leur totalité. Elles disent qu'elles ne privilégient pas telle de ses parties sous prétexte qu'elle a été jadis l'objet d'un interdit. Elles disent qu'elles ne veulent pas être prisonnières de leur propre idéologie. (80)[16]

Here Wittig anticipates *écriture féminine* and other calls for a writing which bears the "mark of gender." She rejects such a project as yet another form of ideological imprisonment. Instead, these marks of gender, these Os will be refashioned as the "perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow them" (114). These Os, lacunae, represent gaps in the master discourse which will eventually allow the women to overthrow the patriarchal order.

Os multiply throughout the text. There is the green siren covered in scales who sings O: "The women say that of her song nothing is to be heard but a continuous O. That is why this song evokes for them, like everything that recalls the O, the zero or the circle, the vulval ring" (14). Here the siren, one of the fantastical women who might be found to inhabit the *féminaires*, presents an exemplar of a woman alienated from language. Feared in male mythology for her ability to seduce men to their deaths, her power is contained by the "continuous O" that obstructs meaningful speech. Yet the O that she sings carries the sound of

[16] "The women say that they perceive their bodies in their entirety. They say that they do not favour any of its parts on the grounds that it was formerly a forbidden object. They say that they do not want to become prisoners of their own ideology" (57).

the word "eau" (water) (Ostrovsky 62); water is frequently associated with the women in both this novel and in *Le Corps lesbien*, in idyllic recreations of Lesbos and other Amazonian islands. Is she imprisoned by the O and her placement in the depths of the sea by male myths or is she reclaiming this space?

In later sequences the O becomes a path the women march in the prelude to war. Old photographs show women marching in a circle outside a closed factory. They bear placards with slogans, sing, shout, and "[u]nder their feet in the field is a circle of beaten earth" (39). This is echoed later when the women dance in a circle to "warlike Minerva" (93). In a more lighthearted image, the women play a game with coloured hoops. Violet indigo blue green yellow orange and red hoops are cast out into the air by a machine, their momentum creating an "immense spiral" (60). Yet this prefigures the *ospah*, their most "formidable weapon," which they whirl over their heads in battle to create a "green circle which crackles and emits odours," a zone of death: "The coalescence of the O's is produced by the desperate combatants, full of courage audacious tough and unyielding" (104). A list is presented of tribes whose names begin with the letter O: the Ophidian women, the Odonates Oögones Odoacres Olynthians Oöliths Omphales Ormur Orphise Oriennes, all women who "have massed and gone over to the attack" (103). Typographically, three giant circles (O) appear at roughly the beginning middle and end of the book, stark and black against the otherwise empty white page, while the lists of women's first names presented in blocks of capital letters are glossed as "THAT WHICH IDENTIFIES THEM LIKE/THE EYE OF THE CYCLOPS,/THEIR SINGLE FORENAME" (13).

At one point in the text it is observed that women have been systematically relegated to one side of a binary. Women are variously associated with the earth and the sea, with tears and humidity, with negativity and surrender. This association, the text suggests, is "the product of mechanistic reasoning. It deploys a series of terms which are systematically related to opposite terms" (80). The women find this binary division so crass they laugh and joke about it, and compare it as falling between Scylla and Charybdis: women are crushed by a monstrous body of myth. An embracing of either pole is deemed unacceptable, as

either leads to death. Again, Wittig anticipates early feminist attempts to valorize previously denigrated attributes of women, and warns against them. As is apparent in her discussion of the *féminaires*, such a focus or valorization may be an important first step, but ultimately such binaries must be discarded in favour of multiplicity. This is pursued in the multiplication of the Os and their meanings throughout the novel, from vulva ring to coloured hoops to the *ospah*, green ring of death, to a revolutionary call for an overthrow of the new order. "Overthrow," with its serendipitous first letter *o,* replaces *renversement* in the English translation.

With this multiplication, O and the various symbols it denotes become war machines, the Trojan Horse within the *féminaires* which ultimately serves to undermine and destroy the text of woman. Just as the *féminaires*, however, are discarded after they have served their purpose, *Les Guérillères* must also be discarded in the approach to a ground zero, in favour of a new form. This new form is hinted at in the register and the dictionary which make brief appearances in *Les Guérillères*. The register is a large book laid open on a table, frequently approached by the women who either write in it or consult it; it is without sequence or chronology, rather "[o]ne may take it at random and find something one is interested in" (53). The dictionary is being compiled by an assembly (76). Both projects appear to be communal works in progress and the subject of much interest and debate, independent of the *féminaires* which have been destroyed. It is at this stage in the project of lesbian or political writing that *Les Guérillères* ends. With a discarding of the metaphorized female body, the construction of a new textual lesbian body, *Le Corps lesbien*, begins.

Writing the Lesbian Body

> Abominable maîtresse j/e suis par toi saignée tout entière. Des bourdonnements m/e viennent aux oreilles le bruit de ta respiration à des moments haletante le son de ta voix frénétique, j/e crois encore par instant entendre ton rire. Tu ne tireras pas de m/oi les cris d'une truie qu'on égorge. D'ailleurs il est trop tard. M/es artères ont été sectionnées, m/es veines sont dilatées de façon systématique. Les artères plantaires

> péronières tibiales fémorales iliaques carotides cubitales radiales sont les plus grossièrement tranchées, tailladées est le mot. M/es veines saphènes fémorales iliaques axillaires basiliques céphaliques radiales jugulaires sont maintenues ouvertes par les pipettes de verre qui y sont introduites. J/e n'entends pas m/on sang couler. M/on coeur est pressé épongé, il saute par instants ou bien il s'immobilise brutalement, il fonctionne encore par à-coups. M/on sang quitte m/on cerveau, il est tiré de m/a figure par m/es artères temporales par m/es veines faciales, m/es joues se creusent, m/on sang sort de m/es membres attachés de m/es bras de m/es jambes de m/es aines, il ne coule pas à travers m/es intestins, j//ai cessé d'être nourrie, m/es poumons ne sont pas oxygénés, m/a respiration est de plus en plus difficile. J/e vois comment complètement vidée sans plus d'épaisseur qu'une carte de géographie m/a peau va être par toi étirée tendue m/es organes tout plats tombant d'eux-mêmes m/es os devenus poudre s'écroulant, m/on corps tout entier tout juste prêt à présent à être punaisé sur ton mur, sois maudite une fois pour toutes toi que j/e vois clairement debout passant parfois tes doigts sur m/on corps aplati y cherchant les traces des anciens canaux des anciens orifices. (141-2)[17]

Anatomy, from the Greek *temnein* 'to cut,' is defined as both the art of dissecting an organism in order to determine the structure and functioning of its parts, and as a treatise on this art (Merriam Webster). In this most extreme passage the narrator *j/e* is anatomized by her lover: arteries are severed, veins dilated, blood drains away. Her skin, stretched paper thin, is prepared as parchment to be fastened to the lover's walls with pins. The metaphor of body as text is taken most literally. The lover runs her fingers over the narrator's skin, now no thicker than a map, as if reading an ancient medical textbook. Margaret Crosland, in her introduction to the English translation of *Le Corps lesbien*, has described this text as an *écorché*, an anatomical cut-away (6). The anatomy of the beloved is excruciating to read:

[17] "Abominable mistress *I* am bled dry by you. Buzzings affect m/y ears the sound of your intermittent gasping respiration the sound of your frenetic voice, still from time to time *I* seem to hear your laughter. You shall not wring from m/e the cries of a sow whose throat is being slit. Besides it is too late. M/y arteries have been severed, my veins systematically dilated. The plantar peroneal tibial femoral iliac carotid ulnar radial arteries are most rudely severed, slashed is the better word. M/y saphenous femoral iliac axilliary basilic cephalic radial jugular veins are kept open by glass pipettes inserted therein. *I* do not hear m/y blood running away. M/y heart is squeezed sponged, it bounds intermittently or else it suddenly comes to a halt, it goes by fits and starts. M/y blood quits m/y brain, it is leached from m/y face by m/y temporal arteries by m/y facial veins, m/y cheeks are hollowed, m/y blood leaves m/y attached limbs m/y arms legs groins, it does not flow through m/y intestines, *I* am no longer nourished, m/y lungs are not oxygenated, m/y breathing is increasingly more difficult. *I* see how completely emptied with no more thickness than a geographical map m/y skin is going to be stretched out taut by you m/y organs all flat falling spontaneously m/y bones turned into powder crumbling, m/y entire body now absolutely ready to be fastened with drawing-pins on your wall, may you be accursed once and for all you whom *I* clearly see standing sometimes passing your fingers over m/y flattened body seeking the traces of former canals of former orifices" (126).

in its precise use of anatomical terms and descriptions of procedures (in this passage, of a body exsanguinated, flayed, pinned down as if a specimen and the body read as a text, a diagram); and in the words that denote violent acts against bodies, bodies that are dilated, severed, slashed, leached, hollowed, flattened; in the first person pronouns presented with a diagonal slash, *j/e*, *m/on*, *m/es*, as if visually depicting a fragmenting of the subject.

In other passages, the lover and her beloved are perforated, penetrated by one another, turned inside out, their organs pulled out or coughed up through their noses and mouths, ingested and vomited up by one another, nailed to the earth and burned to black char by the sun, torn into small pieces and scattered across the land. This is characterized as an anatomy of love; an extreme dissection is carried out as a sacral act, necessary in order to proceed to the beloved's resurrection, which can be read as a destruction of the body of woman within heterosexual society and its resurrection as lesbian subject. This textual resurrection is carried out at several levels: in the language of *Le Corps lesbien*, such as with the experimental pronoun *j/e*, which is taken apart in an attempt to claim for the lesbian subject the universal point of view; in the appropriation of discourses, registers, and literary forms that have traditionally viewed the female body as specimen-object; and thematically, in Wittig's feminizing of myths of the resurrection of Christ, and of the Egyptian god Osiris.

At the level of language, which Wittig has described as the material of the writer, like clay to a sculptor, words are first taken apart in order to reassemble them. This is most apparent in her manipulation of the personal pronouns *j/e*, *m/a*, *m/on*, and *m/es*.[18] This unusual notation, which typographically suggests a violent tearing of the subject, has been described by Wittig as an expression of her alienation from language: ""*J/e* is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the

[18] See Ostrovsky for a detailed examination of Wittig's linguistic experiments. She observes, for example, that Wittig's idiosyncratic use of intransitive verbs serves to create a new syntax, breaking down traditional boundaries between lover and beloved, subject and object. Wittig uses "intransitive verbs in a way that makes the action pass immediately from subject to object (of desire)" (96). This can be read as another form of resurrection, the two lovers as parts of a whole, reunited.

exercise of a language which does not constitute m/e as a subject. *J/e* poses the ideological and historic question of feminine subjects" (Author's Note 10-11). As noted above, she identifies pronouns as the primary bearers of gender which call into being a whole spectrum of gender effects; even in the use of the pronoun *je*, apparently neutral, gender is called for with the introduction of past participles and adjectives, which will immediately locate the *je*, the speaking or writing subject, as female. To work on pronouns, then, is to work on transformation of language as a whole: "the whole nebula of their constellations shift, are displaced, engulfed or reoriented, put sideways" ("Mark of Gender" 82).

Yet the diagonal slash / which depicts a violent rending of the subject is later reconceived by Wittig as a sign of excess, a "sign that helps to imagine an excess of 'I,' an 'I' exalted. 'I' has become so powerful in *The Lesbian Body* that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love, and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women" (87). This is also carried out through the feminizing of male mythic figures (Christa, Achillea) and the lesbianizing of classic male-female couples (Isis and Osiris, Orpheus and Eurydice).

Beyond this deliberate dismantling and reconstructing of language, certain discourses, registers, and literary forms are reconfigured. *Le Corps lesbien* consists of lyrical prose poems, some reminiscent of the Song of Songs, others of mythical scenes (for example, Orpheus guiding Eurydice out of hell), interspersed with a running list of the parts of the lesbian body. Wittig herself has written that the "body of the text subsumes all the words of the female body. *Le Corps lesbien* attempts to achieve the affirmation of its reality" (Author's Note 10). This intermittent list attempts to name all the parts, processes, secretions, functions, and sensations of the female body:

> LE CORPS LESBIEN LA CYPRINE LA BAVE LA SALIVE LA MORVE LA SUEUR LES LARMES LE CERUMEN L'URINE LES FÈCES LES EXCRÉMENTS LE SANG LA LYMPHE LA GÉLATINE L'EAU LE CHYLE LE CHYME LES HUMEURS LES SÉCRÉTIONS LE PUS LES SANIES LES SUPPURATIONS LA BILE LES SUCS LES ACIDES LES FLUIDES LES JUS LES COULÉES L'ÉCUME LE

> SOUFRE L'URÉE LE LAIT L'ALBUMINE L'OXYGÈNE LES FLATULENCES LES POCHES LES PAROIS LES MEMBRANES LE PÉRITOINE, L'ÉPIPLOON, LA PLÈVRE LE VAGIN LES VEINES LES ARTÈRES LES VAIS- (22-23)[19]

Appearing on facing pages, the words are printed in bold, 20-point capital letters, justified left and right, which results in unusual spacing between words. The overall effect, with the words bleeding into the margins and even, because of their thick black letters, into the text printed on their reverse, is of a physical, material presence. The list begins and ends with "LE CORPS LESBIEN," an indication of Wittig's overall project of claiming an integral lesbian body; through parataxis, anatomy specific to the female body is not accorded special status. Metonymy is favoured over metaphor. In a recapitulation of the *féminaires*, *Le Corps lesbien* can be read as the equivalent of a textual autopsy, where the female body is dissected, examined, washed of earlier and archaic metaphors (clitoris as almond, vulva as rose, etc) and reassembled. The list of words serves as an incantation, an appropriation through intermingling of liturgical and medical registers. The bible, classical myth, medical textbooks, and the Christian liturgy, formerly that which pinned and labeled the female specimen, are all enlisted in the lover's exploration and resuscitation of the beloved. [20]

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[19] "THE LESBIAN BODY THE CYPRINE THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE SNOT THE SWEAT THE TEARS THE WAX THE URINE THE FAECES THE EXCREMENTS THE BLOOD THE LYMPH THE JELLY THE WATER THE CHYLE THE CHYME THE HUMOURS THE SECRETIONS THE PUS THE DISCHARGES THE SUPPURATIONS THE BILE THE JUICES THE ACIDS THE FLUIDS THE FLUXES THE FOAM THE SULPHUR THE UREA THE MILK THE ALBUMEN THE OXYGEN THE FLATULENCE THE POUCHES THE PARIETES THE MEMBRANES THE PERITONEUM, THE OMENTUM, THE PLEURA THE VAGINA THE VEINS THE ARTERIES THE VESS-" (28) I have modified this translation. The English translation by David Le Vay on page 28 ends with "THE VESSELS THE NERVES" whereas I have followed the French edition which cuts off mid-word. I have also left the word *cyprine* in its French form. Le Vay translates it as "the juice" but this drains it of its specificity and its shock value. The word doesn't appear in the desk versions of the Collins Robert and the Petit Robert. Wittig and Zeig define it in their *Brouillon* as "Secretion produced by the companion lovers when they are in a state of love" (37). This is an example of their lacunary method, which I describe below. Note that "LES SUCS" is translated as "THE JUICES" so "LES JUS" was left out of the English translation.

[20] Grosz writes:

> Lacan's account of the founding role of what he calls 'the imaginary anatomy' is perhaps one of the most productive and under-developed features of his work. The body as it is perceived or experienced by the child is the fragmented body-in-bits-and-pieces. This is an uncoordinated, discrete assemblage of parts exhibiting no regulated organization or internal cohesion. Out of this largely biological chaos of neuronal prematurity will be constructed a lived anatomy, a

The motif of the passion, of the crucified god whose body parts are scattered across the land or ploughed under into the field, leading to renewal and rebirth, appears throughout *Le Corps lesbien*. In many passages the beloved is ingested by the lover in an act of communion reminiscent of the Christian ritual,[21] yet with a relish and bloody carnality screened out of the original, such as in the passage "*I* begin with the tips of your fingers, *I* chew the phalanges *I* crunch the metacarpals the carpals, *I* slaver at your wrists, *I* disarticulate the ulnae with great delicacy [. . .] *I* eat m/y fill of you m/y so delectable one, m/y jaws snap, *I* swallow you, *I* gulp you down [. . .]*I* absorb you m/y very precious one, *I* retain you within m/e" (121-122). Communion is presented not just as the intimate and erotic act of taking another into one's mouth, but as cannibalistic. It is both a secular and sacred union.

The Christian myth of resurrection is complemented by the Egyptian myth of Osiris and his sister-consort Isis, to whom the authorship of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* has been attributed. The *Book of the Dead*, as described in chapter 1, offers a more visceral, material depiction of the resurrection of the body than that of the ritualized communion in the Christian tradition, and bears a closer resemblance to the visceral enumeration of the lesbian body in Wittig's text. Her lists of body parts (and in *Les Guérillères*, of fruits, scents, women's names, birds) can be read as magical incantation along the lines of the formulas listed in the *Book of the Dead* used to animate the lifeless corpse and reunite it with the Spirit-soul. Metamorphoses, as of the spells which allow the dead to transform into a hawk, a lotus-flower, a heron, occur throughout *Le Corps lesbien*: the beloved is transformed into music of the spheres, a stone Niobe, a black sea ("it seems to m/e that you are the water which comes and goes in the closest confines of m/y body"

> psychic/libidinal map of the body which is organized not by the laws of biology but along the lines of parental or familial significations and fantasies about the body—fantasies (both private and collective) of the body's organization. (*Jacques Lacan* 43-4)

Wittig's presentation of the fragmented female body can also be read as a recapitulation of this experience of the body-in-bits-and-pieces leading to the construction of a lived anatomy, the *corps lesbien*. The body-image as it is informed by socio-cultural conceptions of the female body is now infused by a lesbian consciousness.

[21] Ostrovsky has observed that the "various parts of *Le Corps lesbien* can be seen as an appropriation and recreation of the Holy Mass: Introit, Gloria, Invocation, Passion, Ascension, and Assumption" (82).

125), a black swan, a single-celled organism ("m/y fine protozoan m/y green infusorium m/y violent vorticella" 45), sphinx of clay, and so on. Amulets and talismans as described in *The Book of the Dead* are also invoked. The tet of amethyst representing the uterus and vagina of Isis, to be placed on the neck of the deceased, is echoed in *Le Corps lesbien* in the clitoris, which, "detached from its burning hood rolls glinting at your feet ready to adorn one of your fingers in the setting of a ring" (162). A necklace made of the extracted teeth of the beloved is offered to Sappho (127).

It is in the story of Isis and Osiris that the mystery of the resurrection of the body is recounted in Egyptian mythology. Osiris is the god of death and resurrection, analogous to Christ in the Christian tradition. According to one version of the story, his dismembered and mutilated body is restored to life by Isis, the Mother goddess of civilization and fertility who travels over the world to collect the scattered body parts of her brother-consort, founding a shrine at each spot. She and her fellow goddess Nephthys "often depicted with great wings" restore him to life with her breath (Chevalier 726). In *Le Corps lesbien*, the lover, cast in the role of Isis, collects the body parts of her beloved, a female Osiris:

> J/e marche sur la terre noire. Des fleurs de cerisier la jonchent. J/e regarde la terre noire et humide que m/es pieds nus touchent. Un contact doux m//immobilise. J/e vois sous les plantes de m/es pieds que les globes de tes yeux sont là, j/e les ai enfoncés un peu. Privée de paupières tu m/e regardes dans les mottes de terre, tes yeux m/e regardent, j/e fais un bond en arrière, j/e m/e penche, j/e m/e jette à plat ventre pour les recueillir au creux de m/es mains. Ce sont tes lèvres jointes jetées un peu plus loin que m/es mains touchent. Tout ton corps est là fragmenté [. . .] J/e te prends morceau par morceau. J/e te reconstitue. J/e lèche chacune de tes parties salies par la terre. J/e te parle. Un vomissement m/e vient, j/e m//étouffe, j/e hurle, j/e te parle, j/e te veux avec une force si merveilleuse que tout soudain les fragments s'assemblent, il ne te manque pas un doigt pas un tronçon. Alors j/e m/e mets à souffler dans ta bouche entrouverte dans ton nez dans tes oreilles dans ta vulve, j/e te souffle sans discontinuer là couchée sur toi nue dans la terre noire. Des fleurs de cerisier tombent sur toi, j/e les écarte. (127-130)[22]

[22] "*I* walk over the black earth. It is strewn with cherry blossom. *I* look at the black and humid earth touched by m/y bare feet. *I* am halted by contact with something soft. Under the soles of m/y feet *I* see your eyeballs there, *I* have embedded them somewhat. Deprived of eyelids you gaze at m/e in the mounds of earth, your eyes gaze at m/e, *I* start back, *I* bend down, *I* throw m/yself flat on m/y face to gather them in the hollow of m/y hands. It is your closed lips thrown a little further off that m/y hands touch. Your whole body is in fragments here [. . .] *I* gather you up piece by

Eyes lips breasts belly ears, all have been scattered into the rich earth, ploughed under like the Christ-gods who bring renewal of the seasons through their sacrificial death and symbolic resurrection. This long elegiac passage is broken up in the original French edition by one of the intermittent lists of body parts. Reading of the lover's anguish in finding fragments of her beloved in the earth below, you can see through the thin pages of the book the large black capital letters of the restorative incantation—"[. . .] LE SQUELETTE LA COLONNE VERTÉBRALE LES CLAVICULES [. . .] LA VULVE LA MATRICE LA VESSIE [. . .] LE COEUR [. . .]"—just as the lover collects the eyeballs in the hollow of her hands, gathering up the beloved piece by piece. She prostrates herself on the ground into which the beloved's blood has spread, licks life into the individual pieces, and by strength of her desire wills the pieces together. As with Isis and Nepthys, she breaths life into the beloved, "dans ta bouche entrouverte dans ton nez dans tes oreilles dans ta vulve."[23]

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piece. *I* reassemble you. *I* lick each of your parts sullied by the earth. *I* speak to you. *I* am seized by vomiting, *I* choke, *I* shriek, *I* speak to you, *I* yearn for you with such marvellous strength that all of a sudden the pieces fall together, you don't have a finger or a fragment missing. Then *I* begin to breath into your half-open mouth into your nose your ears your vulva, *I* breathe without ceasing lying here on you naked in the black earth. Cherry-blossom falls on you, *I* brush it aside" (113-114).

[23] The passage which follows this scene begins with an invocation to Sappho, invoked as the Holy Spirit, who "causes a violet lilac-smelling rain to fall over the island," as if blessing the rich, cherry-petal strewn earth. Ostrovsky points out that Wittig herself plays the role of Isis in relation to Sappho, as does Cixous to *la morte,* Nadezhda to Osip, the poet to the shattered fragments of language in a post-Holocaust age, as if potshards or seeds buried deep underground. Mary Barnard, a translator of Sappho, explains that papyrus scrolls were sometimes recycled by being torn into strips and either made into coffins or stuffed in the mouths of mummified crocodiles. Because of this, many of the poems of Sappho that have come down to us on strips of papyrus (texts were always printed in capital letters without punctuation) exist only in incomplete lines. Similarly, classical writers have preserved fragments of Sappho's poems, either as grammatical examples or demonstrations of her poetic style (104-105). The lists of body parts that unwind scroll-like throughout *Le Corps lesbien* are printed in capital letters with little to no punctuation, a typographical feature suggestive, whether intentional or not, of this dispersed Sapphic corpus. The lyrical passages in between the unfurling list appear then to stitch together these scraps, an attempt to gather the fragments of the Sapphic/lesbian textual body.

As women have either been silenced or alienated by language, according to Wittig, lesbian writing seeks to reclaim this language by seeking out those gaps or lacunae in the patriarchal fabric; her 1976 *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*, co-authored with Sande Zeig, presents a fanciful lexicon for lesbian writing, and can be read as a companion piece to *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*. Wittig calls her dictionary "lacunary" in its method. The dictionary, she writes, "allows us to eliminate those elements which have distorted our history during the dark ages [. . .] This arrangement can be called lacunary. The assemblage of words, what dictated their choice, the fiction of the fables also constitute lacunae and therefore are acting upon reality" (43). The OED defines "lacuna" as "1. a hiatus, blank, or gap 2. a missing portion or empty page, esp in an ancient MS, book, etc 3. *Anat.* a cavity or depression, esp in bone." Wittig takes this standard dictionary definition and adapts it to describe an aspect of her writing project.[24] Lacunae are now recognized as gaps in the language, as the

[24] Besides Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's *Brouillon*, there have been various attempts by feminists both to compile dictionaries of terms interrogated by or newly minted by feminist semantics, and to question or challenge the theoretical principles and historical practice of dictionary making. Examples include: Suzette Haden Elgin's *A First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan* (the second edition came out in 1988, however, Elgin was working on this project from mid-1982); Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler's *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985); Mary Daly and Jane Caputi's *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (1987); and Jane Mills's *Womanwords: A Dictionary of Words About Women* (1989). *Brouillon,* as a companion volume to *Les Guérillères*, presents many terms and names in a legendary vein, and is in this way unlike the later Anglo-American lexicographical projects which situate their work in contemporary culture; however it can be read as a blueprint for future attempts. Elgin, a feminist linguist, also pursued an ambitious project, which was the construction of an entirely new language (Láadan) complete with rules for grammar, syntax, and a lexicon of over 1000 words; she then explored the implications of creating such a language in her *Native Tongue* trilogy. These various forays into lexicography are intimately connected to a questioning of the way in which semantics encode our reality (Sapir-Whorf, again).

Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, writes:

> 'The way back to reality is to destroy our perceptions of it,' said Bergson. Yes, but these deceptive perceptions were/are implanted through language—the all-pervasive language of myth, conveyed overtly and subliminally through religion, 'great art' literature, the dogmas of professionalism, the media, grammar. Indeed, deception is embedded in the very texture of the words we use, and here is where our exorcism can begin. (3)

The methods employed by these feminist lexicographers to seek out the radical potential of words, radical in the Brossardian sense, include the coining of neologisms, an appropriation of words through punning (gyn/ecology), and research into the etymological "origins" of words. The recognition that dictionaries may standardize and regulate "the very texture of the words we use"

absent lesbian subject, as missing or blank pages which fail to describe women's history, as distorted representations of women in history, legend, myth, and fiction, and, to make use of the anatomical definition, those cavities or depressions in the standard medical vision of the female body, lacunae which Wittig has now identified with such precision in *Le Corps lesbien.*

The dictionary is arranged in alphabetical order, and includes plants and animals (asp, snapdragon, and yam), famous lovers, places linked to lesbian mythology, verbs, processes, states of being, and the names of languages spoken by the companion lovers. Brief histories are given of companion lovers such as Eve and Lilith, Hippolyte and Antiope. Places significant to lesbian myth—Crete, Lesbos, and Gomorrha—are included. States of being such as torpor are defined. In addition, words which are familiar to readers such as *wife* and *woman* are described as "obsolete." *Woman*, for example, is "[c]onsidered by many companion lovers as the most infamous designation" and then is glossed as "'one who belongs to another'" (165). The definitions allow the reader to supplement her vision of the glorious age previously depicted in *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien* both through definitions of a fanciful material culture and glimpses of the history which led to the glorious age, a lesbian utopia.

It is in her definitions of *language*, *history*, and *words*, that Wittig presents more of her vision of lesbian writing, describing a linguistic and philosophical split which occurs within the originally nomadic lesbian amazons. Some of the amazons settle down in villages and become obsessed with childbearing, developing "a whole 'new' culture in which nothing could escape analogy to their own engenderment" (75). These amazons called themselves *mothers*. While the nomadic amazons continued to speak the "original language of 'letters and numbers'" (94), the mothers created "multiple languages" in which "the meanings were redoubled and multiplied, through redundancies which functioned like a gallery of mirrors" (94). Wittig in the *Dictionnaire* under the entry for "language" further defines the nomadic Amazon language as an

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also resulted in a questioning of the dictionary form (jam. ismail's "Diction Air," Daly's use of word webs in the *Wickedary*). There are significant connections here with what I am calling a feminist poetics. Brossard and Marlatt in particular are influenced by Daly's writing, especially her work on radicals and creative etymology, and cite her in their own texts.

> original language of 'letters and numbers' which the ancient amazons did not relinquish. It was, without doubt, a language at the same time much more simple and much more complicated than those which were known later. The legend says that the old language was capable of creating life or of 'striking' death. The legend says that the old language could displace mountains, or, in any case, enormous stones. The legend says that the old language could stir up storms from the sea or appease them. Nothing is known anymore of these 'letters' and of these 'numbers.' The significations and the phonemes had without doubt a different relation between them. One cannot imagine that this language was composed of 'sentences' with a construction and a syntax as rigid, rigorous, repressive as those we know. (*Lesbian Peoples* 94)

Here language is conceived as a physical power in the world, where there is a more direct relation between word and action, or word and thing, between theory and practice. This passage also resonates with Woolf's concept of a 'woman's sentence,' which seeks to undermine an inflexible patriarchal syntax. This Amazonian original language, which Wittig holds up as an ideal for lesbian writing, is described as having certain characteristics. Simpler than the language of the mothers, and yet more complex, it is said in legend to have had direct influence on the material world: it can strike death, move enormous stones, and stir up storms. The language of the mothers is criticized for being obfuscatory, reveling in multiple meanings or connotations. Wittig intends this Amazon language to have been more strictly denotative: "the significations and the phonemes had without doubt a different relation between them" (94). However, no more is speculated on what this relation might be. This depiction of a legendary language of letters and numbers, a mythic lesbian *langage,* suggests a yearning for a lost paradise, a utopian ur-tongue untainted by the rules and regulations of male-dominated language from which women are alienated.

By contrast, the languages of the mothers can be read as a reference to *écriture féminine*, to Cixous and perhaps to the collective *des femmes*. (*La Jeune Née* came out in 1975, *Brouillon* in 1979). In these mother languages, basic literal sense is confused (78), that is, denotation yields to connotation, and redundancies function "like a gallery of mirrors" (94), a reference to unlimited semiosis. The mothers who speak many languages, when reunited "did not understand one another and would undertake infinite exegesis and decoding of meanings because

even between them suspicion arose" (78). In the languages of the mothers, metaphor and its accompanying exegesis are embraced. While the mothers sit at home pregnant, undertaking this "infinite exegesis," the amazons continue to travel and to fight to defend their way of life. This language is connected with violence of some kind, violence which is thought to be necessary for Amazonian survival. In *Les Guérillères* it is suggested that the creation of a lesbian language must be accompanied by a destruction of older patriarchal forms: "Elles disent qu'il faut brûler tous les livres et ne garder de chacun d'eux que ce qui peut les présenter à leur avantage dans un âge futur" (192).[25]

Wittig's austere vision of an Amazonian language as concrete, without metaphor, strictly denotative and bearing a direct relation to the world, is coupled with the advocation of violence, a censoring of statements which do not reflect the new order, and a burning of unflattering books. The above quotation goes on to argue that all principles must be reexamined, and "the vocabulary of every language is to be examined, modified, turned upside down, that words must be screened" (134). Here lesbian writing strikes a militant tone in its patrolling of language, with its vocabulary of correction, screening, and destruction. In *Le Corps lesbien*, the dissection and reconstitution of the beloved is depicted as violent, as is the imagery throughout *Le Corps lesbien* of disintegrating, dissected, decomposing, and mutilated female bodies. Cixous uses the resurrection of a dead woman, *la morte*, to describe the coming to the light of day of an *écriture féminine*. Brossard abruptly and shockingly declares, j'ai tué le ventre.[26]

Wittig in her introduction to this text aligns violence with the necessarily violent insertion of the female subject into a male-created language coextensive with patriarchal, hence heterosexual, ideology. She declares that she will bring the body "violently to life," and that "a generic feminine subject can *only* enter by force into a language which is foreign to it" (10). This call for linguistic violence

[25] "They say that all the books must be burned and only those preserved that can present them to advantage in a future age" (134).

[26] It is also reminiscent of Trinh's use of the rotting corpse of Dyongou Serou as a metaphor for the introduction of the female body into writing, where the female body acts as a contaminant or generator of cyclical impurity. I discuss this in the following chapter.

is accompanied by a call for violent action as depicted in *Les Guérillères:* "They say, let those who call for a new language first learn violence. They say, let those who want to change the world first seize all the rifles. They say that they are starting from zero. They say that a new world is beginning" (85).

Wittig explicitly rejects any form of writing which embraces difference; the ultimate aim of a lesbian writing is to eliminate the mark of gender from language. She attempts this through a variety of techniques designed to claim a universal position for the lesbian subject which has formerly been marked, and therefore subjugated: neologisms, habituation through repetition, feminizing or lesbianizing of myths and male gods, excision of the neutral masculine pronoun and its allegedly universal subject position. Yet many of these are the same techniques employed by Cixous who attempts a "marked" writing, one which seeks to inscribe difference. Both strike neologisms (Cixous's *sextes* or Wittig's *féminaires*), feminize myths (Cixous's Promethea, Wittig's Archimedea), and first shock, then habituate their readers in incantations of the parts and processes of the female body. In Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* (1973) and Cixous's *LA* (1976) significant use is made of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and its ritual invocation and resurrection of the body. The underworld—Gehenna in *Le Corps lesbien*, the tomb in which the woman awakens in *LA*—can be read as women's symbolic incarceration that each writer attempts to dismantle through language. Both employ the book as utopian textual space for exploration of a new female body, and share a fascination with a textualizing of this body, conceiving of the body as a text which can be rewritten, just as the text, words, language, are recognized as material, sensual bodies.

However it is in the conception of language where the two approaches—*écriture féminine*, lesbian writing—diverge. In its theoretical influences, *écriture féminine* as outlined by Cixous assumes *différance.* Meaning is the result of difference and is always deferred. Writing is evasive; words always slip out of one's grasp. This is what she finds liberating in her aligning of *différance* with

difference. One of Cixous's favoured techniques then is the pun, playing on words in order to tease out new potential definitions or to undermine conventional meanings. Wittig, by contrast, seems to favour a more static conception of language, where words are like bricks laid down and fixed in place with mortar. Cixous writes lyrical passages on the body, spinning out word play, teasing out the possibilities of words while Wittig presents a precise anatomy of the female body in capital letters. Her idealized Amazonian language of "letters and numbers" which can strike death, stir up stones, is contrasted with the textual proliferation of the mothers and their unlimited semiosis and incomprehensible textual exegesis which limits communication and renders them inactive.

Wittig has presented a theory of writing using the language of warfare. New literary forms, neologisms, the strategic use of the personal pronoun, all are conceived as war machines. In *Les Guérillères* the women, *elles*, employ guerrilla tactics to overthrow the men. A clean sweep is envisioned, but will only be achieved through violent action: "They say, let those who call for a new language first learn violence. They say, let those who want to change the world first seize all the rifles" (85). Language can have force and effect in the world, but must be accompanied by other forms of action. Cixous, in "Sorties," uses the metaphor of women writers as moles: "Or nous vivons justement cette époque où l'assise conceptuelle d'une culture millénaire est en train d'être sapée par des millions d'une espèce de taupe encore jamais reconnue" (119).[27] A *taupe* is a mole, an animal which burrows holes in the earth, a rather benign image; yet the word is also used to refer to a spy (a mole), and a machine that digs tunnels. A *taupin* is a "soldat qui pose des mines sous terre." The English translation alerts us to these multiple meanings. Although they have divergent goals (to eliminate the mark of gender, to inscribe difference), in this image Cixous comes closest to Wittig's conception of writing as a military machine or device used to undermine foundations from within.[28]

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[27] "We are living in an age where the conceptual foundation of an ancient culture is in the process of being undermined by millions of a species of mole (Topoi, ground mines) never known before" (65).

[28] The use of metaphors such as moles, ground mines, and Trojan horses recalls the virus, especially as these writing practices are all interested in reconstructions of a conceptual body.

Words then could be said to have a viral function, infiltrating and recoding a text (corpus, body). Donna Haraway's work on the cyborg is significant. In her "Cyborg Manifesto" of 1985, she expands the concept of writing to include technology itself as a writing practice, whether it is the writing of the human genome or of memory in binary code on a silicon chip:

> Contests for the meanings of writing are a major form of contemporary political struggle. Releasing the play of writing is deadly serious. The poetry and stories of US women of colour are repeatedly about writing, about access to the power to signify; but this time that power must be neither phallic nor innocent. Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. (175)

She advocates a widespread analysis of various kinds of such writing: the writing of the human body by new bioscientific technologies; feminist science fiction stories that interrogate the current military-industrial complex and the related, burgeoning field of information technology; and alternative political networking on the Internet, a technology that was originally a U.S. military system designed to facilitate communication in the event of nuclear war. Writing becomes for Haraway a metaphorical and literal recoding of phallogocentric technologies—"biotechnology and microelectronics—that have recently textualized our bodies as code problems on the grid of C^3I" (175).

I initially hoped to offer a more extended discussion of Haraway's cyborg writing, but decided that while she shares affinities with the writers discussed her, she doesn't fit into my definition of a feminist poetics (she is abjected from the body of this text?). But her reconfiguring of technological metaphors (the World Wide Web, OncoMouse™, and so on) is echoed in Marlatt's "narrative in language circuits" (*Readings*) in which she describes language functioning as a web, "intersecting lines of communication. touch-points that fire multi-byways of meaning" (54), and in Brossard's interest in the hologram. In "Synchronie" (*La Lettre aérienne*) Brossard notes that the metaphors used to describe the body are constantly changing. The brain is now described in terms of the hologram and the computer. Haraway's interest in a cyborg writing is reflective of this.

4 Interval[1]: Innécriture

[. . .] between rational and irrational enslavement there is the interval and there is the possibility for a third term in the struggle.
—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (8)

Clarity

Ecriture féminine, writing in the feminine, lesbian writing: each was offered in the 1970s and 1980s to describe an alternative writing practice that interrogated the relationship between women and language. Each was placed in opposition to what the dominant culture claimed was a neutral and universal language, what Trinh T. Minh-ha has called the language of "clarity." Her own style, seeking to subvert clarity, is not quick to offer definitions or to present a writing manifesto in the style of Cixous's "Sorties", although she is influenced by Cixous and adapts Cixous's theory of an *écriture féminine* when she speculates about the possibility of an *innécriture*. Rather, Trinh incorporates substantial selections from other texts within her own, either through direct quotation or paraphrase, to the point where it is often difficult to tell whether the words on the page represent her own

[1] **interval** *n.* [ME *intervalle,* fr. MF, fr. L *intervallum* space between ramparts, interval, fr. *inter-* + *vallum* rampart (14c)] [rampart: fr. MF *ramparer* to fortify, fr. *re* + *emparer* to defend...1. a protective barrier, bulwark 2. a broad embankment raised as a fortification and usu. surmounted by a parapet 3. a wall-like ridge (as of rock fragments, earth, or debris)] 1a. a space of time between events or states 1b. *Brit* : intermission 2a. a space between objects, units, points, or states 2b. difference in pitch between tones 3. a set of real numbers between two numbers either including or excluding one or both of them (*Merriam-Webster*).

interval: "to come back fearlessly to the 'old' in order to bring out the 'new'" (*Cinema Interval* 43). This is Trinh's response to the question of whether certain concepts she invokes (the interval, hybridity, the interstice, the marginal) become overworked theoretical commodities. As she writes she listens for the resonance of a term, to gauge its effect within a particular context (37). Echoes of Marlatt: to seek new life in old roots, to tease out the resonance that reflects off the denotative surface of a word. This is sympathy as I define it, textual bodies communicating vibrational energy.

view or that of the writer whose ideas she is exploring. As she notes, writing is "listening to the others' language and reading with the others' eyes. The more ears I am able to hear with, the farther I see the plurality of meaning and the less I lend myself to the illusion of a single message" (*Woman* 35). She proceeds in incremental stages, slipping into a thought and considering its potential before moving on to the next.[2]

Clarity, by contrast, is closed off to other perspectives; it is a "hermetic and incomprehensible language" (*Moon* 124), a language which, according to Marie Cardinal (and transmitted through Trinh), "not only has no sex, but *allows nothing of the body of those who are using it to pass through.* The serviceable words are without scars" (124). Clarity serves instrumentality; an insistence upon clarity in writing is often the result of intolerance "for any language other than the one approved by the dominant ideology" (*Moon* 84). The woman writer is asked to "show her identity papers" (Cixous), to provide a Master's name, without which her product will be deemed valueless (*Moon* 86). Treatises of rhetoric call for clarity as the correct form in which to persuade—Trinh asks, what about paradox? the vernacular?—to send "an unambiguous message" (*Woman* 16) which serves the powerful: "To write 'clearly,' one must incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge, purify; in other words, practice what may be called an 'ablution of language' (Roland Barthes)" (17). Language is not glass, a medium of transparency. Rather it is the product of a social nexus, and a material thing in itself, an integral part of "the suchness of things." Clarity or transparency in form (linear, logical, literal) that allows content to "travel unhindered" is linked by Trinh to a complicity with patriarchal ideology, where words "thoroughly

[2] **interval**: "Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same *and of* other without which nothing lives; un-doing death's work by willing the togetherness of one-another, infinitely charged with a ceaseless exchange of one with another [. . .]" (Cixous, *Newly Born* 86). Within this context, Cixous suggests women carry the other in writing, that women may be more receptive to this interval opened up by writing as a result of cultural positioning, as well as the experience of pregnancy and childbirth (90). Pregnancy is described as the interval in which self and other share the same space-time, communicating through touch (flutters, kicks), sound (heartbeat, voice), the constant circulation of fluids across the permeable placental barrier; there is also the interval between contractions which leads to separation, a letting go. Trinh has defined interval as being about the relationship between things, between musical note and pause, silence and word, between words, sentences, ideas, between "one's voice and other women's voices; in short, between oneself and the other" (*Cinema Interval* 38).

invested with realities that turn out to be not-quite-not-yet mines are radically deceptive" (*Woman* 20). Innovative rule-breaking approaches to writing are called for to mirror revolutionary content: "Shake syntax, smash the myths, and if you lose, slide on, *unearth* some new linguistic paths" (20). DuPlessis will make a similar argument in her introduction to *The Pink Guitar,* pointing out that it is perhaps not enough to say something radical in the old complacent form.

The body, writing the body, writing what has formerly been washed out of language, namely gender, colour, is presented as one way out of this impasse of a vertically imposed language: "'Writing the body' is that abstract-concrete, personal-political realm of excess not fully contained by writing's unifying, structural forces. Its physicality (vocality, tactility, touch, resonance), or edging and margin, exceeds the rationalized 'clarity' of communicative structures and cannot be fully explained by any analysis" (*Woman* 44). In Trinh's definition of "writing the body" are echoes of Cixous, of Brossard, of Marlatt, and of DuPlessis: a blurring or merging of traditional binaries such as the personal-political, an emphasis on excess and a privileging of the marginal. Cixous's fictional texts embody excess, seeking to outrun the structure of the patriarchal symbolic. Similarly Brossard values the polyvalent nature of words which might allow women's texts to mean differently. Emphasis is placed on the corporeal roots of language, as in Marlatt's work on *sense, to sense, tongue, to mouth, to intimate*. DuPlessis frequently returns to the potential of the marginal—she writes of a sustained critique of the centre so that a text bleeds out to the margins (*Pink Guitar* 112). In this way, an *innécriture* would seek always to deny closure as a strategy of resistance to the vertically-imposed language of clarity.

Red

> A, black; E, white; I, red
> —"Voyelles," Rimbaud (qtd. in Trinh, *Moon* 83)

Wide and often contradictory meanings are attributed by various cultures to the colour red: life, vitality, happiness, the sun, fire, revolution, war, blood, impurity,

contamination, death.[3] In Dogon mythology, red sorghum grows in a pond contaminated by the rotting corpse of the first human dead, the ancestor Dyongou Serou. Death has made the water, and therefore the grain, impure. Red is further associated with the sun (feminine in Dogon culture) which helps to rot the corpse of Dyongou Serou. Therefore, red is aligned with contamination and death (90). Yet as the sun is also essential to grow plants, red is also aligned with life. Women, however, who also give life, are perceived as the "cyclical producers of 'impurity.' Dogon societies abound with rituals in which the "bad blood"—menstruation, the blood shed at childbirth, the dark blood that clots—is distinguished from the bright healthy blood that flows in the body" (*Moon* 90). Yet Trinh points out some interesting gender crossovers in this symbolics: the bright red flowers of the Kapok tree are associated with menstruation and death (and yet, they are bright red, not dark). It is the Dogon men who carve the wood of the Kapok tree into masks, and when they do so, or when they tint fibres red, they are said to be impure and are avoided by the women, just as the women separate from the community while menstruating so as not to be a source of contamination. When the men spill blood at circumcision they are said to be menstruating, and at this time they are also impure.

This recounting of the complex symbolics of the colour red in Dogon mythology is then glossed with a Chinese story in which a family is chastised by a "local pedant" for eating red sorghum while in mourning, for red is the colour of

[3] Trinh notes that red is worn in many Asian and African cultures as a bridal colour, while red scrolls, firecrackers, and red envelopes filled with money are used to celebrate Chinese New Year. White, by contrast, is a colour of mourning. Western cultures symbolize romance and passion with red and pink flowers. Red is also the colour of war and as such "the badge of revolution" (*Moon* 82). In Vietnamese opera, red is the colour of anger (89). Chevalier's *Dictionary of Symbols* provides a further discussion of the significance and ambivalence of the colour red which accords with the Dogon mythology described by Trinh. Bright red is generally perceived as male (stimulating, dazzling, outwards, strong, like the sun, the red of "flags, ensigns, posters") while dark red is female (nocturnal, mysterious, inwards, a colour which "warns, holds back and awakens vigilance and ultimately anxiety") (792). Dark red is identified with the mysterious center of the earth, and therefore with the womb but also the heart. "Menstrual blood is impure because it inverts its polarity when it passes from the darkness of the womb to the light of day [. . .] Such women are untouchable and, in many societies, they have to go into retreat to be cleansed before they can be restored to their place in the society from which they have been temporarily excluded" (793). Men who had shed another's blood were also taboo. Red is associated with warfare and the spoils of war. It is also aligned with heat, fire, blood, and life. In Japan red-coloured rice is sent as a token of good wishes. Every culture, according to Chevalier, recognizes the ambivalence of this colour.

happiness and life. The pedant's attempt to fix the meaning of the colour red points to its inherent instability or ambivalence, what Brossard means when she speaks of polyvalence and the radical potential of words, or Marlatt when she speaks of "chaotic language leafings" (*Readings* 13). Red "exceeds all linear interpretations and remains inexhaustible. A sign opening constantly onto other signs, it is read in practice with all its signifying subtlety and density" (*Moon* 89). As Trinh has just demonstrated, the meaning of the colour red is dependent on context and cannot be stabilized or exhausted; it is "a sign opening constantly onto other signs" (89). She refers to the plurality and multivocality of language which exceeds all attempts to fix meaning—reference is also made here to Derrida's critique of the structuralist centre, the transcendental signified, and to Cixous's insistence on the ability of writing to outrun patriarchal law—and defies all expectations. This excess can be read as a key characteristic of a new writing practice which Trinh explores elsewhere: a writing which is porous, exceeding the linear and the literal and outrunning conventional interpretation, a variation on Cixous's *écriture féminine*. Such a writing, she suggests, referring to Rimbaud, necessarily borders on sense and non-sense, on the profound and the absurd; it is a practice which seems "provocatively fragile" (*Moon* 84).

Within the dominant culture, women are perceived as the cyclical producers of "impurity," (the quotation marks indicate for Trinh that this impurity is a culturally, socially constructed concept), an impurity symbolized by the colour red, which can be read as colour, ethnicity, race, as well as plurality of meaning, an excess often indicative of such impurity. She suggests that impurity can be thought of as an *interval*, a space in which a woman—although, as she points out, sometimes it is a man in specialized circumstances, for example when he is participating in ritualistic practices such as circumcision or mask carving—bears the potential to pollute or contaminate the community, those other "clean(sed) and clear(ed) subjects" (*Moon* 91). While this interval is the moment when gender divisions are powerfully expressed, it can also be profitably conceived as a time in which such categories are broken down; in the interval when the impure subject is feared and alienated exists the potential for a

challenging of hegemonic boundaries: "Bound to other, marginalized groups, women are often 'impure' because their red necessarily exceeds totalized discourses" (*Moon* 104). Women, situated by the dominant culture in the interstices of this culture, necessarily participate in a constant movement across boundaries (*Moon* 104-5).[4] This deployment of the interval of impurity, of the interstice, of a subject in process, are characteristics of an *innécriture*, a writing which seeks to taint the language of clarity described above. If this neutral language is the pond of water in the Dogon mythology, an *innécriture* would seek to introduce the contaminant, the rotting corpse. This may be the introduction of the female body into writing, writing the body as a scriptive act. Wittig also makes use of the forensic detail in *Le Corps lesbien.* The elaborate rituals of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* are echoed in Cixous, where the female body is first introduced as a dead or dying subject, an inhabitant of the underworld. In both Wittig and Cixous, the female body is written as a sign of excess: as corpse or as contaminant, a stage deemed necessary in order to challenge traditional categorizations of women and allow *la morte* or *le corps lesbien* to be reborn.

Innécriture

Trinh's speculations on an alternative writing practice are presented in two essays, "L'innécriture: Un-writing/Inmost Writing" and "Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box."[5] In both essays she explores what it might mean to "write the body," while the second essay explicitly considers the nature of commitment in writing, and the writer's often torn or ambiguous allegiances to various ethnic,

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[4] **interval**: spiral = circle + linear progression. In this a rhythm is established, a return that is deferred through time. There is movement into and out of the wild zone, the realm of (non) sense, the footnote. Trinh, trained in musical composition, teases apart the standard western scale: "[. . .] between a Do and a Re, exist not only a half, a quarter, an eighth of a tone, but a whole variety of shifts and fluctuations of sound" (*Moon* 120). These are tones we have to learn to hear, the serendipitous mishearings that arise when speaking with an accent. *On est comme un homme, On est comme on nomme.*

[5] "L'innécriture: Un-writing/Inmost Writing" first appeared in French in *French Forum* 8.1 (1983), and was later collected in *When the Moon Waxes Red.* "Commitment from the Mirror Writing Box" appears in *Woman Native Other* (1989). Further discussion of her ideas about writing can be found in the interviews collected in *Cinema Interval.*

racial, class, and gender formations. Because the language of clarity, this "vertically imposed language" which presents the illusion of neutrality yet is in fact heavily inflected in favour of the patriarchal, is the language with which we must work, many women, Trinh argues, "see writing as *the* place of change, where the possibility of transforming social and cultural structures is offered" (*Moon* 135-6). The old rules which suggest the writer must be objective, impersonal, and distant, are alienating for women who first must steal this "neutral" male language and then internalize the masculine pronouns and nouns which are said to be generic and neutral (*Woman* 27). Women "dye this voice universal, a tint that can only be obtained through words like *man, mankind, he-him*" (27), again, an ablution of language.

Historically, as Trinh observes, education being thought to "unfeminize," women often resorted to stealing language.[6] Lady Murasaki learned Chinese by eavesdropping on her brother's lessons. Women in Heian Japan[7] were forbidden

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[6] In chapter 3 I outlined Wittig's work on the masculine pronoun as universal subject. To use *ils* when referring to a group of six women and one man, as French grammar would require, is to wash women out of the language. Wittig also attempts a kind of theft through her strategic use of pronouns. The word *elles* functions as a Trojan Horse, seeking to claim the universal subject position for lesbians.

[7] I noted in my Introduction that women modernists such as H.D. and Gertrude Stein could be described as forming a sympathetic community, as I have defined the term. Another group which bears interesting parallels is the women writers of Heian Japan. Trinh touches upon this historical period when she describes Lady Murasaki Shikibu's early education. What these women were attempting in their experimentation with a new vernacular script and the diary form is similar to that of the twentieth-century women writers I study here. Sei Shōnagon records the following in her *Pillow Book:*

> One day Lord Korechika, the Minister of the Centre, brought the Empress a bundle of notebooks. "What shall we do with them?" Her Majesty asked me. "The Emperor has already made arrangements for copying the 'Records of the historian.'"
>
> "Let me make them into a pillow," I said.
>
> "Very well," said Her Majesty. "You may have them."
>
> I now had a vast quantity of paper at my disposal, and I set about filling the notebooks with odd facts, stories from the past, and all sorts of other things, often including the most trivial material [. . .] it is written entirely for my own amusement and I put things down exactly as they came to me. How could my casual jottings possibly bear comparison with the many impressive books that exist in our time? (Shōnagon 263-4)

In this way she describes the genesis of her *Makura no Sōshi* 'Notes of the Pillow.' The only extant example of this genre from the Heian Period, it consisted of a collection of informal notes, poems, lists, and personal observations composed in the evening and possibly kept in a drawer of the writer's wooden pillow (Morris "Introduction" 11). Shōnagon documents the ten years she spent at the Imperial Court of Fujiwara no Sadako, one thousand years ago. Her *Makura no Sōshi* is seen by Japanese readers as a "model of linguistic purity" (Morris "Introduction" 13), her language

to use written Chinese, the language of bureaucracy, scholarship, and literature; it was considered "unbecoming for a woman to know Chinese, a useful fiction if the intention was to keep the language of bureaucracy in male hands" (Bowring xvii). In seventeenth-century France, Madame Lafayette had to study Latin in secret and was associated, via her maiden name, *de La Vergne*, with Lavernia, the Roman goddess of theft (*Woman* 19). Women writers are characterized by the dominant culture as "language stealers." Yet this stealing of language is accompanied for the woman writer by a growing consciousness of the emptiness of this neutral, hermetic language, of what it cannot express, for as it has been stolen, it is always the true property of the one from whom it was stolen: "Words thoroughly invested with realities that turn out to be not-quite-not-yet mines are radically deceptive. Whenever I *try my best* to say, I never fail to utter the wrong words; I weasel, telling you 'hen' when I mean something close to 'duck'" (*Woman* 20).[8]

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being of "extraordinary beauty and evocative power" (13). Yet at the time, Shōnagon wrote in the vernacular by default: pure Chinese was forbidden to her. This is why Murasaki Shikibu must learn Chinese by eavesdropping on her brother's lessons. A Japanese syllabic script—*kanabun*—had been developed by the mid-ninth century from Chinese characters. While men continued to use the more prestigious Chinese writing, women began to develop *kanabun* "which allowed them to record the native Japanese language, the language that was actually spoken, in a direct, simple fashion that was impossible either in pure Chinese or in the hybrid form of Sino-Japanese known as *kambun.*" (Analogous to Latin in the West, Chinese was used by scholars, priests and the bureaucracy; "the exclusive medium for any serious form of writing" [Morris *World* 212]). While *kanabun* was better able to record the Japanese spoken language and the private, emotional life, *kambun* or Sino-Japanese was "artificial and inflexible" (Bowring xix). This distinction is mirrored in the subject matter of Shōnagon's *Makura no Sōshi.* While the bundle of notebooks she used to write this work were originally intended for "Records of the Historian," the official history found in "impressive books," Shōnagon commandeered them for her "casual jottings." So it was that the women of the Heian period developed the earliest vernacular literature of Japan.

Richard Bowring observes that the writings of Heian Japanese women provide us with "some of the earliest examples of an attempt by women to define the self in textual terms" (xvii). Writers in the feminine continue this experiment, seeking to express a feminist and lesbian consciousness, to inscribe female experience and the female body, all in textual terms, and using the forms first developed by Heian women—the diary, the notebook, the annotation, the note.

[8] **interval**: "1. a hiatus, blank, or gap 2. a missing portion of an empty page, esp in an ancient MS, book, etc 3. *Anat.* a cavity or depression, esp in bone." The spaces between the incantatory lists of body parts in *Le Corps lesbien.* The blanks between the words themselves as they are irregularly spaced on the page and bleed into the margins. The interstices between these fragmented lists and the short lyrical prose sections, whereby the lists are stitched together, as is the anatomized beloved, the lesbian body, the body of Sappho's work. These lacunae are interstitial (a word often used to describe fibrous tissue), and could be alternately glossed as a regularly repeating interval, a rhythm that permeates *Le Corps lesbien,* a rhythm opening up spaces for new conceptions of the lesbian subject. Trinh: "Here also, in this part of the world where intervals are classified as consonant and dissonant and made to hate each other, the beats and the howls they release when combined together are called 'wolves'" (*Cinema Interval* xiii). The wolf dressed in grandma's

Trinh warns against *féminitude* and false valorization of the female in writing as an antidote to the alienation a woman might feel as a result of this stolen language, worrying that such valorization might disintegrate into a kind of unproductive egotism or navel-gazing. "Writing about the body" versus "writing the body" is her notation. Yet she argues there is a strategic need for a qualified exploration of *féminitude* or femininity in writing. Henri Peyre is quoted for his observation that a man never feels the need to express literary virility (and so why should a woman feel the need to express femininity); yet men have always assumed the right to speak for the other and "isn't it redundant to try to prove literary virility in an already virile language?" (*Moon* 123). Such virility inherent in the apparently neutral language will remain invisible to one who is master of his world. As such, his "vision is a one-way street" (123), that is, he lacks the "double-vision" of the non-hegemonic subject. Brossard similarly describes the woman writer's battle against a *sens unique* or one-way meaning, just as the Ardeners observe the ability of the Bakweri women to speak the language of both the male-based compound and of the wild-zone. And as will be seen in chapter 5, DuPlessis argues for "both/and vision" in a female aesthetic.

The writer is described as a historical subject and the product of a particular social nexus; she is both writing and being written by the complex intersection of race, gender, class (*Woman* 6). Yet this raises the question of commitment. Trinh asks, "Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first? Where does she place her loyalties?" (6). The apparently neutral, generic language is not only virile but saturated by a "white-male-is-norm ideology" used to perpetuate entrenched hierarchies of power (6). She develops a typographic notation to express this positioning of the woman writer of colour: 'I/i' for the "plural, non-unitary subject" and 'i' for the "personal race-and-gender-specific subject" (9). In addition, she resorts to "she," perhaps a way of indicating her sense of alienation from a language of clarity which claims a neutrality she does not personally experience.

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clothes, the Trojan Horse: disguises traditionally coded as masculine that seek to gain entrance, to enter the gates (Interval: the space between ramparts).

What then, tentatively, might be the characteristics of an *innécriture* that would seek to challenge this neutrality? A variety of concerns and techniques are suggested, although always in a provisional and self-questioning manner. And a primary concern for an *innécriture* is a constant self-referential questioning of *how to write* and *what writing is or can be.* Writing, as noted above, is not a transparent means for expressing reality or transmitting political messages, rather is constitutive of the social fabric and therefore a significant site for social change. Drawing on Shklovsky, Trinh makes a distinction here between language as a window on the world and language as a "sketched window" (21). Because it is a sketched window, writing can sketch out new realities. Writing is always referring to itself, and is never free of other texts; it is "meshing one's writing with the machinery of endless reflexivity" (23). A radical questioning of the world can be carried out through this endless meshing and questioning of what it means to write (17).

The concept of the interval is invoked, the space of impurity of which women are the cyclic producers. Here then, as with Cixous, an *innécriture* seems to be a writing practice carried out primarily by women as a result of cultural and social positioning. Crucial to this introduction of a contaminant or impurity is the body, which I discuss in more detail below. Connected to the interval is the interstice, the "in-between-the-naming-space" (*Moon* 112): "And as there is no need to rush, just leave it open, so that it may later on find, or not find, its closure. Words, fragments, and lines that I love for no sound reason; blanks, lapses, and silences that settle in like gaps of fresh air as soon as the inked space smells stuffy" (*Woman* 19). This interval or interstice is, conceptually, the space of questioning of the impure subject who can challenge hegemonic divisions, the space of a ceaseless work upon language itself, the "space where the question of saying, of being able to say, and of wanting to say/to mean is asked" (*Moon* 136).[9]

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[9] **interval**:
pregnant
pause
as
conceptual
space

Again, this returns to the self-referential nature of an *innécriture.* Typographically, this is only hinted at in her two collections of essays. In "Mechanical Eye, Electronic Eye" she writes in double columns in the manner of Kristeva's "Stabat Mater." The left-hand column is in standard print while the right-hand column, printed in italics, is an annotation of the left. Blank spaces appear between comments, producing the effect of a dialogue. The interstice is present in the inclusion of stills from Trinh's films at intervals throughout both *Woman Native Other* and *When the Moon Waxes Red*, the stills married to quotations from the text which don't appear to make a direct comment on the images.[10] It is also present in her generous and flowing inclusion of other writer's texts within her own. She uses italics, parentheses, and paraphrase to such an extent it is difficult to disentangle other voices from her own. With this approach she presents a porous, polyvocal text: "Excluded from the named, she must also and ceaselessly work on language in order to make it permeable to feminine concepts" (*Moon* 136).

Connected to this use of the interstice and the constant on-going work upon and questioning of language, is Trinh's emphasis on process. Feminist consciousness is described as a process (13), which can be in turn linked to writing, an on-going exploration and expression of this consciousness. As such, there is no static vision of a feminine writing, an *innécriture*—rather it is meant to be always in process, in an experimental state without closure. There is no aim

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interval
between
inner
outer
folds (Tostevin)

interval: The blank space opened up at the foot of the page. Tostevin returns us to womb as conceptual space, pregnancy as an interval in which the ramparts between self and other are breached. Tostevin notes at the end of *Gyno-Text:* "Writing which differs in space and defers time." Trinh describes the character for the word *Jian* in an ancient Chinese writing known as the Small Seal Script: "*Jian*, which means *interval, space, partition*, shows a doorway with a picture of the moon in the middle. No matter where one is in life, one still has an interval of time to use wisely, advises Deng Ming-Dao for whom, 'the time when the moon shines through a doorway indicates both space and interval'" (*Cinema Interval* xiii). And so she returns again to the moon, the moon waxing red, the interval of cyclical impurity. This is an interval in which you can be "both:" self and other (the moon in the door, the fetus in the womb), here and there, hovering between birth and death.

[10] Annamaria Morelli in *Cinema Interval* reads these film stills as the creation of silences within the text, which break up its linearity and give the reader pause for thought (38).

towards some perfected vision or version of an *innécriture*. To write should be thought of as an intransitive verb: "To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet), but to become, intransitively" (*Woman* 18-19).

To describe the permeability and plurivocality of this writing, a passage from "Sorties" is quoted in which Cixous writes, "'Writing is in me the passing through, entering, going out, staying, of the other who is me and not me, who I cannot be [. . .]'" (*Moon* 127). The writer constantly travels to and fro, between writing and being written, receptive to others. This is the concept of sympathy I defined in my Introduction, the capacity to enter into the interests or the emotions of another, to slip into another's skin. Trinh herself describes writing as "listening to the others' language and reading with the others' eyes" (*Woman* 35). There is also a reference here to the writer letting go of authorial control and letting herself slip into the currents of a language which bears her. The writer acts as a temporary marker within a fluid context. Writing is only ever process that is concerned "not with inserting a 'me' into language, but with creating an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires. To confer an Author on a text is to close the writing" (35). Barthes's distinction between Author and writer, work and text is invoked. The writer is the nexus where various social and cultural codes are enacted; she becomes a passageway or a receptive container where "'I' endlessly comes and goes." Her distinction between 'me' and 'I' may also refer to Benveniste's description of the 'I' as that subject called into being by language, or to Althusser's conception of the individual as interpellated by cultural and social institutions such as language.

This emphasis upon the individual as passive nexus or container raises the question of agency in relation to a feminist agenda for social change, a crucial concern expressed by DuPlessis: how to use language to challenge the hegemony when language is part of the very fabric of that hegemony. This depends on how much space or leeway (an interval, an interstice?) is believed to exist which will allow for movement, for new thought and new paradigms, and for a shifting of

language by the individual subject.[11] All of the writers studied here argue a weak or moderate version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity:

> The categorial system of every language, including lower level grammatical and all lexical categories, points its speakers toward somewhat different evaluations of externally similar observations. Hence speakers of different languages have somewhat different views of the world, somewhat different habitual thought, and consequently their language and cultural knowledge are in a somewhat different relationship to each other. They don't live in the same world with different labels attached but in somewhat different worlds. The more dissimilar two languages are, in their lexicon—that is, in conceptual and grammatical categories—the greater their tendency to embody different world views. (Werner 3658)

These writers would apply this hypothesis to the differences between language used by men and by women. Yet, while our choice of symbol system may influence our ability to solve a given problem, it appears that choice is possible. If it weren't, then the feminist project regarding language would be in vain. Werner observes that language is flexible, allowing us to create "alternative categorizations," and that the possibilities contained in human language are great. The result can be "conceptual revolutions and conversions," although such revolutions, which necessitate a movement outside of the habitual use of language, will not be easy (3661). While entangled within the patriarchal matrix of language which embodies its ideology and (meta)narratives, and perpetuates its philosophical categories of hierarchized binaries, still there is the possibility for thinking and speaking one's way out of this matrix and for alternative categorizations to spark conceptual revolutions. Trinh suggests that *innécriture* works to identify and open up the interval or the interstice—what Wittig has called lacunae, what Brossard identifies as the zone of non-sense—in order to pursue just such conceptual revolutions.

A variety of writing tactics may be employed by an *innécriture*. As I mentioned earlier, the female body as contaminant or producer of cyclical

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[11] **interval**: the space opened up by the footnote, the endnote, the annotation, the gloss, the margin, the spaces between letters and words, between lines. I am thinking forward to DuPlessis in chapter 5, every space meaningful. In the encore issue of *(f.)Lip*, contributor Catherine McNeil says of her poem "fugue," "i am working with scoring the line like sound on a page and the spaces between."

impurity is key. Cardinal suggests that women must "'place ourselves on the border of our bodies, express the unexpressed [. . .]'" (*Moon* 129) and Trinh notes the often negative reaction evoked by the suggestion that women should "write the body:" impatience, disgust, distaste, irritation, indignation ("A woman's body? We don't want to hear any more about it! They talk about nothing but that!" 129). This disgust is analyzed within the context of the language of clarity described above, a language that has been "sanitized" so as not to disrupt. To refuse such internal censorship is to challenge this clarity. Trinh argues that "[b]ody-writing challenges the flaws in the Western metaphysics of Presence" (135). She focuses in particular on the womb, which I will consider as cyclic producer of impurity in the following section.

Formal characteristics of such a writing might include the use of Zen-like riddles and paradox, very much part of the texture of Trinh's writing: "Lose, freely. When you are silent, it speaks; when you speak, it is silent. Writing is born when the writer is no longer" (*Woman* 35). It may include multiple quotations embedded in the text from other sympathetic writers, neologisms (*innécriture*, *nourricriture*, unwriting), puns. Trinh: "Writing unravels (délie; dé-lit) and weaves (relie; relit); it repeats tirelessly the same gesture. 'Rain, Sowing, Dissemination. Web, Tissue, Text, Writing,' notes Barthes [. . .]" (*Moon* 214). The influence of Barthes and Derrida, and poststructural tropes used to describe writing and text as texture, as body, are significant. She notes approvingly of Barthes's writing as a Japanese package that defers closure, "what it encloses is 'postponed for a very long time'" (214). Words are thought of as chameleons that always bear a trace of colour, a trace of their previous definitions, always containing within them the possibility for metamorphosis. There is a refusal of closure or *telos*. As a result, Trinh's essays often feel incomplete; this is an effect of her not arguing a particular thesis so much as exploring multiple positions and possibilities surrounding an often amorphous subject. She hesitates to present exhortations or rules, yet writes:

> So where do you go from here? where do I go? and where does a committed woman writer go? Finding a voice, searching for words and

> sentences: say some thing, one thing, or no thing; tie/untie, read/unread, discard their forms; scrutinize the grammatical order(s). Shake syntax, smash the myths, and if you lose, slide on, *unearth* some new linguistic paths. Do you surprise? Do you shock? Do you have a choice? (*Woman* 20)

Here are instructions also found in the writings of Woolf (break the sentence and the sequence), Brossard (make incursions into the patriarchally defined world of non-sense), Wittig (use words as war machines, infiltrate patriarchal subject positions, rewrite the epic form), and DuPlessis (write not *belles lettres* but *lettres laides*, express radical feminist content in a radical form). While these sound like rules, the do's and don'ts which Trinh has earlier criticized in the language of clarity, she acknowledges that often attempts at cultural disruption will result in rules generated by fear of the new and the unknown.

Finally, she emphasizes that "writing the body" is a scriptive act, distinct from "writing about the body" which would be a narcissistic account of the individual (*Woman* 28) and suggests that the latter is prevalent and runs the risk of egotism. By calling "writing the body" a scriptive act she stresses that this is not an essentialist practice that perceives the female body as biological given that orients one's writing as a woman, rather, writing the body is a consciously employed cultural practice steeped in poststructural theory which takes the womb in particular as a theoretical site of cultural struggle, what I have in earlier chapters called a feminist matrix.

Kath

> Closure and openness, again, are one ongoing process: we do not *have* bodies, we *are* our bodies, and we are ourselves while being the world [. . .] We write—think and feel—(with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts. It is a perversion to consider thought the product of our specialized organ, the brain, and feeling, that of the heart. (*Woman* 26)

Trinh begins with the discursive status of the womb which has been systematically appropriated by cultural and legal patriarchal structures. Culturally, metaphors of gestation and birth are claimed by male writers. A legal claim is

also made on the womb: legislation is passed to determine the status of the fetus and the mother with regards to the question of abortion rights. The womb in many cases has been made property of the state; "[t]his is how the womb is fabricated" (37). A crucial distinction that she sees in male and female use of the womb in metaphors of the creative process is that women writers will sometimes claim to speak or to write from the womb, whereas men writers will situate this creative generation in the mind. For these women writers, the mind is seen to be "englobed" by the womb, not in opposition to it (37): "Women use 'womb' to re-appropriate it and re-write (or re-differ) themselves, their bodies, their places of production" (38).

The standard mind-body binary which has traditionally aligned women with the body must be interrogated, but Trinh's concern is not to merely reverse the terms, or to valorize woman-as-body, rather, she stresses the importance of going beyond the binary, to displace it or destabilize it by means of a third term. The first step, a reversal or revalorization, she claims is necessary, and explores women's writing as "'organic writing,' 'nurturing-writing' (*nourricriture*), resisting separation. It becomes a 'connoting material,' a 'kneading dough,' a 'linguistic flesh'" (38). The female body here is written as a *res cogitans*;[12] there is a reversal of the binary, and consciousness appears to be located in the thinking flesh. An emphasis is placed on the writer as embodied—writer's ink becomes analogous with mother's milk, menstrual blood and so on. Such metaphors are pushed to their extremes.

But then a second step is required, a further displacement in order to avoid the frozen dogma of a mere reversal. To this end, Trinh introduces a three-centre model of human consciousness based on the Asian conceptualization of the human as bearing three centres, an intellectual centre (the *path*), an emotional centre (the *oth*), and a vital centre (the *kath*). The *kath* or womb is proposed as a

[12] I take the phrase *res cogitans* from the philosophy of René Descartes who distinguished between the *res extensa* (the physical, material world, including biological processes and animal behaviours) and the *res cogitans* (a thinking substance—*res* 'thing, matter'—entirely independent of matter) (*Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*). I use the phrase in an oppositional manner to describe thought and writing processes as inextricably linked to the body, the material; in the phrase *res cogitans* is embedded the word 'thing, matter,' which suggests a crucial interdependence.

destabilizing "third term" in the mind-body. It is located below the navel and might be thought of as belly or womb, a radiant source of life:

> It directs vital movement and allows one to relate to the world with instinctual immediacy. But instinct(ual immediacy) here is not opposed to reason, for it lies outside the classical realm of duality assigned to the sensible and the intelligible. So does certain women's womb writing, which neither separates the body from the mind nor sets the latter against the heart (an attitude which would lead us back to the writing-as-birth-delivering-labor concept and to the biologico-metaphorization of women's bodies previously discussed) but allows each part of the body to become infused with consciousness. Again, bring a new awareness of life into previously forgotten, silenced, or deadened areas of the body. Consciousness here is not the result of an accumulation of knowledge and experience but the term of an ongoing unsettling process. (*Woman* 40)

This model proposes to bypass the mind-body binary—which would define body negatively as not-mind, female as not-male— by offering a tripartite relationship between intellect (reason), emotion, and instinct (body), where each term is assigned a positive value. It suggests that there are alternative ways of conceptualizing and mapping the human subject outside of the western philosophical tradition. Her suggestion of a third term that goes beyond the classic binary represents a refusal of the binary and an operation of displacement. Further diffusion and displacement is suggested when she writes that thought is "as much a product of the eye, the finger, or the foot as it is of the brain" (39). A person has and is a body; it is impossible to write purely from an objectivist or subjectivist stance (40).[13]

However, Trinh cautions that "writing the body" does not work on the premise that there is some unmediated direct access to the body, nor does it use the body as a biological foundation for its writing practice. She points out that

[13] In this she follows H.D.'s conception of the three manifestations of life: body, mind, and overmind, which I briefly outlined in chapter 2. Creative vision is visualized by H.D. as a diffuse, amorphous state that oscillates between the brain and the womb: "The brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important" (21). She describes visualizing the jelly-fish consciousness as located in her womb (it is described as both the womb and the fetus within the womb), its feelers floating up through her body towards the brain (20). Trinh similarly writes of the mind "englobed" by the womb (*Woman* 37). To enter a third term in the classic mind-body division (the *res cogitans/res extensa* of Descartes) is to destabilize this hierarchy and allow for a reconceptualization of textual production.

those who would accuse "writing the body" of being naive in this respect are in fact themselves assuming the body as "conveniently separate from the socio-historical." "Writing the body" in fact seeks to explore this continuum of the biological-social, recognizing there is no simple division between body and culture, sex and gender. She also notes that "writing the body" has been theorized by a number of male writers, Barthes in particular, and as such has been accepted for its theoretical "authority." She says it is in the materialization of this "concept-practice" that it is poorly understood and rarely accepted without a struggle (41). Theory is often seen as being profound, serious, scientific and so on and some women have criticized it on these grounds as hermetic, elitist, 'neutral.' It is the language of clarity. Yet theory can threaten in its ability to uproot dominant ideologies, and as such is useful in feminist practice (41). In particular, theory should recognize its own "locatedness" in language, in the body, operating on the borderline between theory and non-theory, blending genres (fiction-theory), and recognizing the instability of the sign and the writing subject: "To be lost, to encounter impasse, to fall, and to desire both fall and impasse—isn't this what happens to the body in theory?" (42).

Trinh cites Wittig and Zeig's definition of *word* in the *Brouillon*, in which words are said to have constant shifts and variations in meaning. The "bearers of fables" travel from community to community and record these changes in their bodies, registering the constant flux of meaning. In addition, the companion lovers are said to pay a tribute for words that they want or need, a practice which is called "to write one's life with one's blood" (166). Trinh visualizes her writing subject as analogous to these griottes, bearers of fables, seeking to register the metamorphosis of language, to avoid fixed meanings, and to "write one's life with one's blood." The woman writer of colour is a subject who must attempt to redefine language (write her life with her blood) while at the same time being defined by it. This is DuPlessis, trying to restring the guitar, yet, "I am playing, I

am playing. I am playing."

In pathology and physiology sympathy describes the relation between either two organs or parts of the body, or between two bodies, wherein a symptom present in one induces a corresponding symptom in the other, what Doane has called an "instantaneous communication and affinity." I've suggested that this definition can also be productively applied to feminist textual production, where the concept of a sympathetic contagion is extended figuratively to textual bodies. Just as these women's texts sympathetically infect, or bear affinities with, one another, their texts also introduce an infectious contaminant into the patriarchal body.

Trinh describes impurity as a socially constructed interval, that is, a conceptual space or lacuna, within which the impure subject is feared, and often excluded from the society in which she lives. Women who are menstruating enter seclusion in various cultures so as not to contaminate the community. Menstrual blood is associated with the dark blood: mysterious, internal, female, associated with the womb, and, as this blood emerges, becoming a contaminant as it passes from the darkness of the interior of the body into the "light of day." This moment or interval however can be most productive; the impure subject acts as a social contaminant, crossing borders, and challenging reigning conceptual hierarchies. This is consonant with Foucault's observation in *The Birth of the Clinic* that women are perceived as marginal yet threatening because of the potential for women to infiltrate and contaminate the centre, that is, the healthy male body.

In a similar way, these alternative writing practices seek to infect the patriarchal body, a textual body which Brossard has called a patriarchal matrix, a body which Cixous envisioned as the tomb in which Antigone is placed in *LA*. I have already described some cultural practices which contribute to its fabrication: the range of poetic epithets used to describe women, embodied in such forms as the *blazon de beauté*, and the various medical and legal claims made on the womb—Pierre Trudeau perched atop a pregnant woman's belly in *Québécoises deboutte!* as he declares that the fetus belongs to society. The introduction of the

rotting corpse of Dyongou Serou into the pond and its subsequent contamination of the water which turns the sorghum red is read by Trinh as an analogy for the writing of the female body, a scriptive act which infiltrates and contaminates the patriarchal text.

I mentioned in a footnote to chapter 3 that the virus might be a useful metaphor to describe how contamination of the patriarchal symbolic is carried out by these various writing practices. A virus is an organism consisting of a gene in a coat of protein that enters a host cell and reprograms it; we can think of a virus as a twist of letters forming words and sentences that infiltrate the body and rewrite it, often with devastating results. Similarly, words and sentences—sentences that have been broken, the "woman's sentence" of which Woolf writes—act as viruses which infect the patriarchal text. Cixous makes extended use of the polysemy of words; her elaborate puns seek to outrun or exceed patriarchal definitions. Brossard describes the felicitous divergence in meaning made possible by speaking with an accent; she describes words as bearing a polyvalent potential. *Polyvalent* is a term used in chemistry to describe a multi-purpose substance, "effective against, sensitive toward, or counteracting more than one exciting agent (as a toxin or antigen)" (Merriam-Webster); Brossard uses polyvalence (literally, "many powers") to describe the multiple and ambiguous use of words by women, "né de notre ambivalence à l'égard du sens," so that language is set adrift from the usual or standard meanings. The patriarchal body is infiltrated then by "un déferlement continu de mots allant dans toutes les directions" (96).[14] This kind of work is being done by Marlatt when she explores the radical etymology of *dhei* or when Tostevin teases out the potential of a *gyno-text*. Wittig similarly describes words (*elles, féminaires, Guérillères*) as war machines. A virus is aptly described as a Trojan Horse that is welcomed into the host body only to attack it from within its very foundations. Trinh points to the polyvalent, polysemic excess of words (*red*) as a challenge to the vertically-imposed language of clarity, a form of subjection. Words, in all of these writing practices, can be described as viral,

[14] "born of our ambivalence with regard to sense" and "a continuous onslaught of words going off in all directions" (111).

seeking to deconstruct and recode the text of woman in the way that a virus enters a body and replicates within it an alien DNA.

5 New Sonorities: Writing as Feminist Practice

And could I change the instrument (restring, refret, rekey, retool, rehole)

Invent
new sonorities
new probes
new combinations
new instruments

I struggle for a tread. Everything must be reexamined, re-seen, rebuilt. From the beginning, and now. And yet I am playing, I am playing. I am playing

with a stringed lever.

—Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar* (158-159)

In Man Ray's 1924 photograph *Violon d'Ingres*, a woman sits with her naked back to the camera, a cloth draped around her hips and a patterned turban on her head, which is turned to one side. Rachel Blau DuPlessis reads this photograph as a palimpsest emblematic of the position of the woman artist in patriarchal culture. As the title suggests, *Violon d'Ingres* presents a photographic allusion to the nineteenth-century paintings of Ingres—*La Baigneuse de Valpinçon*, *Harem Interior*, *Turkish Bath*. DuPlessis notes that in *The Turkish Bath* (1863) the woman has finally been given "something to do. She is playing a hidden instrument, perhaps a mandolin" (157). *Violon d'Ingres* presents the woman herself, Kiki of Montparnasse, an artist in her own right, as musical instrument, as violin, played by the photographer and by the culture at large, resonant with its symbols:

> Her solid, curved, lush back has, imposed upon it, brilliantly placed sound holes, black f-openings (f-openings!) which recall the *f* for function in mathematical symbol, force in physics, forte in music, and the abbreviation both for female, and for feminine gender in grammar. She is thereby made sonorous with cultural meanings (157).

In a play on the title—"Violon d'Ingres. Violin d'anger. Vial in danger" (158)—DuPlessis suggests her oppositional reading of the photograph: Alice Prin the artist is subsumed by the position in which she is placed by the male photographer. She becomes Kiki of Montparnasse the model, an instrument to be played and a vial or repository for various cultural associations.[1] A pun on Ingres leads DuPlessis from the "anger" she feels at this displacement to a sense of the woman artist "in danger." The musical trope—mandolin played by Ingres's bather, Man Ray's play on his *Violon d'Ingres*, Wallace Steven's blue guitar

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[1] In the most recent English translation of *Kiki's Memoirs* (published by The Ecco Press in 1996), Kiki's own words first appear on page 75, preceded by: a foreword by the current editors, a short essay called "My Friend Kiki" by the artist Tsuguharu Foujita, for whom she often posed, an Introduction to the first English edition by Ernest Hemingway, the translator Samuel Putnam's response to Hemingway, and a publisher's note to the earlier limited edition of which the current edition is a reprint. You could say that she is framed by three men, Foujita, Hemingway, and Putnam. (Hemingway's Introduction includes an interesting jibe at Virginia Woolf. Of Kiki's manuscript he writes, "It is written by a woman who, as far as I know, never had a Room of Her Own [. . .] If you ever tire of books written by present day lady writers of all sexes, you have a book here written by a woman who was never a lady at any time" [53]).

Of the many photographs of Kiki, usually nude, that appear throughout the memoir, one shows her in a full-length black dress sitting on a chair in a garden with an easel balanced on her lap. She looks up, as if observing an artist's model. The caption reads "Kiki Painting" and this is the only photograph that presents Kiki as a cultural producer in her own right, as the many reproductions of her paintings throughout also witness. Of these, two in particular caught my eye. In one, a line drawing captioned "I Pose...", Kiki has drawn a caricature of herself standing naked in front of Foujita who himself stands before a giant blank canvas that seems to separate the two, maker and muse. In the second one, "The Tightrope Walker" (1927), a woman with billowing robe teeters above a crowd of male onlookers who, because of the angle of the painting, seem to peer up into her skirts, an image which seems to nicely capture the predicament of the woman artist/muse which DuPlessis describes; the tightrope walker is both artist and object of the gaze.

Foujita, in "My Friend Kiki," describes a day when Kiki arrived at his studio wearing nothing but a coat, which she quickly discarded.

> She took my place in front of the easel, told me not to move, and calmly began to draw my portrait. When the work was finished she had sucked and bitten all my pencils and lost my small eraser, and delighted, danced, sung and yelled, and walked all over a box of camembert. She demanded money from me for posing and left triumphantly, carrying her drawing with her. Three minutes later at the Café du Dôme a rich American collector bought this drawing for an outrageous price.
>
> That day I wasn't sure which of the two of us was the painter (Kiki 42).

While she is the one who has painted a portrait of Foujita, she still insists on being paid for posing (the prerogative of the artist/muse?), and Foujita is led to question his own role as artist by this carnivalesque reversal (during which Kiki has sucked and bitten his pencils, lost his erasers, walked all over his camembert). In the following sentence however this topsy-turvy world is rectified; Foujita notes that the next morning "happily, it was I who was the painter" and he produced "Nu couché de Kiki" in which she languorously reclines on a divan. Kiki's painting of Foujita (fully clothed) is in profile; he appears to contemplate some minute detail on a canvas which we cannot see. While Kiki has momentarily seized the necessary tools for cultural production, she still replicates Foujita as producer, herself as produced ("I Pose").

transformed—appears in variations throughout *The Pink Guitar* (1990), a sonorous notation for the double bind women find themselves in as both cultural product and producer:

"I pick up this guitar. $\begin{matrix}\text{It is}\\ \downarrow\uparrow\\ \text{I am}\end{matrix}$ a woman! I say (158)

The pink guitar[2] represents the language she uses to write, and the cultural figures and tropes she inherits, specifically the figure of Woman—Ingres' odalisques, Man Ray's "Kiki of Montparnasse," Helen of Troy, the Sirens, Medea, Eurydice, and so on. The woman writer must struggle with this unusual "bifocal" position in which she is both subject and object.[3] The figure of Woman is the guitar DuPlessis picks up and plays, only to discover that "the languages, the words, the drives, the genres, the keyboards, the frets, the strings" are inflected by traditional gender relations and representations. The pink guitar "has gender in its very grain. Its strings are already vibrating with gender representations" (158). Her urgent need as a feminist writer is to restring the instrument, to change it in some way, to invent "new sonorities." She finds herself in the difficulty of both

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[2] An allusion to "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (Wallace Stevens):

> They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
> You do not play things as they are.'
>
> The man replied, 'Things as they are
> Are changed upon the blue guitar' (qtd. in *Pink* xi).

[3] The poet who illustrates this position throughout these essays is H.D. When Pound invokes the *makirs* in *The Pisan Cantos*, (Yeats, Ford, Eliot, Joyce are all included), the only woman in the list is H.D. All the women cultural workers Pound knew such as Marsden, Monroe, Weaver, Moore, Lowell, and Loy are absent: "He mentions none. The loss, the erasure, the missing" (42). Even H.D. is named not as writer but as muse—"Dryad," a mythologizing that is read as further erasure. H.D.'s role as muse, as a female artifact assigned a particular gender script by the male modernists with whom she worked is in opposition to her role as poet. DuPlessis gives various instances where H.D. was advised by male poets to follow this conventional female script. For example, D.H. Lawrence, presented as Rico in H.D.'s fictional *Bid Me To Live*, advises her to remove the part of her poem in which Orpheus speaks and to stick to Eurydice: "'It's your part to be a woman, the woman vibration, Eurydice should be enough. You can't deal with both'" (qtd. in *Pink* 21). DuPlessis notes that H.D.'s poem "Eurydice" does in fact stick to Eurydice, that the poem "speaks about having one's own death appropriated. Then it shows how Eurydice becomes reconciled to her fate as a 'dead' woman, because she is in fact secretly alive with a glowering, unregenerate light at the buried center of the cavern" (21).

being the instrument—the figure of Woman—and playing it.

Thought Emerges

Rodin's statues "The Thinker" and "Thought" are introduced by DuPlessis to visually represent this contradiction of the woman cultural producer as both subject and object in cultural discourse. The Thinker, a man, is essentially separate from the material out of which he has been fashioned, while Thought, a woman, is presented as a head cast in bronze who seems to emerge out of the material from which she is made: "Thought emerges. She emerges or is sinking. She is self and rock. How can I say this without drowning?" (39). A woman "outside the gates of culture is called a sphinx, inside called a heroine. Inside is called poetess, outside poet. She [H.D.] feared being poetess (*No, no! my poetry was not dead*); and at the same time, locked in conflict, feared the exile demanded of the woman poet. As riddling sphinx" (36). How does the woman writer pull herself out of this matrix of stone?

In my previous chapters, I have made reference to a patriarchal matrix; in part I am referring to feminist narratological analyses of classical narrative structure in which women are configured as elements of plot-space.[4] Teresa de Lauretis asks questions that classical narratology has not: what happened to the Sphinx after her encounter with Oedipus? what did Medusa feel as she saw herself in Perseus's mirror the moment before her death? (de Lauretis 109). What answers might such questions yield? When Teresa de Lauretis poses them, her answers are indirect. We can't know what became of the Sphinx, or how Medusa felt, if the creators of these narratives—narratives now deeply embedded in western culture—didn't bother to include such details. De Lauretis turns to the method by which such narratives have been analyzed, from Propp through Greimas, Lévi-Strauss, and Lotman. Through the focus of classical narratology monsters such as the Sphinx, she argues, have been interpreted as fragments in

[4] See Knutson's *Narrative in the Feminine* for a comprehensive survey of classical and feminist narratology.

someone else's story, markers of position (*topoi*) which locate the *limen* or frontier between nature and culture, the Other or obstacle through which the male hero must pass in order to come to new birth. In the work of Jurij Lotman she finds the nadir of classical narratological reduction of all narrative functions to two, the male subject/hero who penetrates the female topos (cave, grave, womb) and emerges as human being (male), "active principle of culture" (119). The female function represents "what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (119). The hero of any particular narrative is always morphologically male while the obstacle, morphologically female (118). As Susan Knutson observes, it would not be enough for a woman writer, wishing to challenge this binary, to substitute a female for the male hero in a quest narrative, because in formal terms this still "leaves the dominant quest narrative structure intact" (*Narrative* 41). The quest narrative structure would still produce the female hero as a male human subject traversing and emerging victorious from a female plot-space. The subject will still be "male-hero-human" and the object "female-obstacle-boundary-space"—a male-female hierarchized binary is still reproduced (de Lauretis 121).

Both de Lauretis and Knutson argue this has implications for cultural production in general, for it suggests that "the inherent logic of narrative is patriarchal," naturalized and thus leading to alienation for women who consume this culture (Knutson 42). As narrative helps us to codify and understand the world, this has radical implications. But if quest structure always reproduces this hierarchized gender binary, "regardless of whether or not a female character occupies the subject position" (41), where do we go from here? Both also agree that the "story must be told differently." How can this be done? What kinds of strategies or models might be employed by a feminist practice of writing that would avoid reproducing the "generically feminine matrix" (Knutson 41) (what I have called earlier the patriarchal matrix) in order to produce a feminist matrix? DuPlessis, to return to her musical motif, puts it this way: "I struggle for a tread. Everything must be reexamined, re-seen, rebuilt. From the beginning, and now. And yet I am playing, I am playing. I am playing/with a stringed lever" (158-9).

The new sonorities, probes, combinations, instruments, form the basis for a writing as feminist practice.

Writing as Feminist Practice

The essays collected in *The Pink Guitar* can, in their form, in their style, and in the strategies they employ, be read as examples of the feminist poetics, the writing as feminist practice, that DuPlessis seeks to describe. She notes that she started to write this kind of essay in 1978, in a style she calls "non-objective, polyvocal prose" (vii), influenced by essay forms developed by writers such as Robert Duncan, H.D., Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Roland Barthes, Cixous, and Irigaray (vii). She calls her essays *lettres laides* (vii) and with them, sought to challenge a neutral, objective prose style, what Trinh has described as the language of clarity. Trinh notes that women writers have often tended to interpret the objective, distant voice in theory as hermetic and elitist, and DuPlessis seems to have experienced such an alienation, adapting for herself the essay form for its flexibility; the essay allowed her to speculate about a range of gender-related subjects in a structurally innovative manner. She argues that while feminists had made inroads in terms of content and theme in their struggle for cultural change (she is writing in 1989), most women writers still made use of standard or naturalized language strategies, forms, and styles, which on her view "seemed to partake of the same assumptions about gender that they would claim to undermine. So it has seemed crucial for feminist writing to reexamine and claim the innovative writing strategies for which our century is noted, turning collage, heteroglossia, intergenres, and self-reflexivity (to name just some) to our uses" (viii). Modernist strategies in particular created the kind of cultural disturbance she wanted to effect for feminism.[5]

[5] William Carlos Williams is invoked, perhaps with irony, as "grandfather" in her essay "*Pater*-Daughter." She acknowledges his influence: "And I am forever in his debt. He opened writing. Writing as writing. Writing as praxis. Ongoing. Curious. Situated. Rapid. Rabid. Marked with one's markings. Not uniform. An exposure. Incomplete. Unsafe. Even deplorable" (*Pink* 61). Yet, the problem for her as a woman writer is that the modernist project as she understands it was

DuPlessis's essays have an engaged and passionate and even intimate tone, although they are not revelatory. Personal details are kept to a minimum and are often enigmatic. Lines of prose break off mid-sentence. Each paragraph or section of writing is separated by several line breaks, so that a sentence then might be fragmented as it is carried over from one section to the next, while lines of poetry will sometimes interrupt a line of thought. She occasionally uses numbers to separate these fragments, as if presenting ordered propositions in the manner of a philosophical tract. Yet one numbered fragment may be a question about the patriarchal symbolic while another fragment is a grocery list or a compilation of commercial sequences taken from a soap opera, so that the content subverts the authority of the propositional form. In "*Pater*-Daughter" she further subverts this logic by introducing numbered propositions out of sequence.

Visually, the effect is of a patchwork or a mosaic; an argument of some kind is generally presented, but as with Trinh, it is examined in a multi-faceted

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indebted to traditional gender narratives, conventional and conservative. H.D. is Dryad, not Makir. Male modernist texts consistently recreate Woman. For Pound, she argues, woman was the Sargasso Sea, an octopus, chaos, and so on (152). Again, this is the traditional narrative structure that reproduces obstacle as morphologically female. She notes that the analogies for major form in modernist texts shifted from feminine (domestic) to more conventionally masculine (public) forms; Pound, early on, describes his pre-Cantos as a "rag bag," a quilt, a catch of fish, but this eventually gives way to the Cantos, legal edicts. The earlier analogies, DuPlessis argues, belong to a "feminine code" that Pound renounces, desiring to say not "This is my point of view," but rather, "This is how it is" (47).

In her discussion of twentieth-century avant-garde practice, DuPlessis does not specify any particular artist or school. Rather she uses the term to refer generally to artists who have expressed a certain alienation from society and a desire to break with convention. She approves of its suspicion of centres, of *telos*, of its use of a "secular lens" and connects it to postmodern concerns with a centreless polyvocality and heterogeneity. Yet, she says "one is thereafter shocked by the quietism and asocial turns of its dual poetics of immanence and textuality, at odds with historical responsibility to the political and functional contexts of language" (153). And so she asks, how can the techniques employed by the modernist avant-garde be used by feminist writers to conduct a sustained inquiry into the nature of gender relations as they are enacted in writing? One possibility she considers:

> Let the discourses crash against each other, for the opposite of cleansing the words of all connotations ('cleansing' is a word which Williams will typically use), the opposite of purifying the language of the tribe (the phrase typical to Eliot) would be to let the connotations and the discourses—the appropriate, the inappropriate, the intelligent, the silly—swirl, coagulate [. . .]. (53)

Her critique of cleansing is similar to Trinh's critique of clarity and transparency. Both writers question the impulse that seeks to present a clean and unsullied language, to maintain the *corps propre* of the patriarchal text through an ablution of language. As with Trinh, one solution is to introduce the contaminant, the interval of impurity; in this case, through a removal of the artificial barriers that separate types of discourse. In her essays DuPlessis uses personal observation interspersed with fragments of poems, transcribed glossolalia, close textual analysis, and so on.

way. Where Trinh uses repetition and an assuming of positions, a mouthing of the words of other writers, DuPlessis manages a similar multifaceted exploration through this fragmentary presentation. There is some tentative wordplay, but not nearly to the extent that it is found in Cixous. A single sentence might be set like a line of poetry. Sentence fragments may exclude pronouns of subjects, suggesting an intensive and immediate engagement with the material she is exploring.

There is also typographical innovation. The essay "For the Etruscans" is interspersed with italicized quotations from members of the workshop in which this essay was developed. In "The Pink Guitar" she inks out large sections of a paragraph, leaving certain words stranded, and uses arrows ↑↓ to indicate the divided consciousness of a woman writer. Elsewhere she uses the hinged parenthesis { as a copula, often enlarged, to join two or three words in a column, one above the other as if to indicate that she cannot or will not choose only one, or that traces of each are contained in the other. She uses typographic symbols to designate body parts in her discussion of an installation by Duchamps: °° for "peepholes," **(o)** for "cunt-mark."

Beyond these typographical innovations, key premises informing DuPlessis's approach to writing include Kristeva's model of the semiotic chora and of the semiotic and symbolic modalities. Related to this is the premise that women come to language differently as a result of their social positioning; the writer is conceived as a social nexus, a marker who enacts various cultural codes. Finally, while indebted to this poststructural account of writer and text, there is a belief in the possibility for social change, of rewriting the patriarchal symbolic from within.

Tostevin writes that she conceived of her poem cycle *Gyno-Text* as existing "[a]t the ridge where becoming of subject is affirmed and developed through process." She refers here to Kristeva's semiotic chora that models the process of language acquisition and the emergent speaking subject. DuPlessis situates her own poems in a similar way: "Thinking about language in my poetry, I imagine a line below which is inarticulate speech, aphasia, stammer and above which is at least moderate, habitual fluency, certainly grammaticalness, and the

potential for apt, witty images, perceptive, telling and therefore guaranteed 'poetic'" (*Pink* 144). She is describing a basic distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic modes, elaborated in Kristeva's model. In "Language Acquisition," she interweaves her questions about the role of the semiotic in writing with somewhat cryptic references to her own daughter's language acquisition: first, the kitten mews and sheep bleats, then the operatic concerts that come in the middle of the night, the echolalia, the range of syllables that seem to come for a time, and then go: da da ba ba, a repetitive 'l' or 'f/v,' sometimes ma ma, but sometimes not. She includes a log of her daughter's first spoken words: "Week of 1-6 July, 17 months. Words: mur mur mur (more); caow; mMMoo; DIRty; WWWride (ride); Rrweh (wet); Bluhh (blueberries)," contrasted with less than two months later, "Record of 26 August, 18.5 months. Words: farm, boat, backhoe, blanket (bottue), cow, roll, milk, up, on, shut, open, I do, bye bye, seat, night, motor...."; it is, as she observes, an explosion of language (99).

As in Marlatt's "musing with mothertongue," DuPlessis notes that children learn the rhythms of a language before they speak it in any meaningful way, although the noises they make are always "assimilated" by the adults, who will translate what the syllables might mean, or talk back to the child, or respond emotionally (84). For DuPlessis, the richness of Kristeva's model is as metaphor for excess and rupture, where the heterogeneity of language "will always sing more than we can hear" (85). She includes her own scraps of babbling poetry: "thay hey ho, aydee thay yo you" (85) at random throughout the essay as if to insist on this excess. As have previous critics, she questions the way in which Kristeva has divided up the semiotic and symbolic realms into a realm which is "maternally connoted" versus the Law of the Father, but then goes on to concur with Moi that this is not so much a declaration of essences but rather of positionality, the female position happening to intersect with the position of the marginal, of the subversive, of dissidence (Moi 166; DuPlessis 185). DuPlessis emphasizes that the chora "is not silent: there is babble and pulse, intonation, mark and sign. There is everything of language in it but specificity and form. It is the place that could be any language (Greek, Egyptian)" (85). She sees the value

of the semiotic in its ability to weaken and subvert dominant discourses by means of ruptures within the symbolic. As such, it is of great value to a feminist writer.[6]

A second premise that informs DuPlessis's conception of a feminist writing practice is that to a certain extent women come to language differently than men as a result of their socio-historical, cultural location. I have described this as a moderate or weak feminist variation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. She notes that the poet Beverly Dahlen asks, tongue in cheek, "'For woman, perhaps, language as a second language?'" (qtd. in *Pink* 120). She speculates that women then become translators needing to acquire new syntactical structures and new vocabularies in order to voice their particular experience. In the Ardeners' formulation, women speak both the language of the male enclave and the language of the wild, the *liengu* or mermaid tongue. They translate back and forth between the two.

As with Trinh and Cixous, DuPlessis also assumes that the writer is a nexus for language; the writer becomes that place where language, where cultural codes and customs, are enacted. All three stress that the writer must be open to what comes. DuPlessis: "There is no I when I 'speak'/but places of gridded and bubbling social voice;" there is, she writes, "no I no 'I' no i" (168-9). Here she is in accord with Trinh, who writes in *Woman Native Other* that writing the body is the process of creating "an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires" (135). Similarly, DuPlessis recognizes that she is a site for the various resonating gender codes and conventions of her cultural inheritance—"a sol fa la"—played through language, and through a body of language. As with Trinh, the 'I,' the writing subject, is dissolved in a network of discourses and codes. In "The Pink Guitar," she describes herself as a "marker," explaining that she places the marks, or signs, on the page, but that they also come through her, using a sensual imagery of the body reminiscent of Marlatt in "musing with mothertongue;" writing is described as a sensual, corporeal pleasure, words pulsing through her veins.

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[6] DuPlessis reads H.D.'s use of the palimpsest in her writing as an evocation of the interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic modes. See "Language Acquisition."

The fourth and most crucial premise that underlies DuPlessis's writing as feminist practice is that women can use, just as they are used by, this language. Language as pink guitar is restrung. She doesn't suggest that such a restringing is impossible, for she both presents and models a great number of strategies which might accomplish this task. A moderate version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would account for the possibility of new paradigms, of breaking out of old routines of thought. Hence all of these writers—Cixous, Marlatt, Tostevin, Brossard, Wittig, Trinh—emphasize the interval, the interstice, the margin, the footnote, the space between, the silence which surrounds speech. All provide a space, however marginal or small, to place a lever which can shift the larger structure.

I turn now to the various strategies DuPlessis explores as constituting a feminist poetics. In order to outline these strategies I am unraveling them from their embedded position within a text, a texture, that includes all of the poetic allusion, personal reference, multi-vocality, and intimacy, that such a feminist writing practice employs. The essays in *The Pink Guitar* visually resemble a patchwork in that they stitch together many quotations, such as significant sections of writing by members of Workshop 9. She includes scraps of personal detail, such as her early experience as a student and glimpses of her quotidian life (making fruit salad, thinking about buying groceries). Sentences begin mid-sentence, while other sentences more often ask questions than assert fact. I've sorted the strategies she uses into four inter-related categories: metonymy and marginality; breaking the sentence/sequence; the body; and writing as process.

Great value is placed on metonymy as an operation of contiguity over substitution; metonymy allows for a recognition of the connections made between things and guarantees the "exasperating plenitude of signs, tones, registers, margins and pages alike" (114). Wittig's "radical parataxis" is cited, in which she lines up names of women, or of fruits, or of parts of the body, so that each is given equal attention. Cixous, although she is often placed in opposition to Wittig, offers a similar effect in her long incantatory sentences describing the female body. Trinh perhaps does something similar when she quotes from a range of

writers, incorporating their words into her text one after the other, as if by placing them next to one another they might resonate one with the other (a sympathetic contagion). Metonymy for DuPlessis is associated with the margins and a refusal of centres:

> To write metonymy is to write all margins, no page. Is to make some critique of the center such that the binary distinction between text and space disappears, and so that a work bleeds, as is said of a photograph printed to the edge. All is margin, all is center. And the once-compelling binaries like full, empty; frame, presence; absence, mark, become pluralized into voided markings, marked void. (*Pink* 112)

Reading this passage I was reminded of the intermittent pages of Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* in which the parts of the body are listed in dark block letters that run into the gutters of the page. In order to create this effect large white spaces are occasionally produced in the middle of a line or in the middle of the page, a whiteness readers are not accustomed to.[7] Derrida's model of the sign is also relevant. Where a static conception of the sign would suggest a metaphoric relation of substitution (a word replaces an object in the world), the Derridean concept of the sign entails contiguity or trace; each word bears traces of other words, gives on to the next word in an unending chain of signification.

To follow in this vein, the gap and the marginalized space—the space of the footnote, the endnote, the annotation, as well as the spaces between letters and words—are explored as having great potential for a feminist writing. [8] Narrative

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[7] This effect is lost in the English translation which collects the words in the centre of the page, visually contradicting the effect of a body "bleeding" into the margins in the French original.

[8] In "Draft 17: Unnamed," DuPlessis stitches into the fabric of the poem lines from a newspaper article, "Lithuanians haunted by Holocaust" (by Fen Montaigne, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 July 1992). The article describes the experience of a woman who found notes and addresses in a field of rye where 155 Jews had been executed; they threw down the scraps of paper just before they died. "To this day, she regrets that, out of fear, she did not pick them up" (*Drafts 15-XXX* 11). The notes left in the field are metonymically chained to flowers strewn on a grave, the discarded leather shoes of the dead, stars, words in the margin of a poem, objects found tossed in a gutter. This poetics attempts an impossible gathering. Cixous has Nadezhda Mandelstam gather all the Ms, all the letters of Osip's name, all the letters he used to write his poems, all the fireflies, mayflies and "twenty thousand species of birds." Wittig names every part of the lesbian body, stitches together the scattered scraps of papyrus on which are written the poems of Sappho. Marlatt undertakes a radical archaeology of words, unearthing roots and bringing them to light. DuPlessis has written: "I consider myself a writer of a post-Holocaust era. The relation of this fact to my poetics is straightforward. I try to write so that if a single shard were rescued in the

can then be side-lined and diverged so that new offshoots and new paths are created. Narrative is forced to "take its turn among an array of strategies" (113). DuPlessis notes that Howe writes "on the margins of the institution of 'the Book'" (130), that she questions all aspects of textual production. In "The Pink Guitar," DuPlessis lists the sequence of commercials throughout an episode of a soap opera and then notes "to enter from the shifting ground of interstices 'between the acts'" (160). Here again is the interstice, the Wolf (Woolf?) interval, an encouragement or a notation, perhaps to herself, to enter this marginal space, to interrupt the narrative sequence (Trinh's interval of impurity). Trinh effects a similar divergence by refusing to proceed in a linear argumentative fashion in her own writings. As I suggested in chapter 4, she slips into a variety of theoretical positions, not necessarily negating any one. Wittig, in *Les Guérillères* presents a fragmentary narrative that is cyclical in form, beginning in the Golden Age and then returning by the last third of the prose text to the events which precipitated this Age. Marlatt makes extensive use of endnotes in *Touch to My Tongue* to describe the radical potential of divergent meanings, of the unleafings of language; this is Brossard's polyvalence—the way in which words shoot off in various random and unexpected ways when spoken with an "accent," spiraling into patriarchally defined non-sense.

Connected to the margin, the note, and a diverting of narrative is the presentation of multiple voices and perspectives: to write a text that is polyvocal. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia is an influence. Midrash is also presented as a model by DuPlessis, a variation on the annotation or the note, "the possibility of continuous chains of interpretation, thinking into/the relations of things" (162). In section 9 of "The Pink Guitar," as she searches for descriptions of a feminist writing practice, she presents two columns, typographically not quite separated from one another as the left-hand column sometimes bleeds into the right. On the left, she presents a fragmented list of characteristics of the writing practice she seeks: "multi-discursive, interrogative, polyvocal, heterogeneous/interactive" (163), "associative, critical" (164), "a motion captured in motion," "hysterical,

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aftermath of some historical disaster, that one shard would be so touching and lucid as to give the future an idea of who we were" (*Contemporary Women Poets* 103).

site-specific," "the site of many centers/a non-transparent textuality" (164) and so on. While on the right, she presents snippets by writers and theorists such as Irigaray, Kristeva, Griffin, Spivak, Cixous, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Lynn Hejinian. Similarly, Trinh's extensive use of quotations upon which she elaborates and comments can be thought of as polyvocal. The effect of the two interwoven columns is of a dialogue, of a text in motion, also of the "continuous chains of interpretation."

The second category I've identified in a feminist poetics is that work which is carried out at the level of grammar, syntax, and diction; what I've called breaking the sentence and sequence. I refer again to Woolf's observations in her discussion of a woman's sentence and the fictional author Mary Carmichael. Gilbert and Gubar chose to read Woolf's call for a new sentence as a call to rethink women's relationship to language and as a refusal of the various patriarchal "sentences" that have circumscribed women's literary production. However as I mentioned, a feminist poetics is equally interested in the "sentence as grammatical unit," and a breaking of traditional grammatical forms which are thought to sustain patriarchal structures. Trinh refers to this as the language of clarity, the rules of which are outlined in traditional handbooks of rhetoric, and often used as a form of subjugation. DuPlessis notes Gertrude Stein's use of the term "forensics" in Stein's *How to Write.*[9] DuPlessis defines forensics as "the dialect, ideolect, or rhetorical mode of a specific group which holds and practices power ('they made all walk'), social replication ('forensics is a taught paragraph') and definition" (133). The very term forensics suggests a rather cold, scientific dissection of a body laid out beneath white lights. It suggests Wittig's own anatomy of the female body in *Le Corps lesbien*, a radical solution to the forensics which has positioned the female body as a specimen in a tray.

I present here only a minute sample of possible syntactical ruptures and other barbarisms that such a writing practice might make use of.

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[9] Stein: "Forensics are a plan by which they will never pardon. They will call butter yellow. Which it is. He is. They will call birds attractive. Which they are. They are. They will also oblige girls to be women that is a round is a kind of hovering for instance.

Forensics may be because of having given.

They made all walk." (Stein 385)

DuPlessis notes that the writer Susan Howe favors the anacoluthon, a syntactical inconsistency in which the writer shifts from one construction to another mid-sentence. This narrative drift leads to a sense of incoherence.

Other techniques used by Howe to counter the forensics of the taught paragraph include: the isolation of letters, of syllables, the elision of words, the use of "syllable-sounds of semi-meaning" (for example, "thefthe"), the use of cryptograms, of visual palimpsests, doubles, repetition, a sensitivity to the vibrations or resonance of meaning of words in other words (words as palimpsests) (*Pink* 132).[10]

Silence, blank space, and the "crevices of language" (132) are read as meaningful. In *The Pink Guitar*, DuPlessis includes her deletions, which are struck out and written over. There is an awareness of what is missing, of what has been removed. In her title essay, "The Pink Guitar," page 166 includes blacked out sections of a paragraph which leave words and phrases stranded, such as the word "feminine" or the phrase "paralyzing conflict. Cut off, burned out" (166) which highlight the strategy itself and ask us to consider what is necessarily removed or abjected from the body of a text in the pursuit of a linear sense.

DuPlessis, referring to her own writing, says that of course she knows how to write these sentences smoothly, correctly, grammatically, but in order to break the patriarchal grip of this forensics it is necessary to use tactics of struggle, of rupture. To shatter the notion of language as glass. The result may be ugly (*lettres laides*), lacking in a smooth, clear finish. On Howe, she notes "Depoeticize: reject

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[10] Both Howe and DuPlessis cite Emily Dickinson as influential in the development of their own poetics. See DuPlessis's "The Darkest Gush," which I discuss below, and Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*. In her poems Dickinson would mark with a small cross those words for which she had alternates in mind. At the bottom of her handwritten manuscript she would include these substitutions in a "footnote," the alternate words stitched together by small crosses. The ninth poem in fascicle 34 (unpublished in her lifetime, she collected her poems into fascicles which she sewed by hand) which begins "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—," offers at the bottom of the page the following alternates for the words *in, Deep, stir,* and *power*: "+ the + low + harm + art" (Howe 32-34). Visually, this suggests the metonymic chains, the relationship of contiguity, and the syntagmatic axis within a structuralist conception of language, all emphasized by DuPlessis in a feminist poetics. It also resembles the valuing of the metonymic over the metaphoric in Wittig's use of a "radical parataxis." In this way, certain words or line-endings in Dickinson's poems serve as palimpsests. The word *Deep* hovers within or bears traces of the word *low*, suggestive of the paradigmatic possibilities, possibilities which are shut down when a single word is chosen. By refusing to choose between either *Deep* or *low*, but rather to entertain the hesitation between the two, and in doing so to highlight the palimpsested nature of words, closure is denied.

normal claims of beauty" (144). In "The Pink Guitar," she describes her own essays as "hairy and ungainly things [. . .]" (173). She also uses the language of cybernetics to describe the kind of white noise she seeks to generate, where feminist writing becomes a "practice of interference, or trying to stop a normal, normative, coherent, flowing and consumable practice" (173).[11] Cixous attempts something similar through the use of excess, as does Trinh in her assuming of other positions so that it is hard to know which words or ideas she claims as her own.

The body, in *écriture féminine*, *écriture au féminin*, lesbian writing, *innécriture*, has played a prominent role, not only a body of language and the various cultural and legal conceptualizations of the female body, but also,

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[11] Her allusion to cybernetics as a model for communication, where feminist writers might seek to intervene in the smooth and consumable flow of information, returns me again to Donna Haraway. With cybernetics, humans and the world in which we live are newly conceived as systems through which code (messages, information, language) travels, its signals translated, interpreted, and acted upon. The role of the scientist is to attempt, as far as possible, to keep the lines of communication clear in order to receive such messages, and to learn to interpret and, if necessary, reprogram the code to further human ends. This is the language of clarity, of forensics. In Norbert Wiener's conception of cybernetics as a liberating science, scientists attempt to crack the code of nature. His discussion of nature's secrets is littered with the vocabulary of game playing and the military. Nature is said to be resistant to decoding, yet in a passive way; it doesn't actively attempt to jam communication channels. Nature's secrets will be penetrated (51).

Haraway identifies computer and genetic code in 1985 as the cyborg's language, a code in which we must all become fluent in order to engage with what she calls the "informatics of domination:"

> Communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies [. . .] communications sciences and modern biologies are constructed by a common move—*the translation of the world into a problem of coding*, a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange ("Manifesto" 164).

This is the search Wiener identified as the penetration of nature's secrets: the attempt to translate DNA and the subsequent drive to document the human genome.

In the Information Age, code is pervasive, often invisible, and yet has significant material effects on the everyday world. I am thinking in particular of DNA as a code and the increasingly important and controversial mapping of the human genome, and of computer code, the scaffolding of the Information Age. Technology itself Haraway sees as a writing practice, whether it is the writing of the human genome or the writing of memory in binary code on a silicon chip, just as bodies have become surfaces upon which these technologies write. The silicon chip, she writes, is "etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise, the ultimate interference for nuclear scores" ("Manifesto" 153). This is both a literal and metaphorical observation: to some extent there is an actual etching or scoring of silicon chips in order to store permanent memory. The four bases of DNA can be thought of as an alphabet that forms a rudimentary language of three letter words. Cyborg writing, in Haraway's vision, would seek to generate noise, to jam up the smooth flow of communication. I read this as an operation analogous to the breaking of the sentence/sequence advocated by DuPlessis in *The Pink Guitar.*

inevitably, inextricably caught up in these conceptualizations, the material body and its processes. For DuPlessis, the body is marked; it is "gridded" with words and "dunked in the culture, stained with it, the little vascicles, fascicles of 'self.' All cells are cultural cells" (*Pink* 170). I imagine a sample of tissue in a petri dish stained purple to render it visible. The interplay of the female body and a body of language is captured in the play on *fascicle*, where fascicle can be read as both slender bundle of nerve fibres or a portion of a book published in segments. She perhaps alludes to the manuscripts and publishing history of Emily Dickinson. Wittig's *féminaire*, and Cixous's "book of my parts" in *LA*, also come to mind. For DuPlessis, there is a constant play between body of language and material body:

> What body, then, is speaking? Does her body speak? Is it a body of words? Of cultural ideas? A body of language? A body of words inflected with its female body? A body of pulses, impulses, fissured, hopeful and afraid inside of and dyed with a complex of rich and contradictory readings of the female body? A body to whom things have happened AS a female body, rape, for instance, and other tragedies still. Does this statement immediately color things (do you see red; have I willfully made you see red)? If this language appears defenseless, unguarded, if it mentions certain blood, if it strips itself and waits for impulsive behaviors to strike, waits for the play of association, if it provokes feelings of bemused recognition at quotidian interruptions
>
> then what? From what is she writing? (170)

When DuPlessis turns to the body, she switches to the pronouns *her*, *she*, as if distancing herself from the discussion, from her own body, to speak of it in a more objective manner. Her use of the third person feminine pronouns may also signal her experience of alienation from the body, her own body, and the female body as it is culturally represented. I noted in chapter four that Trinh also switches between *she* and *I, i* when describing her relationship to writing as a woman of colour as a way of indicating her varying levels of access to language, and her experience of alienation from a language that is said to be universal.

In the above passage DuPlessis uses *I* twice. In the first instance, the effect of the *I* is to make us question whether or not in this long passage she is referring to herself, to her own experience, for example, when she describes violence done

to this body—"A body to whom things have happened AS a female body, rape, for instance, and other tragedies still." She then switches, in brackets, to a more personal, intimate tone of address "(do you see red; have I willfully made you see red)?" Is it a particular woman, a particular experience of the body that she describes, or an abstraction? Is it her own experience in/as a body? Does this switching between *she* and *I* allow her to have more control over a discussion of the body which may be poorly received, misunderstood, found to be somehow inappropriate or distasteful? As Trinh puts it, mouthing the distaste she has encountered—"A woman's body? We don't want to hear any more about it! They talk about nothing but that!" (*Moon* 129). She is sensitive to the fact that to "mention certain blood," for example, may trigger such reactions—"(do you see red; have I willfully made you see red)?"—may reduce a woman who writes to "gynecology," yet at the same time, recognizes that the body is undeniable, that there is "no way to take her as anything but a female body speaking words inflected by her being constructed female." Here is the double bind Morag Shiach outlines: "To evade the bodily is to reproduce a structure of oppression which has made of women's bodies their point of vulnerability and of guilt. To speak of the bodily risks a similar reproduction" (*Politics* 20).

DuPlessis at first appears to respond to this double bind by distancing herself from approaches to writing that privilege the body: "Isn't isolating 'the body' conceptually still an unhelpful gesture from a long-criticized, though apparently inexhaustible, mind/body split that should immediately be declared moot?" (171). As a result of her sense that to isolate 'the body' is 'unhelpful,' she describes in detail in these essays a body of *language*—the body that is traversed by words, as if run through with coloured threads, a patchwork, a rag bag, or a tissue culture stained with dye. DuPlessis takes care to express a multiplicity of bodies, of positions, not wishing to pin the body to one definition as if in a dissecting tray. The sentence runs from a denial of the body as a body, to a description of the body as language, as writing, as inscription. This is a position consistent with the other writers studied here, and with Grosz in her *Volatile Bodies*. DuPlessis then continues, briefly, to describe the body that is hungry or

sick—an acknowledgment of the body as biological—and then moves back to a reaffirmation of the body as mediated, not pure. Above all, there is unending process noted in the constant shuttling movement from body to body of language and back again. The female body bears the marks of an endless practice of writing.

And writing is for DuPlessis an unending process or practice: "For writing is a *practice*—a practice in which the author disappears into a process, into a community, into discontinuities, into a desire for discovery" (172). Here she describes a (post)structural conception of the writer as a location which enacts various codes of a wider community, becoming one node in a body of language. Writing, she affirms, above all else, is an on-going process, a feminist practice that is unending, refusing *telos* and centre. In an attempt to resist *telos*, a feminist writing can present itself as a draft, temporary and fluid. There are glimpses in Wittig's novels of an open book placed in a room where the women come and go, occasionally writing in it, endlessly negotiating amongst themselves over the meanings. DuPlessis turns to classical allusions of weaving and spinning to express this on-going process: Arachne who weaves images of women raped by gods, Philomel who weaves the story of her own rape and mutilation, a story read by her sister Procne, and Penelope who strategically weaves and unravels her own weaving in order to divert her suitors (167). These mythological scenes are newly read as scenes of women writing, reading, interpreting, of women working on culture, of writing as feminist practice.

Tabula Rosa

Tabula Rosa, a collection of DuPlessis's poems published in 1987, can be read as a companion to *The Pink Guitar*. Divided into two sections, the first contains extracts from an invented "History of Poetry" in which poems by poets such as Sappho and Praxilla are reconstructed in an attempt to "deform" the lyric tradition. The second section marks the beginning of DuPlessis's writing of

"drafts;" a poem called "Writing" functions as introduction to her project.[12] I read here only a few of the traces or marks of this poem.

"Writing" contains throughout its 28 sections reference to the process of writing, to the action of placing marks on a page. There are the conventional punctuation marks (often used in unconventional ways), allusions to the smudges of ink from a ballpoint pen, and to the letters of type that are used to print the poem, in addition to handwritten words scattered throughout the pages. But the idea of a mark is expanded to encompass a reading of marks in the (extra)textual world; the world is now read as text.

> A rose weathers out of the page
> o death
> a strawberry out, greedily, of jam
> a finger, a bud who
> curls there, comma,
> period, sky-reading
> marks
> creating marks for 'others' (ellipses). . . (67)

In her declared interest in deforming the lyric tradition, to weather a rose out of the page might be read as a conscious attempt to erode the traditional metaphorical description of Woman as flower, as rose. The weathered rose is followed by "o death," as if an embracing of the death knell sounded on lyric Woman.[13] In an earlier poem ("Crowbar") DuPlessis has alluded to a paper mill at the Fontaine de Vaucluse that creates paper embedded with flowers, as if a demonstration of the manufacturing of Woman and her mark of difference within the lyric tradition. The rose can also be read as material mark, the traces of twigs and flowers felt in the very texture of the paper. The rose being weathered out of the fibrous network of paper suggests other kinds of markings uncovered as the result of erosion, although these aren't explicitly mentioned in the poem: fossils imbedded in stone, the red stains of autumn leaves on pavement that appear when

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[12] This project continues in *Drafts 3—14* and *Drafts 15—XXX, The Fold.*

[13] This may also be a reference to the penultimate line of Woolf's *The Waves.* Woolf's own experiments in form and her theoretical interest in the woman's sentence, which I discuss in the Introduction, as well as her interest in indecipherable marks ("The Mark on the Wall," the strokes of the lighthouse in the section "Time Passes" in *To The Lighthouse*) and incomprehensible languages (the birds singing in ancient Greek, the old woman at the gates of Hyde Park in *Mrs. Dalloway*), are a key antecedent for DuPlessis; she has described Woolf's essays as "talismanic."

the snow melts. Again, this can be read as an erosion of the lyric tradition which uncovers new gender formations.

There are other, domestic erosions. The strawberry teased out of a jar of jam refers to an earlier line, ".Letters: a readable staining/inked jelly floats loosely/lacking pectin" (67). She is making jam; the strawberry is a solid chunk of fruit not properly mashed that is now worked out of the jelly. Yet this domestic task is described in terms of a reading of letters formed by the "inked jelly." I wonder also if the strawberry in the jelly evokes the abject, the clot of menstrual blood, the miscarriage.[14] The strawberry is followed by "a finger, a bud who/curls there, comma,/period" and suggests to me the invocation of the emergent form of the embryo in Tostevin's *Gyno-Text.* In her "writing on 'Writing'" DuPlessis lists a series of "subjects" for this poem which includes not only the marks of writing but also the menstrual cycle and the early months with a "baby who comes as otherness, as difference" (*Tabula Rosa* 84). The finger/bud/comma cluster evokes the reading of an ultrasound, the curled form of an embryo emerging out of the soupy grey matrix on a video screen. One speaks of the arm buds, the leg buds, the C-shaped embryo in the shape of a comma, the body as flower, blossoming. I am especially intrigued by the common use of punctuation and letters on the page to describe the size of an oocyte. Natalie Angier in *Woman: An Intimate Geography* describes her daughter's ovaries at twenty weeks gestation: "Halfway through her fetal tenure, she already had all the eggs she would ever have, packed into ovaries no bigger than the letters *ova* you just passed" (2). To describe the ovaries or the ovum in terms of letters or punctuation (menstruation as a period) points to an intriguing interaction between writing and the body, a relationship that is central to all of these writers.

Punctuation then leads us in two directions, as did the *fascicle* as both slender bunch of nerve fibres (organic definition) and a bundle of pages (reference

[14] I've come across kinds of fruit used to describe the size of the growing embryo from conception to twelve weeks: a poppy seed, an apple seed, a blueberry, a raspberry, a small grape, an average strawberry, a lime, at which point the skeleton hardens. This appeared on a website for a women's health clinic that offers abortions. This is why I suggest a strawberry worked out of the jam may also indicate a clot of blood (this poem is also about menstruation) or a miscarriage, at twelve weeks, "an average strawberry."

to textual production in Dickinson). For DuPlessis, attention must be paid to the smallest detail, not only to the words, but to every written mark that appears on the page.[15] She has noted that she seeks to rupture the page space in the modernist tradition (see "The Darkest Gush"). In her drafts, sections of the poems are justified left, then right, or appear in adjacent columns; some later drafts look like midrashic commentary. The poems are set in various type, including handwriting and hand-drawn symbols, as well as intermittent bold face or italics; the effect she seeks is that of text bleeding into the margins. The period is read not only as textual mark but also as organic definition where menstruation is a sign of female difference (again, the "darkest gush," with irony).

But to hold off for a moment on blood, I want to continue with the rupturing of the page with the gush of a handwritten mark. DuPlessis notes that to include her own handwritten lines in this poem is "something alarmingly taboo, for it brings the sloppy mark of the writer right into the book" ("Darkest Gush" 7). She also calls attention to Dickinson's fascicles, "the hand of the poet there sullying or entering the technologically-contained printed text" (7). There is an intimacy in seeing the handwritten mark of the writer, as in the choice of stitch in a quilt. It suggests also a breaking down of containment, as in the generation of an impurity that works away at the patriarchal body. The printed text is implicitly read as male body contaminated by the cyclically-produced impurity of the woman writer's mark (the "sloppy mark," the "darkest gush.") Here is sympathy at work in the pathological sense wherein a "proper" body (*propre* 'clean, one's own,' in Kristeva's sense of the term) is infected by the impure contaminant. The effect of the appearance of this handwriting is to pull the reading eye in two directions: which do you read first, the printed text, or the handwriting? Is one a gloss on the other? Why have these particular words been written in by hand and are they part of the poem or an afterthought? And even, at first glance, has

[15] Although DuPlessis does not mention Dorothy Richardson, her "About Punctuation" (*The Adelphi,* Vol.1 no.2 April 1924) offers yet another modernist antecedent in her attention to the effects of the smallest marks on the page: "Yet it is not to be denied that the machinery of punctuation and type, while lifting burdens from reader and writer alike and perfectly serving the purposes of current exchange, have also, on the whole, devitalized the act of reading; have tended to make it less organic, more mechanical" (991).

someone been writing in my copy of this poem? It also recalls the dark block letters of the named parts of the lesbian body bleeding through the pages in *Le Corps lesbien*, a disruptive textual experience that begins with the taboo words LE CORPS LESBIEN LA CYPRINE...

On the page of this poem in which handwritten marks are first introduced, other marks are also described. The beams of a car's headlights trace paths in the fog, tunneling out letters. Dark trees rush out of the whiteness like letters on a page. On the right-hand side of the page is a list, which I also read as objects which either mark or can receive impressions: film, fine tip flairs, baby wipes, khaki thread, nipples. Film receives the marks of light, traces of images that can then be transferred to photographic paper. Yet until the film is developed the image is suspended in darkness in an indefinite interval. There are other kinds of film: film as in the skin on a cup of hot milk—this is Kristeva's example of the abject—or film as an obscuring fog. Both are white surfaces that receive impressions. The skin of milk leads us both to feces (baby wipes) and nipples (milk). Fine tip flairs are markers, although the pun on flares suggests pants and may lead us to khaki thread. DuPlessis notes one of the subjects of her poem is "creating marks: pen, smudge, letters, things that make marks or take impressions (Baby wipes)" (*Tabula Rosa* 85). Nipples suggest a darker smudge of skin but also perhaps there is an indirect reference to Cixous's rhetorical invocation of a writing in white letters, "Letters are canal-/ized as white foams/zagging, a fissure on the/sheet." The khaki thread returns us to the trope of weaving and stitching as a kind of writing which leads back to Ovid and his metamorphoses, where women resort to these traditional arts as subversive communication. Philomela: "Cunningly she set up her threads on a barbarian loom and wove a scarlet design on a white ground, which pictured the wrong she had suffered" (Ovid 150). She appears a few pages later "And in the space between entropy/and arousal,/Philomel,/or, longing for liquid/song."

The scarlet threads Philomela uses to weave a message of her suffering against a white background are picked up throughout "Writing" in the recurrent traces of red, pink, rose signs. One of its subjects is the menstrual cycle, and

DuPlessis notes that in "Writing" there is, intermittently, "an almost unfollowable flash of (flesh of) red or a related color. Red is the trace or signal of otherness. Signalling like that (red flag) is probably one of the more traditional aspects of this poem. Of this writing" (85). Red returns us to Trinh, where red is the interval of impurity and a symbol of ambivalence that evades binary divisions, working away at a patriarchal foundation. DuPlessis effects a similar multiplicity in her exploration of various kinds of red markings, red as a dark gush that rends the page. I've already noted the rose weathered from the page. Red also appears in her suggestion of cuts, of mastectomies (59), of red tickets (for a baseball game or a concert?) (61), and of accidentally sewing a scrap of red into a quilt: "inserted an 'unmatching' background slash" (63). There is the strawberry worked free of the jelly (the clot, the miscarriage). There is a reference to St. Lucy, patron saint of sight, with her eyeballs trailing red tissue: "little eyes on the plate, saint/carries her staring obvious odd place/trail of whispy/red in a white/space" (74). St. Lucy, by tradition, is a virgin martyr who, upon refusing a suitor is ordered to be "violated in a brothel, but she was made miraculously immovable" (*Oxford Dictionary of Saints* 304). This is analogous to Philomela who weaves the wrongs she has suffered, scarlet on a white background.

"Writing" ends with a description of the insertion of a tampon:[16]

> White telescope inside
> slides
> a packet of batting
> me part is fulled with paper (82)

The writer is "fulled with paper." Paper receives marks; the body is infiltrated by signs. The taboo description or insertion of the tampon into the poem indicates the project DuPlessis has in mind, of a writing which ruptures (the darkest gush, the period as both textual and organic mark), which considers the most minute detail, and in particular, the experience of women and the ways in which literary works encode gender relations. The colour red, or rose, also appears in the title, *Tabula*

[16] DuPlessis asks whether her description of the insertion of a tampon is the "fourth, maybe the sixth/tampax in writing?" (83). In *The Pink Guitar* she suggests that the first description of this process may be found in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook.*

Rosa, an allusion to the *tabula rasa* or blank slate first mentioned in Aristotle and developed by Locke to describe a theory of mind. The rose-tinted play on this blank slate indicates that the smallest cells are stained with culture. We are "dunked in the culture, stained with it, the little vascicles, fascicles of 'self.' All cells are cultural cells" (170). No surface is blank. Her words are dyed red. Writing as feminist practice involves then particular attention to the *rosa* in the palimpsestic overwriting of a patriarchal text.

Throughout *The Pink Guitar* DuPlessis explores a variety of models which might describe her vision of writing as a feminist practice, models which are flexible enough to suggest emotional texture, polyvocality, and able to hold multiple positions in some kind of non-hierarchic pattern. Models described include the patchwork, the quilt, the tote-bag, the journal, forms which allow for contradiction, nonlinear movement, forms which are nonhierarchical, fragmentary, and multiply-centered, with these centres distributed across its surface. As DuPlessis notes, she seems to be describing to a certain extent the experience of female orgasm and the "multifocal female body" (8). She gives two examples: Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* and Virginia Woolf's description of her diary. Wittig's novel is described as a verbal quilt, where her multiple lists and series of objects—fruits, scents, women's names, body parts—become a "radical parataxis" in which a joining of parts is made possible without subordination.

Similarly, Woolf is quoted as saying she would like her journal "'to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through'" (qtd. in DuPlessis 9). This is contrasted with Pound, who began with the "rag bag" or a mess of fish as model for a series of poems but eventually rejected this for "the form of *Analects*, of codes, a great man's laws. *The Cantos*" (9). A draft suggests the potential for a new arrangement of its material. A draft is never static, it never presents itself as the final word, the law. Such forms as the quilt or the capacious hold-all are "holistic" and allow for an apparent nonselection where selection would imply

censorship of "the unknown, the between, the data, the germ, the interstitial, the bit of sighting that the writer cannot place" (10)

Trinh places similar value on the interstitial, on the interval of impurity—the diary, the rag-bag, the mess of fish, the laundry bag, all are potentially impure. Rupture of the cultural hegemony is sought at the level of form in a feminist writing practice; traditional binaries are dismantled (art/life, creativity/'high' art, journal/art, artifact/experience). Wittig's *Les Guérillères* is said to resemble a quilt. I've also suggested that it resembles a mosaic. Daphne Marlatt's *Readings from the Labyrinth*, while ostensibly a collection of theoretical writings, is interspersed with fragments from her diaries, letters, reproductions of conference programs, and personal photographs, so that the overall effect is to infiltrate a theoretical language with the experiences and perceptions of her daily life. Similarly, Trinh's own theoretical writing is porous, including stills from her films, as well as the generous inclusion of quotations and the recounting of stories from other writers and cultures. Brossard's *L'Amèr* constantly surprises with its shifts in form, from short prose descriptions of her family life to quotations from other writers to experimental prose-poems that expand the possibilities of the Figure of Woman. DuPlessis's own essays in *The Pink Guitar* are presented as fragmentary, as if pottery shards she pieces together searching for a lost form.

It is the palimpsest however, the *tabula rosa*, with its poststructural textual allusions, that provides for DuPlessis "the visual image of the situation of writing" (86), while writers such as Brossard, Marlatt, and Cixous frequently use a matrix to describe their texts. I turn then in my Conclusion to the palimpsest and the matrix as models for a feminist poetics.

Conclusion: Two Models

The book has somehow to be adapted to the body [. . .].
—Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own* (78)

Palimpsest

In the process of researching and writing this thesis I have been thinking about the models offered to describe both the practice and 'scene' of feminist writing, whether this scene is the text, the body (the female body, a body of language, of ideas), or the writing subject. As I noted at the end of the last chapter, such models are sometimes consonant with poststructural models, and have included the quilt,[1] a woven fabric or tapestry (text as texture), the journal,[2] and a container or "capacious hold-all."[3] All of these models are appealing, particularly as they revise cultural forms traditionally associated with women. The palimpsest and the

[1] The quilt allows for individual pieces of material to be stitched together into new patterns; in its fabrication it suggests the coming together of a community of women and a recycling of second-hand materials. In terms of contemporary literary theory, this model, along with that of the text as texture, as woven fabric, suggests intertextuality, polylogue, and heteroglossia.

[2] The journal form is intimate and processual, allowing for a gathering of often wildly divergent observations, so that grocery lists and events in the news might be interspersed with glimpses of the writer's experiences and emotions.

[3] In "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986) Ursula K. LeGuin describes stories as containers that hold things, analogous to the invention of containers that allowed nomadic peoples to gather food and other objects. (A poetics of gathering). She writes of an alternative narrative of human evolution which emphasizes the significance of gathering in the evolution of the species over the sporadic if more spectacular hunting of large game: "If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf [. . .] and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter [. . .] and then next day you probably do much the same again—if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all" (168). In this essay LeGuin describes her own narrative strategies in the writing of science fiction, noting that in what I have called a poetics of gathering it may be difficult but not impossible to "make a gripping tale of how we wrested the wild oats from their husks" (169). For LeGuin, the novel form is conceived as "medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us" (169).

matrix, presented as models most systematically by DuPlessis and Brossard respectively, offer a more contested site for feminist writing. In my introduction I quoted Morag Shiach's observation of the double bind women writers find themselves in when it comes to writing the body: the body is where women have been "so ruthlessly placed," yet to respond to this by denying the body is still to "reproduce a structure of oppression." I suggested that this is why the body is a crucial site for the production of feminist theories of writing. The palimpsest, and even more so, I suggest, the matrix, represent this contested status, the difficult relationship of feminist writers to a patriarchal literary tradition. I present here a synthesis then of the various writing practices explored in the previous five chapters by comparing the palimpsest and the matrix.[4]

The palimpsest, from the Greek *palimpsestos* 'scraped again,' denotes a parchment or some other writing surface that has had its earlier writing scraped away in order to accommodate a new text. By extension, the term has come to mean anything with diverse layers apparent beneath the surface. Built into the word is the sense of a text which is impermanent or temporary, as in a draft. In 1706 the *palimpseston* was defined by Phillips as a "sort of Paper or Parchment, that was generally us'd for making the first draught of things, which might be wip'd out, and new wrote in the same Place" (OED). Palimpsests were common when writing materials were scarce; often the earlier text, imperfectly removed, was still visible beneath the new.

Beyond these references to an earlier manuscript culture, the palimpsest also suggests various theories of mind, where the mind is described as a *tabula rasa.* This is relevant for feminists interested in the formation of the gendered subject. The palimpsest also recalls discussions of writing as a debased,

[4] Models, as with metaphors, can govern how we perceive and respond to particular problems. I return again to Haraway, among others, who has worked extensively on the tropes that prevail in current biological discourse, tropes which may direct the ways in which the scientific community will respond to issues of women's health, the human genome, GMOs, and so on. Haraway herself frequently makes use of literary tropes—writing the body, inscription, deconstruction. Discussions of DNA and the mapping of the human genome frequently use metaphors of writing, which has pertinence for feminist writing practices that are equally interested in the ways in which the body is "written."

externalized form of memory, from Plato's dialogues through Derrida's reading of Freud's "Note on the Mystic Writing Pad."

In the *Theaetetus* Plato has Socrates speak of cognition in terms of a block of wax in the soul, which receives impressions: "we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, in the way in which we take the imprints of signet rings. Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know so long as the image remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget and do not know" (Plato 67). The model of the block of wax is introduced by Socrates as a way of discussing the connection between perception and knowledge.[5] Similar images of the mind as a blank slate have been used by the philosophers Bonaventura, Duns Scotus, and John Locke. Bonaventura suggested that minds are like blank tablets, inscribed by ordinary experience. Duns Scotus used the phrase *tabula nuda* to express a similar concept. John Locke, in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, argued that the "individual begins in the world as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, on which experience writes" (Reese 415-6). Memory has often been described in terms of writing, as in a wax tablet inscribed by a stylus. Writing is then considered as an external supplement to memory, secondary, and hence derivative or debased.

In "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" Freud seeks a model to describe the two-fold nature of memory which has both an "unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent—even though not unalterable—memory-traces of them" (228). He notes that writing is both a "supplement and guarantee" of memory, and then discusses the relative merits of two writing systems, first, ink on paper, which allows for permanent traces but is quickly exhausted, and second, chalk on slate, which is inexhaustible as it can be wiped clean each time, but bears no permanent trace. He finds however in the *wunderblock*, or 'mystic writing pad,' a more complex model

[5] In *The Book of Memory* Mary Caruthers notes that the *Theaetetus* contains the "earliest explicit use of the seal in wax model for cognition" (21), although this model is not original to Plato. Plato uses the phrase *kérinon ekmagéion* 'block of wax.' Caruthers traces the history of the noun *ekmagéion*, which "has a long career in philosophical writing. Aristotle used it to mean 'matter as a recipient of impressions' [. . .] it is used as a verb by Plato (in *Theaetetus*) and other philosophers to mean 'mould' or 'impress'. It can also mean 'model'" (21).

which accounts for both an unlimited capacity for reception and the retaining of permanent traces.

The mystic writing pad is a device consisting of a slab of "dark brown resin or wax" over which is laid a sheet of transparent celluloid and beneath this, a sheet of waxed paper, both attached by one end to the slab. A stylus is used to write upon the top sheet of celluloid; as the wax sheet beneath is pressed into the wax slab by the pointed edge of the stylus, the "grooves are visible as dark writing upon the otherwise smooth whitish-grey surface of the celluloid. If one wishes to destroy what has been written, all that is necessary is to raise the double covering sheet from the wax slab by a light pull, starting from the free lower end [. . .] The Mystic Pad is now clear of writing and ready to receive fresh notes" (229). This is the inexhaustible receptive capacity. The wax slab beneath however retains traces of the impression, therefore the writing is also permanent. For Freud, this effectively models the system *Pcpt.-Cs.;* the wax slab represents the unconscious. While one hand writes on the apparently virgin slate, making permanent impressions in the wax slab beneath, the other hand lifts the combined celluloid and wax sheets away to wipe the slate clean, ready now to receive new impressions. The celluloid, he notes, protects the fragile wax paper beneath from tearing, just as the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* has built-in protection against over-stimulation. The "appearance and disappearance of the writing" is analogous to "the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception" (231).

Derrida observes that in Freud's insistence upon following in a metonymical chain the various metaphors for the psyche—path, trace, and breach, through neurone, light, and wax, he "performs for us the scene of writing. Like all those who write" (229). Derrida finds in Freud's graphic model a description of *écriture,* or *différance.* As Handelman notes, on Derrida's view "[p]erception is inscription. The 'trace,' the sign of the absent other becomes the constituent factor of memory. The mechanism of consciousness is 'deferral'; in the beginning is postponement, not presence" (166). On Freud's description of the celluloid as a protective sheet, Derrida notes, "There is no writing which does not devise some

means of protection, *to protect against itself,* against the writing by which the 'subject' is himself threatened as he lets himself be written: *as he exposes himself*" (224). Writing in a sense can be said to precede consciousness and perception. Here is the poststructural subject written by previously existing codes and texts as she (to introduce the female 'subject') writes. That writing then implies a vulnerability, an exposure, is taken by both Cixous and Trinh in a new direction when they explore the implications of the embodied subject; both insist upon writing and in particular writing the body as scriptive act, as the process of opening oneself to the other. Derrida goes on to note:

> If there were only perception, pure permeability to breaching, there would be no breaches. We would be written, but nothing would be recorded; no writing would be produced, retained, repeated as legibility. But pure perception does not exist: we are written only as we write, by the agency within us which always already keeps watch over perception, be it internal or external. The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a *system* of relations between strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world. Within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found. (226-7)

Here he describes a palimpsest; we have seen feminist variations of this poststructural expression, when Trinh asserts that writing is an unending process that seeks to create "an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go" (*Woman* 35) or when DuPlessis insists, "But always prior inscriptions. Incessant marking. A writing whose condition is over writing" (*Pink* 143). Yet there is a difference, and this is the preoccupation these writers have with the gendered writing subject when 'she' lets 'herself' be written, and what this might entail. The palimpsest then, within this poststructural framework, offers a useful model for a feminist writing practice as it accounts for both a certain resistance the feminist writer encounters, (whether this is society's gender expectations or the texts already produced within a patriarchal literary tradition) and the writer's simultaneous attempt to insert herself within this preinscribed 'scene.' The palimpsest describes the dual process in which she writes while being written; this is the writing subject's receptive capacity and ability to bear a retentive trace. This is DuPlessis's understanding of the palimpsest, and I'll return to this shortly, but

first I want to look at a different, yet relevant, treatment of the palimpsest to describe women's literary production, found in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

Placing a feminist spin on Bloom's anxiety of influence thesis, Gilbert and Gubar describe the predominant aesthetic strategy of the nineteenth century woman writer as palimpsestic, producing texts "whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (73). In creating this palimpsestic text the woman writer subverts "patriarchal literary standards" (73). A poem by Emily Dickinson (a poem to which I'll return at the end of this section) which includes the line, "Infection in the sentence breeds," is read as an allusion to the patriarchal sentence, a sentence which restricts women's access to various poetic, medical, legal, and religious discourses, and "infects" their literary texts. Women poets are "[d]is-eased and infected by the sentences of patriarchy" (71), and so they replicate inherited literary influences on a superficial level, yet undercut this patriarchal surface by embedding within their texts a deeper, repressed, "less socially acceptable" meaning.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) is read as emblematic of this palimpsestic production. The narrator, a writer ordered to take a rest cure by her physician-husband, is placed in the attic nursery of an ancestral mansion, where she becomes obsessed with the sulphurous wallpaper that hangs in patches across the walls, a wallpaper that "surrounds the narrator like an inexplicable text, censorious and overwhelming as her physician husband" (*Madwoman* 90). As she spends more time in the room studying this wallpaper-text, she comes to realize that in certain lights, the wallpaper resembles the bars of a cage, behind which lurks the shadowy figure of a woman trying to escape. As she slips into madness she begins to peel away the wallpaper to allow the woman to escape. Gilbert and Gubar read the wallpaper as the patriarchal literary tradition that has sentenced women to confinement, while the shadowy figure confined within is, in her gradual attempt to creep each day further and further out of her prison "not unlike the progress of nineteenth-century literary women out of the

texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority" (91). In this image, they imply that the palimpsestic strategy then is only temporary; as the wallpaper-text is removed, the woman writer gains more and more freedom and will presumably no longer need to resort to embedding in her texts a repressed feminine or feminist subtext.

DuPlessis, by contrast, suggests that the palimpsest is inescapably the scene of writing. Showalter concurs when she adapts the Ardeners' model of muted and dominant groups to describe the literary production by women of "double-voiced discourse," that is, texts which always reproduce both muted and dominant cultural heritages (263). The wild zone of this model she reads as the "open spaces" of Gilbert and Gubar's reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper," a "playful abstraction" and an "idyllic enclosure," a virginal space, a blank page. Wittig suggests a similar yearning for such a space when her *guérillères* call for a return to ground zero. But as I have argued in earlier chapters, the wild zone in the feminist poetics I describe here is not so much blank page or playful abstraction as it is a crucial conceptual space, a space which I have variously explored as the fragment and the margin in DuPlessis, as the interval and interstice in Trinh, as the lacuna in Wittig, as the zone of non-sense in Brossard, as the space of deferral in Cixous, as the footnote that runs along the bottom of the page. These are spaces that exist within the patriarchal fabric yet allow for the conceptual leaps necessary to create new paradigms, a position which is consonant with the moderate version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which would allow for "alternative categorizations" and "conceptual revolutions and conversions," only made possible by moving outside of the habits of language (forensics, the language of clarity) (Werner 3661). This is why the writers I study here focus on the significance of breaking the "sentence and sequence," and by sentence is meant not only the sentence-as-interdiction, but more importantly for literary production, the sentence-as-grammatical-unit. The sentence can then be said to infect, in the manner of a sympathetic contagion, the patriarchal body. Again, I return to this infection of the sentence shortly, but Dickinson is also of great interest to

DuPlessis, who traces her own breakthrough in her poetics to her interest in the alternate word choices and endings found in Dickinson's manuscripts.

"Oil," a poem which has appeared twice in DuPlessis's books of poetry (once in *Wells* and once in *Tabula Rosa*) she speaks of as a "seed" for the new poetics she was developing. In her journal in September 1978 she wrote, "*Tremendous* idea about 'Oil'—write it in two versions! Do an 'alternative'—a second ending just like Dickinson" ("Darkest Gush" 1). Here also is the seed of her interest in the palimpsest as the scene of feminist writing. By offering two endings, the "struggle for the page" is made visible (2). Words are always palimpsested. Standard poetic techniques select one word for one space on the page; a selection is snapped into place from within the paradigmatic axis. Yet the structuralist conception of the sign teaches us that the range of possibilities are not only present as shadows or traces, but essential for the production of meaning. To offer an alternate word, or an alternate ending, is to create a space of indeterminacy (an interval, a lacuna, a space of deferral) and to challenge any one dominant textual tradition or meaning. It is also to acknowledge the palimpsested space itself and the presence of a dominant tradition, for in this poetics there is no blank page. In her reading of the poetry of Beverly Dahlen, DuPlessis notes that the text is a site "where language (and thus social registers and discourses) constantly overwrites and whispers the otherness of half-seen, shadowy words. An 'it,' a space half-entered" (*Pink* 112). The poststructural influence is clear; there is emphasis on the trace, unlimited semiosis, and multiplicity. She also notes Bakhtin's observation that language is "'populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others'" (117); she privileges a reading of the world for such traces—a poetics of an impossible gathering.

Tabula Rosa, in its form, also alludes to the palimpsest, and necessarily then to the earliest models of cognition and perception, from Plato's waxed tablet in the *Theaetetus* to Locke's *tabula rasa* and Freud's mystic writing pad. In chapter 5 I noted the rose weathered from the page in "Writing" may be a reference to the paper mill at the Fontaine de Vaucluse that manufactures paper in which flowers are embedded. To write across such a textured surface would

necessarily affect the form and spacing of letters and words on the page. Here is a palpable allusion to the way in which gender conventions embedded within the lyric tradition offer opposition and obstacles to the feminist writer who seeks to write lyrics. In her revised "History of Poetry" in Part 1 of *Tabula Rosa*, where she reconstructs poems by Sappho, by Praxilla, and invents others (such as "Crowbar,") DuPlessis enacts the scene of feminist writing. In Part 2, which contains "Writing," as well as Drafts 1 and 2, she continues with her new poetics which emphasizes process, marginality, and the meaningful fragment, and employs a range of disruptive strategies to break up the habits of language. *Rosa* 'rose' (a feminine noun meaning the flower), bears traces of the word it writes through, *rasa* 'scraped, scratched out, erased.' In the substitution of a noun for an adjective, DuPlessis also employs parataxis, where the *tabula*, a feminine noun meaning any surface which is inscribed, such as a 'plank, board, writing tablet, picture, painting, map, votive tablet,' is now modified by a second feminine noun, *rosa*, which also bears for both French and English speakers the tints of rose and pink, colours conventionally associated with women, now reclaimed to declare a new feminist poetics at work on the already worked surface of the *tabula* or page.

One of the strengths of the palimpsest then for a feminist poetics is its ability to model the feminist engagement with a poststructural conception of words and texts. It also engages with feminist models of women's literary production of the 70s and 80s such as Gilbert and Gubar's use of the palimpsest to suggest the anxiety of patriarchal influence and Showalter's cultural model of difference in which she describes women's texts as carrying a "double-voiced discourse." DuPlessis and Brossard both invoke the palimpsest when they describe their own writing practice, Brossard implicitly in her model of the spiral to describe the incursion of women cultural workers into a dominant field, and DuPlessis explicitly and systematically in *The Pink Guitar.*

There are however two characteristics of the writing practices I describe here which I feel the palimpsest is less able to accommodate: the emphasis placed on process and becoming over telos; and the engagement to a greater or less extent with the body in language. The palimpsest is I think a fairly static model to

account for this emphasis on process, on drafts and constant renewal. This might at first seem surprising, if we imagine the constant act of scraping away the surface of a piece of vellum to clear the surface to receive each new draft, or think of Freud emphasizing the one hand writing on the surface of the mystic pad while the other lifts away the surface to prepare it for new inscription. Yet the palimpsest as an inscribed parchment or mystic pad, as with a quilt or a woven textile, still suggests a static artifact. I noted in my conclusion to chapter 2 that Roudiez, in his description of a text as woven texture, also cautions against conceiving of text as a static object but rather as an on-going process. I explain in the following section why I feel the matrix is better able to model this process and this is connected very much to the second limitation that I find in the palimpsest, which is its lack of corporeal allusion. The palimpsest does suggest skin: parchment, vellum, Kiki's luscious white back like a page of paper across which the patriarchal codes are written.[6] But again, the matrix also interests me as a model because in its etymological history it bears traces of the female body and the interaction of this body with various bodies of language, crucial for a feminist poetics. The matrix is especially appealing as a model when combined with a viral conception of the word, of the sentence as infection which recodes bodies of language:

> A Word dropped careless on a Page
> May stimulate an eye
> When folded in perpetual seam
> The Wrinkled Maker lie
>
> Infection in the sentence breeds
> We may inhale Despair
> At distances of Centuries
> From the Malaria—

A conventional reading of this poem might produce the following narrative: words and poems outlive the writer who produced them and can still produce

[6] Elizabeth Grosz, in her *Volatile Bodies*, seeks to demonstrate how "[a]ll the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface. Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds" (vii). The palimpsest as a model then is also consonant with her challenging conception of a "corporeal feminism" which she models on the Möbius strip.

profound emotional disturbances in the reader. Words have a long afterlife, a life suggested by the drop on the page, as in a drop of blood, and in the image of words as germs that breed. Gilbert and Gubar offer a feminist reading of this poem as an acknowledgement in the Bloomian sense of those ghosts and guests that "inhabit literary texts." The sentence is described then as a weapon wielded by a patriarchal authority in a program of "germ warfare:" sentences are conceived as breeding germs that infect women writers, a breathing in of 'Despair'. Dickinson, they argue, saw that literary texts could be "coercive, imprisoning, fever-inducing" (52). This leads to their reading of the "Yellow Wall-Paper" for its image of a woman imprisoned within a patriarchal text. In Dickinson's words, she is "folded in perpetual seam."[7] The choice of imagery in Dickinson's poem resonates with the frequent imagery of death, decay, and the forensic detail, particularly in Trinh, Cixous, and Wittig. And I have suggested that such imagery, along with other textual strategies which seek to break the sentence and sequence, works away as an irritant, a virus, words as viral which can effect a sympathetic contagion of a patriarchal corpus. Where Gilbert and Gubar suggest the sentence-as-interdiction works as a germ that infects the woman writer (an anxiety of influence), I suggest the sentence-as-grammatical unit works within a feminist poetics as a germ or virus which infects the patriarchal text.[8] The sentence as virus can be further developed within a model for the scene of feminist writing that incorporates the body, and so I turn now to the matrix, in the hopes that a comparison of these two complementary models will provide a richer description of the experimental feminist writing practices I

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[7] I suggest a third, complementary reading of the poem as structural allegory: the Author (the Wrinkled Maker) is absorbed by the codes and conventions of the text (a perpetual seam). The reader is now implicated in the production of meaning; each reading enacts a variety of codes and texts in which the poem is embedded.

[8] Showalter also emphasizes the sentence-as-interdiction over the sentence-as-grammatical-unit, although she doesn't use these terms, in her "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." For example, she notes that in her draft essays on writing (collected in *The Pargeters*) Woolf protested against the various interdictions women writers have faced. Yet Showalter makes no mention of Woolf's equally strong interest in formal innovation: her plan for *The Pargeters* in which fictional scenes would be interspersed with theoretical essays, is a case in point. The theoretical drafts were eventually removed and *The Years*, Woolf's most popular novel in her day, was the result. This oversight in the significance of formal innovation and the sentence-as-grammatical-unit suggests a preference for realistic conventions in fiction over experimental poetry and prose.

have explored in the previous chapters.

Matrix

As with the palimpsest, the matrix has a rich history grounded in classical philosophical thought; however in the case of the matrix, this is a history in which women have been aligned with formlessness and chaos out of which a masculine form emerges. I outlined in chapter 2 that in Nicole Brossard's *L'Amèr* the term *matrix* is used as a trope for the female body, the pregnant body, the mother, Woman, all as these concepts are symbolically fixed by patriarchy within a field of language. This can be thought of as the patriarchal matrix—a body of patriarchal thought and theory, as well as the linguistic-ideological field which sustains it. To employ the matrix then as a model for a feminist writing practice is to claim a heavily contested site.

Matrix, from the Latin *mater* 'mother,' originally denoted a "female animal used for breeding" and, in later Latin, "womb." The French *matrice* still carries this latter meaning. From the common stem *mater* came a constellation of resonant terms in both French and English languages—maternal, *maternel*, maternity, *maternité*, matriculate, matrix, matron, *matrone,* madrepore, metropolis, *métropole* (from the Greek *mētēr* 'mother'), material, *matière,* matter, and the Greek earth goddess Demeter.[9]

The flexibility of a term which, in the abstract, referred to a point or source of origin, led to a range of definitions encompassing everything from organic structures to typographical moulds, truth-tables, and electronic circuits. The first five definitions in the OED are: "1. The uterus or womb. Also occas. used for ovary, esp. with reference to oviparous animals [. . .]. 2.a. A place or medium in which something is 'bred,' produced or developed [. . .]. b. A place or point of origin and growth [. . .]. c. The formative part of an animal organ [. . .]. d.

[9] Etymology and associated words taken from the *Petit Robert*, the OED, the *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* 1992 and 2000. All cited definitions and sample quotations come from the OED (2 vols) unless otherwise stated.

Bot. The body on which a fungus or lichen grows." As such the matrix is a source of sustenance and nourishment, origin of life—"The partes of the Female are the wombe and the rest which by a general name are called matrices" (Crooke *Body of Man* 1615)—and the earth, implicitly coded as female: "The earth is the matrix wherein seeds sprout" (Chambers *Cycl.* 1727-52) and "*La terre, inépuisable et suprême matrice.*" (HUGO). In Botany, *matrix* refers to the body that nurtures a fungus or lichen, while in Biology it denotes the "substance situated between animal or vegetable cells," as in "The structureless substance and fibres form what is called the matrix of the tissue" (Mivart *Cat* 1881). Here, the matrix is structureless, nurturing source out of which form and structure emerge. More generally, the matrix becomes any "material in which something is enclosed or embedded (as for protection or study)" (Merriam Webster), whether it be the womb which envelopes and nourishes, the pith or marrow of a tree or plant, or the earth itself which harbours gold, emeralds, seeds—Demeter's domain.

These definitions which identify organic, biological concepts appear to link the term *matrix* with conventionally feminine characteristics: the female matrix is the point of origin, that which nurtures, sustains, breeds. It is aligned with the corporeal and, by extension, with matter, material, the earth, and is lacking in definite structure or form. Out of its structurelessness emerges structure, out of its indeterminate array of variables are produced definitive products and sums. Technological applications of the term suggest a quality of excess and multiplicity via endless duplication: the mother matrix mass-produces LPs, the printing mould generates type. In this lexicographical notation, no hierarchy of values is necessarily invoked which might suggest that these feminine characteristics are in some way negatively valued. However, philosophical and narratological models employ the feminine matrix as an inferior but necessary formlessness out of which a superior form, coded as male, can emerge.

The *Timaeus* documents a conversation between Socrates and three acquaintances—Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates—which is said to have taken place around the year 425 BC. The previous day, Socrates has outlined his vision

of the ideal society, and the men reunite in order to flesh out his vision in a wide-ranging, eclectic discussion which includes the myth of Atlantis, characteristics of natural phenomena, and an attempt to map out the dimensions of the known universe and to identify its origins. Plato's account here of a creator-god influenced the Neo-Platonists and prefigured the Judeo-Christian God. A Latin translation of its first 53 chapters by Chalcidius survived "into the Dark and early Middle Ages, and in that sense its influence on European thought can be said to be continuous from its publication until the present day" (Lee 7).

Out of their preliminary attempts to describe the nature of a world which consists of that which is (the eternal forms) and that which becomes (the world as perceived by the senses), emerges a shadowy, ill-defined figure variously identified as a third form—"difficult and obscure" (67), a receptacle of becoming, a material or space. It is further developed within a three-fold model of the world which consists of "that which becomes, *that in which it becomes*, and the model which it resembles" (italics added 67). This shadowy space or *chora* is "that in which it becomes."[10] In his first vague outlines of this space, Timaeus gropes for words to describe it, from "third form" to "receptacle" to "nurse of all becoming and change" (67) and "the natural receptacle of all bodies" (69). It is an obscure, mysterious receptacle, without feature or form. He then turns to metaphor in order to describe its nature, offering the example of a man modeling geometrical shapes in gold: while the shapes might be melted down and remodeled, the substance out of which the shapes are formed, the gold, is always the same. The *chora* then is like a malleable metal or a "neutral plastic material" which receives all things, "on which changing impressions are stamped by the things which enter it" (69). According to this metaphor, the *chora* is some kind of material capable of receiving the clear impress of the eternal forms. A second metaphor is then presented, identifying the *chora* with the female body and its maternal function:

[10] The term *chora* 'area, space' is closely related to the terms *hyle* 'matter, material,' *hypodoche* or *hypodechomene* 'receptacle,' and *topos* 'place.' Aristotle identifies *hyle* as that which is and is not a substance and which receives the *eidos*. It is not like a substance because it lacks two chief characteristics, "it is neither a separate existent [. . .] nor an individual" (Peters 90). Aristotle saw *hyle* as analogous to Plato's *chora*: both are matter which receive form. This opposition of form with matter is preserved by the Stoics in their distinction between "an active (*poein*) and passive (*paschein*) principle" (90).

> We may indeed use the metaphor of birth and compare the receptacle to the mother, the model to the father, and what they produce between them to their offspring; and we may notice that, if an imprint is to present a very complex appearance, the material on which it is to be stamped will not have been properly prepared unless it is devoid of all the characters which it is to receive. For if it were like any of the things that enter it, it would badly distort any impression of a contrary or entirely different nature when it received it as its own features would shine through. So anything that is to receive in itself any kind of character must be devoid of all character. (69-70)

Here the matrix is a female maternal receptacle devoid of all character which receives the forms, now coded as male, the father. The neutrality or blank quality of the *chora* is emphasized several times in the dialogue, compared at one point to a liquid which must be odourless in order to receive scent and to any receiving structure which must necessarily be smooth. The female body is presented as a passive, unresisting medium receptive to a male imprint. The *chora* is further described as invisible and formless, "all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp" (70). To return to the three-fold distinction of the world, it becomes apparent it is coded by a hierarchized gender binary. The forms, or that which is (being), the eternal forms, are indestructible and imperceptible to the senses, rather, "the object of thought" (71). These are coded as male. The copies, or that which becomes, are in constant motion and can be apprehended by sensation (71). Space, or the *chora*, that in which the world becomes, is also indestructible, but is apprehended only through "a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in" (71). This "primitive chaos" not directly apprehended by thought, rather by inference, is coded female. The male-coded forms are directly connected to structure, reason, and thought, while the female-coded *chora* is aligned with formlessness, "spurious reasoning," and matter (a receiving medium, a scentless liquid, a neutral plastic material). In light of Aristotle's theory of the generation of animals and the Pythagorean table of opposites, it becomes clear that not only are these oppositions coded with a gender binary, but are assigned a hierarchy in which the male forms are perceived to be superior.

On Aristotle's view, the male animal is the formal or moving cause of the generation of animals and the female animal is the material cause, by which he means that the female provides the matter out of which the offspring will grow. This is a passive substance analogous to the neutral plastic of the *chora*, able to receive clear impressions. The male provides the form (definition) and initial movement necessary to generate offspring ("Generation" *passim*). The male is agent/mover while the female is patient/moved (241). Aristotle goes to great pains to establish that the male contributes no matter at all to this process, merely a "capability in the semen" (242).[11] He is likened to a carpenter who leaves no part of himself or of his tools in the wood which he forms: "in those that do emit it the seed is no part of the fetus that is produced, just as nothing comes away from the carpenter to the matter of the timber, nor is there any part of carpentry in the product, but the shape and the form are produced *from* the carpenter *through* the movement *in* the matter" (243). The seed is merely a tool which imparts form; the female is likened to the wood which is formed, an agentless patient. Superior value is then assigned to the formal or moving cause: "the proximate moving cause (in which is present the definition and the form) is better and more divine in its nature than the matter" (245).

Marguerite Deslauriers argues that Aristotle exhibits a gender bias in his theory of the generation of animals in that he has no scientific or philosophical basis for assigning the material cause[12] to the female animal: "It is clear that Aristotle believes not only that there is a difference in the contributions of male and female to generation, but also that there is a hierarchy between these contributions, the hierarchy between matter and form. It is also clear that he places the female lower on that hierarchy by identifying her with matter rather than with form" (156-7). This is in spite of his apparent philosophical commitment to the sameness of essence between the sexes (158). Once again, as

[11] The male is able to produce a greater degree of natural heat than the female, and is therefore able to concoct blood into semen. In the female, not enough heat is generated to concoct semen, therefore her 'seed' remains at the level of blood, that is, menses (Deslauriers 148).

[12] She notes that some have attempted to argue that menstrual blood appears more like matter than does semen, but argues that semen also has a material substance and therefore Aristotle cannot have made an "innocent empirical observation" on which to base his evaluation of male and female contributions (157).

with Plato's *chora*, matter and matrix are coded as inferior and female, neutral, passive, without form.

This hierarchy is most clearly mapped out in the 6th century B.C. Pythagorean Table of Opposites as described in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (986a):

Finite-Infinite	Resting-Moving
Odd-Even	Straight-Curved
One-Many	Light-Darkness
Right-Left	Good-Bad
Male-Female	Square-Rectangular

In these ten pairs of opposites can be seen the skeletal outline of the classical matrix which relies heavily on a hierarchized binary structure. According to Geneviève Lloyd, "femaleness was explicitly linked with the unbounded—the vague, the indeterminate—as against the bounded—the precise and clearly determined" (3).[13] The terms on the left hand side of the table—finite, male, straight, square, and so on—are superior to those on the right because of the "primary Pythagorean contrast between form and formlessness" (3). The terms on the right-hand side of the table—infinite, many, female, moving—are precisely those characteristics which define Plato's *chora*, which, it is now apparent, is coded as inferior formlessness, a female receptacle out of which superior male forms evolve. G.E.R. Lloyd, in his study of polarity and analogy in ancient Greek thought, points out the negative and inferior terms (in which the female is included) are all connected in some way to that which is unlimited—that is, the limited/unlimited binary structures all the other terms (96). He sees the Pythagorean Table of Opposites as having antecedents in the earliest pre-Socratic Greek thought, including Alcamaeon, Anaximander, Parmenedes, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras (16), as well as in Plato's distinction between Being and Becoming, and in Aristotle's physical treatises where "right, male, above, front, hot and dry would certainly appear on one side, set over against left, female, below, back, cold and wet" (64). In the *Metaphysics* "one of each pair is a positive term, the other a (mere) privation" (63). Various physical accounts of generation

[13] Geneviève Lloyd offers her feminist analysis of ancient Greek thought in *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy.*

identify the left testicle and left-hand side of the womb with the production of a female embryo. For example, the Hippocratic treatise *On Superfetation* suggests that "seed from the right testicle produces male children, seed from the left females" while all the early writers assumed "*male* and *right* are connected and so too *female* and *left*" (50). It is in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, Lloyd argues, that we find the first systematic presentation of this hierarchy of binaries which are ultimately founded on the limited/unlimited opposition (63), and that this tendency towards oppositional schema had influence into the Middle Ages.[14]

Regarding this tendency of classifying natural phenomena into hierarchized opposites, he observes two general assumptions embedded in the system: "(1) that the two classes are incompatible (not *both* the one *and* the other), and (2) that they are exhaustive alternatives (*either* the one *or* the other)" (94). This results in a conceptual inability to perceive "that some of these pairs are not exhaustive alternatives (like odd and even) but *admit intermediates*" (italics added 96). From the shadowy *chora* which finds embodiment in the maternal body, the patriarchal matrix finds its most abstract and earliest systematic expression in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, a codification of the ancient Greek emphasis on dichotomous or polarized thought as found in physical and metaphysical treatises, a system which does not admit intermediates, and defines the 'inferior' terms as "(mere) privation."

These hierarchized binaries find expression in narrative. Twentieth-century narratological theory codifies the patterns wherein the hero (male) enters a dark, confined space (female), only to emerge victorious. As Jurij Lotman describes it:

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[14] "In alchemical literature, we meet a theory based on the principles sulphur and mercury, which were generally conceived as opposites: sulphur is the spirit of combustibility, mercury that of fusibility, and they were often identified in alchemical writings as the Male and Female principles and referred to cryptically by such titles as Sol and Luna, King and Queen, Osiris and Isis. The sulphur-mercury theory flourished well into the sixteenth century, Tomas Fludd, for example, put forward an elaborate schema of opposites: in cosmology, Heat, Movement, Light, Dilatation and Attenuation are together opposed to Cold, Inertia, Darkness, Contraction and Inspissation, and in the microcosm Father, Heart, Right, Eye and Sanguis Vitalis are together opposed to Mother, Uterus, Left Eye and Mucus. The continued attraction of this schema is obvious" (G.E.R. Lloyd 84).

> The elementary sequence of events in myth can be reduced to a chain: entry into a closed space—emergence from it (this chain is open at both ends and can be endlessly multiplied). Inasmuch as closed space can be interpreted as 'a cave,' 'the grave,' 'a house,' 'woman' (and, correspondingly, be allotted the features of darkness, warmth, dampness) [. . .] entry into it is interpreted on various levels as 'death,' 'conception,' 'return home,' and so on. (Lotman 168)

Teresa de Lauretis's feminist response to this narratological analysis is: "Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (119). This narrative topos is analogous to the *chora*, both of which locate woman as receptacle, nurse, grave, plot-space, matrix, and matter. Language itself can be described as a patriarchal matrix in that it functions as a field or grid which maps out these binaries and types, while at the same time perpetuating them and contributing to their development (Yaguello 8). Patriarchal ideology, whether of the *chora*, the table of opposites, or of the female topos, finds expression through the network of language. The matrix then offers a three-dimensional version (texts as bodies, or culture as a body) of the palimpsest as a preinscribed surface with which a feminist writing practice must contend. These practices, while immersed within a patriarchal text or body of work, must seek out those intervals, interstices, and margins I discussed above, the smallest of conceptual spaces, in order to enter and recode the patriarchal body. This is Brossard's "crossing through the symbol" in order to create rewrite a lesbian or feminist matrix.

While there are limitations with the matrix—unlike the palimpsest, it contains no direct allusion to writing, the manuscript culture, or to the poststructural "scene of writing," an allusion which is significant for all of these writers—it is especially well able to model feminist writing as this on-going process that resists the reduction of a text (or, a conception of the female body) to static artifact. This is directly related to its second strength, its etymological history (matrix as womb, female body, site of origin) which locates these writing practices within the theoretically contested yet crucial space of the body. The body is in continual process of becoming—the regeneration of blood and tissue cells, the shedding of skin cells, hair, the uterine lining, elimination of urine and

feces, the burning of energy (this is the maintenance of the borders of the *corps propre* in Kristeva's terms), as well as the on-going exchange of body or bodies and cultural signs in our constantly evolving conception of the 'body.' These feminist writing practices, especially conscious of this evolving conception, employ the tropes of body as text and text as body, with an emphasis on the role writing plays in this process of exchange.

In *LA* Cixous employs metonymic chains in a linguistic version of the transformations described in *The Book of the Dead* (from heron to lotus-flower to hawk and so on), analogous to the transformations of the body of *la morte* as she emerges from the tomb-womb. As I suggested in chapter 1, *LA* in its entirety, and as one of a long continuum of texts produced by Cixous, can be thought of as an attempt to construct a resonating chain of words which redescribe the female body newly born from the matrix-womb of her text. Yet, in keeping with her development of the Derridean concept of *écriture* in an *écriture féminine*, this body is never absolutely defined, rather, it is in a continual process of being written.

Wittig also alludes to the ancient Egyptian burial rites in *Le Corps lesbien* as she exhumes the body of the beloved, a body which is variously a black sea, a black swan, a single-celled organism, a sphinx of clay, a stone Niobe. Again, this is reminiscent of the chains of traditional metaphors for the vulva, vagina, and clitoris in *Les Guérillères*. Niobe's punishment by the gods for an overweening pride in her beauty and in her fertility, is described in Ovid. With her fourteen children and her husband slain, "grief turned her to stone. The breeze could not stir her hair, the blood drained from her colourless face, her eyes stared in an expression of fixed sorrow. There was nothing to show that this image was alive" (142). Even her internal organs are turned to stone. Stone Niobe and Sphinx of clay represent the image of Woman within a classical literary tradition; many of the transformations the women in Ovid undergo are the result of an escape from patriarchal violence. Through her metonymic presentation of the emergence of this Woman into a lesbian subject, Wittig attempts through the writing process a metamorphosis of liberation.

Trinh begins her *Woman, Native, Other* with an invocation of a story that "never really begins nor ends," and situates its telling in a "remote village" where the people have gathered to discuss an important issue, yet, "the discussion does not have to begin at a precise time, since it does not break in on daily village life but slips naturally into it" (1). And so men continue to play a game, a woman bathes her child, and the discussion is woven into the life of the village, which carries on. This is a story whose "differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence" (2). Here is the same interest in process that informs Cixous's writing. Trinh notes that this story is passed on from generation to generation and is older than her body or the body of her grandmother.

The communality of the process of story telling is echoed in Brossard's model of the spiral whereby women, influenced by developments in feminist cultural production are, like atoms or molecules, excited by this movement as in a sympathetic transmission of energy, leading to further movement. The spiral of their process supercedes the closed patriarchal circle of absolute definition. This sense of an unfurling beyond any absolute definition of woman is also present in Tostevin's *Gyno-Text*, which she situates at the "ridge where becoming of subject is affirmed and developed through process." Marlatt, as with Tostevin and Trinh, emphasizes writing as an unending process in her "musing with mothertongue," tracing the constant seeding and unfurling of words in new directions—"chaotic language leafings" (13).

DuPlessis similarly conceives of writing as on-going practice, signaling this in the title of her *Drafts.* She writes that these poems "behave as if they were provisional, that is, as if they were 'drafts' of some other, or of some larger, work. It is a peculiarity of a draft, generically speaking, that a line, a phrase, a word, a sentence or statement can be temporarily placed in any of several positions within the text" ("Darkest Gush" 8). This suggests a constant circulation, for example, between body and signs in the process of writing. In *Les Guérillères* Wittig also emphasizes the temporary nature of all such transactions in the register, a book open for all the women to write in, a book which undergoes constant revision and

debate over the meanings of words and textual bodies. This is echoed in the French title of her *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*: a *brouillon* is a draft, temporary and fluid and not meant to stand as the last or only word.

The matrix, classically defined as womb, and by extension, the female body, incorporates this sense of process. And it is this corporeal 'base' that I find most productive as modeling the scene of an experimental feminist writing. I refer again to Shiach on the body as contested, and therefore theoretically productive, site for women writers. Woolf's thesis, "The book has somehow to be adapted to the body," is still then a radical statement. In *A Room of One's Own,* it follows her hypothesis of a woman's sentence. She goes on to speculate about women's fiction: what forms, what writing strategies, what sentence, she asks, will women use? These questions "lie in the twilight of the future [. . .] I will only pause here one moment to draw your attention to the great part which must be played in that future so far as women are concerned by physical conditions. The book has somehow to be adapted to the body" (78). She suggests women's books may as a result be "shorter, more concentrated." This is not an essentialist reflection but a reference to the frequently interrupted schedules of a woman writer whose time is divided by other household tasks. Yet more generally, I take her to acknowledge by this statement the complex interaction between body and signs, and the wide range of physical conditions that influence and inform the writing subject.

The matrix, with its corporeal allusions, acknowledges the body as a non-essentialist base for these feminist writing practices which in their emphasis on process, detail this complex exchange between bodies and signs. Cixous explicitly situates her writing in *LA* within the matrix of a womb-tomb. The body is presented as excessive, a surfeit of signs in a metonymic chain of deferral: *matrice, matière, ma terre, mer, mère.* Madeleine Gagnon best summarizes the project of *écriture au féminin* when she writes "Mon corps est mots"—"My body is words." Language is presented by Marlatt as nourishing body; Tostevin explores the trope of text as womb, as chora; Brossard situates the text of *L'Amèr* within the patriarchal *matrice* in order to "traverser le symbole alors que j'écris" (14). Trinh, as with Tostevin, is interested in the site of womb or *kath* as

signifying space that can subvert traditional hierarchized binaries. DuPlessis beautifully expresses this notion of an exchange of body and signs in her reading of the palimpsested image of Kiki of Montparnasse, her body "made sonorous with cultural meanings" (*Pink* 157).

In my Introduction, I suggested that these writing practices—*écriture féminine*, *écriture au féminin*/writing in the feminine, lesbian/political writing, *innécriture*, and writing as feminist practice—were sympathetic, by which I meant not only affinity, but contagion. I have found the term useful for describing the way in which these writers and their texts resonate with one another, in the sense of "communicating their vibrational energy to one another through some medium," where the medium is language, textual bodies. This is Brossard's conception of the excitation caused by women in movement. The concept of affinity is closely aligned with that of contagion, in that the pathological definition of sympathy suggests a process of contagion, whereby one organ or body affects nearby organs or bodies, a form of "instantaneous communication and affinity" (Doane 172). If language and its cultural products or texts are conceived not just as a field or a palimpsest but as a matrix, a patriarchal body susceptible to a sympathetic contagion, then these feminist writing practices provide the necessary contaminant that works away at this body from within.

I have outlined in the previous five chapters the range of strategies that seek to deconstruct or dismantle this patriarchal matrix from within its limits. I have suggested that words are used as viruses and sentences as infectious agents to infect the patriarchal body-text. These strategies break the habitual uses of language, elsewhere described as forensics and the language of clarity: metonymy favoured over metaphor, and the resultant radical parataxis found in a text like *Les Guérillères*; the use of puns and neologisms; a blurring of genre; a use of heteroclite syntax, grammatical 'barbarisms,' and repetition, as in Brossard's *L'Amèr*; a recuperation of blanks, lacunae, margins, and marginal forms; an etymological excavation of words, words as scattered fragments or potsherds.[15]

[15] Writing here I have tried to develop the footnote as visual allusion to both the conceptual space which might weaken the patriarchal fabric—the margin, lacunae, interstice, the space of the interval—and as fragment, an allusion to the discarded remnants of a feminine culture or other

Many of the texts I have studied here explicitly situate themselves within this patriarchal matrix, this contested site, in order to infect and hence rewrite it. Cixous resuscitates *la morte* within the tomb of patriarchal confinement. In *L'Amèr* Brossard describes an internment by the matrice or matrix, which she seeks to reconfigure with her lesbian text, which is "Tout à la fois matrice, matière et production" (14). Tostevin situates the poem cycle *Gyno-Text* within the womb as signifying space, analogous to Kristeva's conception of the chora. Trinh explores the *kath* as the scene of a feminist cultural production, a third space, the cyclical producer of impurity. The rotting corpse of Dyongou Serou is introduced as abject contaminant to infect the patriarchal body. Wittig and DuPlessis do not make such an explicit connection to a matrix, yet the model works equally well as a description of the effects they seek through their deployment of experimental textual strategies. DuPlessis seeks to restring the pink guitar, "And yet I am playing, I am playing. I am playing/with a stringed lever" (*Pink* 159). She turns to the innovative modernist strategies of cultural disturbance. Wittig attempts through writing to "lesbianize" texts and literary tradition; again, the viral metaphor works well here, as if her *j/e* and *elles*, like radical twists of DNA, can enter the patriarchal corpus and lesbianize it from within.

Writing is a material practice. Slender finger bones, attached by sinew and entwined with muscle, wrapped in a thin layer of flesh, hold and direct the movement of a pen or type out characters on a keyboard. Ink soaks into a white page, alphanumeric characters in binary code appear on a screen of light, are burned onto paper. Words are combinations of marks, themselves representations of sounds, breaths, vocalizations, they are received as patterns of light by the eye,

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marginalized texts or traditions that are still being recovered. In this latter, I echo Gilbert and Gubar, particularly in their invocation of the Sibylline leaves of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. The footnote: a bit of rolled bark or leaf used as a container each day; hastily scribbled notes thrown down from a train enroute to the labour camps; twists of paper found in a field of rye, site of an execution; scraps of papyrus bearing the remnants of Sappho's poems. An impossible attempt to trace the offshoots, to collect all the dropped stitches and fallen notes, all the Ms and the As and the fireflies. In China, fireflies were thought to be the companions of students, providing them with light for their night-time studies. To some cultures, they symbolize the souls of the dead.

mouthed and echoed, felt through finger tips. The writer is embodied, is male or female, sexually oriented, of a certain age, scarred or marked by disease, by occupational repetition of gestures or movements, by childbirth. Pregnancy leaves fetal cells in the blood of the mother decades after the child is born, childbirth marks the body—silvery stretch marks, darkening of tissues, scoring of the os coxae. All of these states and experiences which mark the body may be transferred through the process of writing to the text itself, which then carries traces of the writer's embodied status. Writing, far from producing a static, inert text, can be a political action, that is, an action which has some effect in making changes in the social world, just as it can lead to further political activity by others who read and find the text influential. There is a sympathetic connection, by which I mean both affinity and contagion. This is why I have suggested thinking of the text as a matrix in the endless process of becoming, out of which political activity can emerge, particularly if there is a sensitivity to the presence of the body in the text, which can remind us of the physical implications of our metaphysical practices.

Beyond, or as a complement to the text-texture-tissue cluster I outlined in chapter 2, and the conception of a text as a palimpsest, which I explored above, the matrix carries the organic sense of biological processes as well as the cultural generation of signs—matrix can refer both to a printing mold and the intercellular substance in which tissue cells are embedded. Both a printing mold and a cellular matrix are in a constant process of growth and regeneration, of renewal; the printing mold produces endless combinations of letters and words, cells constantly die and are reborn. The origin of the term *matrix* in *mater* itself suggests a process of corporeal becoming from regeneration of humans within the uterus to the quotidian shedding and regeneration of cells. The matrix as metaphor for both body and text allows writers in the feminine to assert the corporeal and the symbolic realms as intimately merged.

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