Writing So To Speak:

The Feminist Dystopia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to highlight a neglected tradition of women's experimentation with the dystopian genre. The dystopia has been marginalised in critical work on speculative fiction as a sub-genre of the utopia; I argue here for a reading of the `bad place' as a distinctive and potentially radical genre. The thesis concentrates on contemporary women's fiction (post-1969) and two issues in particular. In the first part of the study, I focus on texts such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Michèle Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah*, and Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, to examine the ways in which feminist writers use the non-realist form of the dystopia to foreground and challenge the cultural silencing of women. I discuss literary form, narrative authority, and language as especially important areas in this challenge. In the second part, I describe the dystopia as a subversive representational space in which the construction of feminine identity can be re-imagined. To demonstrate this, I consider the representation of the maternal body; feminine desire, and gender and space. Primary texts here include Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains*, Elizabeth Baines' *The Birth Machine*, and Rebecca Brown's *The Terrible Girls*. I am also interested in points of connection between the feminist dystopia and feminist critical theory. My readings of the primary texts also consider feminist theoretical work on language, motherhood, the female body, and desire. An historical overview of the feminist dystopia is provided in the form of a primary bibliography (1877-1993).

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is all my own work and that no portion of it has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

DEDICATION

In memory of my sister Kathleen.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Note: all abbreviations used in this thesis are indicated in footnote references before being used in the text. This list is provided for the convenience of the reader.

N	Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah*
P	Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*
LD	Vlady Kociancich, *The Last Days of William Shakespeare*
HMT	Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
V	Christine Brooke-Rose, *Verbivore*
NT	Suzette Haden Elgin, *Native Tongue*
B	Margaret O'Donnell, *The Beehive*
BM	Elizabeth Baines, *The Birth Machine*
POH	Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*
`Baby'	Kate Wilhelm, `Baby, You Were Great'
H	Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains*
`Chamber'	Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*
M	Pat Califia, *Macho Sluts*
TG	Rebecca Brown, *The Terrible Girls*

Introduction

`A Vortex of Summons and Repulsion'[1] :

Reading the Feminist Dystopia

Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is this zone that we must try to remember today. - Catherine Clement.

In the eyes of this society, such a posture casts her as a victim. But elsewhere?
- Julia Kristeva.

To uncover `somewhere', `elsewhere': Clement and Kristeva articulate the challenge which frames this thesis. The possibility of a `zone' outside of culture yet recuperable, has become an increasingly important project in feminist fiction and theory, and central to non-realist literary narrative, such as utopian, dystopia, fantasy and science fiction. Feminist attention to these metaphoric discursive zones is double-edged. Firstly it recognises that it is to such marginal cultural places that women have been excluded, occupying only, Luce Irigaray has suggested, `the blanks in discourse'.[2] But this uncovering is also concerned with bringing texts and voices of `otherness' from the margins into discourse, and claiming for them a subversive and transforming power.

This project links the work of a number of feminist theorists, the implications of whose work are, I argue, represented and contested in the fictions under discussion here. I am particularly interested in points of connection between the fictional space of the

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[1] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.1.

[2] Cited by Margaret Whitford in *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.

dystopia and debates within feminist theory, and have subsequently selected a number of contemporary primary texts for discussion. My central argument is that we need to look to marginalised, neglected genres and forms in any attempt to re-imagine constructions of identity: in the feminist dystopia, conventional limits of representation are uncovered and called into question. While there remains a need for an historical study of women's experimentation with the dystopia to be written, I am more concerned here to read the texts in terms of their challenge to the cultural silencing of women and the new voices and narratives that are brought into the genre.[3]

Already, my prioritising of the feminist dystopia as a radical representational space is clear, and this is a crucial `point of connection' with recent feminist theory which has attempted to locate alternative discursive realms in which to unravel and re-imagine constructions of identity. Hélène Cixous for example, argues that through writing women must discover `some elsewhere ... in this other place that disrupts social order'.[4] Teresa de Lauretis' work on the `space-off' of filmic texts has foregrounded a representational space which is usually unseen: the space around the frame of the filmic image which is `cut' in production.[5] Julia Kristeva's prioritising of the *semiotic* stage of subjectivity suggests a pre-Oedipal `zone', traces of which constantly question and threaten the symbolic or cultural realm excluding it. In each case, the theorist suggests a space of alterity for thinking through issues of gender and identity; the feminist dystopia also offers such a space. Each of these theorists foreground spaces of *representation*, written

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[3] An historical overview of women's experimentation with the genre is presented in this study in the form of a primary bibliography, 1877-1993. Nan Bowman Albinski's critical survey of utopian and dystopian fiction by women provides useful bibliographies for each decade of the twentieth century, with some plot detail for most of the texts: *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988).

[4] Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 97.

[5] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), p. 25.

or visual, as potential sites of transgression: `the production of an other cognitive space - a space that occupies the realm of the unknown, which is the unrepresentable of totalising thought'.[6] My reading of the feminist dystopia - fictions set in future `bad places' - concentrates on both aspects of such theoretical projects, suggesting that the fictional texts self-consciously occupy a marginal place in order that they might open up subversive textual spaces. It is in such spaces that limits of representation, particularly with regard to the delineation of feminine identity, can be brought into view.

MARGINAL PLACES

The marginality of the contemporary feminist dystopia needs contextualising. Most importantly these fictions are all examples of *feminist genre fiction*: self-consciously feminist rewritings of literary genres and narratives.[7] This kind of writing puts Adrienne Rich's concept of `writing as re-vision'[8] into practice, as the established genre takes on the status of palimpsest - a place for contradiction and contestation, rather than a reiteration of recognised literary codes. `Contradiction' becomes a pivotal motif in both the fictions and critical readings of such texts; genres are seen as fluid and malleable categories, capable of *saying something else:*

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[6] Jane Moore, `An Other Space: a future for feminism?', in Isobel Armstrong (ed.), *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 65-79, (p. 69).

[7] For a discussion of feminist genre fiction, see Helen Carr, *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), and Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). Cranny-Francis includes chapters on feminist subversion of science fiction, detective fiction, fantasy, and the romance.

[8] Rich argues that such rewriting is crucial for women's self-knowledge and resistance to cultural silencing: `Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves'. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (London: Virago, 1980), p. 35.

>...women as writers or readers can rework or subvert genres, either consciously or unconsciously, imagining new possibilities for themselves.[9]

Furthermore, literary genres are recognised as ideological rather than neutral categories, reflecting wider social formations and constituting particular reading and, thus, social subjects:

>Feminist writers must engage with, and contradict, traditional narrative patterning in order to (re)construct texts capable of articulating their marginalised, oppositional positioning - both inside, described by, patriarchal ideology (as the idealist construct, Woman) and outside that discourse...[10]

Within such a politicised context, the literary genre becomes an `arena of struggle',[11] a possible `zone' for challenging exclusion and silencing.

While this is a productive context in which to read the feminist dystopia, the problems and limits of a `(re)constructed' genre text must also be considered. Feminist focus on genre fiction suggests that such literary codes and conventions have a specific ideology: they are seen as sites of textual and sexual power, as conservative and resistant to change. If this is so, is it then possible to `contradict' such patterns? Continuing the analogy of the literary genre as palimpsest, while the original writing may be erased and replaced, the form and structure remain, and these - literary form and structure - are not beyond ideology. It is not a simple process of reversing generic conventions around, or looking at narrative `through a different lens'[12] as comments such as Ellen Friedman's on women's experimental writing might suggest:

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[9] Helen Carr, *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 8.

[10] Ann Cranny-Francis, 1990, p. 15.

[11] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 2. Harlow is referring to fiction written within political conflicts around the world. Her study examines the ways in which literature can become a site of `resistance' to political oppression.

[12] Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 271. Wolf uses the metaphor of a `different lens' to argue that we need to look at history from another perspective which will not exclude marginal voices.

> In subverting the forms of conventional narrative, they subvert the patriarchal social structures these forms reflect. With such structural disruption, the `woman' in the text is liberated from the secret folds of the fiction and comes to inhabit the entire text.[13]

This possible progression from `subverting .. narrative' to liberating `woman' (inside and outside the text) shapes this study: the first part concentrating on the subversion of narrative; the second on `woman' in the text. Crucially, the place of feminist fictions in any subversion of `patriarchal social structures' will be examined. As Rita Felski has argued, the relationships between feminist theory and practice, politics and aesthetics need to be interrogated; it is not enough, she suggests, to identify `the (usually experimental) text as a privileged site of resistance to patriarchal ideology by virtue of its subversion of the representational and instrumental function of symbolic discourse'.[14] What *are* the links between textual subversion and political change? Is it possible to read networks of power in any text as representing wider social power relations in microcosm?

The feminist dystopia does not only situate itself as marginal through its rewriting of a literary genre, however. It is also part of feminist experimentation with *speculative fictions*, in forms such as the utopia, science fiction and fantasy.[15] As I will argue in readings of particular texts, the feminist dystopia has an intertextual relationship with other non-realist forms, the distinctions between which are increasingly dissolved in

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[13] Ellen Friedman, `"Utterly Other Discourse": The Anti-Canon of Experimental Women Writers from Dorothy Richardson to Christine Brooke-Rose', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Special Issue `Feminism and Modern Fiction', 34 (1988), 353-370, (p. 355).

[14] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 4.

[15] There is now a growing body of work on feminist speculative fiction. Marleen Barr's *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1987) attempts to establish a dialogue between such fictions and feminist theory; Frances Bartkowski's *Feminist Utopias* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) studies mainly utopian feminist fiction written between 1969-86. See also: Lucie Armitt (ed.), *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1991); Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1988) and Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

contemporary fiction. The `bad place' of the dystopia can be situated in fictional worlds very close to the `real' - in texts such as Elizabeth Wilson's *The Lost Time Cafe* (1993), which depicts late twentieth century London in a state of decay recognisable from contemporary conditions - or in fantastic realms far removed from current lived experience, as in Suzette Haden Elgin's science fiction world in *Native Tongue* (1984). A number of texts include some combination of these possibilities: Michèle Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) for example, incorporates fictions within fictions to such extent that any distinction between `real' and `fantasy' is rendered impossible to maintain.

It is because of this rewriting of the relationship between such distinct and discrete categories - `real' and `fantastic'[16] - and the use of estrangement to critique the `real', that speculative fiction has been feted as potentially subversive.[17] Although in her study of the literary fantastic Rosemary Jackson does not consider the relationship between gender and non-realist writing, the claims she makes for such texts have implications for a feminist rewriting of the `real':

> Fantasy is preoccupied with limits, with limiting categories and with their projected dissolution. It subverts dominant philosophical assumptions which uphold as `reality', a coherent, single-viewed entity.[18]

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[16] I am referring here specifically to the literary fantastic. For a consideration of this genre, theoretical interpretations and textual readings, see: Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981) and Neil Cornwall, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

[17] Estrangement (displacement; distancing in terms of time and space) is crucial to this potential. Tom Moylan comments that in speculative fiction, socio-political conflict is `displaced onto the terrain of an other-worldly locus so that the reader, consciously or unconsciously, can see her or his society and its contradictions in a fresh and perhaps motivating light'. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 32. In her study of feminist science fiction, Sarah Lefanu argues that not only does speculative fiction offer the possibility of critique through displacement of existing conditions; non-realist genre offer a place and space to re-imagine identity: they offer us `a language for the narration of dreams, for the dissolution of the self and for the interrogation of cultural order'. *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, p. 23.

[18] Rosemary Jackson cited by Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 175.

Clearly 'feminism' could be substituted for 'fantasy' here: both interrogate the 'real' from a marginal, displaced position. This displacement is flaunted by fantastic narrative and by feminist theorists and writers who challenge the notion of reality as a 'single-viewed entity'. Both suggest the multiplication of narrative possibilities and subsequently, social and political possibilities. In each - feminist theory and speculative fiction - there is attention to what Bloch termed the 'not-yet', bringing 'the imaginative possibilities of what is not into the concrete realm of what could be'.[19] Jenny Wolmark's study of feminist science fiction makes these points of connection clear. She argues that feminist texts within the genre have

> ... politicised our understanding of the fantasies of science fiction. To do
> so, it has drawn on feminist analysis of the construction of gendered
> subjectivity in order to suggest possibilities for more plural and
> heterogeneous social relations, and to offer a powerful critique of the way
> in which existing social relations and power structures continue to
> marginalise women.[20]

In other words, in both feminism and speculative fiction there is an imagined reconfiguration of the social order, a turning upside down of convention and power relations. This is the possibility suggested in Kristeva's question with which I began: that a woman might look different, might shake off her conventional status of 'victim', if viewed from elsewhere.

The non-realist status of the feminist dystopia is crucial in circumventing the limits of genre subversion discussed above. Speculative fiction is a less coded literary arena than other places to which feminists have looked for re-vision, such as the genres of romance or detective fiction; non-realist fiction have traditionally occupied a marginal position in relation to the literary canon. In fantastic, utopian or science-fiction we

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[19] Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 10.

[20] Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 2.

expect the representation of the unexpected and the unimaginable. In its disruption and

displacement of the socio-political real, it offers feminist writers a radical fictional space,

as Frances Bartkowski argues in her study of feminist utopias:

> ... a place where theories of power can be addressed through the
> construction of narratives that test and stretch the boundaries of power in
> its operational details.[21]

Even within the context of speculative fiction, however, the dystopia occupies a

peculiarly marginal place and this has continued within critical work on feminist

speculative fiction. As a genre, the dystopia remains relatively unformulated and

unstudied; conventionally it has been set up as specifically *relational* to the utopia. Thus

a major study such as Krishan Kumar's *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987)

uses the term `anti-utopian' to include the dystopic, whilst offering a definition of anti-

utopian fiction as a particular kind of narrative which excludes many `bad place' texts:

`conservative and pragmatic critiques of utopia'; `a formal reversal of the promise of

happiness in utopia'.[22] Tom Moylan describes dystopian fiction as an element of `the

utopian imagination', describing the `bad place' as `the more radical critique that the

genre [the utopia] is capable of.[23] Frances Bartkowski also recognises the dystopia's

power to critique the utopia. This comment on her choice of texts makes the paradoxical

marginalisation of the dystopia explicit:

> Dystopian novels are crucial to a full engagement with the problematics of
> utopian thought ... My aim in including the two dystopias is to attempt to
> give voice to that which the utopia *leaves unspoken to do its work.*[24]

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[21] Bartkowski, p. 5.

[22] Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 101; p. 104.

[23] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 9. `the utopian imagination' is part of the subtitle of his book.

[24] Bartkowski, p. 15; emphasis added.

It is my aim in this study to reverse this process of leaving `unspoken' the dystopia and the `radical critique' it can offer.

In *The Scientific World View in Dystopia* (1984), Alexandra Aldridge *does* attempt an historical and critical account of the dystopian genre, but like Kumar she limits the scope of her reading through her use of the same exclusive categories, `anti-utopian' and `dystopian'. For example, she argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* cannot be described as dystopian as there is no utopian impulse in the text; it is, rather, a narrative concerned with a battle for and abuse of power. In this study, I use the term `dystopia' as a flexible umbrella-term, to include writing motivated by anti-utopian impulse (where the `bad place' is an imagined utopia) *and* bad place narratives in which there is no possibility of a utopia (here, the `bad place' is the contemporary `real'). As Kumar admits, the utopia is `no longer a central symbol'[25] - and it is a symbol which has certainly been problematised within feminism - and thus the motivation to critique utopic projects has to a large extent dissipated.[26]

This critical neglect of dystopian writing is striking even allowing for the perceived deficiencies of many of the texts (which are shared by much utopian and science fiction writing). There *are* reasons why the dystopia might be especially marginalised, however, and these are connected with its often reactionary politics - which produces fictions that have too often been `knee-jerk' reactions to perceived threats and crises, usually Socialism or Soviet Communism. Thus there has been little

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[25] Kumar, p. 420.

[26] There is however a strand of feminist critiques of utopian projects in dystopian fiction, most notably those concerned with reproductive technologies and eugenics. See for example Diane Boswell's *Posterity* and Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World*, both written in 1926 in response to calls for further development of eugenics. More recent dystopian fiction has focused on State control of women's' lives through reproductive technologies: see Chris Newport's short story `The Courage of Sisters' in Rita Arditti (ed.), *Test-Tube Women: What Future For Motherhood* (London: Pandora, 1984); Zoe Fairbairns' *Benefits* (London: Virago, 1979); Kate Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* (New York: Harper and Row), and Elisabeth Vonarburg's *The Silent City* (London: Women's Press, 1990).

engagement with such writing by the Left, in the way that there has been with the literary

utopia and science fiction, which have been seen as places of representation for `anti-

hegemonic politics'.[27] However, this does not adequately explain the neglect of feminist

dystopian fiction, as this writing is always politicised, at least in its attention to gender

politics. Also, self-consciously feminist texts are usually characterised by their call for

socio-political change, rather than by resistance to it. *This* neglect may have more to do

with what is written into the marginal place: for the feminist dystopia presents, as Woolf

commented on the rise of European fascism in the 1930s: `a daily and illuminating

example of what we do not wish to be'.[28]

SUBVERSIVE SPACES

> I didn't want to give an impression of coherence, on the contrary I wanted
> to give an impression of a sort of wound, a scar.[29]

Kristeva refers here to writing `Stabat Mater', a text in which she places historical and

Christian discourses on motherhood alongside a personal, lyrical account of pregnancy

and child-birth. She transforms the academic and theoretical essay into a space *marked*

(or wounded) by the maternal body, making it the subject and not object of her study.[30]

The notion of a text as `a sort of a wound, a scar' is suggestive for my reading of the

feminist dystopia: it points to physically and psychically extreme texts, ones which bring

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[27] Moylan, p. 198. The exception here is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which has been critiqued by the British Left. See Christopher Norris (ed.), *Inside the Myth:Orwell, Views from the Left* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984).

[28] Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 207.

[29] `Julia Kristeva in Conversation with Rosalind Coward', *ICA Documents 1: Desire* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1984), pp. 22-27, (p. 24)

[30] `Stabat Mater' is discussed more fully in Chapter 4, in which I focus on representations of the maternal body in feminist `bad places'.

the bodily into view, but which also evoke a bodily response - simultaneously repelling and attracting - in the reader or spectator.

Each of the narratives under consideration here presents `extreme' images, as part of the dystopic imperative of `Don't let the future be like this'.[31] Yet the `bad places' are very often gender-specific, with unremitting attention to women's oppression. They foreground the extension of State control over women's lives (women are declared legal minors in Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, and are forbidden from working or holding bank accounts in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*), particularly in the area of reproduction (in both Zoe Fairbairns' *Benefits* and Chris Newport's *The Courage of Sisters* women are forced to take part in experiments with new reproductive technologies). Violence against women, including rape, is often decriminalised (as in *The Book of Mrs Noah*) or institutionalised (in Margaret O'Donnell's *The Beehive*). In all of the texts, in different ways, women's lives and experiences are limited; in most, their role is redefined to foreground domestic and reproductive `duties'. In a number of the fictions, the `bad place' is marked by State torture and murder of women - in Elizabeth Wilson's *The Lost Time Cafe* and Maggie Gee's *Dying, In Other Words*, a dead woman's body is described in a prologue to denote a dystopic world and in Rebecca Brown's *The Terrible Girls* the horror of the `bad place' is constituted by brutal attacks against women both by the State and by other women.

These `physical extremes' (coercion, pain, death) represent and produce psychically extreme states, both in the text and the reader. As the dystopia is conventionally concerned with perceived threats to individual rights and freedoms, the narrative is usually focused around a protagonist who is in some way a universal figure

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[31] Howard Brenton, `Freedom Writer', *The Guardian*, 23 November 1988, p. 36.

and whose sense of identity is under erasure.[32] In the feminist dystopia this focus narrows to the undermining of women's social and cultural place, and thus the protagonist's defence of her own subjectivity is symbolic of a struggle to prevent the erasure of women's voices and experiences. As the first part of this study (chapters 1, 2 and 3) suggests, narration, language and writing are crucial elements in the protagonist's self-representation and in women's resistance to oppression in the `bad place'. The act of narrating the female self becomes self-conscious and politicised in the dystopia, and as State oppression threatens to silence such narration, the text increasingly gives voice to a psychic extreme as State oppression threatens to silence such narration. Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale*, makes the simultaneity of her struggle for narration and identity clear:

> It isn't a story I'm telling.
> It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.
>
> I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech.[33]

The opposition of `It isn't a story...' and `It's also a story' suggests the complexity of the narrator's relationship to her own story/identity *and* the particular problems a reader might encounter in dystopian writing: that the `real' becomes extreme, horrifying and indistinct from the fictional. These `problems' give the bad place narrative its power of `summons and repulsion': these are texts which pull the spectator towards them while forcing her to turn away. What then is the attraction of the dystopia and how can such representations of women's oppression be recuperated into feminist aesthetics?

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[32] This is most obviously the case in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston Smith functions as a universal character, representative of the liberal humanist individual, pitted against the Party. Orwell's original title for the novel, *The Last Man in Europe*, makes this function explicit.

[33] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 49; p. 76.

In each of the texts I focus on there is at least one scene in the narrative which is horrific to the point of being almost unreadable, in the way that certain scenes from horror films may be unwatchable:

> The scene of horror is so terrifying, abject and confronting that the spectator cannot bear to look at all. Not even the look of the camera, which may have attempted to freeze the horrific image through fetishisation or control it by maintaining a voyeuristic distance, is enough to entice the terrified viewer into snatching another terrified glance.[34]

Similarly, not even the frame of the fiction can create sufficient distance between spectator and image to allow reading of that scene to continue. Yet each of these texts is also compelling and moving, evoking an intellectual reaction (empathy; anger; curiosity as to the narrative's conclusion) and a bodily response (horror; repulsion; pleasure). Whilst such a distinction between intellectual and physical responses may be somewhat artificial, this combination of affects is central to the radical potential of the feminist dystopia. As recent work on the horror genre has suggested, texts which confront us with terror and abjection force us to consider not only our position as spectator of the horrific text, but also our place and construction as social subjects - the place from which we read.

Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) is of interest here, as it interrogates our desire for unpalatable, horrific images and examines the relationship between the real and the non-real in such disturbing texts. Carroll attempts to theorise the persistence of the horror genre, and questions our seeking out of *fictional* horror:

> ... for why would anyone *want* to be horrified... We do not for example, attempt to add some pleasure to a boring afternoon by opening the lid of a steamy trashcan in order to savour its unwholesome stew of broken bits of meat. moldering fruits and vegetables, and noxious, unrecognizable clumps, riven thoroughly by all manner of crawling things. And,

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[34] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 154.

ordinarily, checking out hospital waste bags is not our idea of a good time.[35]

Carroll reads the horror film as an extreme example of what he terms the `paradox' of all fiction: that texts affect the spectator, even though the image is known to be a fiction. In other words, `what is not' somehow has an affect on `what is'. Using `the Green Slime Situation' (on-screen, a mass of green slime threatens to engulf all) as a typical moment of horror-narrative, he suggests three paradigms for interpreting the spectator's response: `illusion theory' which sees the viewer as denying the fictionality of the slime; `pretend theory' which suggests that the spectator only mimics fear and `thought theory' in which the thought of Green Slime produces a response, although the spectator may not believe in its existence.[36] Carroll, however, argues that in confrontations with horrific texts, the spectator is driven by a desire for knowledge and verification of the monstrous, and that this compulsion and subsequent pleasure is fed by the narrative:

> It is not that we crave disgust, but that disgust is a predictable concomitant of disclosing the unknown, whose disclosure is a desire the narrative instills in the audience and then goes on to gladden.[37]

For horror to `work' (that is, to simultaneously attract and repulse the spectator) there must be a physical response as it is only following this that an emotional engagement can take place: `an emotional state requires a felt physical dimension'.[38] Carroll suggests a variety of `felt' dimensions:

> ... muscular contractions, tension, cringing, shrinking, shuddering, recoiling, tingling, frozeness, momentary arrests, chilling (hence `spine-chilling'), paralysis, trembling, nausea, ... perhaps involuntary screaming,

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[35] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p, 158.

[36] I am summarising his argument here; see *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 79-80.

[37] *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 185.

[38] *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 25.

and so on.[39]

Although `involuntary screaming' is perhaps unlikely at even the most disturbing dystopian novel, Carroll's attention to the processes by which a spectator `reads' a horror text is suggestive in thinking through the meanings and possibilities of feminist `bad place' fiction for a reader. While he focuses much of his work on the text's spectator, Carroll does not bring into his discussion a consideration of gender and reading/watching horror. In the second half of this study I argue that what is inscribed in the `marginal place' of the feminist dystopia - the maternal body (Chapter 4); feminine desires (Chapter 5); violent or dead women's bodies (Chapter 6) - suggests a specifically female spectator in the `horror' it produces. A male spectator may experience a different horror, but the foregrounding of women's bodies as the places and spaces of oppression in these texts complicates the notion of the bodily responses. Returning to the opposition of an intellectual response with a physical one: when women read of physical and psychic suffering of other women, perhaps the antithesis of empathy, anger, and curiosity on the one hand and horror, repulsion and pleasure on the other, begins to dissolve.

Also Carroll's emphasis on narrative, knowledge and discovery (and not necessarily the `monster') as driving forces behind spectatorial pleasure in horror reminds us that these feminist `bad places' are crucially concerned with transformation of the `real' *through narrative*. Each text uses literary narrative to `uncover' oppressive socio-political conditions for women: the real is projected elsewhere so that it too can be `read', as Margaret Atwood argues:

> This is a collective nightmare, and the thing about writing it out is that then you can see it. You can see where this or that might lead. I think that's the reason why we write such books.[40]

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[39] *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 24.

The novels I focus on in each of the chapters also seem to suggest that `the thing about writing it out' is that this can uncover resistance to the `bad place', both through the telling of the tale and through a utopic impulse at the end of the narrative. For, one of the `summons' of these dystopias is the generic convention of implying that the `horror' has ended or that the protagonist has escaped from it. This is both a practical consideration (otherwise how could the narrative be told?) and a key to the empowering potential of these feminist fictions.

In exploring this potential, two areas of feminist work are suggestive: recent readings of the horror film and also critical interpretations of Kristeva's theory of abjection, in relation to the `process' of subjectivity. Barbara Creed's work on representations of the feminine (coded as monstrous) in mainstream horror films such as *Alien* and *Psycho* is particularly relevant for my discussion of the dystopia, asking as it does questions which become increasingly insistent in the second half of this study: namely, `What is the appeal of the horror film to the female spectator?'; `To what extent might the female spectator feel empowered?'[41] Although these issues are discussed in some detail in later chapters, two preliminary points need to be made at this stage.

Firstly as I have suggested, the non-realist `bad place' moves the reader from the known and coded `real' to the unknown, the future and the realm of `phantasy' (I deliberately use this term - rather than `fantasy' to imply a level of involvement and interaction by the subject), `an aesthetic and ideological journey' into `our deepest fears'.[42] Thus there is a shift into subjective and, Creed suggests, *unconscious* spaces, which open up possibilities for a variety of spectator/reader responses within one text

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[40] Margaret Atwood. `There's Nothing in the Book that Hasn't Already Happened', interview with Katherine Govier. *Quill & Quire*, September 1985, 66-67, (p. 67).

[41] Creed, p. 155.

[42] Creed, p. 166; p. 155.

(and within one spectator). In horror texts - and, I think, dystopian writing - these responses can be fluid and even contradictory: ·

> The subject positions with which the horror film most frequently encourages the spectator to identify oscillate between those of victim and monster but with greater emphasis on the former. In this respect, the horror film sets out to explore the perverse, masochistic aspects of the gaze.[43]

This may well be one of the `summons', however masochistic, of the dystopia for women readers - these narratives offer a range of identificatory possibilities for a female spectator. This identification takes place most obviously between reader and female protagonist, but even here there is fluidity and room for contradiction: the protagonist of the dystopia is `cast' as both victim and to some extent victor, usually at the end of the narrative. Furthermore a number of these feminist novels implicate women as complicit in the oppression of other women, and when reading such texts, other possibilities of identification become possible and in some cases unavoidable.[44] The complexity and importance of this multiplicity of reader responses to these fictions is two-fold. Even when the reader unequivocally identifies with a protagonist as victim, the feminist dystopia makes visible the means by which she is cast as victim; that is, the narrative is as interested in the effects *and* construction of power. Also, as I suggest in my discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* and Vlady Kociancich's *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* in Chapter 2, the feminist dystopian narrative offers a radical subject position for women readers when it represents the protagonist's escape from oppression.

The second preliminary point to be made with regard to the appeal of the `bad place' for female spectators concerns Kristeva's delineation of the abject in *Powers of*

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[43] Creed, p. 154.

[44] This is the case, for example, in Zoe Fairbairns' *Benefits*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Rebecca Brown's *The Terrible Girls*.

Horror (1982), which is discussed more fully in Chapter 4. Briefly, she defines the abject as the mark or trace left by the subject's entry to the Symbolic Order and simultaneous repudiation of the mother. It is, she suggests, our `personal archaeology'[45]: reminding us of where we have come from, the semiotic maternal realm. Because we carry this mark with us as social subjects, a number of phenomena and experiences can trigger memories of the semiotic and thus threaten to destabilise the subject; thus, we can never be sure of ourselves. The importance of Kristeva's theory for my study of the dystopia is that she suggests a power and transgressive potential for such horrific challenges to the subject (such as the sight of a dead body). For each experience of abjection takes us back to the basis of our status as social subjects: `a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct'.[46] Thus any narrative such as the dystopia which takes as its focus what we usually repudiate, what repulses us as spectators, may facilitate a radical rethinking of subjectivity. For feminists working to challenge dominant `symbolic constructs' of gender, the `foundations' of such constructs must be a starting-place.

The first part of the thesis (Chapters 1-3) focuses upon means of representation. If women are to create new images of and for themselves, literary discourse (and historical, mythic, philosophical, scientific...) will need to be transformed: power-relations within texts, genres and language must be interrogated. This project is taken up by each of the five feminist dystopias which I discuss here, although in different ways. In Chapter 1, I discuss Michèle Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) in order to pose the problem which each of the texts responds to: the cultural, historical silencing of women. It is not a dystopian novel; rather, Roberts incorporates a dystopic short story within a

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[45] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 13.

[46] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 18.

more complex, fantastic narrative frame. My reading of the novel emphasises that literary genres are represented as `free-spaces' by Roberts - it is a text of utopic possibilities of transformation *through* the transformation of narrative, and the dystopia plays an important part in this process. In the second chapter, I discuss two texts which present a gender-specific battle for control of narrative: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Vlady Kociancich's *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* (1990). These texts are concerned with specific forms of power: institutional and canonical. They uncover in the `bad place' processes by which women's voices and experiences are marginalised, devalued, and forgotten. Chapter 3 focuses on the connections between language and identity as proposed in two dystopias with antithetical political impulses: Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984) and Christine Brooke-Rose's *Verbivore* (1990).

In the second section, I am interested in what can be brought to view in the transformed space of literary narrative. In particular, I consider whether in the dystopia women can transgress representational limits with regard to the feminine body. Chapter 4 reads two fictional texts, Margaret O' Donnell's *The Beehive* (1980) and Elizabeth Baines' *The Birth Machine* (1980) in conjunction with Kristeva's concepts of the *semiotic* and the abject, to argue that it is in the fictional texts that radical representations of the maternal body emerge. Chapter 5 examines the limits of feminine desire in theory and fiction and suggests four `stages' of subversion through a close reading of dystopian texts: Kate Wilhelm's `Baby, You Were Great'; Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969), and Pat Califia's `The Hustler' (1988). The final chapter argues that in the `bad place' it is possible to imagine new configurations of the feminine body; to see it as violent and dynamic - a site of contradictory and disturbing desires. Rebecca Brown's collection of short stories, *The Terrible Girls* (1992) is the text here, and I conclude the

study with a reading of `The Ruined City', a dystopian story which includes a scene of recovery and renewal. This is an appropriate place to end as this study is motivated by a conviction that in the dystopia, women can find places and spaces in which to represent their voices and experiences. Hence the utopian impulse in my title: `writing so to speak'.

Part One

Marginal Places

... a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. *The Handmaid's Tale.*

Chapter One

`Fill in One of His Gaps':

Gender and Marginality in *The Book of Mrs Noah*

> *When does she take up the sanctities of official narratives and when set them aside?*
> *How far does she accommodate inherited forms, the official and officious calls to a*
> *specific subjectivity, and how far does she stretch the form to fill her own needs and*
> *desires?... Where exactly does she discover the narrative elasticities and subversive*
> *possibilities of the genre? What narrative counterpractices does she import into the*
> *text?*   - Sidonie Smith.
>
> *..a knowledge that finds itself repeating and departing from the inheritance it*
> *describes.*   - Charles Scott.

In the introduction, I placed the contemporary feminist dystopia within a context of feminist genre fiction and suggested that even within this context, it occupies a marginal position. The first part of this thesis (Chapters 1-3) will argue that from this marginal place conventional and canonical narrative (literary, historical, Biblical, mythical) can be rewritten from a feminist perspective. A central concern will be the extent to which narrative is transformed in this process: can feminist genre fiction produce something more radical than a reversal of existing textual power relations? The fictional texts considered in the first three chapters foreground this process of transformation to such an extent that it becomes the *subject* of their narratives: in each we see a woman (protagonist and/or writer) stretching literary form, narrative and language to find herself a place in discourse. This section is concerned with the ways in

which the flexibility of the dystopia can be used to carve out a space of representation for women.

I begin, in this chapter, with a reading of Michèle Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), looking first at the strategies used to foreground the cultural silencing of women and then at the emergence of this narrative place for women: to meet the challenge articulated in the novel: `fill in one of his gaps'.[1] This text offers a suggestive starting-point for my study as it foregrounds the means by which women's voices and experiences have been excluded from discourse (the problem which feminist genre fiction confronts), but also contains within it a move out of this silence. What interests me particularly here is the way in which the `bad place' can be incorporated as one strategy among many by the feminist writer in moves towards representation. Roberts' novel cannot be described as dystopian - indeed, with its multiple narrative layers it defies generic classification - but it does include a self-contained dystopic story to advance the novel's exploration of gender and silence. Literary genres are not only interrogated from a perspective of gender in feminist genre fiction; they are also transformed: the dystopia is not a limiting, heavily coded generic category for Roberts, but simply another narrative place to go to in her construction of *The Book of Mrs Noah.*

The novel charts Mrs Noah's movement from silence to the beginnings of articulation and this progression is clearly symbolic. She provides an historical symbol for the silencing of women: her `book' tells a story of silencing and containment for her and other women. The focus at the beginning of the text is the repression of her desires - to write and to have a child - these have been stifled by her husband's academic success.

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[1] Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 70. All further references to the text will be cited parenthetically, with the abbreviation *N.*

Her resistance to this begins in a dream; first of her husband's death and then of a fantasy space, the Ark, which provides the setting for almost the entire novel:

> Noah died last night. Surely I should have prevented it, but did not.
>
> ...I argue that it is time to board the Ark, to make the voyage. Noah promised to accompany me. Now he says he has changed his mind. It is too soon. He is not ready. He's not sure he'll ever want to come with me.(*N*,7)

The text is immediately centred around Mrs Noah's struggle to claim her own space and voice within the relationship, and the Ark becomes a motif for the possibility of this freedom: here Mrs Noah is able to take control: `I try out my signature on a piece of blotting paper. Mrs Noah, Arkivist of the Ark'. (*N*,19) This control is thus very much linked with acts of writing and self-representation - `my signature'. Because of this, Mrs Noah, as `Arkivist' attempts to trace another literary history which does not marginalise women's voices and experiences:

> The Ark of Women is the Other One. The *Salon des Refusées. Des Refusantes.* Cruise ship for the females who are only fitted in as monsters: the gorgons, the basilisks, the sirens, the harpies, the furies, the viragos, the amazons, the medusas, the sphinxes.
>
> Where shall we go, the women who don't fit in? Those of us who are not citizens but exiles? Those of us who are not named as belonging, but as outcasts, as barbarians?
>
> Into this Ark of women. (*N*,20)

The Ark provides a fantastic arena for Mrs Noah to construct `a means of "talking back"'[2] to canonical, dominant narratives as a woman. History and literary history in particular are cited as mechanisms which have guaranteed the stereotyping (`sirens',

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[2] Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 20. Smith describes autobiography as one genre through which `the excluded and colorful' can establish an empowering dialogue - hence, the notion of talking back - with dominant narratives of identity. My reading of the feminist dystopia in this study obviously suggests that non-realist narrative offers the same potential.

harpies' and `sphinxes') and exclusion of women.[3] In response to this, historical time has no status on the Ark, and established canons are rendered marginal:

> Every woman who has ever lived has deposited here her book: her story or novel or collection of poems or autobiography.
>
> ... all the stories, from past present and future, are here, rubbing shoulders in the dark.
>
> ... Men's books are of course available, on inter-library loan. Please see the catalogue. (*N*,20)

The Ark is imagined both as a library and as a creative space in which women can write and tell each other their stories. Mrs Noah invites five women - the `sibyls' - on board and fills in biographical background for these women, focusing on the obstacles to their writing which stem mainly from family and social expectations. Gradually, the sibyls begin to speak for themselves and each tells one short story (one of which, towards the end of the text, is a dystopic narrative) with Mrs Noah's encouragement: `I need to hear your stories'. (*N*,32) The act of narration is clearly empowering both for the individual narrator and also for the women who hear the stories; by the end of the text Mrs Noah is finally able to begin her own fiction: `*My story*, I write: *begins in Venice*'. (*N*, 288)

Thus a process of reversal is completed in the novel: through a re-imagining of history, the silence or absence signalled by the title of Roberts' text is replaced by the beginnings of a new voice, previously unheard. The meaning of the novel's title has changed to signal not a biblical `book', but a woman's autobiographical text. Central to this process is Roberts' extensive use of intertextuality: implicit and explicit allusion to a number of other texts and images, all of which form starting-points for an interrogation

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[3] Linda Anderson examines feminist rewriting of history in recent women's writing (in particular, Toni Morrison's novels); see `The Re-Imagining of History in Contemporary Women's Fiction' in Anderson (ed.), *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), 129-141.

of women's marginalisation.[4] Intertextual reference works both to foreground historical and cultural silencing of women and, importantly, to open up a fictional place - in between the existing text and the new - where this silencing can be challenged. I will look first at how intertextuality works in the novel, before considering the dystopia which occupies this new place.

Roberts uses intertextuality to signal the neglect of women's voices across a range of discourses, most obviously the biblical story of Noah and the Ark. The biblical `book' is transformed from a central cultural narrative to a retelling of that text from a peripheral perspective, and as in the work of other contemporary feminist writers, it is the power and currency of such narratives that is interrogated.[5] `Noah and the Ark' is cited as one of many cultural texts which shape our identities and patterns of thought. Specifically it encodes the power of the patriarchal figure of Noah[6]; it offers a seductive narrative of origin *and* of heterosexuality (the pairs of animals boarding the Ark).[7] The

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[4] Theories of intertextuality, particularly as developed by Julia Kristeva, argue that all texts, utterances and languages are inextricably linked. It is impossible to mark texts as separate, discrete or original, as they make use of the same discourses, forms and conventions. Intertextuality can refer to direct citations or allusions to earlier texts, but can also be used to read less obvious and deliberate traces and echoes in texts. Feminist genre fiction is itself an intertextual act: even in the most radical genre subversion, traces of the original form remain. Kristeva argues that intertextuality is at work in `every signifying system' which she defines as `a field of transpositions of various signifying systems'. From an excerpt from *Revolution in Poetic Language* in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 111. See also Judith Still and Michael Worton, *Intertextuality: theories and practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

[5] See for example, Eva Figes' *The Tree of Knowledge* (London: Minerva, 1991) in which she gives narrative voice to Milton's daughter; Angela Carter's collection of fairy-tales, *The Bloody Chamber* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), which rewrites the Perrault stories such as `Little Red Riding Hood' from a feminist perspective; Marina Warner's *The Mermaids in the Basement* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), and Christa Wolf's *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* (London: Virago, 1984), a self-conscious retelling of the mythic tale of Cassandra: both Cassandra's first-person narrative and Wolf's own story about the researching and writing of the text.

[6] Noah's story has not only been rewritten from a feminist perspective: Julian Barnes's postmodern compression and seemingly arbitrary selection of Western history, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (London: Picador, 1990) represents Noah as a power-crazed drunkard who mistreats his wife.

[7] Adrienne Rich's concept of `compulsory heterosexuality' is of interest here. In her 1981 essay, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981) she argues that we are saturated with images of heterosexuality which work in an hegemonic way to limit sexual freedom and maintain the `otherness' of lesbian identity. Her particular interest is in cultural devices - such as romance and rape - through which she argues, the dominance of heterosexuality is established and maintained. Historical and biblical narrative (such as `Noah and the Ark') can be seen as such devices. It is also in this essay that Rich introduces the terms `lesbian experience' and `lesbian continuum' to suggest the presence and history of lesbian women.

use of intertextuality here disrupts the existing narrative by drawing our attention to the silences within the text - and the consequences of such silencing - but this kind of disruption does not work simply as a reversal, telling the same story from a different point of view. Angela Carter's comment on her feminist fairy-tales is more suggestive of the process undertaken by Michèle Roberts:

> My intention was not to do "versions" or, as the American edition of it [*The Bloody Chamber*] said, "horribly adult" fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and use it as the beginning of new stories.[8]

Thus Carter changes the *meanings* of the fairy-tale texts: for example, `Little Red Riding Hood' is no longer a thinly-disguised story of the sexual devouring of a naive young woman (and a warning against her curiosity) but is, rather, a story of a knowing woman's progression towards sexual maturation. The silencing and terror at the end of the Perrault version is replaced by knowledge and pleasure:

> The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him [the wolf] full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it in the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing.[9]

The effect of an intertextual framework in these fictions is both to point to hidden stories within the established forms and also to signal that these, when told, will be of a radically different nature, precisely because of their marginalisation. As Mrs Noah declares, her writing will eschew those values represented by the literary history that has silenced her:

> I was taught that art is supposed to last, to be preserved in libraries and museums, to defy rotting and perishing, to contain eternal meanings that transcend history, that survive the time-span of the body. My art won't be like that. (*N*, 288)

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[8] Angela Carter, *The Literary Review*, November 1984, p. 36.

[9] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.118. I discuss the representation of `latent' feminine desire in this collection and Carter's novel *Heroes and Villains* in Chapter 5.

It is not only the power of a biblical narrative that is interrogated through intertextuality in *The Book of Mrs Noah*. There are also references to classical mythology in the novel (to sibyls, Atlantis and Isis) and once again, these have a dual function: both to signal silenced or forgotten voices in mythic narrative, and also to point to this marginality as a starting-point for *new* texts. The women writers who board the Ark are described as `sibyls'; this naming of them as prophetesses and soothsayers attaches oracular significance to their words. This label also makes reference to the fate of the Sibylline Books, which again foregrounds the neglect and loss of women's voices and stories.[10] *The Book of Mrs Noah*, in its weaving together of new sibyls' narratives, offers a place for reinstating this loss and as, Carter suggests, `the beginning of new stories'. Giving voice and authority to the women writers on the Ark refuses the position of silence assigned to them in canonical texts and opens up these narratives to include different voices and perspectives.[11] Christa Wolf's revision of the Cassandra myth (1984) focuses quite self-consciously on issues of voice, silence and perspective. She suggests that if we look at history or classical mythology through ` a different lens', different narratives will emerge:

> This world would no longer produce stories of heroes or of antiheroes, either. Instead, it would be inconspicuous and would seek to name the inconspicuous, the precious everyday, the concrete.[12]

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[10] The nine Sibylline Books were offered to Tarquinius Superbus by the Cumaean Sibyl, but he refused to pay the asking price she had suggested. She then burned six of the books, before selling him the remaining three - at the price she had originally asked for the whole collection. The books were then kept in the Temple of Jupiter for consultation in times of crisis or emergency. H. W. Parke's *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1988) surveys the representation of Sibyls across different historical periods and cultures until the sixth century A.D.

[11] Sidonie Smith comments that such acts of intervention in what she terms `inherited forms' (not only literary but also other historical and cultural discourses) can `enable her [the woman writer, autobiographer, protagonist or reader] to evade narrative fixture in official scripts of the universal subject' (p. 23). That is, she suggests that such narratives tell us who (and how) to be; but this positioning is open to challenge and `evasion'. This is very much the project Michèle Roberts undertakes in her novel.

[12] Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 271, p. 270

Roberts also includes an imagined journey to the lost city of Atlantis in her novel

and this has the same narrative effect as the references to the sibyls: to point to the

possibility of transforming canonical discourse from the margins, and from a position of

loss; indeed, Mrs Noah describes her text as `this long twist of words spun out of loss'.

(*N*,275) Such possibility is linked to the fact that her discovery of Atlantis is a tracing

back both of a mythical, metaphorical legend *and* of her own memory and unconscious:

> The way in is by water.
>
> To Atlantis: also called the house of memory and forgetting; the fossil of the old world.
>
> ... And now the palace discovers itself to me, a labyrinth of revelations turning over and sliding like the inside of a Chinese puzzle box carved in ivory, as one saloon opens out of, and into, another.
>
> ... In the beginning, I remember: as in the end, the waters covered everything, and all kinds of creatures flourished in them.(*N*,64- 65)

The lost city represents a fantastical free space - even within the non-realist world of the

Ark - in which Mrs Noah experiences a fugue-like sense of dislocation.[13] Distinctions

between past, present and future blur; the end dissolves into the beginning (of

civilization, but also her own subjectivity); memory and forgetting are contained in the

same space. Such temporal distinctions are crucial to the formation and maintenance of

identity and, once these have been dissolved in the palace of Atlantis, Mrs Noah is freed

from social, familial and gendered constraint. Subjectivity becomes a free space in this

place of labyrinthine design; identities, like the palace rooms, open `out of and into,

another'. One of the places Mrs Noah discovers in Atlantis is the `room of

metamorphoses' in which `all the rules are broken, joyfully' (*N*,66) and this includes the

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[13] Both meanings of the term `fugue' are relevant here: *The Book of Mrs Noah* is constructed like a musical fugue, in that it is a layered and polyphonic narrative, but also the process of dislocation experienced by the protagonist in the dream space of the Ark can be described as a psychological fugue.

`rules' of desire, which rely upon an opposition between subject and object.[14] In this room, Mrs Noah is entranced by a mural:

> A naked goddess is painted in the centre of the long wall, her arms outstretched towards me as I enter. As I walk down the gallery, and past her, never taking my eyes off her, her arms swivel and stretch after me, as do her eyes. How's it done? I can't believe it. Laughing, I swim back through the cool green waves and watch the painted beauty turn and languish after me. It is not possible to be other than desired by her, sought by her, reached for by her: she turns, and turns, and turns, keeping me always in the circle of her arms and eyes. (*N*,67)

In the room of metamorphoses all images become fluid and free and any limits on representation are surpassed. This results in a conventional image of femininity (`a naked goddess', `the painted beauty') being transformed from a static text to a dynamic all-encompassing, desiring figure (`she turns, and turns...'). In this representation of desire, fixed positions of subject and object are obsolete and are replaced by mutuality: Mrs Noah's fascination with the image of the goddess (`never taking my eyes off her'), and the image's response (`sought by her, reached for by her'). This re-imagining of the relationship between female spectator and erotic text is rendered possible in Atlantis, a doubly non-realist place which has always been beyond living memory. Roberts' intertextual reference points both to the historical `reality' of the powerful kingdom destroyed in 1500 B.C., and to the mythical, speculative interpretations of the lost city. `Atlantis' in her text is a re-writing of historical narrative in the same way as the story of `Noah and the Ark', but the metaphorical and allusive qualities of this legend produce a fantastic narrative zone: `here chaos reigns for the sheer pleasure of it'. (*N*,66) In each fictional text under consideration in this study we see a search through the dystopia for

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[14] This opposition and the conventional gender-specific grounding of each term are discussed more fully in Chapter 5.

such narrative free-spaces in which the construction of identities can be unravelled and reimagined.

A third intertexual reference Roberts uses to highlight the silencing of women is Virginia Woolf's : *Three Guineas* (1938), a text which is itself concerned with the social and political consequences of the marginalisation of women's voices. In this essay, Woolf poses the question `how to prevent war?', and argues in response that patriarchal, militaristic and dictatorial power are not only logical extensions of each other, but are also predicated on the exclusion of women from the power-centres of culture. As in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf employs a number of non-realist narrative strategies within the essay to illustrate her argument. For example, the essay is written in response to an imaginary letter, and Woolf imagines a photograph of the male world in order to describe patriarchy: `within quite a small space are crowded together St. Paul's, the Bank of England, the Mansion House ... the Law Courts, Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament'.[15] Woolf's particular focus throughout is women's exclusion from education, and in response to this she names an imaginary society for women: the Outsiders' Society. This society would make such exclusion a strength and a starting point for women to work towards

> freedom, equality, peace; but ... it seeks to achieve them by the means
> that a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and the
> different values which result from those differences have placed within
> our reach.[16]

The notion of a Society of Outsiders clearly feeds into Mrs Noah's dream-space of the Ark, imagined for `those of us who are not citizens but exiles'. (*N*,20) The reference to

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[15] Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 34-35

[16] *Three Guineas*, p. 206

Woolf's text remains pivotal throughout Roberts' novel; the reversal of power relations at the end of the text is expressed using the terms `Insiders' and `Outsiders'.

This reversal within the text is celebrated in a party scene at the end of the Ark's voyage: a party in the vessel's hold for `Not Outsiders but Insiders'. (*N*,273) It is a gathering not only for the Sibyls but for all women writers:

> Charlotte Bronte in a scarlet evening frock waves her cigar at Colette, whose ears are large and wing-shaped. Emily Dickinson, her hair in curl-papers, is arguing with Virginia Woolf, whose hands are full of pink betting-slips.
>
> - I hate dinner parties, she yells above the hubbub of the Palm Court Orchestra: but a quiet get-together with friends, that's different. (*N*,271)

Here, the Outsiders take centre-stage and the comedy and excess of the party scene foregrounds what is ordinarily absent from discourse through its presence here: a celebration of the diversity of women's writing and the power invested in naming those left out of narratives (here, the literary canon). The party forms another free space within the narrative which allows the same reimagining of femininity that we saw in the room of metamorphoses in Atlantis:

> A four-legged body splits apart then re-joins itself: identical twin jugglers in glittering leotards toss batons and balls at each other in a swift strobe, mirror-reflections for each other. Which is which? I can't tell. Can they? High above our heads a Degas girl in a feathered silver bird-suit bites on a noosed plumb line, makes geometry on string loops...
>
> I'm wearing pink satin ballet shoes, their toes blocked... I can't stop dancing. (*N*,270)

It is crucial that it should be the hold of the ship - the covered, inner cavity where cargo is usually stored - which becomes a transformative space. In this party scene, what has been hidden away is brought into the text, immediately challenging the limits of conventional, *readable* representation (`mirror-reflections ... Which is which? I can't tell')

both of narrative and of the feminine body which here is disguised (`a Degas girl in a feathered silver bird-suit') and dynamic (`makes geometry'; `I can't stop dancing').[17]

The Ark's hold, this concealed space, is symbolic not only of a `hidden' literary tradition, but also of Mrs Noah's personal archaeology. Like the lost city of Atlantis, the hold represents an imagined place in which she can trace back repressed or forgotten memories and, through the matriarchal literary tradition which is uncovered, confront the power of the maternal, at the root of her `archaeology'[18] :

> Creation starts here, in the Ark. Love actively shapes the work. My mother nourishes me with words, words of such power and richness that I grow, dance, leap. But the purpose of the Ark is that I leave it. The purpose of the womb is that I be born from it. So that when I'm forced to go from her, when I lose her, I can call out after her, cry out her name. I become myself, which means not-her; with blood and tears I become not-the-mother. (N,274)

For Mrs Noah, then, the hold represents a real and psychic space which must be charted before she can construct her own text. Such spaces provide sites of resistance - real or imagined zones outside of the dystopic oppression - in many contemporary feminist dystopias, and it from these that women's narratives emerge: the `Barren Houses' in *Native Tongue*; Renata's diary in *The Last Days of William Shakespeare*; the message in the wardrobe in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the underground printing presses in *The Terrible Girls* and *The Beehive*.[19] For Mrs Noah, the space of the hold leads her

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[17] In Chapter 6, I argue that the feminist dystopia can open a narrative space within which the feminine body can be transformed from a static object of representation to a dynamic subject of the text.

[18] This maternal power is the focus of the dystopian texts discussed in Chapter Four. It is also a recurrent theme in Roberts' fiction, most strikingly in *During Mother's Absence* (London: Virago, 1993); a collection of short stories, all of which are concerned with women's paradoxical emotions towards the loss of (and longing for) the mother.

[19] The notion of an interior space within discourse that women can appropriate has been the focus of a number of recent studies. Bette London's *The Appropriated Voice: Narrative Authority in Conrad, Forster and Woolf* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) looks at narrative `appropriation' of voice as a tool of oppression (of the colonial subject for example) or of resistance (as in feminist texts which foreground parody or pastiche). In *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Récit* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), Naomi Segal reclaims the mythic figure of Echo, suggesting that although women's voices and desires are marginalised, their words, like Echo's, cannot be silenced; they leave a powerful, potentially disruptive trace in any text. Dympna Callaghan's *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989)

to confront the power of her mother's `hold' over her and to sever relations with the maternal body, which enables her to write: `Words of longing for that world I've lost, words of desire to explore this absence-of-her. I must go further into absence, and find more words'. (*N*,274) Through intertextual reference - to the Ark, ... *Three Guineas*, Sibyls, and Atlantis - Michèle Roberts rewrites narratives of origin to expose women's silence and exclusion.

To move *beyond* this, however, Roberts incorporates other narrative strategies which, rather than referring to existing texts and images, point towards what has yet to be written: a radical future place of representation clearly signalled by the novel's ending: `*My story*, I write: *begins in Venice*'. (*N*, 288) The novel ends with the completion of a process of reversal suggested by the text's title; text, identity and history have been claimed by Mrs Noah. Thus her novel goes further than critiquing existing texts to include a new identity: *The Book of Mrs Noah* tells us that identities are constructed through a number of `fictions' whose ownership and meanings are not fixed but open to challenge.[20] And yet at the end of the novel, having jettisoned one unified and unifying

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focuses on the absence, silence and utterances of women in four plays: *King Lear, Othello, The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*. Callaghan also considers the private and marginal places in which women can speak in these texts. Patricia Ondek Laurence investigates the emergence and importance of silence in Woolf's fiction, suggesting that she is able `to subvert the sexist tradition of the silent female by infusing her silence with a new being, a new psychic and narrative life'. *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 41.

[20] This assault in fiction upon canonical narrative mirrors theoretical moves, which can broadly be described as postmodernist (to include deconstructive, post-structuralist, post-colonial and feminist critical theory), to destabilise the liberal humanist subject and the `metanarratives' which have produced it. Such divergent theorists can be linked in this specific instance by their concern to critique and displace this universal subject. David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) provides a clear introduction to postmodern cultural theory, focusing on metanarratives and postmodernism's relation to history in Chapter 3. Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernity as an `incredulity towards metanarratives' is discussed in detail by Thomas Docherty in his introduction to *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 1-31. Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon both consider the theoretical possibilities and problematics for feminists faced with the postmodern `end of history'; see Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1991) and Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988). Seyla Benhabib offers a feminist reading of Lyotard's formulation of the postmodern in `Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-Francois Lyotard', in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 107-130.

subject (represented symbolically here by Noah), another identity is put in its place, seemingly uncritically. Is it a reactionary and untenable position for a feminist writer to claim a place for such a newly `unified' subject within her text, having demonstrated that these same forms of representation have historically excluded women's experiences?

I want to argue that two further narrative strategies in particular ensure that this is not the case. Firstly, the openness of the novel's ending leaves us not with a `unified' text (or subject) but the fantasy of a new narrative space on the margins of representation. This fantasy is left for the reader to construct; there is a decentering at the end of the novel, the point in the text where we might least expect it.[21] Mrs Noah's book is not written but, through intertextual distancing from existing narratives, a place for this future writing is secured. Secondly, the complex narrative structure of *The Book of Mrs Noah* means that at no point can any identity be fixed or assured. It is this complexity which is of significance here as it is deepened, towards the end of the novel, by the inclusion of a dystopic short story.

The complex narrative shape of the novel is signalled first by the multiple possible meanings of the title. The `book' can refer variously to the biblical book in which Mrs Noah's voice is silenced; the book which she creates from the Sibyls' stories, or her own autobiographical text which is signalled at the end of the novel. This multiplicity of meanings is also reflected in the overlapping narrative layers of the fictional text, the many `books' within the text: the `real' world of Noah and his wife in Venice; Mrs Noah's dream-space of the Ark; the descriptions of the sibyls' lives; the sibyls' own stories; the party in the Ark's hold; the intertextual references to Atlantis, for example, and Mrs

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[21] The openness of endings in the feminist dystopia - and the radical potential of this - are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

Noah's own autobiographical text. There is no centre to the narrative; none of these elements or spheres of the text are privileged, and each has the same ontological status. `Fantasy' and `reality' become obsolete categories here, as the interest is clearly in texts, images and metaphors which blur such distinctions.[22]

Wherever possible Roberts foregrounds the chaotic rather than the ordered in her narrative, and this is reflected in her choice of cityscapes, both real and imagined, in the text. Venice is a perfect starting-point for the fantastic journey on the Ark; as `the city that floats' (N,10) it brings together the solid with the insubstantive, and its labyrinthine design produces a decentred space which offers limitless possibilities:

> There are seven exits; I counted them when we sat down. The campo is a kaleidoscope, shifting, turning, offering seven times seven ways of experiencing it, seven ways in and seven ways out, a crystal constantly changing... (N,11-12)

Mrs Noah sees the Venetian square not as a fixed entity or landmark, but as a `constantly changing' phenomena, a beautiful space of patterning, `shifting, turning'. Venice offers infinite experiences and interpretations, `seven times seven ways' due to its `inbetween' status as both real and imagined.[23] The novel's epigraph, taken from Donne's *Elegies*, signals this interest in images which blur distinctions between tangible, solid objects and the liquefying images of the fantastic world: `That floating Colledge, that swimming

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[22] Jeanette Winterson's first novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Pandora Press, 1985) uses the same techniques as Roberts' text to produce a strikingly similar effect. Winterson's chapters take their names from Books of the Old Testament; this framework is then subverted to form a narrative structure for a contemporary *Bildungsroman* which describes a clash of Evangelical religion and lesbian sexual identity. The chapters also include fantasy, fairy-tale and Grail legend narratives which occasionally connect with (but more often divert from) the fictional autobiography. Winterson also uses devices to `decentre' her narrators or protagonists, most notably in *Written on the Body* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) which has an anonymous narrator whose gender is not specified; the narrative of erotic obsession and desire is thus denied its `subject'. The novel revels in this obscurity: `Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; ... In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille'. (p. 89).

[23] Tony Tanner's *Venice Desired* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992) discusses historical and literary representations and re-imaginings of Venice. His study includes chapters on the work of Henry James, Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound and John Ruskin.

Hospitall.' The representation of the lost city of Atlantis further confuses distinctions between real and fantastic, as it also brings together the substantive and ethereal; once again, it is a `fixed' and historical entity like Venice, but also a floating, imagined city. Both cities mirror the `labyrinthine' narrative identity of *The Book of Mrs Noah;* like the square it is `a crystal constantly changing':[24]

> A narrative is simply a grid placed over chaos.. Some writers prefer the chaos, prefer simply to record, rather than to interpret, the interlocking rooms and staircases and galleries of this palace, this web of dream images... (*N*,66-7)

While there *is* a complex `grid' holding a number of `interlocking rooms' or narratives together in the palace and in Roberts' novel, this grid is translucent and never quite hides the `web of dream images' within it. The realist elements of the text (Noah and his wife in Venice at the beginning and end) do not work in a conventional sense to `frame' the non-realist sections of the text; indeed, the fantasy world of the Ark displaces this to become the `real' of the narrative. We have no metanarrative layer within the novel through which to interpret other sections; we are presented with a web of narratives which offer points of connection rather than the possibility of fixed meaning or final interpretation. This is most apparent at the end of the novel when we are presented not with dénouement, but with another `web'; Mrs Noah's story.

Through its formal experimentation *The Book of Mrs Noah* begins to suggest ways for feminists to transform - rather than to reverse power relations - within

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[24] This model of the cityscape is close to Foucault's concept of a `heterotopia', a space which brings together `a large number of possible orders': `Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they destroy `syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to `hold together". The Palace of Atlantis is also constructed to `destroy' the links holding `words and things' together: in that place, Mrs Noah is thus free to re-imagine herself. I would also suggest that *The Book of Mrs Noah* can be described as heterotopic in terms of its narrative structure; at a number of points in the text it becomes `impossible to name [that is, define or be certain of] this and that'. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things,* cited in Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 44.

discourse. In terms of narrative form and structure, Roberts does not simply produce a reversal, but rather, shifts attention from unified subjects and linear narratives, to gaps, silences and metaphors in her text.[25]

This complexity extends further than the narrative structure, however, to include the representation of the protagonist, Mrs Noah, who figures as a symbolic character - a universal, anonymous figure - in the same way as Offred in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the text we have access (through the fantasy space of the Ark) to her memories, desires and unconscious and, once again, the text blurs distinctions between her conscious and unconscious world. If there is any trace of a linear or quest narrative in the text, it is her tracing back of the origins of her identity, leading to the confrontation with the maternal body at the end of the text which we have seen already. This journey begins with her fantasising about her escape from the social world:

> This is the way I imagine it.
>
> I take the lift down inside myself, pressing the button marked *Help*. I drop past floor after floor of memory, down past death, down to the bottom floor of the unconscious. I step out into a large square room. The sign over the door reads *Ladies*. (*N*,14)

From this point, however, the text does not allow the reader to distinguish between Mrs Noah's dream-world and reality. She is the only potential referent for such a distinction, but her identity is shown to be constructed through narrative (conscious and unconscious) and it is these texts which are the novel's focus, rather than any illusion of a conventional, stable protagonist at the centre of the text. This fictional subject is further

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[25] In her study of Virginia Woolf's writing, Patricia Ondek Laurence argues that if we are interested in the representation of what has conventionally been silenced or repressed, we have to look beyond psychological and textual surfaces, to undercurrents and the forms that these take: `Since the unconscious is structured like a form of writing, we must try to "read" the signs and silence that writers "write" in the strata that Virginia Woolf labels the "depths" - signs, symbols, ideography, metaphors, gaps, and dreams'. These kind of `depths' clearly form the `centre' of Roberts' novel. *The Reading of Silence*, p. 19.

displaced in the text by the inclusion of the sibyls and their stories; the narrator's role is fragmented and there are multiple voices feeding into the `web' of images. Noah is not, then, replaced by a female protagonist who takes over his position as the central presence in a realist narrative: this `presence' is also shown to be a cultural myth, as powerful and in need of revision as any specific historical myths. The beginning of Mrs Noah's text (which forms the end of Roberts' novel) signals the radical difference of her future narrative; this difference has been brought into the text by the stripping away of conventional literary form and structure throughout *The Book of Mrs Noah*. I will conclude my discussion of the novel by focusing on the dystopic short story that it contains, to argue that the inclusion of this `bad place' works to further radicalise a narrative which already presents itself as ` a web of dream images'. (*N*, 67)

The dystopia is the last of the sibyls' stories (pp. 250-266), told by the Correct Sibyl in response to a request for a story `about a man and a woman making friends'. (*N*,249) The story includes themes and issues common to feminist dystopias: in the `New Era' State, there is regulation of women's bodies; for example, women are classified into `breeders, feeders and tarts'. (*N*,253) Oppression is suggested most forcefully through language: the New Era State Dictionary does not include `rape', as this is now referred to as `giving bliss' (*N*,255) and State controlled brothels `service' men regularly to channel and contain `male aggression'. (*N*,255) State regulation of their desire begins with an initiation ceremony at a brothel for all young men at puberty, after which they receive a new set of clothes, a video recorder and an alcohol allowance. (*N*,264) As in many other dystopic texts, resistance to the ideology of the New Era comes through writing, articulation and language. The first sign we see of such a resistance is in some graffiti:

> There's a new one since last night. *The daughters of Isis will eat your heart out.* The red loops of the script wobble, and the message ends in a cascade of blood red drops. (*N*,251)

The Daughters of Isis do not confine their resistance to graffiti, however, they also enact violent revenge killings of men for the `expected, the commonplace' (*N*,258) sexual murders of women. They refuse to remain silent and passive; their actions contradict the construction of femininity on which the State's domination relies: `Nobody knows who they are. They are not in the dictionary'. (*N*,258) Other women also resist oppression through articulation: the `Little Sisters of Liberation' hold illegal literacy classes for those who live on the streets:

> The Little Sisters ask no questions, embarrass no one, offer their vision to any who will listen. I struggle, they spell out: I fear, I desire, I cooperate, I love. (*N*,251)

It is both the act of articulation and what is said that is transgressive here: in a State which so controls linguistic choice and expression *and* women's bodies, it is illegal to speak of women's struggles, fears and desires. Indeed when Mouse (the protagonist) does `make friends' with a man at the end of the story, freedom with language is as important to them as their lovemaking in this illicit relationship:

> She lies wrapped up with him, while they play with words. Loud laughter as the poems spill out of them, the images they bounce back and forwards, the jokes that make them wobble, almost tearful with delight ... They name each other, and each other's bodies, slapping each other with new names... (*N*,266)

Although as in all utopian and dystopian writing, there is a relationship between the `real', social world outside of the text (for example, the leader of the New Era State is a thinly-disguised parody of Margaret Thatcher, here called *Big Mummy*), the `bad place' in *The Book of Mrs Noah* occupies a particularly complex narrative position. This short story is neither self-contained - the world it creates is overshadowed by the other worlds of Roberts' novel - or straightforwardly referential. The socio-political oppression

that it refers to is not represented at any other point in the novel and there is thus a disturbing clash of different versions of the `real' here - the dystopic `real' and the fantasy space (the Ark) that becomes the `real' in the novel. Conventional ways of reading the dystopia - as a warning set in some fictional or fantastic future - are further problematised when the larger narrative frame (the rest of the book) denies or confuses temporal distinctions. Thus the dystopic short story does not work to bring elements and themes from the rest of the novel together but rather, through its extreme and specific representation of women's oppression, further complicates the status of the entire narrative. This does not only problematise interpretation of the short story, but also the relation between this narrative layer and the other sections: how are we to read this text other than as a further sign that Roberts `prefer[s] the chaos' (*N*,66)? The dystopic story adds another layer - a doubly non-real layer - to the fugue, making conventional interpretative strategies redundant here. The reader has to negotiate a number of textual levels which are neither clearly identified (as `real' or non-real; memory or future) nor hierarchised, producing a sense of profound dislocation which, Maria Minich Brewer suggests, is commonly experienced when reading contemporary science fiction or fantasy writing:

> .. reading itself [becomes] a matter of survival, a question of deciphering
> and reassembling heterogeneous, discontinuous fragments. Reading, here,
> amounts to an encounter with the persistent narrativity of the fragment.[26]

The dystopia does not organise or structure the surface of the text into a coherent whole but, rather, exacerbates the impression that what is important in the text is precisely discontinuity. The `bad place' remains simply another fragment in the mosaic of the

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[26] Maria Minich Brewer, `Surviving Fictions: Gender and Difference in Postmodern and Postnuclear Narrative', in *Discourse*, 9 (1987), 37-52, (p. 42).

novel, declaring once again the impossibility of a unified, organic text of origin. Placed in this way - that is, removed from any wider social context - the dystopia occupies a surreal and marginal position within an already marginal narrative. The psychological depth (the collective nightmares) of the dystopic story works only to `stretch' the subversive form which Roberts has pieced together from canonical narrative. Its primary function, therefore, is not to point out to any ominous `real' as we might expect in the future `bad place', but to refer back to the *novel's* structure.

The Book of Mrs Noah is a suggestive place to begin my reading of the feminist dystopia. It occupies - and flaunts - a culturally marginal position and is concerned to see how women can use the very forms of representation which have excluded them (specifically here, literary narrative) to carve out a space for self-representation. It also touches upon those subversive spaces which are my focus in the second part of my study: Mrs Noah confronts her memories of the maternal body (Chapter 4); in Atlantis it becomes possible to re-imagine the representation of feminine desire (Chapter 5), and the party in the Ark's hold displays a radical transformation of the feminine body in representation (Chapter 6). Furthermore, through its mixture of fantasy narrative and a dystopic short story which details women's oppression, the novel brings together the two impulses which are foregrounded by the contemporary feminist dystopia: a desire to map out women's extreme suffering *and* to transform literary genre for radical new representation. Each of these make reading `a matter of survival': the reader is confronted by chilling, horrific images of women's oppression often contained within narrative frameworks which are themselves disturbingly chaotic: `a web of [dystopic] dream images'. It is this combination which, as I shall argue throughout this study, works to challenge limits of representation and to transform literary narrative. These `limits'

remain the focus in the next chapter, in which I examine sexual and textual power relations in the feminist dystopia. Whereas *The Book of Mrs Noah* shows us the battle for self-representation won, in the next chapter the `bad place' is the setting for this battle to take place.

Chapter Two

Writing So To Speak:

Textual Identities in the Feminist Dystopia

Why .. not add a supplement to history? calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety? - Virginia Woolf.

We must always keep open a supplementary space for the articulation of cultural knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological, or dialectical.

- Homi K. Bhabha.

My reading of *The Book of Mrs Noah* emphasised the range of narrative strategies with which women can begin to resist cultural silencing and described the dystopia as one such strategy. The transformation of inherited discourse contained within Roberts' novel, culminating in the beginning of Mrs Noah's own `book', presents narrative, form and language as fluid and malleable. In this chapter I want to focus upon one of these - narrative - in detail, as a site of power and oppression, but also as a place `where women might figure' if narrative could indeed be transformed. The struggle to retain a place and voice in discourse is an important theme connecting a number of feminist dystopias in which social or political resistance to oppression or totalitarian rule is mirrored by a battle for expression and control of narrative.[1] In this chapter I focus on two texts which foreground this conflict in the realm of narrative to such an extent that the social oppression is almost eclipsed by the specific struggle for representation. Margaret Atwood's *The*

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[1] This is a common pattern not only in feminist `bad places' but in much dystopian fiction. In some texts, such as Kay Dick's *They* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) the link is made explicit and *writing as resistance* becomes the subject of the fiction: in Dick's narrative, creative writing is outlawed and the narrative focuses on a community of artists. In many dystopic texts, the resistance to oppression is contained within a diary, journal or other autobiographical account - most famously in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but also for example in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) and Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937).

Handmaid's Tale (1985) and Vlady Kociancich's *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* (1990) both include two competing, gendered narratives which clash in a power struggle within the fictional space. Each consists of a masculine spoken or written discourse (the Historical Notes section of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the chapters of Kociancich's dystopia which focus on a prize-winning author, Santiago Bonday) and a feminine, autobiographical text (Offred's story and Renata's letters and diary). Although these cover the same ground and are linked to the same plots, markedly different narratives emerge from these antithetical texts, and this difference is connected to power. Thus two versions of the same `future' are represented in these texts. In Atwood's novel, a handmaid's account of her life as a reproductive `vessel' in the fundamentalist regime of Gilead (which occupies the former United States) shares the narrative space with a Professor's interpretation of her autobiographical fragment. In *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* we see the `Campaign for Cultural Reconstruction' (which outlaws all non-indigenous culture, including the work of Shakespeare) in a South American dictatorship through the eyes of Renata, an unknown writer, and Santiago Bonday, a member of the literary élite.The women's writing in these `bad places' occupies a tenuous, vulnerable position in relation to the dominant narrative which is the site of plot detail, history and tradition. Offred and Renata write in the kind of representational place alluded to ironically and sarcastically by Virginia Woolf and positively by Homi K. Bhabha in my chapter epigraphs: somewhere outside of culture but relational to it; a cultural `supplement' which confuses and destabilises binary oppositions:

> The supplement is one of these "undecidables". In French, as in English, it means both an addition and a substitute. It is something added, extra, superfluous, above and beyond what is already fully present; it is also a replacement for what is absent, missing, lacking, thus required for completion or wholeness.[2]

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[2] Joan Scott, `Women's History' in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 49-50. Scott uses the `contradictory logic' of the supplement to analyse women's history. Homi K. Bhabha makes use of the concept of supplementarity to theorise post-colonial subjectivity in

It is the in-between status of the supplement - something `added' and `what is absent' - that makes it threatening: `Its slidings slip it out of the simple alternative presence-absence. *That* is the danger'.[3] Thus the power relations between any discourse and its supplements are not fixed but fluid (`slidings') and this is because the supplement is theorised as beyond interpretation or containment. My reading of these two dystopias will focus on the `slidings' of power within the texts and, in particular, the site of this battle: narrative authority and control. As I have already suggested, the `bad place' provides a fictional place for the representation of shifting, contested relations of power. Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* offers a strikingly suggestive theoretical and metaphorical parallel to this power struggle, as it develops gender-specific components (*plaisir* and its supplement *jouissance*) in an erotics of reading.[4] I want to begin by looking at the representatives of control and authority in each text, aligning them with Barthes' notion of *plaisir* or `pleasure', before moving on to examine the narrative supplements: the women's writing which threatens existing textual order and brings *jouissance* or `bliss' into the narrative. The chapter concludes with an examination of the clash between these two orders and the uneasy resolution offered by each.

The male protagonists of these dystopias occupy central positions within literary and historical establishments:

`DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation' in Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322.

[3] Jacques Derrida, `Plato's Pharmacy', in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 134.

[4] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). All page references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *P*.

...the tall elegant figure, the attentive grey eyes, the pipe held in his hand like a small intellectual torch; the prize-winning writer, Santiago Bonday, or `The Master' as he is known.[5]

Keynote Speaker: Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, Director, Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Archives, Cambridge University, England.[6]

The `Master' and the `Professor' are at one with tradition and culture, part of the academic or literary mainstream: `prize-winning', `Director', `Keynote Speaker'. Pieixoto works with archive material at Cambridge and has `Darcy' as his second name, while Bonday invents himself in the text as the sensitive artist with his `tall elegant figure', `attentive grey eyes' and pipe. Each of these details aligns them both with Barthes' description of the reader/text of *plaisir*, and situates them absolutely within dominant discourses:

> Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. (*P*,14)

Such texts reaffirm some archaic order; they reinforce values and systems of dominance, rather than challenging them. In this definition of the text of pleasure we begin to see that this `pleasure' includes power: these texts `fill', `*grant* euphoria' and `come from culture'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this power is gender-specific: throughout *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes describes a male reader taking `his pleasure' (*P*, 3) and although he suggests that pleasure itself may be `neuter' (*P*, 23; 65), both the spectator and the pleasure are delineated as specifically masculine. The trope of `voyeur' is introduced to describe the reading subject of criticism or commentary, and a voracious reader who skips passages of a text is compared to

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[5] Vlady Kociancich, *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* (London: Heinemann, 1990), p.2. All further page references will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *LD*.

[6] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 311. All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *HMT* .

> ...,a spectator in a nightclub who climbs onto the stage and speeds up the dancer's striptease, tearing off her clothing, *but in the same order*, that is: on the one hand respecting and on the other hastening the episodes of the ritual. (*P,* 11)

Although Barthes replaces the usual `I' or `he' of his text with `we', so that `we resemble' this spectator (and become implicated in the violation of the `tease'); `we' tear off the dancer's clothes (or perhaps `unknot' from `dénouement', which is presumably what `we' are hastening towards), this `spectator' is unquestionably male; the female dancer is also *in the same order*, trapped and objectified in ritual. Thus within Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, the woman is contained by an `order' of sexual and textual exploitation, and it is this same order that is in place - then contested - in Atwood and Kociancich's texts. Barthes also suggests that the reader of criticism is especially voyeuristic as he observes `clandestinely the pleasure of *others'* (*P,*17, emphasis added) and, as a feminist reader, I realise that he is indeed describing the pleasure of `others': like Renata and Offred in the feminist dystopias, I *am not* and *cannot be* situated in the position of mastery enjoyed by the reader/critic of *plaisir*.[7]

Both Pieixoto and Bonday knowingly occupy this position and their texts are constructed to *perform* mastery; of history and literature, but also of the feminine subjects (or objects) of their narratives. This is clearest in Professor Pieixoto's academic paper entitled `Problems of Authentication...' within the `Historical Notes' coda to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Like the voracious reader of *plaisir* who `speeds up the dancer's striptease', Pieixoto's text moves obsessively towards a dénouement, a denuding of the handmaid's text. The `pleasure' of this text is inextricably linked with interpretation, and this act of historical interpretation is an attempt to keep the handmaid and

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[7] In *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), Alice Jardine considers the meanings and positioning of `woman' and the `feminine' in contemporary critical theory, and in particular, the codification of spaces of `otherness' within such theories as feminine: `the transformation of woman and the feminine into verbs at the interior of those narratives that are today experiencing a crisis in legitimation' (p. 25). Barthes' trope of reading as viewing striptease is certainly this kind of transformation. I return to these issues in Chapter 6 in my discussion of the relations between gender and space.

her narrative in `the same order' of supplementarity or subservience. Pieixoto's is a *centripetal* interpretative practice, concerned only with definition, rationalisation, finding and demonstrating `proof' or truth, essentially epistemic questions. Thus much of his paper is taken up with trying to establish the handmaid's identity so that `we might be well on the way to an explanation of how this document - let me call it that for the sake of brevity - came into being' (*HMT*, 315). Pieixoto's performance is driven by a desire for closure, to `*arrange*' (314), `to *make some decision*' (314), to `*understand*' (315), to `*deduce*' (323) or `*decipher*' (324) the handmaid's tale. His irritation at the text's resistance to this process of interpretation - both in terms of what is said and the way in which it is spoken - is clear: `*we had to go over it several times*, owing to the difficulties posed by accent, obscure referents, and archaisms'. (314, emphasis added). Brian McHale's description of modernist and postmodernist fiction as epistemological / ontological respectively in his book *Postmodernist Fictions* is of interest here, not to suggest that the masculine and feminine texts in these dystopias fall easily into any opposition of modern / postmodern, but to note that there *is* a marked division between the masculine narrative (here, Pieixoto's paper) which concerns itself with questions of knowledge, and the feminine supplement which is more concerned with issues of subjectivity.[8]

This division also structures Bonday's narrative in *The Last Days of William Shakespeare*:

> I do not answer him as Santiago Bonday, the writer, but as Santiago Bonday, the man.
>
> After a lifetime dedicated to art for art's sake, I feel it unnecessary to justify a body of work translated into more than fifteen languages, which, over the past decades has won every major national literary prize and even the congratulations ... of our country's Presidents. However, I wish to correct your critic's crude interpretation. (*LD*, 95)

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[8] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 9-11.

In this rare example of first person narration which, as in Pieixoto's paper, appears only within a context of formulaic, clichéd language, (epitomised by `art for art's sake'), `I' is used to signify the writer's claims to intellectual superiority. As with the sudden change of pronoun in Barthes' text, we should be immediately suspicious; the textual effect is not what we might expect: the use of `I' actually serves to *de*-personalise and distance Bonday's discourse further. The `I' here is a *universal subject*, which can transcend all cultural and historical specifics, `translating' into any language, and one which can unquestioningly assert itself as both the `writer' and the `man'. Bonday's main, hyperbolic sentence aligns his `body of work' with both the literary (`every major national literary prize') and political establishment (`our country's Presidents'), and it is this alliance with dominant discourses which empowers him to state, `I wish to correct...'. Bonday writes *in confidence*: it is a formal, rhetorical (thus the use of `I' is to produce a specific textual effect, marking this text as that of a *man of letters*), polished text.

His status as literary `master' is performative and self-conscious:

> As happened for a few minutes every day, the contents of his workroom injected Bonday with a dose of literary adrenalin. The armchairs upholstered in soft fragrant leather; the exquisitely bound books that lined the walls; the table piled with the Greek and Latin classics for easy, through always postponed, reference. In his office there was his electric typewriter, half a ream of A4 paper, notebooks full of jottings...(*LD*, 7)

Bonday masquerades as artist, surrounding himself with signs of artistry and success. He spends much of his time maintaining what he considers to be an appropriate public image; carrying with him (rather than reading) Dante in winter and Shakespeare in summer: `Both fitted his image as a man of letters, but above all they helped him to believe in his passion for the classics...He didn't often actually read the book'. (*LD*,65) However, he is bored by his own success and the ease with which he writes, and this is confirmed by the details of his workroom: the `few minutes' of

enthusiasm each day, the full notebooks, the half-used ream of paper. We rarely see Bonday write anything at all, and it increasingly seems as if his work emerges effortlessly, almost *slides* from literary tradition itself, rather than from `the Master'. The attention to sensual and surface detail here reinforces this feeling; the upholstery, binding, lining, books used as accessories, foreground material and domestic possessions, rather than the introspection and reflection we might expect and which we come to associate with Renata, the struggling woman writer in Kociancich's text.

Yet this effortlessness is a sign of authority and in both texts, the control of language and utterance is mirrored structurally in the division of the novels: it is in Bonday's and Pieixoto's narratives that we find the controlling elements of plot and time foregrounded. For example, in the 'Historical Notes' we get most of our detailed information about the Gileadean regime and through this, Offred's tale is placed in an historical and cultural context. Bonday's narrative details the `Campaign of Cultural Reconstruction' - both the escalation of power and his involvement in it - in a thinly-disguised future Argentina. This political fanaticism is only obliquely referred to in Renata's diary and letters. It is important that both of these dominant discourses - the `Master's' and the `Professor's' - are shown to have survived the `bad place': Pieixoto's paper is a commentary on the historical past of Gilead and Bonday returns from exile after the Campaign has been defeated.

However, it is clear from the titles *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* and `Problems of Authentication' that the authority of Bonday's and Pieixoto's discourses is challenged by Renata's and Offred's antithetical narratives; the masculine texts are threatened with extinction by the supplementary texts. I want to move now to these voices which threaten to dislocate existing textual power relations, or in Barthes' terms, from the realm of pleasure which is delineated as

masculine, to that of `bliss' or *jouissance*, which is implicitly feminine. Moving from that which `grants euphoria' to `the absolutely new' (*P*, 40); from the voyeur / spectator tearing his way towards control of discourse to that which disrupts `the order' through a relocation: to the women who speak from a different place.

While the focus here is the difference or supplementarity of these women's narratives, it is not my intention to re-confine them to a marginal position. Rather, I wish to investigate the politics of these divided texts and the radical potential of reading Offred's and Renata's narratives as articulations of a feminine economy: a writing and politics `shot through (like shot silk) with otherness'.[9] This is an extreme and risky positioning which can be critiqued as an essentialist gesture, but it opens up a theoretical and metaphoric space in which to represent emergent women's writings such as Offred's and Renata's. It provides a context for writings which are shown to be struggling for discursive space and authority, and for which a tradition has to be excavated (unlike Pieixoto and Bonday who represent established traditions). As Judith Still suggests, `even if there is no such thing nor any such place as a feminine economy, there is an ethical, political and theoretical point to retaining that utopic horizon'.[10] The ethical and political `point' of this theoretical emphasis is to counter cultural silencing (by performances such as the Professor's) and to begin the process of excavation - through acts of `radical destructuring'[11] - of women's

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[9] Judith Still, `A Feminine Economy: Some Preliminary Thoughts' in (eds.) Helen Wilcox, Keith McWatters, Ann Thompson and Linda Williams, *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 49-60, (p.57). I am using the term `feminine economy' to suggest real and metaphorical cultural spaces of otherness: any act of theorising, thinking or writing, which foregrounds the difference of women's socio-political and cultural positioning to suggest a radical transformation of gendered power relations.

[10] Still, p. 55

[11] Judith Still, in Elizabeth Wright (ed.), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p.92.

narratives: `the spilling into the shadows of those long-repressed tears, the anonymous weeping'. (*LD*,62)

> I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.* (*HMT*, 62)

> ...this dry husk of a world that closes in and chokes you before you find your real voice. Here we don't mature, we just grow old in darkness and silence... It's the flow of a river not its origins that interests me, so I'll never find the fountainhead. (*LD*, 96-7)

In these excerpts from Offred and Renata's texts it is immediately clear that we are outside `master' narratives. Here, a supplementary perspective and voice is articulated and an *idiolect*, the language of the individual subject, replaces the language of the establishment or institution. This `tiny writing' occupies a tenuous place, it is only `scratched' skin-deep, almost tattooed `with a pin' (just as Offred's serial number is tattooed onto her ankle by the Gileadean regime) in the *darkest* corner. The tools for writing, a pin or fingernail, are the antithesis of Bonday's `exquisite' and `fragrant' study and his typewriter; the women are writing *primitively* (from the Latin root, `primitivus': first of its kind). Despite being hidden in darkness, the feminine voice is under threat *before it has spoken* from a `dry' world which `closes in and chokes' the beginnings of its `flow'. For the woman whose `tiny writing' Offred discovers it is already too late: she hanged, choked and silenced herself. In her text, which translates as `don't let the bastards grind you down', she has, however, managed to appropriate and subvert dominant and oppressive language. Because of *where it is written* or how it is spoken the Latin message becomes potentially radicalising. Renata's and Offred's texts are written and spoken in the shadows, *through* `darkness and silence' and it is their origins in this darkest corner which marks them as texts of `bliss'.

Barthes associates *jouissance* more with creative or writing *processes*, than with the activity of reading which is aligned with pleasure (we can note here that Bonday and Pieixoto write little or nothing, while Renata and Offred are constantly concerned with issues of narration and pulling their texts together from the dark corners). Barthes also seems to designate `edges' and `shadows' in his account as feminine:

> There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow... but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text.. The text needs its shadow: this shadow is a bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of subject. (*P*, 32)

That this `shadow' should be both fecund and fragmented in discourse (`a bit of representation') signals it as a space in which a feminine *spectre*, `a bit of subject', can be located. If we consider for a moment the places in which the feminine texts are written, this link becomes even clearer. The `Historical Notes' suggest that Offred's tapes may have been recorded in attics or cellars of `safe houses'; the message in Latin is found *closeted* in the wardrobe; and some of Renata's letters and diaries are written from the `red office', an isolated space in the theatre where she works. Atwood's and Kociancich's protagonists both produce fragmented texts: Offred's account is divided into the speculative `Night' sections and other chapters dealing with the daily, lived reality of life in Gilead; Renata's narrative is composed of letters to a writer in exile, Emilio Rauch, and private (and again, more speculative) diary entries. While these divisions are not fixed and indeed they begin to dissolve as the texts progress, the narrating subjects emerging from these texts *are* fragmented. Each narrative posits a feminised idiolect being constructed in the margins, away from the mainstream: the women's narratives are constructed in a safe place, a supplementary cultural space: for Renata this is in the form of letters that will never be sent - `I write you letters which

aren't real letters' (*LD*, 71) - and for Offred, this `supplement' is rendered possible by the freedoms of anonymity and the random, spoken word in her autobiographical tape-recordings.

The emergence of women's voices and narratives is also a concern in Margaret Atwood's poetry and a number of her texts represent a woman protagonist attempting to bring the unsayable into discourse, aware of the power of language and thus inventing multiple identities to do so. In `A Paper Bag' from her *Two-Headed Poems* collection (1978), the narrator considers the possibilities which might open up if she were to re-enact the childish game of making a mask; drawing a new face onto a paper bag and replacing her fixed identity with a *tabula rasa*:

> With you I could have
>> more than one skin,
>> a blank interior, a repertoire
>> of untold stories,
>> a fresh beginning.[12]

In the women's `supplements' in *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, we also see a search for narrative strategies to create new textual identities and, in so doing, resist mastery by the dominant discourses.

One strategy used to declare the otherness of these feminine texts is the inclusion of the very moments of their construction:

> I'm all beginnings. Here I am, docile and lazy, into the first lines of a blank notebook.. I've nothing to say. Perhaps there's no such thing as a writer's destiny and it's all just a pathetic exploration of loneliness, a search for an escape route out of all the confusion and silence.
>
> ... Good grief, I've actually started the diary. But nothing I do comes out right. This doesn't read like a page in a diary. (*LD*, 5/6)

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[12] *Margaret Atwood: Poems 1976-1986* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 3-4.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.

I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes
a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born. (*HMT*, 49; 76)

We see Renata and Offred at the moments of composition (moments which are screened in

the Professor's and Master's narratives): at the `beginnings'; `blank', with `nothing to say',

exploring, searching through confusion (`It isn't a story...It's also a story...'), in *composition*. They

experience what Barthes has called `the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss' (*P*,

7); it is not only the texts but the subject which is in crisis, `*I'm* all beginnings', `I compose *myself*',

`it belongs to the Renata telling the story of my first few hours at the Theatre. I call up my

memories and see myself'. (*LD*, 52) Subjectivity is `composed' in language, in the text, moving

from `confusion and *silence*' to a *narrative* identity. Offred's statement that she composes herself

`as one composes a speech' suggests that these compositions are not only synchronous, but the

same process; `language, or the signs of language, or subjectivity itself are put into process'.[13]

Kristeva's analogy of this process with legal proceedings is especially suggestive here: `where the

subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question,

brought to trial, over-ruled'.[14] As I am attempting to outline, in both of the dystopian texts under

consideration, there is a contestation of narrative control, different versions or, perhaps,

testimonies, clash; both discourse and subjectivities are `brought to trial' with one side eventually

`over-ruled.' Offred's comment that in Gilead `evidence from a single woman is no longer

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[13] Julia Kristeva, `A Question of Subjectivity - an Interview', *Women's Review*, Number 12, p 19-21. Reproduced in
Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory, A Reader* (Edward Arnold: 1989), pp. 128-134,
(p. 129).

[14] See note 13.

admissible' (*HMT*, 43; `single' in both numerical and marital sense) reminds us that some subjects may be called into question more frequently than others.[15]

The self-reflexive (or `involuted', with its connotations of curling or rolling back inwards from, appropriately, the edges) quality of Offred and Renata's narratives foregrounds both the act of narration itself, `I've actually started the diary', `a story I'm telling', and the unease experienced in this position. This unease manifests itself in subjects and texts which are contradictory and unstable: Offred uses the space of her text to wonder whether or not she is `telling' a story. Renata's narrative also suggests a problematic relationship between speaker and text and subjectivity. From the beginning of her text, she details obstacles to her writing and, unlike Bonday, has no image of herself as a writer. As the oppression escalates in the novel, her hold on textuality and subjectivity becomes increasingly precarious: `I can't find the words to express myself' (*LD*, 160), becomes `I slowly drift further and further away from myself' (*LD*, 205). She even describes the emptiness of her life in a textual analogy: `It's like a novel without a plot, a short story without a story' (*LD*, 11). Thus writing and narrating in these texts are inextricably bound up with *being*; rather than the centripetal discourse of Pieixoto (interpretation) and Bonday (plot), Renata and Offred attempt to move through or beyond the text to subjectivity.

Thus far we have seen how the feminine discourses distance themselves from those described as dominant; they eschew traditions not recognised as their own and attempt to speak or write another; their metafictional narratives delineate an unstable text and `subject in process' and ontological concerns replace epistemic questions. However, it is particularly through their

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[15] This also recalls Cixous' description of the moment women attempt to enter into masculine discourse or masculine `economy', in this case academic, `they are immediately asked in whose name and from what theoretical standpoint they are speaking.. they have, in short, to salute ... and show their identity papers'; from `Castration or decapitation?', in *Signs*, 7 (Autumn 1981), p. 51. This suggests that the `calling into question' in the process which Kristeva has outlined, may be gender-specific and is certainly connected to power.

resistance to closure and to the interpretative filter of `plaisir' that these narratives present their greatest threat.

> ... you'll repeat your name, in nights to come, in your dream of another struggle, alive and writing in the sun, Renata, tomorrow.... (*LD*, 230)

> Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.
>
> And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light. (*HMT*, 307)

The most obvious manifestation of this resistance is the way in which the women's texts end (quoted above). Indeed, both refuse to end, they refer speculatively to the post-narrative; Offred and Renata `step up' and out of the narrative, to the unknown, to `strangers', a dream, `tomorrow...'. The openness of these final sentences, epitomised by the classic antitheses in Offred's text[16] and the obscurity of meaning *at the end*, coupled with the possibility that this is in fact `a new beginning' radicalise the women's narratives. Barthes suggests that `subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro' (*P*, 32), and thus to subvert the conventional textual ending is to obscure it, to deny resolution; to blur a clear textual `marker'. These endings can be compared to Pieixoto's and Bonday's texts, which end, respectively, with `Any Questions?' and `The Master' back at the top of the literary establishment, literally back where we started. Renata's and Offred's narratives resist any dénouement, and thus they are not allowed to have the *final word* (they are not `the end' of the either novel); as we shall see in a moment, the dominant discourse asserts itself and attempts to fill in, to speak/write the ending in.[17] The openness of Renata's and Offred's texts -

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[16] Interestingly, the film of *The Handmaid's Tale* was unable to cope with this openness, ending the film with `Kate' (`Offred') killing the Commander in a scene of extreme violence and living outside of Gilead with her second child. (Volker Schlondorff, 1990, US/Germany).

[17] In *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), Frank Kermode writes of `our deep need for intelligible Ends' without which the text becomes a `paradigm of crisis'. We need, he suggests, to be able to make sense of and at the end and thus `its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions', p.8, p. 6

which are `ready to assume any contours' (*P*, 6) - is then another mark of their femininity and *jouissance.*

However, it is not only the endings which work against closure, the women's texts, as a whole, are non-linear; at once self-conscious of narrativity *and at the same time* denying and disrupting narrative. As we have seen they refuse to give the reader an ending; we, with Offred, `have no way of knowing' not just at the end, but throughout the text. These discourses foreground reconstruction, layering, `flashback', spoken or written by an anonymous narrator, `It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction'. (*HMT*, 275) Narrative works here as `a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface' (*HMT*, 153); this reminds us of the handmaid carving out her Braille-like message on the smooth wood of the wardrobe, and emphasises the arbitrary narrative identity of these texts: indistinct, indefinable `shapes'. Spatial metaphors predominate in both texts; like Mrs Noah, Renata is drawn to labyrinthine spaces such as the National Theatre: `There's so much *mystery* in its empty rooms, in the spaces opening out onto *nothing*. I admit it: I love these long *random* walks, these *inexplicable* voids'. (*LD*, 37, emphasis added) It is within such textual and subjective spaces that they arrange the `shapes' that constitute their narratives. Offred's most speculative narration comes in the series of chapters simply entitled `Night' in which she seems freed from the constraints of chronology, place and narrative order: `But night is my time out. Where should I go?' (*HMT*, 47)

The non-linearity of these narratives is further emphasised and, I want to argue, *feminised*, by the surfacing of memory. As Gayle Greene has suggested, memory can work within a feminist text in a radicalising way, offering potential for change. Greene differentiates between nostalgia (from `nostos', `the return home'), which is an essentially retroactive process through which the

subject can only move backwards, and memory, which can take the subject *back* in order to move forward. This pattern is, she argues, so central in contemporary women's writing `as to be practically a defining characteristic'[18] and is certainly at work in both texts under consideration:

> All I have left now is my memory ... In the memories that keep me poised on the edge of the abyss, until they open the door, I seem such a stranger. *(LD,* 221)

> Are they old enough to remember anything of the time before, playing baseball, in jeans and sneakers, riding their bicycles? Reading books, all by themselves?...after that they won't. They'll always have been in white, in groups of girls; they'll always have been silent. *(HMT,* 231)

Renata makes explicit the role memory plays in stabilising a dangerously precarious subjectivity, keeping her from `the abyss' - the confusion and silence which threatened her early texts. Offred also recognises that memory may prevent women from being pushed back to the `edges', losing their idiolect, being `silent' in groups. Memory is linked with both textual and political resistance **for women,** `the text of memory is a mnemonic for remaking, or making over, the past- .. in which, as women, we both find and lose our forgotten selves'.[19] Indeed, Offred's entire narrative is marked by memory and her fragile hold on subjectivity is under threat from what she calls `attacks of the past' *(HMT,* 62):

> ... a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light. *(HMT,* 13)

This excerpt, from the opening paragraph of the novel, shows Offred's text starting from memory and is also suggestive of the textual identity of the women's narratives in the novels. The notion of palimpsest, a text whose original inscription has been replaced by a second, making space for a second writing and another meaning, is crucial not only for Renata and Offred, but also for

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[18] Gayle Greene, `Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory', in *Signs,* (Winter 1991), 293-321, (p. 306).

[19] Mary Jacobus, `Freud's Mnemonic: Women, Screen Memories, and Feminist Nostalgia', *Michigan Quarterly Review,* (Winter 1987), 117-139, (p. 138).

Atwood and Kociancich who are engaged in acts of genre subversion.[20] The feminist dystopia, a `style upon style', transforms the `bad place' to a space for a feminine and transforming narrative: previously `unheard', `forlorn', an `undercurrent'. Like memory in the texts, such supplementary writing (Offred, Atwood, Renata, and Kociancich) occupies a tenuous textual position, remaining fragile; a `wail', `powder', `snow', `tissue paper'. Yet within this fragility lies a power: through genre subversion, new textual identities emerge which allow women to `both find and lose our forgotten selves'.

I want to look finally at the clash of the dominant discourse and the feminine idiolect; the moments at which *plaisir* (which, as we have seen, is the pleasure of certain knowledge; stable subjectivity and plot/dénouement) and *jouissance* (the specifically feminine, anti-linear, involuted bliss, located in the `edges' of discourse) come into conflict. Two moments in particular are of interest here; the first is when the feminine text disrupts the text of pleasure to such an extent that `a state of loss' (*P*, 14) is engendered; the second sees the restoration of the dominant discourse.

> Bonday had imagined that writing this letter would be one of the few pleasant moments he would enjoy at this time, but now he was having real difficulty finishing it. (*LD*, 187)

Increasingly, in *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* it is Renata's text which becomes central, moving from the shadows to assume control of the whole narrative. Plot, which had been found only in Bonday's text relocates to hers, his sentences begin to fragment, breaking down into series of dots, which we might associate more with Renata early in the novel. Bonday is also

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[20] Atwood is engaged in a specific act of genre subversion. *The Handmaid's Tale* subverts the Orwellian dystopia in a number of explicit ways (for example, the use of an historical `Appendix'), but is also littered with clues to and signs of the re-writing: for example, the hotel bedroom at the brothel is Room 101 and Atwood's novel (whichever edition is consulted) begins on page thirteen, just as the clocks are striking thirteen as an ominous note at the very beginning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Amin Malak discusses Atwood's novel in relation to the dystopian genre: `Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and the Dystopian Tradition', *Canadian Literature*, (Spring 1987), 9-16.

suffering from sexual impotence and thus in both senses, his `small intellectual torch', which first aligned him with the text of pleasure, has been replaced by that `dissolve' which bliss brings. He has recurrent nightmares, linked to his impotence; the divide between unconscious and conscious is that which dissolves. When he looks at himself in the mirror he sees not only a grotesque image, but importantly, he sees himself as other:

> The man in the mirror made him feel indignant, ashamed. `I drank a whole bottle, what an animal.' Fixed by the frame of gilt garlands, he observed himself with horror and fascination. `A sick slobbering wolf.' (*LD*, 101)

This perception of self-as-other is something we associate much more with Renata in the early part of the novel and this contrasts sharply with Bonday's seamless performance as the prize-winning author. Crucial points in his breakdown include his first sighting and subsequent infatuation with Renata, and his conversations with a child who later dies, leaving Bonday in a `daytime nightmare'. Both are outside of dominant discourse; both, from the margins or `edges' prevent `The Master' from writing and eventually push him into exile - literal and metaphoric - from discourse and from himself.

The `state of loss' in *The Handmaid's Tale* emerges as Pieixoto realises he will not be able to complete the desired interpretative process on the feminine text,

> -many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer! (*HMT*, 322)

His irritation is made clear by the `had she had...' clauses, established earlier on by a sentence which begins, `She does not see fit...' (318) It is also obvious that the historian would be happier with a text from a `spy', `reporter' or, better still, the Commander, all *discourses* of pleasure, which

would fill those `gaps'. Offred's discourse itself is of no value, as it cannot, despite their reconstruction and arrangement, offer the editors detail or fact; it cannot be pinned down. The moment at which *jouissance* surfaces, however, comes when Pieixoto *names* her text as other, as beyond his interpretation,

> Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is *imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come*; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (*HMT*, 324, emphasis added)

The denotation of `matrix' as linguistic register here, which is presumably what Pieixoto intends, is immediately replaced by the connotations of matrix as womb, as maternal space. This has already been set up in Offred's own narrative, at the `Birth Day' ceremony; `Smell of matrix'. (*HMT*, 133) He is unable to interpret the text of bliss, citing the matrix as that which prevents closure, that which disrupts and opens up the gaps. The maternal associations continue with `out of which they come' and `imbued', implying saturation, moistening, fluidity.

Plot and interpretation break down when faced with the non-linearity and `obscurity' of the matrix. Pleasure is replaced by bliss and the masters of discourse are displaced by new voices, and yet, at the end of these novels, who is speaking? In both cases, the women have been silenced once more and it is the historian and the prize-winning author who have the final word. Bonday, rather interestingly ends with, `Ah yes, for all their faults, one must recognise they've left their mark' (*LD*, 233) signaling that although the feminine voice has been suppressed, it has `marked' discourse. This restoration has come about through a second clash of bliss and pleasure, (alternative and dominant, feminine and masculine); only this time pleasure has asserted itself though the violence alluded to earlier, in Barthes' trope of the spectator/voyeur at the strip-tease:

> Without shouting, or struggling, without even any fear, I let him undress me and rape me. I keep my eyes wide open. (*LD*, 230)

> We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer... (*HMT*, 324)

Renata is finally silenced through masculine violence and this is also the fate of the actress who plays Ophelia in the last production of *Hamlet*, which is banned under the Cultural Campaign. (Interestingly, Ophelia is first silenced - her part in the production is scaled down to mime - and *then* killed; as with Renata and Offred, if a woman's voice cannot be silenced, *plaisir* brutally re-asserts itself). Renata's final journal entry (quoted above) retells the quest for dénouement *from the other side*, from the victim's rather than the voyeur's gaze. Pieixoto's allusion to Eurydice provides a paradigm for the *textual* violence, which is of particular concern here; Eurydice was killed by Orpheus *looking back at her*, just as the handmaid's tale has been edited, rearranged, named and interpreted by the historian looking back. Atwood's series of poems which re-work this myth also focus specifically on the silencing of Eurydice and the violence contained in this act:

> I was obedient, but
> numb, like an arm
> gone to sleep; the return
> to time was not my choice.
>
> But then I was used to silence.
> Though something stretched between us
> like a whisper, like a rope:
> my former name,
> drawn tight.
> You had your old leash
> with you, love you might call it,
> and your flesh voice.[21]

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[21] Margaret Atwood, `Orpheus (1)', *Poems 1976-1986*, p. 106.

The containment of Eurydice (`drawn tight', `your old leash'. `like a rope') is once again at the level of articulation and narrative (`I was used to silence') and the final act of silencing comes, the last line of the poem tells us, because Orpheus is unable to accept Eurydice's own words: `You could not believe I was more than your echo'. The rape and murder of Renata in the `red office' and the textual suffocation of `Offred' show the same desperate masculine discourse, re-asserting dominance through the only means it has left. These are, then, the `last days' of such discourse and the `problems of authentication' will not simply go away.

For the moment, however, the dominant discourse is able to assimilate Renata's and Offred's texts to silence the disruptive narrative, that `something without a shape or name'. (*HMT*, 13) Barthes' distinction between pleasure and bliss seems to suggest that this might be the case: bliss as a transitory, ecstatic moment; pleasure as order which must reassert itself, `it is a veritable *époché*, a stoppage which congeals all recognised values'. (*P*, 65) Yet these `recognised values' are called into question within the space of the fictions and Pieixoto and Bonday - the spokesmen for such discourses - can never quite escape the shadow of the supplementary narratives: Pieixoto admits defeat in his interpretative quest and Bonday retreats into exile. Although at the end of the dystopias we are left with *their* presence and speech, both of these have been destabilised; the power and authority associated with the words of the Professor and the prize-winning author have been challenged and marked by other voices: `... speech, silence, absence and presence operate contrapuntally so that the traces of absence and silence are always latent in speech and presence'.[22] The trace of the supplementary narratives cannot be erased from discourse and thus the balance of

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[22] Dympna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 74

power at the end of these dystopias is only temporary and unstable. Naomi Segal outlines a paradigm of textual power relations close to this in her study of gender and representation in the French récit, using the myth of Echo and Narcissus. Although it might seem problematic to link women's voices and narratives with Echo, in that they are thus assigned only a relational position to dominant discourses - they cannot speak for themselves - Segal argues that women's silences and emergent narratives leave a trace or shadow which disrupts Narcissus' mastery:

> She remains everywhere present, even in the mirror where he looks for himself...
> This Narcissus must echo the undead Echo's wish-to-speak, just as surely as she, in
> his text, is trapped by the conditions he sets upon language.[23]

Renata and Offred's narratives, although ultimately assimilated, unequivocally represent this `wish-to-speak'. In each this wish is foregrounded by a textual *shock*, a moment of horror within the reading of the text which makes clear the entrapment of the women's words: in *The Last Days of William Shakespeare* we realise that none of the letters Renata compulsively writes is ever sent (`the letters never sent, intact, fresh, dead'; 221); in *The Handmaid's Tale* it is the shock of realising that Offred's narrative is a reconstruction, edited and arranged by Pieixoto. Thus Atwood and Kociancich do not show us a battle won like *The Book of Mrs Noah*; their texts include women's voices which remain only `adjacent and adjunct' but the textual identity of the dystopia is irrevocably altered. The non-real fictional place is opened up to include other `cultural knowledges' and the *possibility* of future feminine fictions. The woman's supplementary narrative occupies a crucial position: `[it] exists as a shifting, intermediary state, caught between its representations of its own appropriation and its enactment of an `otherness' it can only adumbrate, a "fiction" of what

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[23] Naomi Segal, *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Récit* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 12

it might become'.[24] The feminist dystopia offers a supplementary place for the multiplying of textual identities: like the narrator in `A Paper Bag', these narratives have `more than one skin', making space for an alternative feminine idiolect and subjectivity to be inscribed in the `opened' text:

> All I can hear now is the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening   (*HMT,* 156; original punctuation)

In the next chapter, the focus shifts from narrative authority to control of language in the marginal place of the feminist dystopia, although similar issues guide my reading. I will argue that the `bad place' can represent both women's linguistic oppression and resistance to such oppression *through* language. These dreams and nightmares of language, like each of the texts discussed so far, include a challenge to inherited, conventional paradigms of identity both within the dystopian genre and outside of it.

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[24] Bette London, *The Appropriated Voice: Narrative Authority in Conrad, Forster and Woolf* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 133. London is describing the possibilities which French feminist theory offers for theorising the feminine voice.

Chapter Three

Dreams and Nightmares of a Common Language:

Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* and Christine Brooke-Rose's *Verbivore*

Language is a crucial site of struggle in the dystopia: `bad place' narratives have conventionally represented oppression through language; a protagonist's struggle to retain identity through a private language or text, and socio-political change reflected by language change.[1] This foregrounding of language as an instrument of oppression *and* of resistance to such oppression is best exemplified by Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* in which the Party's vision of the future is symbolised by Newspeak, and Winston Smith's resistance is located primarily in the act of keeping a diary. An opposition is established in the text between a standardised State language which aims to deny or efface concepts (such as freedom and private emotions) by removing the language with which to express them, and a private language which is treasured, but always under threat from outside.[2]

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[1] George McKay takes language as his focus in his study of twentieth-century dystopian fiction: `The Half-Life of Words: Narrative in Negative Fabulation' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 1992).

[2] This is taken even further by some writers: in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), the entire narrative consists of diary entries which chart the protagonist's move away from acceptance of `The One State'. The language of the text changes, reflecting the transformation of the entries from a celebration of uniformity, rationality and collective identity (`I am writing this - and I feel my cheeks are flaming. Yes - we must carry through the integration of the grandiose, endless equalization of all Creation', p. 19) to a poetic text full of dreams, colour and erotic obsession. Also, in Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (New York: Signet Books, 1946), oppression and resistance are clearly located in language: in Rand's socialist dystopia, citizens are publicly burned for uttering the unspeakable word `I', and only collective thought or action is recognised (`What is not thought by all men cannot be true. What is not done collectively cannot be good', p. 81). The text ends with the protagonist and his lover setting up home in the countryside, away from the dystopic reality of the city: `Gaea is pregnant with my child. Our son will be raised as a man. He will be taught to say "I"' (p. 117).

This battle between State control of language and individual linguistic autonomy, which can be seen as a defining element of dystopian fiction, reveals in the genre a reliance upon - and usually a defence of - a particular model of identity deriving from post-Enlightenment, liberal humanism..[3] Thus there is an insistence in many dystopias that something pre-exists language or lives outside of it; private thoughts, memories and experiences can challenge imposed linguistic standardisation.

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which these generic conventions are reworked in the marginal place of the feminist dystopia: both the model of the self inhabiting the fictions and the ways in which language might work to resist oppression. I bring together two texts which both focus on the threat of cultural silencing but, within the non-realist narrative, they produce antithetical paradigms of the relationship between language and identity. Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984) reworks the conventional dystopic struggle between protagonist and State for control of language, to produce a text which has been read as a manifesto for a women's language - a common language for all women to counter cultural exclusion and silencing.[4] By disrupting the dystopic narrative tradition of an individual resisting oppression through language and

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[3] Steven Lukes' *Individualism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973) provides a clear account of the historical development of this concept of identity. Thomas Docherty's introduction to *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) discusses liberal humanism as an historical phenomenon; that is, as a legacy which postmodernism engages with, challenges and repudiates. See pp. 5-14 of his introductory essay.

[4] Lucie Armitt critiques the novel for not going *further* in its delineation of a women's language and argues that the inclusion of some examples of Láadan in the text only frustrates the reader. See `Your word is my command: the structures of language and power in women's science fiction' in Armitt (ed.), *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 123-138. In `The Naming of Things: Men and Women, Language and Reality in Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue'*, *Extrapolation*, 27 (1986), 49-61, Mary Kay Bray does note the paradoxes posed by the fantasy of Láadan, but still describes it as `an entirely new language which can create realities that have been invisible in previous linguistic frameworks' (p. 60). An extract from *A First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan* is included in *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, ed. by Deborah Cameron (pp. 160-163), prefaced by the following introductory comments: a `recent science-fiction novel [which] specifically deals with the theme of women inventing a new language in order to change the (oppressive) world they live in'. (p. 13)

focusing rather on women's access to language, Haden Elgin provides an implicit critique of the silences and power relations contained within that tradition. In Christine Brooke-Rose's *Verbivore* (1990), the narrative does re-enact the generic pattern of the individual subject desperately attempting to hold onto language and identity, but this is displaced into a postmodern world of global communication networks which render the liberal humanist notion of the self redundant. There is no one central character but, rather, a proliferation of fragmented selves and voices within the text, each constructing their own `mimic minimemoirs'.[5] In both of these dystopias, then, the model of the self inscribed by much conventional dystopian fiction is rewritten. This model is most obviously and famously represented by Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> With the deep, unconscious sigh which not even the nearness of the telescreen could prevent him from uttering when his day's work started, Winston pulled the speakwrite towards him, blew the dust from its mouthpiece, and put on his spectacles.[6]

Here we see Winston Smith at work in the Ministry of Truth, rewriting old articles and news stories in *The Times*, the Party paper in Oceania. He is fluent in both Oldspeak and Newspeak, moving easily between the two as he refashions and translates texts and is thus more than a passive consumer of Party propaganda: Winston is involved in the reproduction of discourse which maintains both Party power and his position within its ideology. It is thus absolutely appropriate that he should work with a `speakwrite', suggesting as it does the question of speaking correctly or in such a way as to gain or maintain the `right to speak'. It also breaks down any distinction or hierarchy between the spoken and written word, and suggests an unproblematic relationship between the two for Winston. We are told that his `greatest pleasure in life' is his work,

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[5] Christine Brooke-Rose, *Verbivore* (Manchester: Carcarnet, 1990), p. 7. All further references to the text will be cited parenthetically, with the abbreviation *V*.

[6] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 37.

that 'Winston was good at this kind of thing'[7] and that this untroubled relationship with language and texts continues into his private life and - the symbol of that life - his diary. Although when he makes an entry in the diary he is clearly unused to writing - his writing is described as 'childish' for example - when he does begin to write it is 'as though by automatic action', his pen slides 'voluptuously over the page' as he transcribes his 'interminable restless monologue'.[8] Thus although the practice of writing might be problematic, Winston's text is already there awaiting transcription. It's worth noting that Julia (the Party member who becomes Winston's lover; interestingly, we do not learn her full name) is also involved in the production of Party propaganda, having worked, for example, in 'Pornosec' which churns out pornography for the proles. There is no suggestion that she too has an internal monologue waiting to be written; indeed she worked with images rather than words: an example of her 'silencing' within the narrative which feminist readings of Orwell's text have noted:[9]

> '...They only have six plots, but they swap them around a bit. Of course I was only on the kaleidoscopes. I was never in the Rewrite Squad. I'm not literary, dear - not even enough for that'.[10]

A relationship between gender and language is thus established: Julia does not *produce* texts or control language, but rather mixes images 'on the kaleidoscopes', and the 'speakwrite' which Winston uses is by comparison, a sign of relative linguistic

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[7] Orwell, p. 42.

[8] Orwell, p. 20, p. 12

[9] For feminist critiques of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular see Deirdre Beddoe, 'Hindrances and Help-Meets: Women in the Writings of George Orwell', in Christopher Norris (ed.), *Inside the Myth: Orwell, Views from the Left* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), pp. 139-54; Beatrix Campbell, 'Orwell-Paterfamilias or Big Brother?', in Norris, pp. 126-38; and Daphne Patai, *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). John Rodden provides an overview and critique of feminist readings of Orwell in *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 211-226.

[10] Orwell, p. 110

empowerment even within the dystopic reality of Oceania. Indeed, Julia's silence in the text works to define Winston more clearly as the centre, presence and `voice' of the text.

Suzette Haden Elgin'and Christine Brooke-Rose's rewriting of this model of the self goes beyond an act of genre subversion however. Both of the texts emerge from particular political and theoretical contexts - radical feminism and postmodernism respectively - and thus reflect wider challenges to the place of the liberal humanist subject. My discussion will focus on the texts in turn and will be concerned to see in what ways they represent, engage with and problematise these theoretical positions.

Native Tongue reflects debates and issues central to Anglo-American radical feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s and in particular, theories of language and gender within this context. The work of writers such as Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly and Susan Griffin most clearly represents the emphases of this stage of feminist theory and politics.[11] Radical feminists can be linked together by their argument for the *specificity* of women's experiences which patriarchal culture has devalued, marginalised and silenced. It is this specificity and exclusion that must be brought into view if existing power relations are to change. One of many strategies used in this process of `re-visioning' culture is to employ silence as a metaphor or symbol; to make silence itself visible and a starting point for change.[12] This is explicit in Adrienne Rich's poem `Cartographies of Silence' which `maps out' silence:

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[11] Maggie Humm's *Feminisms: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) gives an overview of the developments and debates within feminist theory in the twentieth century and includes material by such radical writers. See the sections on `Second Wave Feminism' (pp. 53-83) and `Lesbian Feminism' (pp. 163-176) in particular. Adrienne Rich's collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (London: Virago, 1980) brings together the main arguments of what I am referring to as `radical feminism'.

[12] The importance of `silence' in such writing is reflected by the prevalence of the term in titles of radical feminist texts: for example, Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (London: Virago, 1980); Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Women* (London: The Women's Press,1981) and Rich's collection (see note 11).

Cartographies of Silence

3.

The technology of silence
The rituals, etiquette

the blurring of terms
silence not absence

of words or music or even
raw sounds

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
it has a history   a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence.[13]

Rich's poem challenges our understanding of silence: silence is granted a voice and presence here and is shown to be not only a construction - a `technology' with `rituals' and a `plan' - but also a starting-point for resistance and transformation - `the blueprint to a life'. In Adrienne Rich's poetry and prose, silence figures across all cultural forms and social institutions as a crucial element in the maintenance of gender power-relations. It is shown to be part of a wider set of elements which Teresa de Lauretis has described as `technologies of gender', all of which are constituted by language:

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[13] Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 17.

> ... gender, too, both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalised discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life.[14]

There are specific reasons for the celebration of silence within radical feminism and these are closely linked to ideas about gender and language which underpin this theory and politics.[15] Language is deemed to be an instrument of patriarchal oppression which excludes women's experiences, perceptions and desires. There is thus a gulf between any woman's sense of self and the language she must use to express this self. Language becomes: `... a straitjacket, something that forces women's experiences into categories that do not fit, like the Ugly Sister's foot into the patriarchal glass slipper'.[16] If language is a `straitjacket' which does not and cannot give voice to women's lives, one response is to imagine the possibility of a new language outside of patriarchal control; a language which would not be exclusive - the `dream of a common language' for all women.[17] This utopic notion is used metaphorically in theoretical texts and also in speculative fictions such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). In this text, the use of a non-gendered third person pronoun `per' in the utopic part of the narrative, serves to emphasise the disempowerment - through `technologies of silence' - of the protagonist Connie Ramos in the `real' world, which forms much of the dystopic part of the narrative.[18] *Native Tongue* attempts to go beyond the dream or utopic fantasy of a common language for women: within the text Elgin, herself a linguist, constructs a

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[14] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), p. 2.

[15] Deborah Cameron critiques these theories of language (deterministic and `dominant and muted' models) in detail: *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (2nd edition, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 128-156.

[16] *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, p. 132.

[17] This is the title of a collection of poems by Adrienne Rich; see note 13.

[18] For a discussion of the use of non-gendered language in Piercy's text see Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 49-78.

women's language as a means of escape from oppression in the `bad place'. She takes the `dream', the *blueprint* of a women's language and attempts to give it a `life' both within and outside of the text.

The novel is set in North America in the twenty-second and twenty-third centuries, at a point when women's legal and civil rights have been revoked to the extent that women are deemed legal minors and are unable to work or hold financial assets without written permission from a male guardian. Those in power are male linguists and their families, The Lines. Language acquisition has become crucial for continuing human intergalactic dominance and thus the linguists have created an environment called an Interface, a space which allows human babies to interact with aliens and learn alien languages. Women are allowed to live in linguist households and participate in language work - as translators and negotiators - until menopause when they are sent to `Barren Houses', all-women communities. Male linguists have given the women their own language, *langlish*, to develop as a hobby with the understanding that it is to remain purely a theoretical exercise. In the space of the novel and in the space of the `Barren Houses' the women secretly begin to construct and speak their own language, *Láadan*.

Láadan is constructed around the premise that conventional language does not and indeed cannot include the possibility of naming women's experience, and thus a woman-centred language would radically transform both means of representation and, subsequently, reality:

> ... as more and more little girls acquire Láadan and begin to speak a
> language that expresses the perceptions of women rather than those of
> men, reality will begin to change.[19]

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[19] Suzette Haden Elgin, *Native Tongue* (London: The Women's Press, 1985), p. 250. All further page
references to this text will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *NT*.

In an article on *Native Tongue*, Elgin attempts to push this radical potential of a women's language even further, stating that if what she calls `mainstream culture' were to acknowledge women's perceptions, experiences and desires, `that would result in the culture's self-destruction'.[20] That is to say, patriarchal culture depends upon `technologies of silence' for its perpetuation. It is particularly this claim which I want to examine here and I will argue that it is precisely this translation of the `dream of a common language' in the non-realist text, to a change in reality, which is actually *problematised* in *Native Tongue.*

The bringing into discourse of women's experience is effected in the novel by a process of `Encoding' which the women use to construct Láadan:

> ... the making of a name for a chunk of the world that so far we know has never been chosen for naming ... never before impressed anyone as sufficiently important to deserve its own name. (*NT*, 22)

This process initially appears to offer a way out of silence and, if we accept Elgin's hypothesis, a way to end oppression in and through language. Within the space of the novel this appears and remains a seductive notion, as these examples from the appendix, *A First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan* demonstrate:

> **radiidin**: non-holiday, a time allegedly a holiday but actually so much a burden because of work and preparations that it is a dreaded occasion; especially when there are too many guests and none of them help.

> **rathom**: non-pillow, one who lures another to trust and rely on them but has no intention of following through, a "lean on me so I can step aside and let you fall" person. (*NT*, 303)

However, this utopian possibility is almost immediately undercut when we realise where these Encodings come from:

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[20] Suzette Haden Elgin, Women's Language and Near Future Science Fiction: a reply', *Women's' Studies*, 14 (1987), p. 177.

> ... there is no way at all to search systematically for capital-E Encodings. They come to you out of nowhere and you realise that you have always needed them; but you can't go looking for them, and they don't turn up as concrete entities neatly marked off for you and flashing NAME ME. They are therefore very precious. (*NT*, 22)

Thus these namings of specifically gendered perceptions seem to emerge from an intuitive `nowhere' and are based very much on the experience of the individual (`they come to you', `you have always needed them', `you can't go looking for them').

Ironically, one of the definitions in the appendix seems to suggest what Láadan might become as a language, through this model of construction:

> **raweshalh:** ... a collection of parts with no relationship other than coincidence, a perverse choice of items to call a set; *especially when used as "evidence"*. (*NT*, 303; emphasis added)

It is indeed the `evidence' of Láadan within the text: the sampler dictionary and examples of women speaking to each other in Láadan, I want to suggest, which immediately draws attention to the problems of such a project. Toward the end of *Native Tongue* women in the Barren Houses begin to converse in the language, although we only get reported speech:

> Susannah chuckled. "For example ... when I thought I'd introduce a new word yesterday, for that new way of dancing that we saw on the threedies. You remember, Grace? The one that looks as if the youngsters are all trying to dislocate their shoulders?"
>
> "I remember," Grace said. "I would swear it had to be painful."
>
> "Well! I thought I had a decent proposal for a word, and I suggested it. And one of the littlebits *corrected* me, I'll have you know!"
>
> "Corrected you? How could that be - did you make an error in the morphology? At your age?"
>
> "Of course not, it was a perfectly good Láadan word, formed in accordance with every rule. But she did. She said, `Aunt Susannah, it could not be that way. I'm very sorry, but it would have to be *this* way.'"
>
> "And she was right?"
>
> "Goodness, how would I know that?" (*NT*, 266-7)

Here, we see a prioritising of the instinctive and intuitive - the `native' - over the `perfectly good' and linguistically `correct' and this leads to both exclusion - here, of the old by the young - and confusion ("how would I know?"), an absence of knowledge. Ultimately, then, the women's language threatens to impose a new `technology of silence' (`it would have to be this way'). As de Lauretis suggests, any new `technology', any critique of the representation of gender, will itself depend upon *another* construction of gender:

> Paradoxically, therefore, the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction; that is to say, by any discourse, feminist or otherwise, that would discard it as ideological misrepresentation.[21]

This applies equally to Haden Elgin's `deconstruction' or critique of man-made language.[22] If language is understood to determine reality then this model will apply equally to Láadan and there is little in the novel to suggest otherwise. Thus the example given above demonstrates an effacement of difference between women and, in de Lauretis' terms, another linguistic `construction of gender' is established.

While there are examples of Láadan countering women's specific lack of language in the text, such instances further problematise the `dream of a common language' and any notion of a `blueprint' for change:

> She stopped, because there was no word for it in any language she knew, and she wanted to use the *right* word.
>
> "Oh," she said. "I know ... They are *heenahal.*" And she sighed. "Such a relief, to have a language with the right words in it!" (*NT*, 267)

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[21] *The Technologies of Gender*, p.3.

[22] The concept of `man-made language' was popularised by Dale Spender in her study *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1980).

It is not only the humour here but also the specific example of `heenahal' which begins to undermine a prescriptive reading of *Native Tongue*. For such scenes do not provide convincing answers to the question of what a language such as Láadan would offer women. This point is made forcefully by the fact that `heenahal' does not appear in the sampler dictionary in the appendix and thus the reader is immediately confronted by another kind of exclusion and silence.

Láadan also draws our attention to what the construction of such a language would leave out. Ethnicity is an obvious `silence' throughout the text, despite the claim that Láadan is deliberately made up of sounds which do not prioritise English-speaking women. This claim is almost immediately undermined by the fact that this same language is based on the experiences, perceptions and desires of a small group of highly educated linguist women. It's also interesting that within the narrative two women have to be sacrificed in the struggle for a women's language: Michaela, a nurse, who murders a male linguist once he suspects that the women have constructed a real language, and Bella-Anne, who was placed in the Barren House (and not in a linguist household) at twenty for failing to conceive. Thus those who are in some sense dispensable in the text are not the women linguists. We are told of Michaela:

> She was no linguist and never could be, she couldn't help them with their language and would only be a burden to them if she tried - but she was as skilled at killing as they were at their conjugations and declensions. (*NT*, 281)

The echoes of Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are striking here and remind us of the power invested in the construction of Láadan. Its presence in the text serves to problematise the `dream of a common language', most importantly by reminding us of the

crucial issue here: whether this kind of linguistic subversion would disrupt or reinscribe women's marginalisation.

It seems to me that such problems arise if we read *Native Tongue* as, in some sense, a realist and prescriptive text or a `teaching grammar'. A more useful and appropriate reading I want to suggest is to foreground the non-realist, science-fiction status of the narrative, and the moments within (and outside of) the text, which immediately deconstruct the possibility of a women's language. ·

Firstly, the status of the narrative in *Native Tongue* is made emphatically clear in the Preface:

> We believe this book to be the only work of fiction ever written by a member of the Lines ... *Native Tongue* is not a work of scholarship, or a teaching grammar, or a book of science for the general public; it is a NOVEL. (*NT*, 5)

The whole text, including the Preface and the Glossary, is a self-conscious fiction and in this sense, the excerpt from the *First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan* becomes not a transcript of what women need in order to change their reality, but a dream or fantasy of language. Although Haden Elgin has suggested that her novel be read as `near future science fiction', I think that the metafictional layers in the text (for example, the excerpts from historical `documents' as epigraphs to each chapter) problematise, if not prevent, such a reading and align this text much more closely with the postmodern form of *Verbivore*. One of the last of these epigraphs is a fragment `alleged' to be from the diary of Nazareth, one of the women most closely involved with the construction of Láadan:

> ... all joy, all glory, all radiance, had been systematically excluded. And it was from *that* reality, that linguistic construct, that the women of Chornyak Barren House were attempting to extrapolate. It couldn't be done, of course. You cannot weave truth on a *loom of lies. (NT*, 284; emphasis added)

This seems to be a key moment in a text which is usually read as attempting to translate the `dream' into the `real'. In this quotation, however, Haden Elgin seems aware both of the complexities of language (a `loom' from the Old English *geloma* meaning `tool', but a `tool' only for lies, fictions and possibly, dreams) and the resulting clash between language and any desire for `truth'. Thus, the `dream of a common language', which might `weave truth' of women's identity, is acknowledged to be a fiction in the same way, and in the same place - the chapter epigraphs - as Elgin's text.

The second way in which the claims made in the text for Láadan are simultaneously negated is through the continued presence of silence, both in and around the language itself. An example of this comes when Nazareth is humiliated by her father and husband for telling another man that she has fallen in love with him. Láadan offers no solace at this point:

> "To have a Chornyak daughter thrust herself upon a Man like a common whore ... Nazareth it leaves me speechless."
> AND WHY DO YOU GO ON TALKING, THEN? It was a scream but it was silent. (*NT*, 198)

The women's quarters, the Barren Houses, are the only environment in which the `native' language has any meaning and power, and this once again draws our attention to its marginality. Outside of these separate, all-women communities, Láadan serves to constrict movement away from silence. This is most clearly stated by Haden Elgin herself:

> In the real world that we are in, I have no such resources available. I have nobody to talk Láadan with. Oh, I have the Láadan group, which is an informal group of people scattered all over the country who correspond, but I haven't time to set up anything like a formal correspondence group where we could write back and forth in Láadan even.[23]

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[23] `Women's Language and Near Future Science Fiction', p. 180.

Láadan is then ultimately unworkable in any real sense - it is a `limited edition' (as the

Preface describes the fictional manuscript of *Native Tongue*); any moves towards it leave

the speaking subject in what Lucie Armitt calls `the middle of an absence' - still silenced,

still marginalised, like Nazareth's silent scream.[24] The `common language' remains a

silence then, both within and beyond the text (such as, for example, Haden Elgin's

attempts to use Láadan). One of the chapter epigraphs is an interview with a subject

under the influence of LSD and the interview, itself beyond language as communication,

gives us a suggestion of the problems of a feminised language emerging intuitively from

beyond discourse:

> A: It's not a thing. It's not a not-thing. It's not an idea. It's not a non-idea.
> It's not a part of reality. It's not a not-part of reality. It's not a not-part of
> a not-part of not-reality.
>
> Q: Nils, that's not a hell of a lot of help to us.
>
> A: (LAUGHTER)
>
> (NT: 184)

That Láadan should be framed by a fictional narrative (and not by an article in

Family Circle or *TV Guide*, which Haden Elgin suggests would have been ideal) which

remains shadowed by silences and paradoxes - most obviously, why the text itself isn't in

Láadan - disrupts any reading of *Native Tongue* as a `teaching grammar' or realist text.

However, a reading of the text which foregrounds its status as a fantasy, non-realist

narrative can incorporate not only fictionality, paradox and silence, but crucially, the

blurring of distinctions between the `real' and the `non-real' in the novel, as shown by the

closing lines of the book, which give an address for the `Society for the Furtherance and

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[24] Armitt, `Your word is my command', p. 134.

Study of Fantasy and Science Fiction' who publish the Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan.

If in the space of the text, *Native Tongue* demonstrates that the practical and political issues surrounding a women's language render its translation into the `real' impossible, this does not preclude a radical reading of the text. While the representation of Láadan in the text suggests, as Donna Haraway has argued, that:

> The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of a perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalising and imperialist one.[25]

I would want to suggest that the *dream*, the possibility of a `common language', can be retained by marginalised and silenced subjects, as a concept which challenges conventions of representation from the special place of the non-realist narrative. That is, it is only in the translation into the `real' that such a dream becomes potentially `totalising'. This is not to depoliticise Haden Elgin's text but, rather, by foregoing the notion of *Native Tongue* as `perfectly true' and `perfectly faithful' as a text, it might be possible to read it as doubly subversive; that is, as a narrative which foregrounds identity as re-imaginable, as a fantasy. This foregrounding of the `fantasy' element of a women's language - the `dream' - relocates Haden Elgin's fiction into a different context - that of theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray who use the metaphor of feminised language in their challenges to phallocentric discourse.

Irigaray, for example, uses linguistic terminology to talk about the gaps and silences within Western culture:

> We lack, we women with a sex of our own kind, a God in which to share, a word/language to share and to become. Defined as the often obscure,

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[25] Haraway, `A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 190-233, (p. 215). This article was first published in *Socialist Review*, 80 (1985), 65-107.

not to say hidden, mother-substance of the word/language of men, we lack our subject, our noun, our verb, our predicates: our elementary sentence, our basic rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our genealogy.[26]

This metaphoric use of the notion of a women's language need not be apolitical or essentialising; Irigaray equates language and identity here to call for not only discursive presence (`our predicates') but also a `genealogy', a history or tradition. As studies of feminist utopian writing have shown, a utopic framework or vision does not preclude political demands for change. Indeed, all feminist projects remain utopian gestures at some level, as Margaret Whitford's reading of Irigaray's work convincingly demonstrates. Whitford suggests that rather than critiquing Irigaray's texts as depoliticised and anti-materialist, we can read her work as *one* of the many utopic voices within feminism; not as far as we might think from, for example, materialist critiques. Indeed, this can be a productive clash of theories:

...we are standing between two *phantasies*, two versions of the conditions for the future good life between which we cannot and do not need to arbitrate definitively.[27]

Christine Brooke-Rose's novel *Verbivore* (1990) offers another dystopian `phantasy' representing a different socio-political and theoretical context from *Native Tongue* and suggesting an antithetical model of the relationship between language and identity. This difference is encoded in the titles of the texts: Haden Elgin's connotes an intuitive articulation of identity through language and, furthermore, a stable, natural relationship between language and identity. *Verbivore* foregrounds both loss of language - words eaten up, consumed before us (`vore') - and language as divorced from identity,

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[26] Margaret Whitford (ed.), *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 45.

[27] Whitford, p. 20. Emphasis added.

as a syntactic and grammatical structure ('verbi'). The term also suggests that language is in control, powerful and predatory. Where *Native Tongue* seems to articulate a politics of *identity* (women link together to resist oppression *as women*), Brooke-Rose's text speaks a different language; one which can be described as postmodernist and post-structuralist: it shows identity to be transitory, fragmented and a *process* through language for both women and men. The dystopic scenario in the novel is created by the effects of commodification and globalisation of culture and, in particular, the consequences of trans-global networks of communication becoming part of everyday life.[28] If the questions posed by *Native Tongue* can be summarised as 'Is it possible for women to counter oppression in language through the construction of a new language?', *Verbivore* asks within the narrative: 'Will loss of words lead to savagery ... What is the half-life of words?' (*V*, 138) Language is used as a testing-ground for the decline of culture; the diminishing value and effect of 'private' language in particular is cited as evidence of this decline.

The notion of a 'common language' remains central to the text, but has radically different and negative meanings in *Verbivore*. Rather than a utopic fantasy of an organic relationship between language and self, the 'common language' here is a nightmare: all forms of private utterance and writing have been replaced by electronic languages and

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[28] For a consideration of the relationship between postmodernism and technology see Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 35-38. He argues that technology is not necessarily a determining feature of our contemporary experience but, rather, for producers of cultural texts it is 'mesmerising and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself'. (p.38) Jameson also refers to a strand in contemporary literature - 'high-tech paranoia' - within which *Verbivore* can be placed: 'the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilised by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind'. (p. 38) Judith Halberstam considers the connections between technology, gender and postmodernism in 'Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine', *Feminist Studies*, 17(1991), 439-460.

individual control over communication and meaning has been eroded. Language becomes `other'; an alien system which dictates and limits human experience - and it is this process which forms the narrative action of the text. Brooke-Rose fictionally represents the `scary new networks' which inform Donna Haraway's `manifesto' for new formulations of identities in the postmodern arena. Haraway's article is a response to what she sees as profound shifts in modes of production, moving us from `the comfortable old hierarchical dominations' to what she terms `the informatics of domination', suggesting for example that we have moved from representation to simulation; realism to postmodernism; the opposition of nature/culture to `fields of difference' and from sex to genetic engineering.[29] In this transition, she argues, new configurations of identity become necessary and possible and Haraway proposes the metaphor of a cyborg or hybrid for feminists to embrace:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation.[30]

As an image for subjectivity, the cyborg foregrounds difference within itself and points to identity as a process: the `disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self [which] feminists must code'.[31] Haraway suggests that the most appropriate fictions for representing cyborg identities are science-fiction and fantasy texts and she cites writers such as Joanna Russ and Vonda McIntyre: `these are our storytellers exploring what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds. They are theorists for

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[29] Haraway, p. 203/4.

[30] Haraway, p. 191.

[31] Haraway, p. 205.

cyborgs'.[32] It is this challenge - to represent identities `embodied in high-tech worlds' - that Christine Brooke-Rose takes up in the dystopia. I want to look first at the narrative which emerges from these `high-tech worlds' (the *textual* identity) and then to focus on the model of the self proposed by the novel, to suggest that *Verbivore* is itself a cyborg text; that is, it is constituted by contradictory and paradoxical impulses seen most clearly in the ways language is represented in - and represents - the text.

Although the novel is set at the beginning of the twenty-third century, the European socio-political context presented is a familiar or at least near future one. A European superstate has developed to include the former Eastern block countries and the political milieu is described as `post-socialist'. World super-powers have disarmed, but smaller states are now armed with nuclear weapons and thus there is only a fragile sense of peace and stability. It is in the representation of technological developments, however, that the futurity of the narrative is established: Brooke-Rose locates her `bad place' in an imagined `public electronic age' (*V*, 37) in which all knowledge and communication is mediated through high-tech computer and media networks. Other forms are rendered obsolete - for example `private' acts of writing, such as keeping a diary, have died out, and humanities departments in universities have been closed. It is the consequences of this change which are the focus here and in particular, the culture of dependency which has developed:

> ...our minds and psyches, our entire nervous system and networks of expectations have been transformed by the media...We depend on the media for our lifeblood, the stream of information, the adventures, the violence, the romance, the games, the idols, the beauty, the knowledge, the gossip, all that Plato called Love Truth and Beauty, the explanations, the wooing of our beliefs, the eternal commentary that lines our lives like a loving companion, a double... (*V*, 30).

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[32] Haraway, p. 216.

To demonstrate this level of dependency, *Verbivore* presents the worst crisis imaginable in this context: the overloaded communication networks are thrown into chaos by cuts and silences on the airwaves, with the implication that it is the networks themselves which are eating up language and sound. The narrative centres around a search for the cause and solution to this crisis, but also individual responses to the silencing. Thus there are two main elements to the text: the mystery of what is causing Verbivore (to be solved by Jip and Zab, two characters from Brooke-Rose's earlier novel, *Xorandor,* 1986) and a proliferation of narrative voices which are fragmented and cut by it.

These two strands determine the textual identity of *Verbivore*. It contains a mystery which cannot be solved within the space of the novel in time to prevent the absolutely bleak, silent end:`Blank screen, black with millions of white dots, like a universe. Decibel dies'. (*V*, 196) This insolubility is partially due to the effects of Verbivore itself delaying Jip and Zab's investigations, but the text never presents itself (or works) as a conventional mystery thriller, as the subject of the fiction - the loss of words and sound - removes the possibility of any progression towards a dénouement or unravelling of carefully placed clues. Also, many of the elements of conventional, realist narrative - character, location, linear progression of plot with clearly marked sub-plots, a relationship between space and time - are replaced by `imposed' silences in the text. There is no one central or controlling narrative layer in the text but, rather, a collation of different discourses: for example diary entries, a radio play, computer printout, fax messages, transcripts of meetings. One chapter begins with three pages of words and sounds from radio transmission affected by Verbivore; the silences and cuts are represented typographically:

> 'ere Sam, this is Dave, 'e's new, you tell 'im the ---- don't be so suspi --- just surprised. Surprised at what, eh? What d'yer mean surp -

> We can work it out quite easily, after all Christ was born between 5 and 10 BC, so -

> Oh no! not Bankrupt! Ouf! 500. I'll have an M please. No M. Your turn Dick, 8000, 750, 100, oh, no, Pass, Bad Luck! Sally. -----900. For 900 I'll have a -

> We must stop fighting last year's battles and become realistic. We must look ahead ---------------- But surely that isn't exactly-

> Stay tuned -   (*V:26*)

This is an extreme example of the textual identity throughout: *Verbivore* shows us writing literally under erasure and includes silences and spaces between random segments of text. For the reader this writing denies a comfortable reading, turning our attention away from what might have constituted the centre of the text to a proliferation of fragments in its place. Charles Jencks categorises such a shift of attention as characteristic of postmodernism: `For the modernist predicament often epitomised in Yeats's words - `Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold' - we have the dialectical answer: `Things fall together, and there is no centre, but connections'.[33] This is certainly the worldview proposed by the language and shape of the narrative in *Verbivore*; the transcript of radio transmission dissolves any boundary between different texts and produces a clash of linguistic styles and registers through the bringing together of disembodied voices.

This lack of demarcation between different layers or zones of the narrative is reinforced by a confusion of the ontological status of the characters. There are `real' characters within the fictional world (the Director of the B.B.C., a playwright, a radio producer for example); characters from within fictions within the fictional world (such as Julian and Barbara, characters from a radio play); characters who occupy peripheral positions within these fictions within the fictional world (such as Professor Nicholls, who

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[33] Charles Jencks, *Postmodernism* (London: Academy Editions,1987), p. 350.

gives a radio lecture on Sound in Augustan Poetry listened to by Julian); imagined or

fantastic figures (such as Decibel, a strange presence in the radio play who is only heard

by Julian, and Uther Pendragon, a rebel computer) and characters from earlier Christine

Brooke-Rose novels (Jip and Zab, from *Xorandor* and Perry Hupsos from

Amalgamemnon).[34] Each of these, and others, produce their own narratives within the

text and it is these which are given equal status in a way which disrupts distinctions

between `real' and `fictional'. Attempts at such distinctions are rendered obsolete as the

narratives overlap, as when Julian writes about his new novel:

> My novel isn't going at all well. And it's complicated by the fact that
> Perry's back, and is writing a novel about Verbivore, with me as main
> character, stranded in Moscow and writing a novel about Verbivore. (*V*:
> 187)

This statement makes explicit the confusion in the text; at this moment he represents

both the `real' (`My novel....) and the fictional (`..with me as main character'), with added

layers of fictionality: a novel `about Verbivore' in the novel *Verbivore*; Julian's

appearance in another fiction within the text and *his* seeming ability to distinguish

between the worlds, indeed to create another text (`My novel isn't going at all well..).

Brian McHale, in his analysis of Brooke-Rose's novel *Thru*, uses the term `heterarchy' to

describe this bewildering, `multi-level' construction of narrative:

> This means, in the case of a literary text like *Thru*, that it is impossible to
> determine who is the author of whom, or, to put it slightly differently,
> which narrative level is hierarchically superior, which subordinate.[35]

This `heterarchic' narrative does not only problematise hierarchies *within* the text; it also

confuses boundaries between texts through intertextuality. As we have already seen, the

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[34] For a discussion of Christine Brooke-Rose's `revival' of characters in different texts, see Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 207-222.

[35] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 120.

novel is peopled with characters from other fictions, including Brooke-Rose's, and there are references to and quotations from other authors:

> Man versteht nicht, was man nicht mit andern teilt.
>
> Translation?
>
> One doesn't understand what one doesn't share with others. It's from one of my favourite authors, nearly half a century ago, Christa Wolf. (V: 109)

Thus the hierarchies between one text and another, and one subject's language and another, are broken down in the future fiction of *Verbivore*. In Brooke-Rose's next novel, *Textermination* (1991) these hierarchies have further dissolved: the narrative is *wholly* intertextual, made up of large chunks of quotation from classic and contemporary fiction and peopled by characters from those novels.[36] What we get in both of these texts by Brooke-Rose are multi-layered, multi-voiced and decentered fictions which declare their postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives by showing language, narrative and identity to be confused, chaotic systems rather than discrete and ordered entities.[37] Donna Haraway argues that in the postmodern world, any dream of a common language (and the theory of identity that goes with it) is replaced by `a powerful infidel heteroglossia': a conflation of languages, discourses, voices and demands co-existing, clashing and contradicting each other and their cultural context. It is upon such a model of discourse that Brooke-Rose constructs her fiction.[38]

It is its challenge to conventional textual identity that locates *Verbivore* in a different theoretical context from *Native Tongue*. If Haden Elgin's narrative can be read

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[36] The action takes place at a convention for fictional characters and much of the pleasure in the narrative arises from the clash of fictional worlds.

[37] For a discussion of postmodernism and literary narrative in particular, see Edmund J. Smyth (ed.), *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: Batsford, 1991). Christine Brooke-Rose's work is briefly discussed by Randall Stevenson in his article on `Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain', pp. 19-35.

[38] Haraway, p. 223.

as a fantasy of the emergence of new texts and languages, Brooke Rose's is very much a nightmare of the end of writing and articulation. The act of writing is shown to be archaic and useless as a site of resistance to cultural change:

> The private memoir, the diary or the journal habit, even private letters, decayed so completely as a form of communication during the public electronic age ... who would ever have brought out a Compact Disc called the Collected Telephone Conversations of say, Christa Wolf or Woody Allen, as they used to bring out The Collected Letters, the Journal, The Diary of? (*V*: 37)

Winston Smith's transgressive act of keeping a diary would have no significance here: such fantasies of subversion through writing are shown to be redundant. In the `public electronic age', all means of representation and cultural production have been standardised or `coded' in Haraway's terms and there are subsequently no marginal places within discourse from which to articulate difference or opposition. This renders the conventional attack on the liberal-humanist subject in dystopian fiction even more bleak: we see not only the breakdown of conventional narratives and structures, but also the emergence of new networks of power which we barely have the language to describe and which threaten to remove any possibility for human agency:

> We've become stunted human beings. Loss of senses and muscle through the media, loss of memory and logical capacity through computers. (*V*: 92)
>
> ... we've all been made to share the same abstracted and alienating public knowledge. (*V*: 111)

There is particular focus on the redundancy and loss of individual and collective memory in the text. As I suggested in my discussion of narration and identity in Chapter 2, memory occupies a special place in the dystopia; a marker of identity which the protagonist clings to. In *Verbivore* this crucial constituent of the `self' is now, like all other language and text, on open access:

> All memory is on file, all counting and all logical operations are inside a software. (*V*: 67)

> Gradually all our secret treasures have been removed... (*V*: 111)

The `secret treasures' are not only private memories, but also the subtleties and possibilities of language which have been lost. It is at such moments that the cyborg or hybrid nature of Brooke-Rose's text become clear: we have emerging a new textual identity (`all memory is on file'... what would this mean for not only dystopic fiction, but all literary narrative?) and yet this clashes with a politics of identity in the text which is as entrenched in liberal-humanism as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (`all our secret treasures'). I want to look finally at the construction of a model of identity through language in *Verbivore*; a text which proves to be a meeting-point for contradictory narratives concerning the relationship between self, text and identity.

There is sufficient distance between the form and politics of the text to see this dystopia as a place in which radically different theories of subjectivity engage with each other. The very shifts in socio-political conditional and modes of representation which make such forms seem appropriate and relevant are resisted and critiqued through recourse to a different, seductive and powerful narrative of identity. Brian McHale uses the appropriate figure of an interface to describe a number of contemporary fictions which also contain this opposition: `for it arises from the confrontation between the discourses and world-view of those trained in the humanities (including most writers of fiction) and the new computer technologies and their discourses'.[39] This confrontation can be seen most clearly in the response within the text to the threat of Verbivore.

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[39] Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, p. 222. Judith Halberstam also argues that postmodernism forces a meeting of antithetical discourses: `postmodernity is not only a simultaneous formation across disciplinary boundaries, but it also challenges distinctions between art and science altogether and suggests that the two cannot be thought separately'. `Automating Gender', p. 446.

As I have indicated, the text is made up of a number of individual narratives, `desperate screen-diaries' (*V*, 7) which are produced more frequently and more urgently as the silences and gaps in communication increase. Chapter Ten, for example, opens with a selection of letters of protest against the continued disruption of the media, but these are written and presented in a void: the text does not answer the urgent questions and demands these letters articulate. In a number of these fragments, however, there is a self-consciousness about the act of writing, due to the fact that this is a culture in which private, personal or local communication is not valued (`...it's not an age of journals', *V*, 79) and in which individuals are clearly unused to writing:

> Why am I scribbling all this to myself ... I've certainly never kept a journal before ... Perhaps everyone will now, it's catching. Once one puts pen to paper it runs away in trivia. But it's soothing. Very soothing. (*V*, 79)
>
> So instead, I've taken to spilling myself out into the wordprocessor like everyone else, to give myself some sort of illusion of existence. (*V*, 81)
>
> I went to bed very happy. Actually wrote this in longhand... (*V*, 138)

It is from these kind of statements that a sense of nostalgia begins to emerge and this aligns *Verbivore* with conventional responses to oppression in the dystopia: a compulsion to narrate or to create a fiction, an `illusion' of the self. Such nostalgic sentiment in the narrative points to a peculiarly traditional model of the `self' inhabiting this experimental fiction. Even allowing for the self-consciousness in the act of writing - `to give myself some sort of illusion of existence' - the subject here is not that far removed from Winston Smith transcribing the `monologue' which the State has attempted to silence. Just as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the act of writing is not problematised here - `it's soothing. Very soothing' - and the text becomes an autobiographical space for characters to `spill' themselves into. Although at the end of the narrative almost an entire blank page is used to signify that Verbivore is complete, we still have the text itself, denying

and contradicting that silence (just as the threat of `textermination' in the next novel is represented *textually*).

This compulsion to narrate is one of the responses to Verbivore. Another is a return to leisure activities outside of the media: ·

> The cinemas are packed, and the theatres, and the music-halls, the concert-halls, the art galleries, the museums, the old libraries, the disco-, the cine-, the videotechques, the sports stadiums... People are in fact actually speaking to each other again. (*V*, 132/3)

It brings out `the best and worst of the British' (*V*, 133) and a return to those activities which rely upon a personal, imaginative engagement with public spectacle. People are rediscovering `our secret treasures' (*V*, 111) which had been silenced and deadened in the face of ever-increasing media and fast-changing technology. It is this notion that I find most depressing in the text and most incredible in terms of the narrative: that a crisis in the means of representation after decades of global, computerised networks of communication would result in individuals turning back to such forms of public entertainment seems to be at best a fantasy, and at worst, a sign that Brooke-Rose's text can in fact be read as reactionary and conservative, for all its experiment with the limits of the novel's form.

For the `horror', the stuff of dystopia here is suggested both by excess (media power; global, alienating computer networks) and by lack (the `stunted' subjects in all this excess; the threat of total silence with Verbivore) and these are brought together in one mininarrative in particular. Hanjo, the son of Zab who leads the investigation into Verbivore, is on a visit to China and is thus textually represented by his letters home. He is an important voice in the text, as he has grown up in the years leading up to Verbivore and can be seen as a product of that period of cultural transformation. He is the youngest narrator and while aware of the threat of Verbivore, he does not express nostalgic

yearnings for a time before. His letters are only semi-literate and he phonetically transcribes the words:

> ... the pc I borrowd wich is american I dont know if they use pictchurs on their computers I have desided to be a jurnalist not a physicist...
>
> ... I thouhgt spelling wdnt matter in maths and physics   (V: 97)

Hanjo's narrative, the only one written wholly in non-standard English throughout, works as a shock and warning in the text, demonstrating what we stand to lose in the `postmodern condition'. It is a deviant narrative: his mis-use of English suggests loss of control over language and identity in the same way as Winston Smith's initial diary entries: `they'll shoot me i don't care they'll shoot me in the back of the neck i don't care'.[40] Language is used to *prove* cultural decline within the narrative and to warn against a pluralistic, postmodern worldview: `But then everything is called culture these days, beer-drinking, car-driving, living, loving, sailing round the world on a log or growing soya beans'. (V, 82) The options are limited in Brooke-Rose's narrative: unless we acknowledge the threats posed both to `Culture' and the `Subject' by changes in technology and cultural production, we stand to lose the means of personal expression, and by implication in the text, we may be silenced altogether. There is no possibility of anything positive emerging from such shifts in *Verbivore* and no willingness to take risks or look to the future on anything other than a formal level. There is no space for pleasure in a world as chaotic and `heterarchic' as the one shaped by this fiction and because of this the novel reads as anti-technology and `looking backward' in the same way as many conventional dystopias written earlier this century.[41]

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[40] Orwell, p. 21.

[41] Despite the dissimilarity of style, there are interesting parallels between *Verbivore* and E. M. Forster's short story, `The Machine Stops', in *Collected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 109-146.

By reading these dystopias specifically in terms of the relationship between language and identity proposed in the texts, a number of contradictions have been uncovered. Both of the narratives represent at a *textual* level particular theoretical and political contexts: *Native Tongue* is structured around the fantasy of a women's language and *Verbivore* around the proliferation of languages and discourses in an `electronic' age. Yet as I have argued, each text works with a model of identity and language which is antithetical to these positions: Haden Elgin forcefully demonstrates the impossibility of a `common' language for women and Brooke-Rose produces a polemic against the technologies which determine the shape of her experimental narrative. In both cases, the dystopic form is crucial for this multiplicity of meaning. The narrative freedoms of future fictions allow a textual translation of manifestos and dreams of language change and a marginal place in which to think through their meanings and effects. Such acts of `translation' link all of the texts discussed in this first section: how to move from feminist theory into narrative practice? My focus has been on the particular means of representation (language, narrative, form) involved in any act of feminist genre subversion which challenges conventional structures, stereotypes and silences. In the second section I will look at what can be written into the narrative spaces opened up by such acts of re-writing and this involves a shift of emphasis. Up to now I have been concerned with how and where gender-specific silences can be contested; from here my attention turns to what can be inscribed in the subversive space of the feminist dystopia.

Part Two

Subversive Spaces

But sometimes in an unguarded moment a fissure opens in a once silent body and from it flows an unstoppable, uncontainable speaking as we cast our bodies without thinking into space.   - Elizabeth Dempster.

Chapter Four

Writing in the Mother's Shadow:

Representing the Maternal Body in the Feminist Dystopia

> *How can we give a sign, a discourse, to that which is and has been repressed throughout Western history?* - Alice Jardine.
>
> *They can keep their `Name of the Father': that's their business. I'll have the `Shadow of the Mother'...* - Christiane Olivier.

My discussion of the marginal place occupied by the feminist dystopia focused on specific elements of genre revision: how feminist writers work with generic codes and conventions to transform the dystopia into a place for women's self-representation. In the second half of the thesis I foreground the *subversive space* which this transformation creates and I will argue that in its delineation of `physical and textual extremes'[1] the feminist `bad place' challenges conventional limits of fictional and theoretical representation. To demonstrate this, I focus on three areas in particular: the maternal body, feminine desire and the relations between gender and space. In each chapter my interest is firstly in how the fictions unravel and reveal such limits and, secondly, the means by which these are transgressed. I begin here with a discussion of the maternal body as represented in two feminist dystopias: Margaret O'Donnell's *The Beehive* (1980) and Elizabeth Baines' *The Birth Machine* (1983). I also consider Julia Kristeva's concepts of the semiotic and abjection to outline a particular set of limits in relation to the maternal which emerge from her work and which are very close to the `limits' which

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[1] Elizabeth Grosz, `The Body of Signification' in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 80-103, (p. 80).

these dystopias are working against. Although both the fictions and Julia Kristeva's theory represent a radical shift of attention to the maternal, I will argue that it is in the speculative fictions that we see a potentially transgressive representation of this body.

Margaret O'Donnell's *The Beehive* (1980) is a future fiction in which, as the title suggests, society is segregated into hierarchical orders. This has particularly horrific consequences for women, who are divided into two groups: `worker' and reproductive women:

> The women were either wives or workers. The wives were married at eighteen and then had to produce a child every other year for the rest of their fertile lives. Contraception was illegal...[2]

The text has as its central concern the State regulation of women's sexuality and reproduction in particular. These aspects of the worker women's lives are absolutely denied: they are forced to dress in grey and dye their hair prematurely grey; this surface detail reflecting internal shadows, `the enforced anonymity; the erosion of personality'. (*B*, 85) As in *Native Tongue*, non-childbearing women in O'Donnell's text live in all-women communities and the location of these reiterates the deadening emptiness of their lives: `The hostel sat in an oasis of barren concrete, surrounded by decaying terraces of long-dead elegance...'.(*B*, 144) Men's sexuality is also regulated by the State through a mixture of prohibition and public rituals at which masculine desire is violently expressed, in sharp contrast to the negation of women's sexual desire. Every three months, for example, men receive a ticket to a quasi-religious ceremony for the punishment of `unclean' women who have transgressed their place in the social order. Rows of women are forced to confess their `crimes' on an altar in full view of the men who then rape them:

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[2] Margaret O' Donnell, *The Beehive* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 166. All further page references to the text will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation B.

.. the men suddenly erupted into a pushing, swearing mass; each fighting and struggling in their haste to reach the women; eyes glistening, lips working; mouthing profanities in their frenzy of lust. (*B*, 172)

Sarah, the text's protagonist, is the leader of the underground women's movement and the book charts her progression from absolute oppression in the `bad place' to liberation. Her questioning of and resistance to the socio-political order is triggered by a mural painted by an artist from outside the regime, and this image encapsulates all that Sarah and the other women are denied access to:

Colours sang at her from all sides; strong, vibrant, alive. She stopped abruptly, then slowly turned, looking at each wall. There on the granite walls, obliterating them, transforming them; colours, movement, emotions, hopes and fears... It was all there, throbbing with vitality and sweeping her up into its being...

How could one man's vision of life echo her secret dreams so closely? How could he portray, on these barren walls... (*B*, 19)

Here Sarah is confronted, for the first time, by that which has been repressed in her; and this is signalled as beyond language and the social: `colours'; `emotions'; `dreams'. What has been silenced erupts not linguistically, but through rhythm (`sang', `echo', `throbbing') and gesture (`movement', `sweeping'). Until this point, the worker women's bodies, like the granite and `barren' walls, have signalled the non-maternal; their *muted,* dismal appearance displaying acquiescence to State control of reproduction. Here however the `other' is rendered visible, and it is specifically the maternal, suggested by the antithesis of her `secret dreams' and the `barren walls': `colours', `emotions', `vitality', `being', inscribed upon unyielding granite walls.

The representation of this crucial moment and its affect upon Sarah is very close to Julia Kristeva's delineation of the *semiotic*:

> 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... [3]

Kristeva's development of the term *semiotic* to denote a pre-verbal, pre-Oedipal, pre-Symbolic stage of subjectivity has produced much theoretical reaction and critique, particularly from feminist critics.[4] The semiotic, concurrent with the Imaginary in Lacanian analysis, is an antecedent to the split with the maternal body that the mirror stage brings and is subsequently prior to meaning. It is a realm outside of time, a merging of sound, rhythm, musicality, of non-sense, which must be repudiated for successful entry into the paternal Symbolic, the order of temporality, language, culture and social structures. One of the crucial distinctions between the Lacanian Imaginary and the semiotic is that this shadowy, maternal phase works as a subversive, disruptive influence on the subject. The semiotic surfaces from repression in the psychotic subject, in poetic language and in maternity; where language is pushed to a site of

> archaic, oneiric, nocturnal, or corporeal concreteness, to that point where meaning has not yet appeared (the child), no longer is (the insane person), or else functions as a restructuring (writing, art).[5]

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[3] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 89-136 (p. 97).

[4] For an explanation of the term and critique of its implications, see Judith Butler, `The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva' in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 79-93; Jane Gallop, `The Phallic Mother: Fraudian Analysis' in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 113-131; Elizabeth Grosz, `The Body of Signification' in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), 80-103; Mary Jacobus, `Dora and the Pregnant Madonna', in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 137-193; Alice Jardine, `Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts: the Political Difference of Julia Kristeva', in Nancy Miller (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 96-116; Ann Rosalind Jones, `Julia Kristeva on Femininity: the Limits of a Semiotic Politics', *Feminist Review*, 18 (1984), 56-73; Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 35-39; Claire Pajaczkowska, `Introduction to Kristeva', *m/f*, Special Issue on Sexuality, No.s 5 & 6 (1981), 149-157; Domna Stanton, `Difference on Trial: a Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva', in *The Poetics of Gender*, pp. 157-182; and Allon White, `L'Eclatement du suject: the work of Julia Kristeva', (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1977), Stencilled Occasional Paper, no. 49. Of these readings, Butler, Grosz, Jones and Stanton are most critical of Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and its implications for feminists. Jardine and Oliver offer more recuperative readings and defend Kristeva's work against charges of obscurity and essentialism.

[5] Julia Kristeva, Preface to *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

Already, we begin to see the radical potential of the semiotic: if this pre-linguistic sphere, to quote Kristeva, `neither judges nor postulates, but *refuses, displaces* and *breaks* the symbolic order',[6] offering `a moment of distortion'[7]; texts which inscribe this `space underlying the written' might offer a place to represent new formations of the subject - at `that point where meaning has not yet appeared'. Such an inscription would threaten the foundation of the dominant order - which, Kristeva suggests, relies upon the repression of the maternal - and, in the poetic text, would constitute a direct challenge to dominant literary discourse; a political act.

It is here - at the translation of the semiotic into political strategy - that feminist theorists reading Kristeva have expressed not only concern as to the limits of, but doubts as to the possible existence of a `semiotic politics'.[8] Two recent critiques in particular, by Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler, have drawn attention to the `limits' of the semiotic's radicalising potential. Grosz focuses on the lack of gender specificity, on the one hand, in Kristeva's account of the semiotic (women and girls have no special relationship or privileged access to it) and the specifically gendered producers of poetic - that is, bearing traces of the semiotic - language, on the other: `only certain men... are able to evoke, to name, to re-inscribe this maternal space-time and pleasure'.[9] Judith Butler concentrates both on the problem of a *momentary* distortion, one which is always replaced, smoothed over, by a seemingly unruffled symbolic, and the *marginal* position (outside of the paternal law) which this subversion occupies. Butler is more pessimistic in her account, claiming that the semiotic amounts to little more than a `paternally

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[6] Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, pp. 138-159, (p. 152), emphasis added

[7] Kristeva, in interview with Vassiliki Kolocotroni, *Textual Practice*, 5 (Summer 1991), 157-170, (p. 158).

[8] Ann Rosalind Jones includes this phrase in the title of her article on Kristeva. See note 4.

[9] Grosz, p. 98

sanctioned[10] revelation of the *borders between* the symbolic and the semiotic. We are allowed only the briefest glimpse of another possibility before paternal hegemony reasserts itself. Thus, she concludes, the semiotic remains `a strategy of subversion that can never become a sustained political practice'.[11]

The central paradox which Grosz, Butler and others have identified in Kristeva's theory of the semiotic is that while it is the realm of the maternal body, a material body, a `true body', as Butler suggests, this body does not - *cannot* - make its mark or imprint on maternal discourse,

> ... there can be no specifically female writing, no female text, but only texts *about* women or *evoking* a lost, renounced femininity and maternity, as do (patriarchal forms of) religious discourse and poetical textual transgressions.[12]

That it is left to men to inscribe the semiotic from a distance in both religious and humanist discourse, establishes a set of power relations which would seem to efface any mutinous potential of the pre-symbolic: `He delineates what, in her, is a body rejoicing'.[13] Like the artist who paints the mural in *The Beehive*, this `he' speaks (of) a `mute' maternal desire and pleasure, only this `he' can portray `her' *jouissant* form; shaping, determining what we know of her. It is not only that he delineates her but the ambiguous `in her' suggests that he has transgressed the contour, the *line* or border between inner and outer has collapsed. `He' speaks as an insider of the semiotic. It would seem then that the search in the semiotic for a voice, a discourse for the repressed must

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[10] Butler, p. 85.

[11] Butler, p. 81

[12] Grosz, p. 101

[13] Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 242

flounder: it is *his* word which emerges even from the maternal realm, as it does in the mural: he knows Sarah's `secret dreams'.

The accordance with the mural goes further. Not only is it subversive of the symbolic, `obliterating' and `transforming' it, but it is `one man's vision' echoing feminine, maternal desire. We are back with the problem posed by Grosz: there seems to be somebody, a body, *behind* the subversive text (the mural), but it remains an unidentified, unspecified maternal body. Thus the maternal can only be `evoked', can only be delineated through `one man'; what has been repressed remains muted, the feminine body remains the object and secret of masculine discourse.

There is however another `body' in the dystopian text which *is* specifically gendered. After seeing the mural, Sarah looks at her body in the mirror and we see a first moment of self-knowledge:

> Part of her body was obsolescent. Obsolescent breasts - no child would ever feed from them. Her movements suddenly froze and the fear became larger as she looked intently, into the eyes, suddenly able to answer the questions in them. This was the part of her that Mary had said had been taken away from her; the confusion of emotions, the timid, tentative demands of her body; the unknown part that existed outside of her mind.
> (*B*, 151)

Just as her reading of the painting is subversive in that it focuses on what has been denied to her, Sarah's response to her own image centres around absence and repression: of feminine desire (`timid, tentative demands'); of confusion and the unknown, which clearly includes the maternal. Again the semiotic surfaces in the acknowledgment of the bodily: drives, processes, impulses, everything `outside of her mind', outside of meaning. And yet here this surfacing radicalises - transforms - not the `granite walls' (`granite', which can only be altered superficially, on the surface), but the feminine subject, empowering her to `answer the questions' and to name what had been marked as `obsolescent'.

If in this text (if not in Kristeva's theory) we have a specifically gendered response to the emergence of the semiotic, can we begin to claim a special relationship between women and this other, potentially radical realm and from, here move, toward representation of what has hitherto been marginalised, placed in the shadows of the symbolic order? Crucial to the disruption of the dominant order is the recognition that this realm is marked by the maternal body (`no child would ever feed'...), the whole body, with no `obsolescent' parts or desires, rather than merely a delineation. Whereas in *The Beehive* access to the semiotic remains only possible, as in Kristeva's account, through `one man's vision', in Elizabeth Baines' *The Birth Machine* (1983) we see the development of a semiotic which displays, flaunts even, the maternal mark through *one woman's vision.*[14]

The Birth Machine is set in the recent past (1973) but in a technological future, in which induction of labour has become routine medical practice and technological developments have removed any control over the birth from the mother.[15] The protagonist, Zelda, is chosen as one of the first women to be induced by the new `birth machine' and the narrative consists of her thoughts and memories as labour progresses.

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[14] Elizabeth Baines, *The Birth Machine* (London: The Women's Press, 1983). All page references to the text will be cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *BM*.

[15] A number of feminist dystopias focus on reproductive technology as a threat to women: see for example, Zoe Fairbairns, *Benefits* (London: Virago, 1979) which depicts a future society in which the government (the `Family' Party) take extreme measures such as secretly including oral contraception in drinking water to control the national birth-rate; and Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926) which envisages women's lives after eugenics and cloning have become established `medical' practice. *Test-Tube Women: What Future for Motherhood?* edited by Rita Arditti, Renata Duelli Klein and Shelley Minden (London: Pandora Press, 1984) is a collection of polemical essays arguing against new reproductive technologies; this collection includes a glossary of terms used in genetic engineering, sex selection and in vitro fertilization, and a dystopic short story which attempts to answer the following questions in fiction: `What if the government decided whose children could be carried to term?.. What if the child you were carrying was the `wrong sex'?': Chris Newport, `The Courage of Sisters', pp. 449-456. *Reconstructing Babylon: Women and Technology,* edited by H. Patricia Hynes (London: Earthscan Publications, 1989) argues that women have always used technology, but never from a position of control and sees new developments in reproductive technologies as a further, sinister development of this pattern. See in particular, Gena Corea, `How the New Reproductive Technologies Will Affect All Women', pp. 61-81.

The text becomes increasingly surreal and disjointed as Zelda loses control - and any sense of ownership - of her body. Much of the narrative is made up of childhood memories:

> What colour was the bone? White? No, it had a sheen, and shifting, pearly colours, pink and blue. How could she do that with crayons? The crayon colours were solid, obvious, unmagic. There wasn't even a white. With a sense of disappointment, she left a hole for the bone, a hole of naked paper in a red surround of crayon.
>
> The fish in the fishmonger's. Green and blue, as she's always imagined. It didn't work. They looked flat, like cut-out fishes... each fish too must have a hole to represent the gleam of its eye. A staring hole. Blank. Like an error. Like a piece forgotten.
>
> She turned the sheet over, and father's spidery drawings were there like quiet ghosts. (*BM*, 84)

Here the protagonist, Zelda, recalls an attempt to draw a row of shops, sitting one day at her father's desk. Her drawings are on the back of his, and are in one sense at least, identified with them, `cut-out fishes' and `quiet ghosts'. Yet almost immediately, Zelda focuses on the bodily, the sinews and the flesh, and presents the *unrepresentabilty*, `she left a hole', `it didn't work', `how could she...', `naked', `blank'. She is not able to reproduce what Kristeva, referring to the paintings of Bellini, calls `the luminous density of colour';[16] it is complexity and layering of colour - `gleam', `green *and* blue', `sheen', `shifting pearly' - which elude her, leaving only `flat', `solid', `unmagic' images, just like her father's `quiet' drawings. What Zelda is unable to display in her text leaves a series of voids, `naked paper in a red surround', `a staring hole'. That these cavities in the representation are `naked' and `staring' aligns them unquestionably with the corporeal, but the detail of `red surround' and the repetition of `hole' rather than `space', for example, immediately signals that what is missing here, what is beyond signification, is the maternal body. This is compounded by the enigmatic colours which her `obvious'

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[16] Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 244

crayons cannot match: white, the colour of a mother's milk, pink and blue, with their associations of girls and boys. The realisation that this maternal `space-time' has been *forgotten* brings `disappointment' and suggests that a relationship with the mother has been superseded by identification with the father, although both Zelda and her father live under the maternal shadow, she with a `red surround' and him with `ghosts'. This is in some sense a first stage in the emergence of the semiotic; it is the recognition of a gap in signification, of that which is missing; the maternal mark.

The text represents a second stage with the onset of contractions in labour:

> ... Her breath comes quickly, panic-breaths, at the same time another contraction begins, and she isn't ready, she isn't in control. The contraction seizes her, a giant hand descending and grabbing round the middle and crushing the life out; she's like a rubber doll, helpless. But oh, she can feel, she can hear: faraway, muffled, another voice-over:
>
> `Mrs Harris! What's this? Good gracious me, you'll scare the other patients!'
>
> She is screaming. She stops. The sound cuts, like a radio turned off. Her breath comes in quick sharp bits. The contraction is fading.(*BM*, 68)

We begin to hear other voice*s* *through* Zelda's body, from `faraway', different media (`like a radio') that she can both, it seems, `feel and hear'. Although it turns out to be the nurse's and her own screaming voice that she hears, the text leads us to link the `voice-over', a new, imposed voice, with the violent and life-threatening hand. This distant voice is `muffled', *(OED:* possibly from *moufle,* a thick glove) wrapped up, prevented from speaking, deadened sound, covered up; the connotations of gloves, of a `muff', once again link the voice and the disembodied hand. In the contraction and pain of birth, what has been silenced and lost (`faraway') returns; the maternal is remembered, both by and

through Zelda, the `piece forgotten' - maternity - is re-enacted. This re-enactment can, however, present a threat to the feminine subject:

> But she can just as easily die from this upheaval, if she has been deprived of a successful maternal identification and has found in the symbolic paternal order her one superficial, belated and easily severed link with life.[17]

`Maternal identification' comes for Zelda through the body in labour, but this is by no means certain to be a `success', `she isn't ready, she isn't in control'. This `upheaval' that the first contraction brings is for Zelda a traumatic, disabling experience as she fails to recognise, to identify with, the maternal mark. She sees a shadow -`faraway', `muffled' - but, at this moment, it remains opaque, remote and murky. Kristeva's prediction, `she can just as easily die ...' has quite rightly been recognised by feminist critics as a central problem in her text, working as it does as a threat; words indeed which might serve to keep `a woman' *in her place* in the symbolic order. However, within the same paragraph as this often cited warning in *About Chinese Women*, Kristeva offers an alternative position, which has I think been largely ignored in readings of her theory of the semiotic:

> A woman has nothing to laugh about when the symbolic order collapses. She can take pleasure in it if, by identifying with the mother, the vaginal body, she imagines she is the sublime, repressed forces which return through the fissures of the order.[18]

Here, it seems we might have the beginnings of a strategy which could translate into textual and/or political subversion for women. Two stages, she suggests - identification with the mother and imagining ourselves as the sublime - are necessary to guarantee women's survival both as and if `the order' collapses. I want to suggest a third stage in Zelda's identification with the maternal-semiotic to ask: does this route to pleasure,

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[17] Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 150

[18] Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, p. 150

albeit a treacherous and unchartered one, bring us any closer to the shadow of the mother?

This third stage emerges at the moment when the contractions take over her body:

> She does it, she gets control - snip, cuts her head and shoulders away from the rest of her body, ... `Good girl, well done.' She's their baby, their goody, their Frankenstein beauty. Oh no she's not, here's the urge: her body gels, gathers, and now she's her very own monster, wolf-mouth howling, frog-legs flexing: they flinch back. She can make them flinch back, hold them off from her own magic circle. She laughs, wild strangled laughter, coiling helter-skelter inside the huge knot of her, she sees them looking from one to the other. In spite of their magic, in spite of their enemas, she squirts shit in their faces.
>
> The head smashes down through the bag of her abdomen. It won't come. It won't come out. *(BM, 72)*

Here a woman takes pleasure in precisely the ways that Kristeva suggests: the contractions, once pulling the feminine subject into confusion from *outside* (the clash of voices and the hand crushing the doll-like figure), now bring a moment of distortion of the symbolic, from within the mother's body. The maternal is recognised and identified (with) rather than being `muffled' and distant as it was before and we also see a double imagining of woman as the sublime. For Zelda in the text, this is the first refusal of her silencing (`oh no she's not'), `in spite of' being emptied with their `magic' and `enemas'. The non-linguistic sounds and rhythms of her body in fact silence `them': as she laughs from inside `the huge knot' of her body and squirts shit in their faces, they are no longer repeating their formulaic `good girl' encouragements, but look silently at one another. Elizabeth Baines has also imagined a woman as the repressed which returns to representation through perhaps the most obvious - but least focused upon - *fissure* (opening, narrow space): the maternal. Indeed, in Kristeva's account, the maternal realm

has its own fissure, the *chora*, a pre-social space in which `the mother [is] the receptacle of all that is desirable'.[19] The chora, thus signifying a realm in which the mother is *all* and is enough, surfaces in Zelda's text with `it won't come. It won't come out': here, mother and child, in their inseparability, refuse the dominant order and confuse not only gender distinctions (`it'), but also those between subject and object, self and other. This breakdown begins when she `cuts her head and shoulders away', presenting herself as *le corps morcelé*, the disintegrating body:

> ... the body in bits and pieces... This corporeal disintegration is the reverse of the constitution of the body during the mirror phase, and it occurs only at those times when the unified and transcendent ego is threatened with dissolution.[20]

Thus in childbirth and Baines' feminist text, the feminine body and subject, as constructed in dominant discourse, are dissolving. Within this crisis, however, Zelda revels in new-found control and pleasure (`howling', `wild' `laughter', `flexing') which she is able, against the odds, to retain. Her empowerment comes from the maternal body: her excessive, grotesque, figure - `wolf-mouth', `frog-legs', `huge knot' - repulses `them', creating a space for her display (`her very own monster'); but it is also brought about by the unison of mother and child's bodies, (`it won't come out') which elicits what is certainly a fleeting, transitory moment (a cesarean is eventually performed), but one which forces a turning point in the text's maternal discourse. From the childish drawings in which Zelda cannot identify or reproduce anything *other* than the `unmagic', the `obvious' or ordinary (from the Latin, *ordinarius*, orderly; part then, of the symbolic-paternal order), she progresses through semiotic disruption to a position in which she can

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[19] White, p. 5

[20] White, p. 10

give voice to her `body rejoicing' (rather than seeing only another's delineation of it), a place for `her own magic'.

Yet in both *The Beehive* and *The Birth Machine*, the radical potential of the semiotic - to destabilise textual and political order - is prematurely limited by focusing on the *moment of exchange* from the paternal to maternal realm - that is, on the loss of the stability of the symbolic, in exchange for the uncertainties of the semiotic. This moment brings with it the disintegration we have seen in Zelda's narrative; and it is this moment, the *in-between* time which forms the *abject* in Kristeva's work.[21]

The abject is that which must be repudiated by the subject for entry into the symbolic; it is the result or mark of the process of entry:

> The subject must disavow part of itself in order to gain a stable self, and
> this form of refusal marks whatever identity it acquires as provisional, and
> open to breakdown and instability.[22]

Thus abjection continues to undermine the subject, not only through confronting it with what Kristeva calls `personal archaeology'[23] - the struggle to flee the mother, in other words - but also by signalling a wider archaeology, those areas in which human and animal worlds connect. Emerging as it does in the transition from archaic obscurity to the paternal realm, the abject appears, initially at least, to be aligned with the semiotic, part of `an opaque and forgotten life'. (*POH*, 2) The maternal is rejected in the process of mimesis (by which the subject becomes like another, in order to become itself) and turns into `an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting'.(*POH*, 13) However, Kristeva's account of abjection also suggests a masculine-paternal force

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[21] See especially, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). See also Grosz, `The Body of Signification'.

[22] Grosz, p. 86.

[23] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 13. All further references to Powers of Horror will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *POH*.

behind the transition from maternal identification, `a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside' (*POH*, 1): a violent, possessive catalyst causing and characterising the breaking of semiotic cohesion, `an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be'. (*POH*, 10) This `perverse' `despot' (*POH*, 15) abjection sadistically controls the emerging subject, `it curbs the other's suffering for its own profit' (*POH*, 15) and it is this which marks what Kristeva designates `Great Modern Literature' (the work of Dostoyevsky, Proust and Kafka, for example). We are back, it seems, with `one man's vision'; it is these men who can delineate the suffering of abjection even though, in Kristeva's theory, women's relation to the maternal (and, we might suppose, to utter abjection) is especially traumatic: `a woman is confronted by something not differentiable; she is confronted by the same. Because we are two women... there are psychotic risks attached. I might lose myself, lose my identity.'[24] As with the semiotic, women have no special bond with abjection; moreover, they cannot speak from that place. Although the break with the mother clearly places more at stake for a woman, making her `a specialist in the unconscious',[25] they do not appear in Kristeva's theory, except perhaps as those who claim a tenuous but crucial existence in abjection: `One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims - if not its submissive and willing ones'. (*POH*, 9) `Fascinated', `submissive' and `willing': no gender specificity, but a marked contrast between these `victims' and the possessing Other.

Although abjection brings suffering, it is the offer of a place, however marginal and tenuous, within discourse which enthralls the subject. This fascination, which may render the subject `submissive and willing' to abjection, is experienced simultaneously

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[24] Kristeva, in interview with Susan Sellers, *Women's Review*, Number 12, 19-21.

[25] Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 154.

with mourning for `an "object" that is already lost (*POH*, 15) - the stable, unified subject and/or the maternal. Abjection, then, brings into discourse `pain' usually repressed and excluded in a way analogous to the contrast of the `knowing discourse' of psychoanalysis and the `painful involvement' of the subject and analyst.[26] This analogy and Kristeva's theory of abjection as a horror or terror which must be repressed if there is any chance of holding onto subjectivity, is of interest in considering not only motherhood in the feminist dystopia (bringing the physical and psychological terror of maternal identification into a genre usually concerned with other horrors), but feminist engagement with the genre as a whole.

> He did want her to tell him about the society. He wanted her to tell him of the emptiness and the isolation and the fear... Why did he want to let that horror into his view of life? (*B*, 79)

The terms - *isolation, emptiness, fear, horror* - we recognise from *Powers of Horror*. This question can be rewritten, with specific regard to the feminist dystopia: why do feminist writers and readers engage with a genre which involves representations of `that horror' for women, or within a genre from which they have been excluded? As I suggested in the introduction, the feminist dystopia works as an abject textual space, an ambiguous `in-between' text, an `unruly border'[27] between the `real' and non-real, representing `a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me'. (*POH*, 2) In Kristeva's own account there is some suggestion of the abject as a subversive space, usually controlled by the superego and pushed into repression by the `Master'. The abject, however, `does not seem to agree to the latter's [the Master's] rules of the game ... does not cease challenging its Master'. (*POH*, 2) The text read in this way `beseeches a

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[26] Kristeva, in conversation with Rosalind Coward, *Desire: ICA documents*, cited Jacobus, `Dora and the Pregnant Madonna', p. 16.

[27] Oliver, p. 57.

discharge, a convulsion, a crying out' (*POH*, 2), relentlessly contesting representations of women in the Master's discourse. The abject text places the subject at the boundary of the possible, as does the dystopia which confuses time and space through its bringing together of the known and unknown, and it is crucial that in both there remains a speaking subject, near `the place where meaning collapses' (*POH*, 2) *but not quite in that place*. Ultimate abjection in Kristeva's account is represented by the corpse, that which signifies absolute emptiness and lack, `it is no longer `I' who expels, `I' is expelled' (*POH*, 3) and this is surely the threat contained within all dystopian fiction. The importance of Kristeva's theory for my study of the dystopia is that she suggests a power and transgressive potential for such horrific challenges to the subject (such as the sight of a dead body). Each experience of abjection takes us back to the basis of our status as social subjects: `a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct'.(*POH*, 18) Thus any narrative such as the dystopia which takes as its focus what we usually repudiate, what repulses us as spectators, may facilitate a radical rethinking of subjectivity. For feminists working to challenge dominant `symbolic constructs' of gender, the `foundations' of such constructs must be a starting-place. With this in mind, I want to look now at the moments at which the abject surfaces in the feminist fictions and to consider whether they move toward a `retracing of the fragile limits of the speaking being'. (*POH*, 18)

> "At the age of ten -" Her voice trailed off as the buried memories re-emerged. Her childhood; the special school; the regimentation; the enforced anonymity; the erosion of personality; the school books; the teacher; the catechism class.
>
> ... She shook her head, mutely, unable to control her voice, her hands fluttering uncontrollably, her breath sucked in...(*B*, 85)

Here, that which has been repressed *re*-emerges, pointing to a constant struggle to hold off memories which threaten the subject and thus must be `buried'. They detail familiar dystopic attempts to `erode' the protagonist by replacing idiolect with `catechism', as detailed in chapter three. Abjection brings the `deep well of memory' (*POH*, 6) which, unlike memory within the maternal semiotic, disables and leaves Sarah disempowered: negative, suffering a loss of control, silenced. Her `sucked in' breath could not be further from Zelda's `wild strangled laughter'; without access to the mural which inscribes the semiotic, she is rendered voiceless.

The abject emerges in *The Birth Machine* after the contractions of childbirth create a space, as we have seen, for the semiotic to erupt:

> They lift her over. The ceiling slips, she's slipping, losing grip, losing substance, a soul that doesn't need feeding, falling like a parachute over the skull and round it and away, and for a moment she thinks she's free... But then she sees the wild roses, coming towards her, a bank of pink roses, she's falling towards it, nearer and nearer, so close she can see the individual blossoms, five petals each, each petal shaped like a heart... the stamens bristling like unknown insects, and then she knows the time has come... the skull will be there, smashed- up, bloody, not the doll's skull but a real one. (*BM*,72-3)

With abjection, `they' resume control. Boundaries between inner and outer are collapsing, her `substance', her `body', and her `soul' dissolve as she descends, takes a parachute jump into the abyss of memory. Whereas in the semiotic realm she was able, through identification with the mother, to imagine that she was the `sublime'; here her fantasy - `she thinks she's free' - turns out to be a delusion. From `But then..' she is lost in memories, which lead to the absolutely abject, a murdered body. Emerging, as it were, from a semiotic space-time, Zelda can identify the feminine: `pink roses', `blossoms', `petals' like hearts, a doll; but is pushed into the abject realm by that which she cannot recognise, the `unknown', phallic stamens, leading her to violence, to `an avowal of the

death drive'.[28] As she enters the den she played in as a child, Zelda returns in abjection to a position at the margins of discourse, `falling towards' the abyss, `a hole into which the subject may fall':[29]

> She closes her eyes, sinks down through black water, groping, reaching for something, and hits the bottom, and then she grasps it: the memory, the picture, of the head of the baby. That was it. It had only one eye. No nose. Its eye folded inwards to the centre, and the single eye looking out...
>
> She struggles up, out. The surface splits, grey light flaps down. A nurse is leaning above. No. She was wrong. There were two eyes, like currents. She remembers. The image bobs on the surface of consciousness. (*BM*, 83)

Here, the `hole' is delineated with Zelda in it, `struggling', sinking, immersed. Within this void, the subject can only grope blindly and vaguely (`something'), finding in all directions distorted and grotesque figures which terrorise her. Rather than the identification between mother and child in the semiotic, abjection brings recognition of a repulsive (and necessarily repulsed) Other. Thus the surreal images, `no nose', `one eye' point `inwards to the centre', to the bodily and to the obscure. There can be no subversion on the *outside* which might disrupt the dominant Order above the `surface'. It is not only the abyss, however, which is represented here, but also that very surface, the threshold of abjection and of consciousness, which distinguishes between subject and object, nature and culture. It is the recognition of this threshold and all that lurks beneath it, which threatens the subject with `annihilation'; we might see the image bobbing on the surface, but we will, from that moment, also be able to see the `black water' of the abyss.

"Oh!" he says, conversationally, just before he pulls, "I can see its a boy!"

A boy. Good Lord, a boy. She hadn't imagined the possibility of a boy.

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[28] Grosz, p. 90.

[29] Grosz, p. 87.

The boy. Who would have guessed it would be the boy, under the pink and white skin of roses?

A sluther. Pop. He pulls it out, like a rabbit from a hat.

A purple corkscrew baby.

"Right!" says the surgeon, and begins quickly sewing up the incision. Zelda looks down. Her stomach has gone flat. Back to normal. Transformed. Abracadabra. Good as new. He sews quickly, magic stitches that disappear all by themselves in a week. Invisible mending. No one will know. (*BM,* 79)

The ambiguity of who exactly is in control in abjection - who, as it were, is *behind* it - is most noticeable here, during the Cesarean section performed on Zelda. `Performed' is precisely the right term, as we have returned to `their' magic: a rabbit from a hat, the magic word, `abracadabra' (used originally to cure fevers and possibly here, a *feverish* imagination), the wizardry of scientific discourse transforming Zelda back to their `goody' as she was before labour, `back to normal', `good as new'. The sign of the maternal body is effaced, `her stomach has gone flat', and that which *induced* the semiotic and a moment of control, the visible link between mother and baby (`it won't come out') has been removed; the wound on Zelda's body is erased with `magic stitches'. This is, in Kristeva's terms, the `subject in process' *through* abjection, casting out that which connotes the bodily, the semiotic-maternal (`skin', `sluther', `purple') in order to gain a hold on subjectivity, so that `no one will know' what has gone before and, since, been repressed.[30] Although this process is intimately linked with the maternal body, regression into the abject abyss is triggered here by `a boy', who becomes `the' murdered boy, and the descent is monitored, controlled by the Master, in this case the surgeon, who `can see' into the mother's body. Abjection, then, includes Zelda and is played out on and through her body, but the agents of the abject are scientists and, elsewhere in the

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[30] For a clear explanation of the term `subject in process', see interview with Susan Sellers, note 24, above.

narrative, her husband, her father, the boy. As Kristeva has argued, there are gendered responses to the descent into the realm of abjection, `it's more difficult for women to get out of hell, this descent'.[31] The reasons for this may allow speculation as to ways to further radicalise the feminist `bad place', reclaiming along the way, both the semiotic and the abject.

For Kristeva, identification with the mother threatens to plunge the feminine subject into psychosis as she comes face-to-face with `something not differentiable; she is confronted by the same'[32] and it is this which traumatises women's relations with an (archaic) mother. And yet in the fictional texts under consideration, identification with the semiotic realm (confrontation with the *same*) produces a rupture in the narrative, from which the feminine subject can speak; this is truly transgressive in the feminist dystopia where the `horror' of the text is so often the silencing of women. Two questions then arise: does the identification have to be a confrontation, does it have, in other words, to be problematic; and, speculatively, what would happen if differences, rather than sameness, between mother and daughter, were brought into view?

> Yet they laughed, she and mother in the kitchen. Something was confused. Mother the cook caught out in a contradiction. Mother the conjuror caught out in uncertainty. Child-mother and child.
>
> ... They laughed, schizophrenic, caught between that truth and the pre-sealed images... (*BM,* 118)

Identification remains possible here for the `child-mother and child' in spite of contradiction, confusion and uncertainty. Their laughter, so reminiscent of Zelda's shrieking, is that of the *schizophrenic*, implying a split, a retreat from the symbolic. This splitting does suggest that what is confronted here is not their sameness, but the different

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[31] Kristeva, interview with Susan Sellers, p. 21.

[32] Kristeva, interview with Sellers, p. 21.

facets of the maternal: and `yet they laughed'. The `something' that is confused here is the paternal order, which regards the mother-daughter relationship as natural, without any discursive status, `loaded with emotions, but without symbolic translation'.[33] As Teresa de Lauretis argues, it has been masculine discourse (from the Church and State for example) which has attempted to `erase all actual difference'[34] between women with its `pre-sealed images' of femininity, and it is this narrative which needs to be challenged and rewritten in feminist fictions. Christiane Olivier has already begun this process in her uncovering of the silences contained within psychoanalytic discourse, by questioning the theory of penis envy, suggesting that the inferiority complex ascribed to girls by Freud flounders on a very visible difference: `a girl would have to be oddly blind...to see anything in the boy's sex that remotely resembled hers'.[35] In other words, would the girl take this difference, as Freud suggests, as `a wound to her narcissism' or would she be more likely to celebrate that difference? In a similar way, we might want to consider whether facing the same in relations with the mother must of necessity be traumatic. Isn't it more likely that *recognition* would be an empowering, stabilising moment for the marginalised subject? Otherwise, how do we account for Zelda's and her mother's laughter?

We need, it seems, a model of mother-daughter relations which encapsulates both sameness (dealing with the question of confrontation) and difference (which may allow a rewriting of masculine discourse). This project which would work towards a dismantling of those `pre-sealed images' could include the textual and political strategy of

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[33] Libreria delle Donne di Milano, `Don't Think You Have Any Rights', p. 155, cited Teresa de Lauretis, `The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain', in *differences*, 1(Summer 1989), 3-37, (p. 25).

[34] De Lauretis, p. 24

[35] Christiane Olivier, *Jocasta's Children: The Imprint of the Mother* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 13.

entrustment (`affidamento'`) developed and explored by the Milan Bookstore Collective.[36] With this `one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman... not in spite, but rather because and in full recognition of the disparity that may exist between them'.[37] This relationship, based as it is on a feminised or woman-centred `frame of reference'[38] offers the potential for what the collective call `symbolic mediation', a possibility of a position for women within symbolic discourse: `a relationship of entrustment serves to make the female sex visible in society, to give it presence and a voice'.[39]

Entrustment can provide a frame or structure for relations between any two women, but is based upon a symbolic mother and daughter relationship and, as with any structure, there are power relations, between `the woman who wants and the woman who knows'.[40] In fact *power relations* are crucial within entrustment, as it is through simultaneous identification and difference from the symbolic mother that power, in other words a discursive position for women, can be claimed. The relationship does not aim to exclude women from the symbolic realm (for example, to push them into the semiotic) but, rather, positions them as `autonomous from male definition and dominance'.[41] It is such a moment of entrustment, I want to argue, that we have seen between Zelda and her mother: the daughter here is under the `spell' of her mother's magic. Such moments are rare in the feminist dystopia; although mother-daughter relationships are included in the

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[36] For details of the Collective and the practice of entrustment, see The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference, A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) with introductory essay by Teresa de Lauretis; Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) and Teresa de Lauretis, `The Essence of the Triangle...', (see note 33 above).

[37] De Lauretis, p. 22

[38] De Lauretis, p. 23

[39] Libreria delle Donne di Milano, `Entrustment enters the Palace', cited Kemp and Bono, p. 128

[40] Libreria delle Donne di Milano, cited De Lauretis, p. 25

[41] De Lauretis, p. 25

narratives, they remain marginalised and are often replaced by mother-son relations (as in Zelda's case). There is clearly potential for textual subversion within the alliance of mother and daughter, which Marianne Hirsch has described as `the great unwritten story'.[42] At the end of *The Birth Machine*, Zelda's son stares up at her and is, we read, `waiting for her, waiting for images'. (*BM*, 120) This is very much the position of the reader of the feminist `bad place'; the maternal story, I think, no longer remains `unwritten' or unrepresentable, but has only been traced onto the text.

The representation of the maternal in these two feminist dystopias - both in terms of its place and affect on the text - remains locked in the terms with which we began: the texts foreground the struggle to represent the repressed, a struggle which takes place very much within the shadows, in the black water which threatens Zelda. The moments at which the semiotic erupts and disrupts the texts (in labour and at the mirror) are undermined and *almost* cancelled out by the ambiguity of the abject. `Almost', because something remains: in the feminist dystopia we have (some of) the beginnings of feminist textual representation of the mother, the beginnings of that story. The traces of mother-daughter relationships are there, but need to be fleshed out and, this may only be a stage, to become the central focus of the text. Zelda's reaction when she gives birth to her son is `she hadn't imagined the possibility of a boy', when it fact, it is the possibilities of a girl that have been excluded here.

More positively though, the feminist `bad place' does open up a textual space in which a maternal voice can be heard. Contrary to Kristeva's claim that it is left to a male author to delineate, to speak `from a place where she [the mother] is not, where she knows not'[43]: in these texts, that unknowing, unspeaking position is refused. I believe

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[42] Marianne Hirsch, `Mother and Daughters', in *Signs*, 7 (Autumn 1981), p. 200.
[43] Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 242

they expose and transcend the limits which Kristeva sets for the `maternal identified woman... neither speaking or writing, in a permanent state of expectation'.[44] Ironically, these limits are transgressed and *contradicted* in Kristeva's own work, in her essay `Stabat Mater'. Here the typography reflects the split maternal subject, with autobiographical, lyrical text placed alongside a history and critique of Christian and humanist discourse on maternity. The voice in the personal text is almost identical to the voice of the feminine subject within the semiotic realm in *The Beehive* and *The Birth Machine*:

> **Then slowly, a shadowy shape gathered, became detached, darkened, stood out: seen from what must be the true place of my head, it was the right side of my pelvis. Just bony, sleek, yellow, misshapen...but slit: severed scaly surface, revealing under this disproportionate pointed limb, the fibres of a marrow....monstrous graft of life on myself, a living dead. Life... death... undecidable.[45]**

Here, despite Kristeva's claims to the contrary, it is the maternal text which assumes and *retains* control. The struggle within the maternal shadow is represented here as the fragments of text vie for space on (and control of) the page, but it is the maternal text which comes though the struggle, enveloping the other and having the final word. This represents not only a textual subversion - giving a sign to the unrepresented - but also, perhaps, a way out of the shadow. The speculative fiction of a future `bad place' can represent this possibility and not only with regard to the maternal body. In the next chapter I consider the representation of feminine desire in the feminist dystopia and argue that here also the fictions situate themselves at the limits of discourse to uncover what has been repressed, cast into the shadows.

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[44] Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, in *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 155

[45] Kristeva, `Stabat Mater', in *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 168

Chapter Five

`Submitting All Things to Desire':

The Future of Fantasy

But on her forehead sits a fire:

She sets her forward countenance

And leaps into the future chance,

Submitting all things to desire.

\- Tennyson, *In Memoriam*

Fantasy ... is not the object of desire, but its setting.

\- Jean Laplanche and Jean-Betrand Pontalis

In my discussion of *The Beehive* and *The Birth Machine* I argued that the subversive, extreme textual space of the dystopia enables feminist writers to expose and transcend conventional limits in representations of the maternal body. This process involves giving a voice - a discursive presence - to a material and symbolic body which has occupied a central but silent place in narrative; `neither speaking or writing, in a permanent state of expectation' as Kristeva described her. In this chapter I want to consider the representation of another `body' in the feminist dystopia: that of the desiring female subject. Again, the distinction between real and imagined body is important here. I am interested both in the representation of women's physical, bodily, needs and desires and in a re-writing of the narrative of feminine desire as lack, absence and enigma, most obviously in psychoanalytic theory. While the maternal body has been theorised as a

shadow or trace in the subject's archaeology, the feminine sexual subject has been denied even this half-presence:

> `Ever since we've been begging them - last time I mentioned women analysts - begging them on our knees to try to tell us about it, well, not a word! We have never managed to get anything out of them'.[1]

> We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a "dark continent" for psychology.[2]

Freud's and Lacan's delineation of feminine desire as a silence (`well, not a word!') and mystery (`a "dark continent"') have a metatheoretical status: feminist representations of this desire in theoretical or aesthetic texts must engage with these dominant notions, either to repudiate or rework them. This can be seen in Cixous's discussion of the `problem' of articulating feminine desire, in which she uses the terminology of the colonised body, echoing Freud's use of the trope of the `dark continent':

> And we have internalised this fear of the dark. Women haven't had eyes for themselves. They haven't gone exploring in their house. Their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonised. Woman is disgusted by woman and fears her.[3]

It is perhaps, then, this inherited `fear of the dark' which has helped to maintain the spectacular silence around women's desire in feminist theory and fictions. `Exploratory expeditions' are underway, certainly, and this has included the substantial body of work

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[1] Jacques Lacan, in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 146.

[2] Sigmund Freud, `The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person', cited in Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 210.

[3] Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 68

interrogating Freudian and Lacanian models of feminine subjectivity from feminist

perspectives[4], but it remains the case that in terms of fictional representations, we are

still, as feminist readers, `begging them on our knees to tell us about it'. There is, of

course, much more at stake here than for Lacan, as what we are `begging for' is

representations of ourselves.

How might we begin to counter such deeply embedded formulations of feminine

desire as lack and enigma? Where can we find aesthetic or theoretical spaces within

which to `fill in' this gap when, as Merja Makinen points out, `all we have to inscribe our

own sexual identities from are cultural constructions?'[5] In other words, the only tools -

language, narrative, visual image - we have to represent women as sexual subjects are

precisely those used to produce and maintain repression. However, I want to suggest

that the repressive power of these elements is crucially connected to context and that if

we displace representation to a subversive cultural space such as the dystopia, gender-

specific silences may be broken. Of all speculative fiction the `bad place' offers the most

productive textual place for any challenge to sexual silences and taboos because, as I

argued in relation to the maternal body, the dystopia forces the reader and writer to

encounter what is conventionally repudiated and this is the source of its radical potential.

Indeed, these narratives thrive upon confrontation with all that we, as social subjects,

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[4] Recent examples of this work include Elizabeth Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990) in which she investigates the possibilities and limitation of Lacanian theory for feminists, and Teresa Brennan's *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1992) in which she employs Lacanian and Kleinian theories of the subject to interrogate Freud's `riddle of femininity'.

[5] Merja Makinen, `Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonisation of Feminine Sexuality', *Feminist Review*, 42 (Autumn 1992), 2-15, (p. 13).

distance ourselves from. In the case of feminine desire, as I shall suggest, the `bad place' is able to include both the `pleasure and danger' of uncovering this enigma.[6]

Central to my reading of three feminist dystopias which focus on the representation of feminine desire will be the following question: is there a relationship between the fantasy narrative and the articulation of sexual desire, needs and fantasies? Two meanings of `fantasy' are being conflated quite deliberately here to suggest that this is indeed the case. I am bringing together the possibilities of fantastic literature, (narratives which occupy an `in-between' status; estranged and displaced from reality, but relational to it all the same) and the individual subject's fantasy:

> ...an imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfillment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes.[7]

This second `fantasy' can be linked to the literary fantastic in two ways which are important for my argument. Firstly, it is also located between worlds which are seemingly antithetical: the private, `psychic' world of the subject and the public, external, physical world. Thus the imaginary scene is constructed in a space between these worlds, `the between perception and consciousness'.[8] Secondly, for this kind of fantasy to be thought through or articulated it must constitute a *narrative*: `fantasy, then, is not simply

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[6] The opposition of pleasure and danger echoes the title of one of the few critical texts which focuses on feminine desire: Carol S. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge, 1984). In her introductory essay, Vance argues that representing female sexuality is not a simple matter of giving voice to suppressed desires but, rather, a mapping out of a space in which these voices might then be heard: `what we want is not a mystery, not a blank [but to take pleasure] in imagining the textures and contours that would unfurl and proliferate in a safer space', (p. 3).

[7] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, cited in Julia Creet, `Daughter of the Movement: The Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy', *differences*, 3(1991), 135-159, (p. 149).

[8] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), p.56; cited in Elizabeth Wright (ed.), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, p. 84, (emphasis in original).

a matter of summoning imaginary objects, it is a matter of staging, of *mise-en-scene*'.[9]

The feminist dystopia offers a meeting-place for the staging of these two fantasies; it is 'some elsewhere... in this other place that disrupts social order, where desire makes fiction exist'.[10]

'In this other place', in between the 'real' and the unconscious which is before and beyond language, it is perhaps possible to imagine the forging of new sexual and textual identities.[11] A number of theorists have argued recently that speculative fictions offer a subversive space for such re-imagining and it is thus to such narratives that we should look for reconfigurations of identity, gender and the representation of desire. One of the most interesting articulations of this position is in Judith Butler's article 'The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess' in which she contrasts theories of fantasy from texts which suggest that what is represented in fantasy will have a 'readable' effect on the real (such as feminist anti-pornographic discourse) and non-realist texts such as utopias and dystopias which, she argues, belong 'to a different version of the real', from which we do not claim the same effect on the real.[12] Butler begins by foregrounding the contrasting ontological status of these two models of fantasy and,

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[9] Victor Burgin, 'Fantasy' in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: a Critical Dictionary*, pp. 84-88, (p. 85).

[10] Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 97

[11] I am using 'real' here to denote the social, experiential world, rather than the 'Real' as delineated in Lacan's theory of subjectivity. In his work, the Real constitutes the order prior to the emergence of the ego and seems concurrent with the semiotic in Kristevean theory: '[the real] is an anatomical, 'natural' order.. a pure plenitude or fullness.. Lacan himself refers to the Real as "the lack of a lack"'. Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 34.

[12] Judith Butler, 'The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess', *differences*, 2 (Summer 1990), 105-125 (p. 105). See also Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 136, where she suggests that for a radical 'shake up' of gender and desire in narrative we need to look at feminist speculative fiction. While feminist readings of Angela Carter's representation of women's sexuality in her novels remain divided as to whether she reinscribes or profoundly challenges the repression of feminine desire, the more positive readings argue that it is the non-realism of her narratives that allow her to challenge conventional representations. Elaine Jordan and Merja Makinen both focus upon this aspect of her writing. See notes 5 and 35.

through a reading of Mapplethorpe's work (and the surrounding controversy), brings

them together to argue that meanings of fantasy cannot be fixed or claimed by one group

over another precisely because of the `in-between status' described already. Her

argument - in terms of the representation of desire - is that we need a `proliferation and

deregulation' of images of desiring subjects and this proliferation can only come through

confrontation with texts which disturb the spectator because of their unclassifiable status:

> It is the incommensurability of the phantasmatic and the real that requires
> at this political juncture to be safeguarded: the task, then, is to make that
> rift, that *insistent rifting*, into the *persistently ungrounded ground* from
> which feminist discourse emerges.[13]

It is thus in the `rift', the space between the fantastic and the real, that a radical discourse

can emerge. Because this discourse is always at once grounded - and simultaneously

ungrounded - in this textual fissure, it remains an unstable discourse, always under

`insistent' and `persistent' threat from `a chaotic multiplicity of representations'.[14] Within

such multiplicity, such chaos, Butler suggests, there lies the possibility of representing

new articulations of desire and thus she argues, `it is important to risk losing control' by

surrendering ourselves to the instability of this space.[15]

I want to look at the representation of feminine desire in three feminist dystopias

- the `dark continent' of speculative fiction - all of which deal self-consciously with the

relationship between fantasy, narrative and gender. My discussion of the fictions

interprets them as representing four stages in the `writing in' of feminine desire and, to an

extent, I see the texts reflecting a progression within feminist theory of the sexual

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[13] Butler, `The Force of Fantasy', p. 121, emphasis added.

[14] Butler, p. 121.

[15] Butler, p. 121.

subject. This progression has been most visible in feminist film theory, and it is within this area that some of the most significant work on feminine desire has been produced, particularly around questions of gender and spectatorship.[16] Teresa de Lauretis, reflecting on such work in `Re-thinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory'[17] describes two projects for women's cinema, which inform the first two stages of my discussion of the dystopic fictions. In an historical overview, de Lauretis suggests that the first stage of feminist film theory (and film-making) set about `destroying or disrupting man-centred vision by representing its blind spots, its gaps, or its repressed'.[18] This approach is best represented by Laura Mulvey's article `Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in which disruption of such `man-centred vision' (which she terms `the male gaze') is the explicit aim: `It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article'.[19] The second stage highlighted by de Lauretis is equally applicable to feminist theory and practice in all areas of cultural production, and certainly to a number of feminist dystopian texts:

> The effort and challenge now are how to effect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, to formulate *the conditions of representability of another social subject.*[20]

[16] Laura Mulvey's article `Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Screen, 16 (Autumn 1975) was crucial as a starting point for debates around gender and spectatorship; Mulvey formulates the notion of a `male gaze' which, she argues, is constructed by identificatory structures within mainstream film texts. See also Mulvey's `Afterthoughts on `Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework*, 15-17, (1981). Both are reproduced in Constance Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988).

[17] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender, Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 127-148.

[18] De Lauretis, p. 135.

[19] Mulvey, `Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, p. 59

[20] De Lauretis, p. 135, emphasis added.

These `conditions of representability' must include the possibility of `the spectator as female',[21] as part of the construction of `another vision'. This spectator would then *see* differently, both in terms of ways of seeing and what is seen.

The issues raised by the first stage of feminist intervention in film theory - and re-writing of the sexual subject - described by de Lauretis are central to Kate Wilhelm's short story `Baby, You Were Great' (1975). The dystopia is set in a technological future and is centred around the life of Anne Beaumont, a television `actress' with a crucial difference: fitted with a transmitter, she lives her whole life on screen; all areas of her life make up the performance for a television audience of thirty-seven million viewers.[22] It is only within the course of the narrative that Anne discovers that the transmission is continuous, and that she has no control over what is seen. Viewers wear `helmets' enabling them to simultaneously experience her emotions, whilst watching and listening to her. They can also opt to turn off the visual and aural transmission, retaining access only to Anne's emotions. Through its focus on a female protagonist who exists only as spectacle, `Baby, You Were Great' is able to draw attention to `man-centred vision' - both the *gender* and the *act* of looking - and following on from this, the conventional representation of women's desire as one of the `blank spots' of such a vision. The moment at which Anne Beaumont (and the reader) realises that she is always on screen is crucial:

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[21] De Lauretis, p. 135.

[22] `Baby, You Were Great' is included in Pamela Sargent's anthology *Women of Wonder: Science Fiction Stories by Women about Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 139-158.

"Have you ever watched your own show, Anne?" She shook her head. "I thought not...Where's the camera, Anne? Do you ever know where it is any more? Have you even seen a camera in the past couple of weeks, or a recorder of any sort? You have not, and you won't again. You're on now, honey." His voice was quite low, amused almost. "In fact the only time you aren't on is when you're sleeping. I know you're in love; I know who he is; I know how he makes you feel; I even know how much money he makes per week. I should know, Anne baby. I pay him".[23]

It is only here that the extent of Anne's objectification becomes clear, as the layers of control are revealed. Far from having her `own show', her experience is shown to be completely manufactured (*produced*) by the producer, `I pay him'. Her place within a specifically `man-centred vision' is signalled by references to her as `baby' and `honey', which serve to emphasise that she is fixed within a masculine fantasy[24] rather than articulating her own desires; she can't watch her own show. The `vision' is revealed to be increasingly intimate and erotic; `I know how he makes you feel' suggests that nothing is off-limits or out of the frame. The spectator has access within the narrative/fantasy not only to the surface - the spectacle - but also to the emotions, sensual experience and desires of the `actress'. Anne is trapped in the voyeuristic narrative, her subjectivity is constructed within the limits and conventions of the representation, "You're on now, honey" and outside of this she is silenced, `She shook her head'. Technology - the transmitter can't be removed from her head - and the demands of her audience, mean that it is impossible for Anne to step out of the narrative:

What had started out as A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ANNE BEAUMONT was now a life in the life of Anne Beaumont, and the audience was insatiable. (`Baby', 148/9)

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[23] Wilhelm, p. 152. All further page references will be cited in the text, with the abbreviation `Baby'.

[24] For a discussion and history of both terms, `baby' and `honey', see Jane Mills *Womanwords* (London: Virago, 1991) p. 14 and p. 119.

The pleasure for the spectator is thus, partially at least, dependent on the infinite repetition of the representation at a distance. Voyeuristic desire, that of the *scopophilic*, is centred around, as Mulvey suggests, `using another person as an object of sexual stimulation *through sight*'[25] and here the desire to look is equally, if not more important, than the object of that desire. In many ways, Anne Beaumont is a *femme fatale*, an enigma in the text, whose `secret' must be discovered within and at the same pace as the narrative. Mary Ann Doane suggests that the figure of the *femme fatale* `... is fully compatible with the epistemological drive of the narrative'.[26] This convention is given an ironic twist in the Wilhelm story, as the very `secret' of the text, which is revealed in the passage above, is the extent to which and ways in which the woman is trapped in the image.

As I have suggested already, `Baby, You Were Great' also reveals feminine desire as the `blind spot' of the filmic representation. As well as Anne being constantly on display and thus unable to see herself, we are told that crucial to the performance - and by far the most popular aspect of it - are not the words or the visual image, but the access to Anne's emotions:

> No words or thoughts went out, only basic emotions ... fear, love, anger, hatred ... That, tied in with a camera showing what the person saw, with a voice dubbed in, and you were the person having the experience, with one important difference, you could turn it off if it got to be too much. The "actor" couldn't. A simple gimmick. You didn't really need the camera and the soundtrack; many users never turned them on at all, but let their imagination fill in to fit the emotional broadcast. (`Baby', 148)

[25] Mulvey, in Penley, p. 61

[26] Doane, p. 1.

Conventional identification with the protagonist of the film image has been reversed here, so that the voyeuristic desire is constructed *from inside out*, rather than from the outside (the surface, the representation) in. Feminine desire is contained and limited on a number of levels here: it can be `turned off' if it gets `to be too much' and, more significantly, it is only ever a voice-over, placed onto the text in the final stages of construction. The visual images of the feminine body can also be `turned off', allowing the spectator's `imagination' to produce a fantasy to `fit in' with the emotional essence. This kind of broadcast takes scopophilia one stage further; this act of looking involves a transgression of the boundaries, however arbitrary and tenuous they may be, between inner (the emotions) and outer (the body), physicality and subjectivity. The voyeur is in complete control here, knowing how to `read' and assimilate this `emotional broadcast' (`you were the person having the experience'). The desire for this kind of text, although dependent on a crucial distance from the woman's body, remains a sexual fantasy involving that body: ` precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression'.[27]

Thus we have two levels of control of the filmic image here, the producer ("I should know, Anne baby. I pay him") and the spectator who fills in the `gaps' of feminine desire. There is no possibility of any control or power within the representation for Anne, not even that offered by masquerade.[28] If the visual and aural transmission can be turned

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[27] Doane, pp. 19-20.

[28] By `masquerade' I refer to a concept of identity as *performance*, spectacle and knowing pretence, within which femininity, for example, becomes an option for women to take on or cast off at will. `Woman' in this context is understood to be a social construction in much the same way as femininity. This concept was first theorised by Joan Riviere in her article `Womanliness as Masquerade' (1929) where she argued that `Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask'. The article (and Stephen Heath's reconsideration of it) are included in Burgin et al (eds.) *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 35-44 (Riviere) and pp. 45-61 (Heath). Mary Ann Doane has popularised this concept in her film theory; see `Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' in *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 17-32.

off and, crucially, she doesn't know that her performance is continuous (she doesn't know when she's on) there is no way of `faking' her part in the fantasy narrative; the transmission text becomes her `real'. These textual power relations are displayed quite clearly again at the end of the story, when the other male protagonist, (the scientist who has developed the transmitter) watches the show:

> He adjusted the helmet and sank back into a deep chair. He left the audio off, letting his own words form, letting his own thoughts fill in the spaces.
>
> Anne was leaning toward him, sparkling champagne raised to her lips, her eyes large and soft. She was speaking to him, John, calling him by name. He felt a tingle start somewhere deep inside him...
>
> ... and this time when her body pressed against his, there was nothing between them, and the pounding was everywhere.
>
> In the deep chair, with the helmet on his head, John's hands clenched, opened, clenched, again and again. (`Baby', 157-8)

There is a clear appropriation of desire here, as `John' watches a scene between Anne and her lover, translating the `emotional broadcast' into his own fantasy: although he leaves the sound off, she is calling *his* name. The emotion is converted into physical pleasure, `a tingle', which becomes a `pounding' and this is signalled as masculine desire which is both voyeuristic (the spectacle must remain just that) and violent. Just before this passage, we are told that John `hoped Stuart would hurt Anne just a little' (`Baby', 157) and by the end of the narrative, the spectator is `acting out', mimicking the textual violence. Anne's love scene has become his sexual fantasy, `his own words form' the text. Judith Butler's comments on this act of appropriation in fantasy are strikingly apposite here:

The narrator of the fantasy is always already "in" the fantasy. The "I" both contributes to and *is* the frame, the complex of perspectives, the temporal and grammatical sequencing, the particular dramatic tempo and conclusion that constitutes the very action of the fantasy. Hence, the "I" is dissimulated into the entire scene, even as it appears that the "I" merely watches on as an epistemological observer to the event.[29]

Wilhelm's story thus represents `man-centred vision' and reveals feminine desire as a textual `gap', and it is able to achieve both of these by its construction around the *act of looking*. Women's desires and fantasies are `voiced-over' by a violence which ensures textual eradication of any trace of the feminine body (*its* `tingle' or `pounding'). What we see of Anne, then, is what the spectators see of her; we see through `a subject who has a *fantasy* as a kind of *interior* and visual projection and *possession*'.[30] Questions of narrative identity are raised at the moment the producer tells her `You're on now, honey', as this places the reader *with* the unknowing `actress' rather than the omniscient producers of the fantasy. It unsettles our suppositions as to what is the `real' narrative, outside of the spectacle, and what is the `broadcast'. Questions of how we *look* and the power invested in such a position are thus aligned with similar questions about the act of reading a fantasy text. By blurring the boundaries between what might be `real' and what might be fantastic, the reading subject is denied a comfortable or stable place from which to view the text. Laplanche and Pontalis theorise this experience of reading:

> In fantasy the subject ... appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene... As a result, the subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivised form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question.[31]

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[29] Butler, p. 109.

[30] Butler, p. 109; emphasis added.

[31] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Betrand Pontalis, `Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality', in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds.), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 5-34, (p. 26).

This summarises part of the radical potential of fantasy in Butler's argument; the bringing together in narrative of both the subject's presence and absence, its proliferation and its potential erasure, allows for a questioning of precisely how subjectivities are constructed, and how that construction might be challenged. Fantasy texts, then, present `a splitting or fragmentation'[32] of the subject at the very moment when the same text might appear to be reaffirming the place of the subject. We can see this at work in `Baby, You Were Great', in an `audition' scene which foregrounds issues of power and spectatorship.

The auditions are for another female character to join Anne's story. The producer and the scientist wear `helmets' and watch from behind a one-way screen. A series of women are auditioned and in each case we are given the same kind of physical details, `a long-legged honey blonde'; `brunette, with gorgeously elongated legs'. (`Baby', 140, 142) We recognise the voice here - and the way of looking - from `baby' and `honey' earlier. The `text' for the audition is a simulated rape. We see three unsuccessful actresses, who show themselves to be, variously, `very cool, a real professional' and `poised and expectant'. (`Baby', 142, 140) The woman who gets the job is described quite differently:

> She was younger than the other girls had been, less poised ... When the man entered, her emotion changed quickly to fear, and then to terror. John didn't know when he closed his eyes. *He was the girl filled with unspeakable terror*, his heart pounded, adrenalin pumped into his system; he wanted to scream but could not... there came something else, in waves, so mixed with terror that the two merged...
>
> (`Baby', 142-3, emphasis added)

We have the same look here, that of the voyeuristic spectator, and the hints of a sadism within that gaze (`he hoped Stuart would hurt Anne just a little') are confirmed.

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[32] Butler, p. 110.

The rape fantasy, which is acted out here for the viewer, foregrounds the power invested in the act of looking (he knows it's a fantasy narrative, it seems as if she doesn't) and more than any other scene in the text, raises the question of how to read (how to be a spectator of) this fantasy text; is there space within or around the various levels of fantasy, for readings other than the one we see here: an erotic response, `there came something else'? I want to suggest that precisely *because* of its status as fantasy narrative, this text does indeed problematise the possibility of engaging in the fantasy as the scientist does here, and that any attempt to do so is undermined by the very words `there came something else'. For here, the reader/spectator is forced to see the erotic response (the transition from the fantasy to the `real'), and it is this transition which prevents identification. If we had only seen the scene, this might not be the case, but this revelation of the man's response maintains the reader's position as *another* spectator. For a feminist reader, this text provokes a position described by Bette Gordon: `an observer looks at the viewer of pornography, catching him in the taboo act... other men are complicit, but a woman is not. She is supposed to be the object of their gaze'.[33] I would want to maintain that any kind of complicity is made problematic - if not prevented - by our seeing his `taboo act', by our seeing the sadistic response of the voyeur. Wilhelm, it seems to me, is pushing representation of masculine desire to the textual limits here in a way which serves to disrupt conventional science-fiction fantasy representations. Through ambiguities in the text around what is `real' and what is a simulation (crucially, does the girl know that this is all an `act'?) complicity in watching or reading becomes the central concern of this dystopic text. Although the text ultimately makes the `one-way' (`Baby', 140) spectatorship untenable by the end of the text, by making our

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[33] Bette Gordon, `*Variety*: The Pleasure in Looking', in Vance, p. 197

complicity with the violence of that position clear, it does not offer another way of looking; in de Lauretis' terms, it doesn't offer the possibilities needed to `construct other objects and subjects of vision'. For another view of fantasy we need to look to Angela Carter's post-apocalyptic dystopia, *Heroes and Villains* (1969).[34]

Angela Carter's work, both fiction and non-fiction, is confrontational in its representation of sexual identity. Linking her short stories, novels, essays and criticism is a concern to uncover the sources of narratives and images of sexuality *and* to construct other models of the sexual self. To this end, her texts re-present cultural myths and stereotypes - to show the power of the original texts and to mark a crucial distance from them - and she has been critiqued by a number of feminist critics for merely reinscribing repressive, misogynistic images of women.[35] Carter argues, however, that we need to look again at structures of dominance in order to move beyond them. A good example of this kind of textual strategy in practice is in Carter's rewriting of Perrualt's fairytales in her collection, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Her stories expose the moral values of the original texts and attempt to include all that has been repressed or hidden in their construction; most often women as knowing, sexual subjects. The first story in Carter's collection (also called `The Bloody Chamber'), a re-telling of the `Bluebeard' fairy-tale, opens with a narrative voice antithetical to our expectations of the genre (the

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[34] Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation `H'.

[35] Elaine Jordan's article `The Dangers of Angela Carter' in Isobel Armstrong (ed.), *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 119-131, is a defence of Carter's work against such critiques. In particular, Jordan attacks Patricia Duncker's reading of the work as limited by its heterosexist framework; `She couldn't imagine Cinderella in bed with the Fairy Godmother' (p. 128), and Susan Kappeler's feminist anti-pornography interpretation of *The Bloody Chamber* collection. In an earlier article, Jordan also responds to Robert Clark's argument that Carter's work fails to subvert misogynistic representations. He writes `her fascination with violent eroticism and her failure to find any alternative basis on which to construct a feminine identity prevent her work from being other than an elaborate trace of women's self-alienation'. See Elaine Jordan, `Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions', in Linda Anderson (ed.), *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), pp. 18-40, (p. 26).

disembodied, omniscient `Once upon a time'...) and, interestingly, to that of `Baby, You Were Great':

> I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night...[36]

What is most important here, it seems to me, is that masquerade (not possible in Wilhelm's story for the female protagonists) is here at the opening of the text. In a collection of stories which re-write literary and cultural myths, the textual strategy of `mimicking ... the great pistons' is both crucial and *subversive*. Thus the text, masquerading as Bluebeard's story, is in fact a woman's story, which begins with memories of her desire. It is *her* `pounding', *her* `delicious ecstasy' which is the focus here, rather than the voyeuristic desire of the spectator or the `unspeakable terror' of the young woman in `Baby, You Were Great'. Not only do we have a feminine voice here, it is a *knowing* voice, `I remember how...'; she knows what she wants and, throughout the story, she is aware that this involves a mimicking of what she is expected to desire, `... I was forced always to mimic surprise, so that he would not be disappointed' (`Chamber', 8). Masquerade of feminine desire is only possible when the subject *knows* the conventions and expectations which such mimicking involves (just as Carter's re-writing involves an interrogation of conventions of fairy-tale fantasy). The very possibility of expression of feminine sexuality is thus intimately connected with knowledge:

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[36] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) p. 7. All further page references will be cited parenthetically, with the abbreviation `Chamber').

> I felt a faint tingling of the skin and, when I involuntarily glanced at myself in the mirror, I saw the heart-shaped stain had transferred itself to my forehead. ('Chamber', 36)

The 'heart-shaped stain' here is the blood of Bluebeard's former wives which the narrator carries with her to the end of the story. It is symbolic of her discovery of the horror of masculine desire and love (the 'heart-shape') and thus of a new knowledge - and this new knowledge is crucial to the rewriting of sexual identity through fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*.

The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by three groups: the Professors (who live in dystopic replicas of 'communities', in university-like enclosures surrounded by barbed wire); the Barbarians (a tribal, 'phallic cult', *H*, 29) and the 'Out People' (amongst whom 'the human form acquired fantastic shapes', *H*, 110). The protagonist, Marianne, is a Professor's daughter, but leaves her community with Jewel, leader of the Barbarians. On one level the text is a fairy-tale romance between them, between 'the only rational woman left in the whole world' (*H*, 55) and 'probably the most beautiful man left in the world'. This description of them signals a reversal of conventional representations of gender (masculine equated with mind; feminine with body), and reversal is an important element in Carter's subversion of such repressive ideologies. Within her re-writing of the fantasy text she attempts to 'decolonise' the representation of women's bodies and feminine desire[37] and within that attempt, as I shall argue, she risks losing control in the very way that Judith Butler advocates by working at

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[37] See Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *On Gender and Writing*, (London: Pandora Press, 1983), pp. 69-77. Here, Carter writes that 'it is enormously important for women to write fiction *as* women - it is part of the slow process of decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought', (p. 75).

the limits of such representation: `in part because limits are, in a sense, what fantasy loves most'.[38]

> The textual subversion is clear from the opening of the novel:
>
> Marianne had sharp, cold eyes and she was spiteful but her father loved her. (*H*, 1)

The focus is immediately on the `eyes' through which we see the entire narrative; the detail of this specifically gendered spectator (not the one we might expect in the post-apocalyptic text) foregrounds the presence of a new `way of seeing' and shows Carter bringing a new spectator not only *to* the text (as de Lauretis suggests) but *into* the text. This gaze is referred to throughout the narrative, `she was the audience again' (*H*, 16), and the power connected with the act of looking suggested in `Baby, You Were Great' is confirmed here. This power - to challenge the canceling out of feminine desire - derives once again from self-knowledge.[39] Marianne is always aware of the distinction between fantasy and the `real', acutely so when it comes to her own desires, to an extent unimaginable for Anne Beaumont whose `real' is transformed into other's fantasy unbeknown to her. Marianne displays this insight into the construction of desire throughout the text and through a self-awareness of her part in this process is able to claim both distance from and involvement in sexual fantasies. She says to Jewel:

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[38] Butler, p. 111.

[39] Gerardine Meaney emphasises the challenge to conventional power-relations that this self-knowledge represents: `A woman who observes and understands her own function as sign and is conscious that her role as unit of exchange is an impersonation, disturbs the basis of society itself. She exposes its `ruses', its `hidden motives', and denaturalises it'. See *(Un)like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 106.

> What I'd like best would be to keep you in preserving fluid in a huge jar
> on the mantelpiece of my peaceful room, where I could look at you and
> imagine you... You, you're nothing but the furious invention of my virgin
> nights. (*H*, 137)

Here Marianne displays not only perception as to the process by which her desires are constructed (`the furious invention'), but also of her desire *for* desire (`to keep you in a huge jar'): a fantasy of her power within the sexual fantasy (`What I'd like best...'). Elaine Jordan argues that Carter's exploration of women's `narcissistic desire' and `self-preoccupied fantasies' is crucial to any re-thinking of feminine desire (we need women to be   subjects rather than objects of such narratives), and sees this as a central concern, particularly in her early work.[40] The power contained within these imaginings is confirmed by Jewel's acknowledgment of his own transformation through those `sharp, cold eyes': `She converted me into something else by seeing me'. (*H*, 122) Marianne is also able to reject the Barbarians' images of femininity; in contrast to the young actress in `Baby, You Were Great' she refuses to accept the role they have in mind for her as `our little holy image', `Our lady of the wilderness', `the virgin of the swamp'. (*H*, 50) This is made clear when Jewel tries to assert his authority over her:

> `You'll go in the cart with Mrs Green, like a bloody lady.'
>
> `I'll go wherever you go.'
>
> An expression of terror briefly crossed his face; she could not fail to
> recognize it, printed as it was on her memory.
>
> `Oh, no, you won't, you'll do as I say.'
>
> `Oh, no, I won't, I'll do as I want.' (*H*, 97)

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[40] Jordan, `The dangers of Angela Carter', p. 121. To support this point she cites the following passage from Carter's short story `Flesh and the Mirror' which is strikingly similar in tone to Marianne's view of fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*: `I suppose I shall never know, now, [how he really looked] for he was plainly an object created in the mode of fantasy...'

As in Kate Wilhelm's short story, issues of fantasy and sexual identity are brought together in *Heroes and Villains* through a rape scene. The threat of rape or State decriminalisation of sexual violence against women is a recurrent symbol of terror in the feminist `bad place'; it is used as a sign of the extremity of oppression for women in the imagined future and in most texts is only referred to (through details of changes in legislation, for example), rarely shown. However Angela Carter risks using this most frightening dystopic `reality' to expose the misogynistic fantasy behind the act and suggests that because it is a fantasy - a narrative - it can be contested and disrupted.

Marianne experiences the scene twice, employing different strategies of resistance in each case. First, while Jewel laughs `with apparently pure pleasure', his brothers move towards her *en masse*:

> Marianne discovered she was not in the least frightened, only very angry indeed, and began to struggle and shout; at this the brothers laughed but did not cease to crowd in on her. So she closed her eyes and pretended she did not exist. (*H*, 49)

Marianne knows exactly what's happening here and has a strategy for dealing with the prospect of violation, which is in complete contrast to the girl at the audition pushed to the point of `unspeakable terror'. Rather than the reader/ spectator's attention focusing on the erotic fantasy of the violator (the producer and scientist in `Baby, You Were Great'; the brothers here) we see only Marianne's anger, her struggle and, once again, her refusal to passively accept the stereotype of feminine desire which their fantasy depends upon. Her act of self-effacement, a `desperate device for self-protection' (*H*, 49), masquerades as ultimate passivity - feminine sexuality as a `gap' - but is in fact a subversion of the meaning of their fantasy. If she does not see them, `does not exist', the

ontological status of their fantasy changes. Indeed, there is intervention in the text and the rape does not take place. However, a few pages later Jewel, (who becomes Marianne's husband) *does* rape her. Again, the narrative focuses on the woman:

> `You're nothing but a murderer,' she said, determined to maintain her superior status at all costs.
>
> `You'll find me the gentlest of assassins,' he replied with too much irony for she did not find him gentle at all.
>
> Feeling between her legs to ascertain the entrance, he thrust his fingers into the wet hole so roughly she knew what the pain would be like; it was scalding, she felt split to the core but she did not make a single sound for her only strength was her impassivity and she never closed her cold eyes. (*H,* 55)

The reference here to her cold eyes, reminds us of both the power orchestrated by her gaze and that this is *how we see* the narrative. Thus her `superior status' in the narrative is not questioned: we get her reaction to Jewel's comment and both a physical and emotional response to the violation, `she felt split to the core'. This is obviously quite different from `Baby, You Were Great', in which any response is either filtered through the masculine spectator (`he was the girl') or, in fact, *is* the voyeuristic, erotic response of the on-looker (`there came something else'). Here, Marianne employs a different strategy, she keeps her eyes open and, despite the ritualistic rape taking place, she *is* able to retain `her strength':

> `It was the very worst thing that happened to me since I came away with you,' she said. `It hurt far worse than the snakebite, because it was intentional. Why did you do it to me?'
>
> He appeared to consider this question seriously.
>
> `There's the matter of our traditional hatred. And, besides, I'm very frightened of you.'

> `I have the advantage of you there,' said Marianne, pushing him away and endeavouring to cover herself.
>
> (*H*, 56)

As before, the rape fantasy, which depends upon the passivity and silencing of the woman's body, is disrupted by Marianne's `superior status' in the text, which allows her a questioning and insistent voice (`Why did you do it..?') which uncovers *his* fear.

This voice also allows repressed feminine desire (as in Wilhelm's text or that which proved so elusive to Lacan) to be articulated, in ways which constantly cite `pleasure and danger' for Marianne simultaneously:

> She pulled the night-dress over her head and threw it away, so she could be still closer to him or, rather, to the magic source of attraction constituted by his brown flesh. And, if anything else but this existed, then she was sure it was not real.
>
> ... There was no pain this time. The mysterious glide of planes of flesh within her bore no relation to anything she had heard, read or experienced. She never expected such extreme intimations of pleasure or despair. (*H*, 83)

Here, Marianne translates fantasy into the real (from what she has `read' to what she experiences); the same process as the scientist watching the `audition', but here the pleasure is not appropriated or assimilated by a controlling spectator. It is a `mysterious' and paradoxical experience but one which Marianne can take pleasure in all the same: `Night came; that confusion between need and desire against which she had been warned consumed her'. (*H*, 134)

When Jewel dies, Marianne takes control of the Barbarians and thus of the fantasy narrative; `I'll be the tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron'. (*H*, 150) Central to the process of empowerment is a rejection of her fantasy of Jewel:

> She thought: `I have destroyed him' and felt a warm sense of self-satisfaction, for quite dissolved was the marvellous, defiant construction of textures and colours she first glimpsed marauding her tranquil village; it had vanished as if an illusion which could not sustain itself...She got up and threw the pots of paint he left behind him into the weedy cleft between the station platforms. She threw the mirror after them, in case she saw his face in it, his former extraordinary face left behind there, for it must remain somewhere; she watched the mirror break with pleasure. (*H*, 147)

Here, I think, there is an attempt to get beyond the reversal of conventional aesthetic representation of feminine desire, with which so much of the text is taken up. The `female spectator' has been brought into the text and a different kind of fantasy (and possibly a different kind of `real') have been written into the dystopia. But here, even that new, subversive *way of looking* is rejected, the construction is `dissolved'. In its place Carter sketches a fantasy of a new narrative and it is this which renders her text more complex than a re-presentation of conventional sexual images of women by the `high-priestess of post-graduate porn'.[41] The end of *Heroes and Villains* suggests that, once empowered (`She felt the beginnings of a sense of power', *H*, 144) this new feminine spectator might be able to *see her way* to a new form of fantasy, which incorporates a multiplicity of desires, the very `deregulation' that Judith Butler recommends.

This possibility is signalled structurally in the text. After we are told about Marianne's eyes, the opening of the text continues with details of her father:

> He was a Professor of History; he owned a clock which he wound every morning and kept in the family dining-room upon a sideboard full of heirlooms of stainless steel such as dishes and cutlery. (*H*, 1)

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[41] This is how *New Socialist* labelled Carter in 1987; cited by Merja Makinen, p. 3.

Although it is a condition of the fantasy, and particularly of the post-apocalyptic narrative, that time should be disrupted - its meanings and status must change - the Professor here obsessively clings to a sense of the `real', through time and heirlooms. Time, Marianne realises, is `frozen... and the busy clock carved the hours into sculptures of ice' and she is `not impressed' by the clock. (*H*, 1) By the end of the text, the clock is, however, in different hands:

> Prominent among the minarets, spires and helmets of wrought iron which protruded from the waters was an enormous clock whose hands stood still at the hour of ten though, it was, of course, no longer possible to tell whether this signified ten in the morning or ten at night. This clock was held in the arms and supported on the forward-jutting stomach of a monstrous figure in some kind of plasterwork... It was the figure of a luxuriously endowed woman scantily clad in a one-piece bathing costume which, at the top, scarcely contained the rising swell of mountainous breasts in the shadowy cleft of which sea birds nested... The head, equipped with exuberant, shoulder-length curls, was thrown back in erotic ecstasy and, though partially worn away by the salty winds, the face clearly displayed a gigantic pair of lips twisted in a wide, joyous smile...
> (*H*, 138).

I have quoted this passage at length as it brings together the various problematics and possibilities of representing feminine desire that Carter's text suggests. Thus we have another `construction', a fantasy in sculpture of an eroticised, feminine figure, `luxuriously endowed', with `mountainous breasts' and `exuberant' hair. This is not, however, the passive, `unspeakable' sexuality of the women in Wilhelm's text, but, rather, an aggressive (`forward-jutting'), powerful, `joyous' feminine sexuality, which flaunts itself. That it should be this figure left holding the clock, holding `time', is suggestive of a displacement which is crucial both in Carter's text and in any moves towards a new

representation of desire.[42] We have moved on from the Father/Professor obsessively

`holding time' and clinging to an outmoded version of the `real', to a new construction of

a feminine subject, taking pleasure in a new textual space. Marianne's mother dies early

in the narrative (`... when she ate some poison fruit she took sick almost gladly and made

no resistance to death', *H*, 7) and forms an absence in the text which is only countered at

the moment Marianne sees the statue. For this figure is the maternal body - the birds nest

in her breasts - signifying a subversive, `monstrous' version of feminine desire.[43] The

displacement, then, is from the realm of the Father, of time and of the `real', to a

maternal, desiring, fantasy space. This space is symbolised in the text by the sea which

the statue rises out of and which Marianne sees for the first time when she sees the statue

(`Marianne had never seen the sea', *H*, 2). This sea has the power to effect change:

> The grey sea horses which now looked so quiescent would grow violent
> in the equinoctial storms; they would assault the cliffs not merely with
> their own impetus but also with missiles concealed inside them, boulders,
> pebbles and abrasive sand... The waves would in this way undermine the
> cliffs until the upperpart finally collapsed. (*H*, 138-9)

The sea, here, is suggestive of where we are, in terms of the representation of

feminine desire, by the end of Carter's text. It incorporates an empowered feminine

subject and once this subject has been brought into the narrative, and particularly the

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[42] Gerardine Meaney focuses upon the relations between gender, time, space and history in her reading of *Heroes and Villains*. Through a discussion of Kristeva's categories of time (`cyclical' and `monumental'), she argues that in *Heroes and Villains* Carter `attempted to `wind back' the clock of history, perhaps to uncover something undetermined', (p. 217). In other words, if history is interrogated from a gender perspective (wound back on itself), oppressive myths of origin - here, psychoanalytic `myths' of feminine sexuality - can be uncovered and subverted.

[43] `Monstrous' is used here to signal an unruly, powerful and threatening presence contained in the representation of the feminine body. Mary Russo's article `Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory' re-reads Bakhtin's theory of the carnival to argue that the woman's body which is coded as `monstrous' has the potential power to disrupt not only limits of representation, but wider social formations. See Teresa de Lauretis (ed.), *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 213-229.

fantasy narrative, the text becomes subversive, undermining the structures and conventions of representing feminine desire. In Wilhelm's text, such structures and conventions are uncovered and critiqued, and in Carter's text, gendered positions of subject and object are reversed. This reveals a power hitherto concealed: `missiles concealed inside them, boulders, pebbles and abrasive sand'. By the end of Carter's narrative, the risk has begun to be taken of a third kind of representation; what we might want to call, after Kristeva and with the statue in mind, *women's time*. We can now imagine the `corporeal and desiring mental space',[44] that combination of the fantastic (`desiring') and the `real' (the bodily). This might be the very place in which wholly `deregulated' desires can be represented.

But what might these desires consist of and what might their textual representation involve? I want to conclude my reading of desire in the `bad place' by considering a dystopian short story which flaunts its own `outlaw' status in terms of sexual desire: `The Hustler' by Pat Califia, included in her 1988 collection *Macho Sluts*.[45] This is a collection of stories of lesbian sado-masochistic desire written, Califia states in her introductory essay, to counter the taboo status of her own sexual identity:

> The things that seem beautiful, inspiring, and life-affirming to me seem ugly, hateful, and ludicrous to most other people. This may be the most painful part of being a sadomasochist: this experience of radical difference... Our culture insists on sexual uniformity and does not acknowledge any neutral differences - only crimes, sins, diseases, and mistakes... These short stories are attempts to tell the truth about my own desire... (*M*, 9, 10)

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[44] Julia Kristeva, `Women's Time', in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 209.

[45] Pat Califia, `The Hustler' in *Macho Sluts* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), pp. 177-210. All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *M*.

Califia's essay situates the stories very much as political, agitational texts working against a number of different prohibitive contexts. One is the reactionary political climate in the United States in the mid-1980s and the subsequent curbs on sexual freedom (*M*, 22-24) which, Califia argues, has particular consequences for women:

> Women - especially lesbians - exist under conditions that make us frightened to step out of line, frightened to challenge the status quo, almost unable to imagine what bold and brassy, peacock creatures we could be if we were free. (*M*, 14)

She also acknowledges limitations on representation of sexuality in a post-AIDS context and while abiding by her publisher's policy `against eroticising high-risk sex' (*M*, 17), Califia is concerned that fantasy and the `real' are being aligned in a prohibitive way. The collection as a whole is attempting to safeguard the free space of fantasy to represent precisely what does not translate into the real: `I don't believe "unsafe" porn causes AIDS any more than I think "violent" porn causes rape. Nobody ever caught a disease from or got assaulted by a book'. (*M*, 17) Califia also charges feminism and lesbian culture with censoring images of women particularly in the kind of feminist "erotica" which is produced and tolerated:

> "Feminist erotica" that presents a simplistic view of lesbian sex as two women in love in a bed who embody all the good things the patriarchy is trying to destroy isn't very sexy. This stuff reads as if it were written by dutiful daughters who are trying to persuade Mom that lesbian sex isn't dirty, and we really are good girls, after all. (*M*, 13)

Each of the stories in *Macho Sluts* foregrounds its `deviant' status to challenge at least one of these political contexts. I want to look at one of them as an example of sexual desire as political contestation; to read it as a site `of discursive production, which might

then contest the authoritative production produced by the prohibitive law'.[46] The crucial shift in terms of representation here is that the `prohibitive law' here is feminism itself, rather than psychoanalytic theories of the sexual subject as it was in Wilhelm and Carter's fantasies.

`The Hustler' is a future fiction set in the former United States which is now a `Democratic Socialist Feminist' State. (*M*, 201) The futurity is established by references to a violent feminist revolution which erupts after another World War. There are few specifics of time and place, but this is clearly a post-apocalyptic world: `Now that they're slowly cleaning up the air and water and the old munitions and chemical-waste dumps, the birth-defect rate has fallen considerably'. (*M*, 179) We are also given only sketchy details of the women's revolution, as what is of real importance in the text is the post-revolutionary ideology of sexual identity which is in place. This evolves from a State based on principles of radical feminism (as described in chapter 3) and Califia clearly relishes the opportunity to present an extreme, dystopic version of this: any trace of patriarchal ideology becomes an anathema here. The nuclear family is replaced by `collectives or biofamilies' (*M*, 188); acts of sexual deviancy (prostitution, misogyny and `assorted other counter-revolutionary acts'; *M*, 183) are outlawed; clothes which emphasise sexual difference are no longer worn and are replaced by `long, loose robes in soft color and straw sandals' (*M*, 188), and lesbian relationships are regarded with embarrassment and lack of tolerance: `Now that equal relationships between the sexes are possible, being queer is effete and sort of ungrateful'. (*M*, 207)

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[46] Butler, p. 119.

The protagonist, Noh Mann, occupies the most marginal and transgressive position possible in this society. She is an outlawed prostitute and hustler who sells lesbian sadomasochistic sex not only to survive economically, but to retain her own sense of strength and power and to deny the State's fantasy of pleasure through equality: `I prefer the feel of a helpless neck in between my hands to being squashed under somebody else's fantasy'. (*M*, 189) Clearly, in terms of the representation of desire we have come along way from Anne Beaumont trapped by technology `under somebody else's fantasy'. There are three brief sexual `scenes' (by which I mean enacted fantasy narratives) in the story and I want to focus on one of them in particular to argue that Califia's work represents a third stage of feminist thinking on questions of sexual identity. This stage involves a critique of the `blind spots' within *feminist* discourses on desire and the bringing into view fantasies that mainstream feminism would rather not see.

The `scene' I want to look at is one which in fact constitutes the narrative frame of the whole story. `The Hustler' opens with Noh Mann being charged with prostitution and misogyny and it gradually transpires that this charge relates to a scene we see later in the story between Noh and a young woman who is willing to pay for s/m sex with another woman. She is quite clearly a novice in such transactions; she draws attention to herself by her all-too-obvious outfit when she enters the pick-up bar: `...she had locked a collar round her neck, but it was the wrong kind of chain, one of those flimsy things with large links that they use to hide electrical cords. The lock was too big; it looked clumsy'. (*M*, 202) She has recently been left by her lover; an older, more experienced woman who took control of their s/m relationship and she is desperate to find another woman with whom to continue the fantasy of domination. We see her humiliated by Noh in the bar

when a comment from her provokes a violent beating after which, absolutely degraded, she offers Noh money for more of the same:

> Tears were running down her face. She took her hands off the table, made fists inside her jacket pockets, and came back with a ten in each hand. She shoved them at me across the table, little crumpled paper balls, confessions that her need was stronger than shame. (*M*, 206)

She is dragged into an alleyway by Noh and their acting-out of a s/m fantasy is described in detail until they are caught by the Police who have recorded what they have heard and seen:

> I had taken off my belt and hit her ass a dozen times when a bright light hit both of us, and we were hauled out of the alley... Then the lady cop said, "This occurred in a public place," and hit the switch. Out came a stream of profanity I didn't even remember using. But it was my voice, saying how bad she must want it if she was willing to pay for it, she had to take everything I wanted to give her, and the misogynistic slurs and all. (*M*, 208)

Both women are tortured by State authorities and then released. They meet up afterwards and Noh takes the young woman `under her wing' as she has been thrown out of her apartment for her `deviant' sexuality. Although the power relations remain the same between them, Noh does not accept any more money from the woman; seeing evidence of violence done to her outside of the fantasy (that is, in the `real') affects Noh:

> Her black eye makes me wince. It's puffed out and raw, and so is part of her lip. Her clothes don't look new any more. There is blood and puke on the T-shirt ... "Okay. Let's start walking. Now listen to me, I'm going to tell you how it is and how it's going to be. I don't love you. But somebody is going to have to take care of you and teach you what's what. If I slap you around a little, it's to make sure you listen'.
> I talk, she nods, we walk fast. It's cold. I take off my leather jacket and make her put it on. (*M*, 209-210)

This last detail is important as it gives the story (and the fantasy within) a circularity: Noh is mourning her lover's death at the beginning of the story and her leather jacket is

all she has to remember her by. It is made clear that Noh was the `novice' in their relationship; the end of `The Hustler' shows that Noh has taken over her dead lover's position: she is now empowered to teach and discipline the younger woman. There is also a sense of affirmation at the end of the story: new beginnings from the post-apocalyptic `bad place'.

What interests me in the representation of sexual desire in the Califia stories (and in `The Hustler' in particular) is the power to shock that they contain and flaunt. The sexual encounter between Noh and the young woman which I refer to above is presented in such explicit, pornographic terms that I found myself imposing self-censorship in my description of the scene; I felt unable to reproduce the scene in quotation. The language, images and violence used in the narrative worked to collapse the difference between fantasy and the `real' for me as reader. The boundaries between this fantasy (which we might read as transgressive) and any other pornographic representation (which we might deem conventional or hegemonic) are blurred by their use of a shared set of codes (such as objectification) and power relations. I was struck in reading `The Hustler' - much more than the two other dystopic texts - by the `between' status of all fantasy as a potentially problematic issue: fantasies are not outside of social and political relations, but absolutely grounded in them.[47] Julia Creet argues that this is particularly the case with fantasies represented in narrative fiction in contrast, for example, with fantasy in daydreams or unconscious fantasies traced in psychoanalysis:

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[47] Clare Whatling considers this `in-between' status of lesbian s/m: `As with other sexual practices, it may be oppositional under certain circumstances, but is never always so. Indeed, like most marginal sexual practices, it is likely to play into, as well as out of, the dominant structures of the society in which it is practised'. See `Who's read *Macho Sluts*?' in Judith Still and Michael Worton (eds.), *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 193-206 (p. 194).

...."erotic" or "pornographic" stories are fantasies that have been written
down, edited (worked over), and published: they have been subjected to
more linguistic and social processing than the daydream that might pass *through*
one's head.[48]

If such fantasies are shaped by social relations - of domination, inequality, oppression -

does an uncritical acceptance and embracing of all fantasy, however `deregulated', serve

to reinforce those very relations?

The `shock' contained within the story comes only partially from the language

and images used, however, and more from the context; just as `Baby, You Were Great'

raised questions about how to *view* male voyeurism as a female spectator, `The Hustler'

forces us to consider how - as feminists - to read pornographic fantasy written by a

woman.[49] Also, Califia uses the marginal fictional space of the erotic text to articulate a

virulent anti-feminist discourse; feminism (or a version of it) *becomes* dystopic here.

While we might be accustomed to challenging phallocentric constructions of woman as

`lack' and psychoanalytic theories of feminine desire as an enigma, Califia's work alerts us

to the `lies' that feminism has told women about their sexual identities and thus forms a

severe critique from within.[50] `The Hustler' suggests that feminism has been as regulatory

as any other political discourse in this respect; the women's desires are branded

transgressive in the feminist state and are seen as a hangover from patriarchal modes of

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[48] Creet, p. 157. She also argues that in fantasies presented in narrative fiction we can see `strong evidence of social influences at work in the production of sexual identity'. See note 7.

[49] Clare Whatling argues that *Macho Sluts* forces us to consider feminism's own `blind-spots', and its inherent contradictions with regard to fantasy: `It is a mark of feminism's sexual fix, however, that where we can fantasise over Amazons and vampires to our heart's desire, as soon as fantasy enters the realm of the explicitly sexual, a totally other standard pertains and we are required to police our thoughts for signs of political reaction'. `Who's read *Macho Sluts*?', p. 200.

[50] Julia Creet gives an historical and critical account of the context for Califia's writing, reading lesbian s/m `almost entirely a product of the 1970s and 80s, and a reaction against the restrictions and prescriptions of North American and British feminist analyses of pornographic representation as primarily oppressive to women, particularly that which involves violence or evidence of dominance and submission'. See note 7.

domination. The text poses the important question: what happens to the woman whose desires are deemed `deviant' by feminist discourses on sexuality?

> It's just fine with me that men don't run the world any more ... But I can't help wondering why so many of us have not profited greatly from the women's revolution, despite the fact that we are women. Perhaps it's because I'm just not the right kind of woman. (*M*, 179)

It is this insistent questioning of feminism and the reading of it as a powerful, exclusive and repressive discourse that makes `The Hustler' such an important text for the future of feminist fantasy. It also makes it, as my comments suggest, a disturbing read; one which produced anger, repulsion and fascination in equal parts in my case. Indeed, the various meanings of `hustle' are apposite here - the text is also a `hustler'; pushing us, jostling, coercing us to deal with the fantasy it contains. Just as Noh Mann is a marginal, `outlaw' figure in the Democratic Socialist Feminist State, this dystopic story occupies a disturbing and subversive space, even amongst `bad place' fantasy texts *and* lesbian erotica.

The violence of its representation forced me to consider the silences and biases within mainstream feminist discussions of feminine desire and to imagine a fourth stage of feminist theory in this area. If as I argue, radically different spaces of representation have been opened up (I used Kristeva's concept of `women's time' to suggest this) then feminism will have to confront and theorise the very different voices which fill these spaces, and find a way to incorporate those women formerly deemed `improper'. This challenge is posed by the dystopic text I consider in my next and final chapter, Rebecca Brown's *The Terrible Girls*.

<u>Chapter Six</u>

Dancing with the Future:

Gender and Space in the Feminist Dystopia

Feminism ... must hold open a space of radical indeterminacy within the way it expresses the category of women. - Diane Elam

This study began with a challenge for women to uncover `somewhere, elsewhere' within literary narrative and I have argued that the feminist dystopia offers one `space of radical indeterminacy' in which this process can begin. This indeterminacy is produced most obviously by the genre's blurring of distinctions between the `real' and the non-real, but is specifically located and radicalised in its attention to the relationship between cultural, theoretical and fictional spaces and gender. In each of the texts considered so far, the construction and foregrounding of space in this regard is crucial to the radical textual effects: for example, in the self-conscious creation of a distance between the Biblical story of `Noah and the Ark' and Michèle Roberts' feminist rewriting; in Margaret Atwood's focus on the difference between the handmaid's tale and the historian's metanarrative; and in the gulf between the dream and reality of a women's language in *Native Tongue*. In each of these, spatial distancing is used to highlight the marginality of women's words, voices and narratives. In the second part of the thesis, however, the configuration and implications of textual space are shaped more by the *corporeal* and, as a result, are more subversive: the space between subject and object in conventional representations of feminine desire for example, and that occupied by the maternal body in discourse. In this final chapter, my focus is the relationship between space and gender proposed in Rebecca Brown's collection of short stories, *The Terrible Girls* (1990).

Reading her two dystopic stories - `Lady Bountiful and the Underground Resistance' and `The Ruined City' - I argue that the feminist dystopia offers a site for rethinking the representational space occupied by the feminine body (in theory and fiction); as with its delineation of feminine desire and the maternal body, the `bad place' takes us off-limits, and beyond.

Cultural constructions of images and meanings of the female body have been an overarching concern of second generation feminist theory and critique, linking work across academic disciplines and bridging the gap between theory and political activism.[1] In general terms, such work has addressed the critical space between women's lived experience of their bodies and the idealised, classical, immaterial images presented in aesthetic and cultural texts.[2] Specifically, feminist revision of `the feminine body as figure in discourse' has focused on the structuring system of binary oppositions and the dominance of these antithetical pairings. Thus the alignment of `woman' with nature rather than culture, the body rather than the mind, silence rather than articulation, and space rather than time, has been a starting point for feminist critiques which, as Diane Elam argues in her work on the relations between feminism and deconstruction, profoundly challenge how we think about gender construction:

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[1] For example, *meanings* of the female body are contested both by academic, theoretical work on representation of the maternal body and political campaigning for women's autonomy in issues such as questions of reproduction and contraception.

[2] See for examples of this kind of work, Laurence Goldstein (ed.), *The Female Body: Figures, Styles, Speculations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (eds.), *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (London: Routledge, 1990); and Susan Rubin Suleiman, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

> Feminism ... places philosophical thought face to face with the practices of gendered bodies. There is no synthesis here, no fusion of language and matter, of bloody bodies and rational minds. Instead, both feminism and deconstruction persistently inhabit the unthinkable paradox that a thinking body represents for the Western tradition.[3]

This paradox is obviously deepened if the `thinking body' is female. Feminist work on cultural representations of the female body has not only focused on `explicit' or visible images in aesthetic texts, however. Also of critical interest have been more implicit inclusions of a feminine figure in discourse: women's body as textual metaphor, space or hidden presence. This kind of critique has been central to feminist history of science, for example: critics have noted not only the marginalisation of women within the scientific community and the neglect of their achievements, but also the grounding of scientific discourse in metaphors and images of the feminine body.[4] Thus in terms of practice, methodology and self-representation in discourse, science is shown to rely upon the construction of woman as object of inquiry, as `other' and as space for mastery.

The same process of feminist `uncovering' of gendered bodies and spatial configurations lurking within discourse has also taken place within cultural theory and in literary criticism in particular. This work is crucial to my understanding of Rebecca Brown's text as subversive in its configuration of woman in the text, as it challenges the way we conceptualise acts of reading, writing and critical interpretation. For example, Alice Jardine traces the presence of a triad of woman/body/space in the work of several male theorists in *Gynesis*, a term devised by Jardine to signify `the putting into discourse

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[3] Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyme* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 59.

[4] This body usually represents nature which must be mastered by scientific discourse: as Brian Easlea demonstrates in his study *Science and Sexual Oppression: Patriarchy's Confrontation with Women and Nature* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), the trope of a feminised sexual body is often used to symbolise the process of scientific inquiry. Londa Schiebinger's *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) is an historical account of the role of particular women in the development of European science which also focuses on the representation of women's bodies in scientific discourse.

of "woman"'.[5] In the work of theorists such as Derrida, Lacan and Barthes she argues, `Woman' becomes `a new rhetorical space'[6]: within postmodernism, as the shift of emphasis in theory turns to all signs of `otherness', there is both a reaffirmation of woman as `other' and a codification of silences, gaps, fissures, and aporia in cultural representation as feminine: `There is always something about and in her which escapes discourse'.[7] Ruth Salvaggio also interrogates a tradition of conflating the feminine and spatial in literary criticism, and offers an historical account of a process of defining `theoretical boundaries in terms of the concept of space'[8] and particularly feminine spaces at that. Salvaggio traces a development from the implicitly feminised metaphorical spaces of the New Critics and, later, the work of Barthes and Bachelard (who suggested feminine spatial contours in *The Poetics of Space*: `the space we love ... everything round invites a caress'[9]) to the `illusive, hysterical, and explicitly feminine spaces of Derrida and Jacques Lacan'.[10] Through this development, she argues, women have been assigned two discursive spaces: the space of the margins or the space of the body (that is, women have traditionally been represented in bodily terms across all discourses). Both of these can and have been recuperated by feminist theorists: Salvaggio cites de Lauretis's work on the `space-off' or blindspots of discourse to show how the margins do not have to be an exclusionary zone but can, rather, offer a double perspective, both from the centre and periphery of culture. The `space of the body' has also been reclaimed

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[5] Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.

[6] Jardine, *Gynesis*, p. 38.

[7] Jacques Lacan, cited in Ruth Salvaggio, `Theory and Space, Space and Women', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 7 (1988), 261-282, (p. 269).

[8] Salvaggio, p. 261.

[9] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, cited Salvaggio p. 265.

[10] Salvaggio, p. 269.

in feminist theory through work which propounds the possibility of *écriture feminine:* in the work of theorists such as Cixous and Irigaray, for example, the female body provides a starting-point for disruption of the socio-political order: this disruption is written *through* the body.

These two acts of recuperation of space in feminist theory, Salvaggio suggests, open a third, radical space which is self-consciously feminised: `liquid space', `the space of woman's body... forming new spaces, fluid spaces'[11] which emerges as feminist critique puts `things in flow'.[12] These `things' include the very boundaries, divisions, power relations and hierarchies established through the construction of the spaces of the margins and body; this point is made forcefully in a quotation from Cixous which Salvaggio includes:

> Philosophical discourse, if you like, is not free, since it must obey imperatives of signification. A philosopher is obligated to hold on to logic - even Derrida, for example, who pushes his work to the limits where logic vacillates ... Derrida knows this. This is why he always says that each time he arrests, each time he coins a concept, he hurries to put it into that general movement of oscillation in order not to make of it a master concept. But it is like a ford of a river, if you like: he must jump from concept to concept, or from rock to rock, whereas I allow myself to say, since I do not have any obligation toward philosophy, I really do prefer swimming. I prefer being in the water and openly in the water; for me, those inscriptions with which Derrida must deal do not exist.[13]

Cixous's trope of the `ford of a river' foregrounds the fluidity of the theoretical space she claims for women (`in the water and openly in the water'), but also suggests a bodily (`swimming') and marginal (`I do not have any obligation toward philosophy') spatiality.

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[11] Salvaggio, p. 276.

[12] Salvaggio, p. 276.

[13] Hélène Cixous, cited by Salvaggio, p. 276-7.

Such celebration of these spaces which have been used to exclude and deny women's presence in discourse, raises the question of whether they *can* in fact be recuperated? Can women salvage anything from this `domination' in contemporary critical and literary theory (a different configuration perhaps, but one which still elides the feminine with the bodily and the spatial) and which still relies upon the cultural silencing of women? Can we turn what seems to be a *fascination* with the feminine into an opening up of spaces within cultural theory which women can then inhabit and speak from? Meaghan Morris's work on gender and postmodernism suggests that we can. Morris argues that in spite of claims made by male postmodern theorists that their work breaks down existing cultural and political power-relations through an interrogation of `metanarratives', a process of exclusion (by gender, race, class) remains in place. Rather than accepting this exclusion from one of the `boom discourses'[14] of the 1980s, Morris argues that feminists should claim the space of postmodern theory through

> ... a generically feminist gesture of reclaiming women's work, and women's names, as a context *in* which debates about postmodernism might further be considered, developed, transformed (or abandoned).[15]

Before looking in detail at the two dystopic short stories, I want to briefly sketch two further spaces - one (in theories of spatial literature) as an example of the containment of woman-in-discourse and one (in modern dance) of subversion - to frame my discussion of gender and space in the `bad place'.

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[14] Meaghan Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, reading, postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1988), p.11.

[15] Morris, p. 16. The inclusion here of `women's names' is a reference to the bibliography of postmodern theory written by women which Morris includes at the end of her essay (pp. 17-23). For further discussion of the relationship between feminism and the `space' of postmodernism, see Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1990), in particular her first chapter, `Postmodernism and Feminism: Where Have All The Women Gone' (pp. 1-33), and Geraldine Finn, `Why Are There No Great Women Postmodernists?' in Valda Blundell, John Shepherd and Ian Taylor (eds.), *Relocating Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 123-152.

My interest in spatial theories of literature is linked both to a process of gender-specific marginalisation *and* a feminine bodily presence which can be uncovered in the theoretical paradigms suggested by critics in this field. Much of this work has followed on from Joseph Frank's influential essay `Spatial Form in Modern Literature' (1945) in which he suggests the term `spatial' in his analysis of avant-garde, experimental writing, particularly texts of high modernism. His fascination with such writing came after reading Djuna Barnes' s *Nightwood*:

> The book haunted me for some reason - perhaps because it was so
> difficult to understand, yet so impressive at first contact - and I began to
> define for myself the difference between it and more conventional novels
> ... I jotted down quotations from my reading. None of them fitted any
> particular pattern I could see...[16]

Frank also writes of being `haunted' by Virginia Woolf's style which, he argues, `contradicts the laws of narrative'[17] and yet despite his concentration on two women writers as exponents of spatial narrative, and his self-conscious marginalisation of writers such as Joyce and Proust, he does not raise the question of gender and spatial stylistics. This remains a curious silence in spatial theory (for example in the 1981 collection of critical essays, *Spatial Form in Narrative*[18]) and it is this silence that is directly challenged by the work of critics such as Salvaggio and Jardine.

Theoretical work on spatial narratives concentrates on the otherness of the text and it is in this delineation of alterity that the hidden `woman in discourse' can be traced. Spatial narratives are usually categorised as `other' in that they discard those elements

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[16] Joseph Frank, `Foreword' to Jeffrey Smitten and Ann Daghistany (eds.), *Spatial Form in Narrative* (London: Cornell University Press, 1981),p.7-8.

[17] Frank, p. 8.

[18] See note 16.

usually understood to *constitute* literary narrative such as attention to character and theme development; plot sequence with linear progression and the creation of some kind of illusion, encouraging readers to suspend disbelief. Such narratives foreground the textual gaps that they contain; these gaps may be filled by literal spaces (attention to landscape for example), or by the inclusion of less obvious kinds of "setting":

> ... insofar as a work *describes* anything in relation to anything else, it renders an "order of coexistent data," whether that data is comprised of characters, objects, images, sensations or emotions. Whatever our reading leads us to "see" not simply in the visual sense but in the entire field of perception is part of the field of descriptive space in literary experience.[19]

A spatial text then, rewrites our assumptions as to what `coexistent data' might exist in the literary text and, as this and Frank's earlier comments on *Nightwood* make clear, a different relationship between text and reader is assumed. If the spatial narrative denies conventional reading practice and, rather, foregrounds gaps, contradiction and non-linearity, the reader must *synthesise* textual elements to produce a reading, just as Frank attempted to make a `pattern' from the jottings in his notebook. This is, as I shall go on to suggest, very much the experience of reading *The Terrible Girls*.

Looking beyond formal features of this disruption of narrative (lack of plot, themes and so on), again and again the theorists come to align textual spatiality with the bodily, and thus underpinning much discussion of experimental narrative is a reliance on the oppositions of time/space linked to mind/body and, I would add to this, articulation/silence. These examples from spatial theorists make the associations clear:

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[19] W. J. T. Mitchell, `Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (Spring 1980), 539-567, (p. 551).

Space is the body of time ... Time is the soul of space ... [20]

It is through silence that space declares its presence: silence is its pulse.[21]

While the gender of the `body' is not made explicit, the inclusion of traditional binary opposites here signals a feminine or feminised body and one which remains silent. Its mark on the text is one of physicality and pulsation; interestingly, a *rhythmic* disruption of narrative, and rhythm takes us back to the body and, in particular, a dancing body. In his study of spatial narrative, W.J.T. Mitchell includes a discussion of the origins of the term `rhythm', which was

> ... originally the "positions" that the human body was made to assume in the course of a dance, in other words the patterns or *schemata* that the body made.[22]

Thus the spatial elements in a text (which so haunted Frank) are linked to rhythms of the body, pulsations, movement and, possibly, dance. Gradually, then, a feminised body is revealed to be at the centre of the text's otherness: the patterns of the dancing body disrupt the linearity of the realist text.[23] This leads me to the second configuration of bodily space - in dance - where the figure is not concealed but flaunted.

Dance is one area of cultural and aesthetic production which *has* traditionally foregrounded the feminine body (as for example in classical ballet) and there has been a

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[20] Mitchell, p. 545.

[21] Ricardo Gullón, `On Space in the Novel', *Critical Inquiry*, 2(1975-6), 11-28, (p. 17).

[22] J. J. Pollitt cited by Mitchell, p.548.

[23] Elisabeth Bronfen focuses on the `otherness' of the feminine body in representations of death in art, literature and film in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). Bronfen argues that the pleasurable `horror of such images relies upon the construction of the feminine body as `the superlative site of alterity', thus creating a distance between the spectator and death itself: `They repress by localising death away from the self, at the body of a beautiful woman, at the same time that this representation lets the repressed return, albeit in a disguised manner'. (p. *xi*)

recognition that this prominence offers potential for rewriting the representation of that still silent body. This potential stems directly from a recognition of the performative aspect of femininity in dance[24] and the subsequent fluidity of bodily representation in the free space of the dance:

> We understand the *dance* only from space transformed by music or in silence. The `past-and-futureless space' of the dance, widely differing from our daily world of utility creates the dance, inspires the dancer with new life that metamorphoses her body.[25]

The notion of metamorphosis - transforming, going beyond the bodily - is crucial to an escape from the elision of the feminine with the bodily, spatial and silent. As Isadora Duncan suggests, in the dancing body we have the potential to refuse gender-specific stereotypical constructions:

> The dancer of the future ... will dance not in the form of a nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of a woman in her greatest and purest expression ... From all parts of her body shall shine radiant intelligence, bringing to the world the message of the thoughts and aspirations of women. She shall dance the freedom of women.[26]

Duncan's paradigm of the `dancer of the future' centres on a rejection of culturally imposed, *external* images of the feminine body and in their place, an uncovering of an interior landscape which includes women's `thoughts and aspirations'. In modern dance,

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[24] I am using `performance' here in much the same way as I used the term `masquerade' in Chapter 5. Sally Peters discusses this performative aspect to ballroom dance in particular, arguing that there is a critical distance between femininity as performed in the dance and lived experience, and that this distance allows a temporary transcendence of the limits of gender identity: see, `From Eroticism to Transcendence: Ballroom Dancing and the Female Body', in Laurence Goldstein (ed.), *The Female Body: Figures, Styles, Speculations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 145-158.

[25] J. H. Van Den Berg, `The Human Body and the Significance of Human Movement' in Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek (ed.) *Psychoanalysis and Existential Philosophy* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1962),p. 121; cited by Sally Peters, p. 148.

[26] Isadora Duncan, cited in Elizabeth Dempster, `Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances' in Susan Sheridan (ed.), *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 35-54, (p. 50).

it seems, the feminine body does not have to represent fixity in the way it does in the theoretical texts already discussed. Rather, due to two crucial aspects - movement and performance - this corporeal space can become a site of conflict, realignment and transformation:

> The modern dancer's body registers the play of opposing forces, falling and recovering, contracting and releasing. It is a body defined through a series of dynamic alternations, subject both to moments of surrender and moments of resistance.[27]

In *The Terrible Girls* we witness this `dynamic' body in moments of both `surrender' and `resistance': the female figure is a contested space through which a transition from the body as contained (as seen in spatial theories of narrative and as critiqued by Jardine and Salvagggio) to the body as containing `opposing forces ... falling and recovering' (as in modern dance) can be imagined.

Rebecca Brown's *The Terrible Girls* is a collection of short stories which are linked thematically and by intertextual references between individual stories.[28] Each story deals at some level with the `fall-out' from a relationship which breaks down; these are very often illicit relationships between women, conducted in `the dark black alley of the night' (*TG*, 74) and frequently the narrative includes the clash of `open' and secret worlds, focusing on the space between them. The narrators (whose gender is not always specified but when it is, they are female), speak of these relationships in terms of loss, pain, betrayal, violence and lingering desire and, on a literal level, the `plot' of the collection is concerned with recovery from the breakdown of the relationships. This is symbolised by a search for a heart which has been violently stolen from the narrator by

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[27] Dempster, p. 43.
[28] Rebecca Brown, *The Terrible Girls* (London: Picador, 1991). All further references will be cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *TG*.

the `terrible girls'. There is clearly an intertextual relationship between the stories and

Stevie Smith's poem `I'll have your heart':

> I'll have your heart, if not by gift my knife
>
> Shall carve it out. I'll have your heart, your
> life.[29]

Two of the stories are explicitly dystopic, `Lady Bountiful and the Underground

Resistance' and `The Ruined City'; these stories are set in the same place (the post-

ecological disaster city and literally in the same building at one point), but are told from

different narrative viewpoints that don't quite match up. Brown plays with the markers

that we usually rely upon when reading to make sense of a text, such as narrative voice

and setting, and the collection problematises any attempt at classification. The stories are

too interdependent and similarly narrated by the same obsessive voice (even when the

persona changes) to be described as discrete short stories, and yet there is too great a

sense of dislocation to place the text as a short novel or a novella. The centre of the text,

if there is one, is made up of the spaces *between* the stories; like Joseph Frank reading

Djuna Barnes, we can only trace patterns in the narrative through seemingly random

voices, perspectives and events. This textual space, then, becomes the *setting* for the

narrative and the effect of this is not to build up any sense of continuation or `identity'

within the narrating voice; indeed, it serves to undercut such a possibility. A critical

distance is riven between narrator and text, text and reader. We can begin to imagine

how this distance might operate if we compare it to the ways in which costume can work

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[29] This short version of the poem appeared in Smith's *Selected Poems*. The full version is included in the *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 148, with a second stanza: `I do not love you, Mother,/ I do not love another,/ Love passed me by/ A long time ago, And now I cry/ Doh ray me fah soh'.

in avant-garde performance, not to establish identity but to work against any such illusion. Yvonne Rainer's description of this is strikingly similar to the textual effect of Brown's writing if `narrative' is substituted here for costume or dress:

> The costumes bring in another dimension ... of, not exactly a persona, but an association with personae created earlier and elsewhere... There's a recurring, fleeting transformation from a body moving to a flickering, female image. I think that because the dress stands away from the body the image is never totally integrated or unified.[30]

This tension spatialises the text: it is saturated with silences, oblique references and gaps (both typographical and narrative) and the problems of naming, classifying and describing the text place it within the category of `spatial' writing theorised by Frank and others. Rebecca Brown utilises this space to write the feminine body - an unidealised, material body - into her text. Indeed, she goes further, to metaphorically shape her dystopic narrative like a body; as Offred says of her `tale', `like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force'.[31] This is the textual identity of the first of the dystopic short stories in the collection.

`Lady Bountiful and the Underground Resistance' is the longest of the stories in *The Terrible Girls* and is placed at the centre of the collection. Details of the dystopian world - the `New Era' State - are sketchy, however, as Brown's focus is how power operates, in general terms, in both public and private spheres. The narrative is set in a city stratified by class; the story is told by an anonymous narrator from the ghetto where she lives under curfew and military rule. State power is located outside of the ghetto, resistance to this power is contained within: an underground collective of women publish

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[30] Yvonne Rainer, cited in Dempster, p. 48.
[31] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (London: Virago, 1987). p. 279.

and display propaganda (made in an illegal printing press) beyond the dividing line. The only other person to transgress by moving between the two territories is Lady Bountiful, now the wife of the State leader, but once a member of the women's group and the narrator's lover. Although through marriage Lady Bountiful now symbolically represents the `New Era', she returns to the ghetto every night in an attempt to return the narrator's stolen heart.

Much of the story is made up of the narrator's fantasies of revenge and empowerment over Lady Bountiful. Having received a party invitation from her for example, the narrator fantasises about violently repaying her lover's betrayal:

> We open fire, the girls and I, and blast the bleeding Jesus out of this house of ill-repute you've clawed your way into. I'm hugging a hunk of a machine gun to my side, and as I rat-a-tat off round after round, my body shakes... (*TG*, 78)
>
> I don't know what we do because of course I don't go to your silly party. (*TG*, 79)

The narrator also obsessively imagines the scene of reunion between them at the door of the hut:

> You'll come to me so frightfully, You'll say, I made a terrible mistake, You'll say, I'm sorry, You'll say, Forgive me, You'll say, Let me in.
>
> Like hell I will. (*TG*, 74)
>
> There was a knocking at the door.
> Who is it?
> You cleared your throat, It's me.
> Who? I asked, as if poor old grandma me was hard of hearing.
> It's - it's Lady Bountiful. (*TG*, 54)
>
> There was a knocking at the door.
> Who is it? My voice was like a shy old maid.
> Hello-o-o! you sang. You were trying to sound chipper, as if this was the first time you had come here. (*TG*, 56)

The narrator constructs these imaginary encounters from the dark space of the printing room in the ghetto which she now inhabits alone. In this safe space she is omniscient, able to decode Lady Bountiful's intentions and disguises and thus able to gain control of their relationship (`You'll say, Forgive Me'). For the reader, these fantasy scenes make it impossible for any distinction between `fiction' and `reality' within this fictional world to be maintained. Not only are there metafictional comments (such as `I don't know what we do...' after the party scene and `Like hell I will') which problematise any such distinction, but also, as demonstrated by these quotations, Lady Bountiful and the narrator assume different voices and personae in the imagined scenes; we do not know which is the `real' until the end of the story. At this point Lady Bountiful has to flee to the hut to escape punishment from her husband (who has discovered her night-time visits to the ghetto) and, now that she is absolutely humbled, the narrator takes her revenge: holding the heart, they are both trampled to death by government soldiers on horses:

> You're close to me, so close that when you stop chattering, you hear, despite the noise of the stampede, what I've desired to tell you for so long: Look, Look, you stupid bitch, here come the horses.
> This is how you're trampled in my arm. (*TG*, 87)

From this summary of the narrative, a concern with the bodily is apparent: the story describes an emotional loss - and the revenge taken - in violent, physical terms, and these are returned to again and again throughout the text. The feminine body contained by this narrative is thus the antithesis of an idealised image: Brown delineates a wounded and malevolent body in the dystopic fictional space. This can be most clearly seen if we look at the place of the narrative's construction and the foregrounding of bodily suffering as evidence of the dystopic `reality'.

Each of the narrator's fantasies of her meeting with Lady Bountiful is constructed in spaces (literal and metaphoric) which are doubly `underground'; the printing room in the hut is literally underneath the city in the ghetto, but is also a site of resistance, an illegal space. They are constructed in a psychic space which can be deemed `underground'; not only are the fantasies structured around acts of brutality, but they express lesbian desire deemed illicit in the New Era. These fantasies do not work to `flesh out' the dystopia but, rather, they draw our attention again and again to the spaces in which they are constructed: the ghetto (`the lines were drawn, the gate was clear and marked', *TG*, 54); the hut (`it was completely dark inside', *TG*, 56) and the narrator's mind (`when you first left I dreamt you would come back', *TG*, 64). The *interiority* of these spaces is emphasised by the foregrounding of the door to the hut, which provides both a frame for the narrative - everything is seen through the doorway - and a border between the dark space inhabited by the narrator and the outside world. It also represents a limit or threshold between her transgressive desires and the socio-political reality which denies and prohibits them. The narrator's perspective is confined to what she can see through a crack in the door and this gap in the frame becomes a space of possibility which frees the narrator from the constraints of the realist narrative and the political `real':

> I wondered if you felt me too. You couldn't see me but I saw you through the tiny crack that appeared in the door when you left...
>
> ... Very close to me, not six inches away, I saw the side of your face pressed against the door. Your hands were flat against the door as if you thought your touch, like some old charm, could open it. (*TG*, 56)

The doorway represents a border between liminal and subliminal states and this division is shown to be under pressure from the touch, face and hands of her lover. In bodily

terms, it is also suggestive of the boundary between one body and another that skin constitutes. The presence of the doorway symbolises the distance between the narrator and Lady Bountiful following her betrayal; in sharp contrast to the mutuality - expressed in physical terms once again: `we always knew each other's moves by heart'. (*TG*, 69) It is because of this that Lady Bountiful wants to rid herself of the stolen heart - but however she tries to dispose of it, it remains with her, transgressing the border between one body and another - herself and the narrator:

> You've worn it underneath your skirts and pressed it so hard it *prints against your skin* ... You've tried to throw it away or push it down the disposal or flush it down the john or run it through the meat grinder. But it remains. It stays with you. It keeps itself close to you. *Like it's inside.* (*TG*, 74; emphasis added)

The relationship between the narrator and this barrier is analogous at one level with the relationship between the woman and her narration: the door is under pressure from outside (the dystopic reality against which it is a flimsy barrier) and from memories of a once desired body:

> Through the crack in the door I see you. You're flushed and bruised and limping. You're crying. You lean your body against the door. You press your open palm against the door...(*TG*, 86)

Her body, here wounded (`flushed and bruised and limping'), exerts a pressure on the narrator and thus on the narrative; this is very much how feminine bodies are used in the construction of the `bad place' in the text: scarred, bloody, murdered women's bodies are the contested signs of this dystopia.

As I've suggested, `Lady Bountiful and the Underground Resistance' brings into the fictional space the `dirty, low-life underside' (*TG*, 55) of love and this is constructed

through obsessively detailed fantasy narratives. In contrast, the dystopic reality, the `low-life underside' of the `real' is only sketched in; we have little sense of how the New Era operates or is sustained. What evidence there is of the `bad place' horror is made up of the mutilation and display of women's bodies:

> After a couple days we'd find what was left of her - her ass and mouth stuffed full, her arm cut off, her eyes gouged out, a copy of the news speared to her chest, her bloody remnants ground by the horses' hooves. Sometimes they'd hang her carcass over the ghetto gate to remind us what awaited the resistance. (*TG*, 68)

Whilst this use of dead bodies by the State as warnings is a feature of other dystopias (the public hanging in *Nineteen Eight-Four* and the display of those punished with death in Gilead on the old walls of Harvard University in *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example), here the killing and exhibition of bodies is gender-specific: we see no male dead bodies in Brown's short story. It is not only the corpses of real women that the State uses in this way; the image of a woman `ground by the horses' hooves' is reproduced in statues that Lord Bountiful commissions:

> And there's him trampling someone under the feet of his noble steed. Do you recognize the girl beneath the hooves? Can you see beyond her pulled-back lips, her wild eyes, her hand clutching out at nothing? (*TG*, 72)

These same images are reclaimed and subverted for political purposes by the women in their `tiny acts of sabotage' (*TG*, 68):

> We xeroxed photos of the hoofed. We were not shy. We didn't mince. The few of us who dared to risk the streets all night ... slipped thousands of copies to other huts and hung news from posts and taped it to walls and folded it into paper airplanes and flew it over the walls to the part of the city where Lord Bountiful and his fatcat hoodlums lived. (*TG*, 68)

The image is thus returned to Lord Bountiful with its meaning (and intention) reversed; the discursive space occupied by the female body remains malleable even in such extreme

form. What is clear is that women's bodies represent differing interpretations of the political `real': the reconstruction of these images here is a challenge to the very political order that the first image (woman as punished body) signifies. The codes and ethics of the body politic are encapsulated in a feminine body on public display in this dystopia, and the resistance to this political order is also situated within the same corporeal representation.

In `Lady Bountiful' Brown *locates* her dystopia in the (contested) space occupied by the female body and thus the image of the body itself becomes abject, horrific, injured. There is no possibility of celebration of this body as ideal or beautiful and, equally, no potential for recovery. All `bodies' in the New Era (from the body politic to the bodies of individual women) are damaged, broken and vengeful, not just on the surface but also inside, where the horror is really located. Just as the acts of brutal murder show the true face of Lord Bountiful's regime, the narrator's fantasies of revenge signal that the interior space of desire has - like the body - been shot through with violence and pain:

> Do I find that handy rope around your middle and do I tie you up with it and make you watch us tear every inch of this nasty pleasure play-house where you live? Or do we not do you the honour of singling you out for attention, but merely splatter your innards against the rococo replica furniture with everybody else's? (*TG*, 78-9)

The second dystopic story in *The Terrible Girls*, `The Ruined City' also takes loss and desire for revenge as its starting point. This, the final story in the collection, is set in the same city as `Lady Bountiful'; the city figures here as a palimpsest - it is not the same story that is told, but a different story concerned with the same emotional and bodily space, the heart. The narrative follows the search for a heart that has been stolen by the `terrible girls' and left in a city `ruined' by ecological disaster and surrounded by a

desert landscape. The narrator is forced to return to the place where she left her heart and to confront the woman who took it, by her present lover who states simply, `you can't and I refuse to anymore, live without what you left in the city'. (*TG*, 105) It is this quest for the heart and the process of reclamation that shapes the narrative and in the final line of `The Ruined City' the loss that has motivated all of the narratives in the collection is finally named and restored. My interest here is in the way Rebecca Brown is able to transform this abject bodily space into a place of restoration and renewal.

`The Ruined City' is the only story in the collection which has a quest or journey narrative as its structure. The other stories are constituted by bizarre and increasingly surreal moments following the violation by the terrible girls, but here there is a tracing back to that moment of violation and an unwilling confrontation with it through narrative. There is at the beginning of the story a critical distance (constituted by time and memory) from the loss, which the narrator does not wish to traverse:

> The maps were gone. The roads that I remembered had been bombed, the bridges burnt... I'd never told her where I'd left. But even what I could have told would not have been enough. I had worked hard not to remember. (*TG*, 106)

However, under pressure from her lover and as the journey goes on, this self-imposed silence is no longer tenable. After crossing the desert (which metaphorically represents the emotional space she has placed herself in since the loss), the narrator finds the `terrible girl' who stole her heart and realises her own potential for violent revenge:

> I could have done it then, I could have, while you slept so pretty and so unaware in the living room, slipped the knife out of my shirt and hacked your heart right out of you. (*TG*, 115)

The fact that she doesn't take revenge at this point (because she sees that the woman understands and feels remorse for her crime) gives her confidence and strength to confront the `bad place' in her memory and in herself.

This first involves the recounting of the most horrific scene of violence to her lover:

> At any time, at night or in the middle of the afternoon - they had no shame, they didn't even close the door - we could hear them going at it. We'd hear them beating and tearing at some poor wretch's scant reserve ... We'd watch them drag our neighbour into the street, or watch them have her in her private quarters. We'd continue watching until she had been had to see what they cast off from her - a sleeve, a chunk, a thing sucked dry. (*TG*, 120)

She also tells of how the terrible girls eventually find her and tear her heart out: `They pinned me down with their hands and knees. They trampled me. When they'd torn me apart they let what was left of me fall'. (*TG*, 122) Through this act of narration, the scene which has been so long repressed is confronted. What is being faced here is once again the flipside of conventional images of femininity and - crucially - her own place in this `dirty, low-life underside' of subjectivity. (*TG*, 55) This involves articulating a truth about herself which names her too as a `terrible girl':

> This was the greatest desire, the greatest desire that I have ever known. I longed to skewer those little rat's-assed bitches' asses up. I longed to string up the severed parts of them and watch them rot. (*TG*, 122-3)

This realisation that the `greatest desire' she has known is driven by hatred and revenge is not ultimately disempowering as it was in `Lady Bountiful'. Although this story is also saturated with images of violence by and to women's bodies (for example in both,

figurative language expresses this horrific physicality),[32] this confrontation with the horror of the self triggers a scene of recovery.

In a bizarre, ritualistic ceremony, the narrator's lover returns the stolen heart to her body:

She said, Believe this telling of the tongue:

There is a sundering of blood
There is the carrying of loss.
There is the burial in earth.
There is the waiting in the dark.

There is the laying on of hands.
There is the opening of flesh.
There is the light within the body.
There is the resurrected heart.
(*TG*, 125; emphasis in original)

The lover places the heart on the narrator's skin; the pressure it exerts reminds us of the doorway in `Lady Bountiful':

Then I felt it lowering, then something cold against my skin. I felt it slipping on my skin and weighing down, then I felt an edge of something sharp, again, against where what had been hacked out of me was hacked. (*TG*, 125)

This time, however, the pressure leads to a `resurrection', a recovery of the feminine body as the artificial boundary of the doorway has been removed to form an `opening' and `light within the body'. While `Lady Bountiful' takes us to the border of abjection (fantasies set in `the dark black alley of the night', *TG*, 74), its mirror-text, `The Ruined City' takes us to this violent point and beyond. This renewal of the feminine bodily space is made possible by a journey through the dystopia and the horror - the images and desires - that it contains. Articulation of this horror is shown here to contain the

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[32] In `Lady Bountiful and the Underground Resistance', for example, the removal of the bag containing the stolen heart is described as being `like a dismembering' (*TG*, 86), and in `The Ruined City' the chain of a broken porch swing is `like someone hung' (*TG*, 114).

possibility of transformation which is crucial, finally, for the radical future fictions that the feminist dystopia leads us to: `There was something against my body, there was an opening, a blaze, there was the heart'. (*TG*, 125)

`The Ruined City' offers a parable for future readings of the feminist dystopia. It tells us that through confrontation with the horror that the `bad place' contains for women, a scene of recovery and catharsis is possible. This `horror' may be located in the socio-political real *or* in the narrating subject; in both cases, a tracing back of the `foundations of the symbolic construct'[33] is an empowering process. Through this, women can articulate their fears and desires, conventionally silenced in literary narrative, and can bring into view networks of power not only within a specific literary genre, but outside of it also. The dystopia offers feminist writers and readers a place in which to imagine women's oppression *in extremis*, but also their future liberation in a transformed literary and socio-political space: `something that both forms a boundary and opens up endless possibility'.[34]

[33] Julia Kristeva, *Powwers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 18.
[34] Jessica Benjamin, cited by Ruth Salvaggio, `Theory and Space, Space and Women', p. 275.

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