

TOWARDS BODY-RECOVERY: A COLLAGE OF ORALITY  
HERSTORICAL POETRY-TELLINGS WITHIN FEMINIST  
AND ECOLOGICAL FEMINIST NARRATIVES

by

Maria Walther

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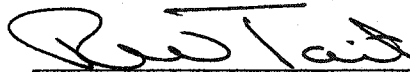
## APPROVAL

Name: Maria Walther

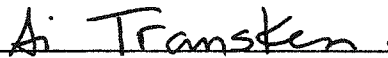
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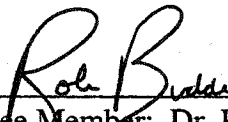
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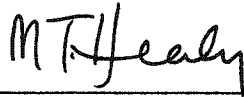
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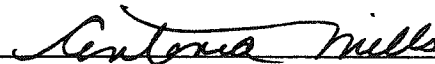
Supervisor: Dr. Si Transken  
Assistant Professor, Social Work Program  
UNBC



Committee Member: Dr. Robert Budde  
Assistant Professor, English Program  
UNBC



Committee Member: Dr. Theresa Healy  
Adjunct Professor, Women's Studies Program  
UNBC



External Examiner: Dr. Antonia Mills  
Associate Professor, First Nations Studies Program  
UNBC

Date Approved:

April 11, 2003

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis presents an exploratory effort in the local-global ecological feminist quest to further stimulate debate of ways in which we-women, within our selves and the eco-social context of our communities, may acknowledge and honor biologically anchored gender difference. As such it is premised on the recognition of women's biological difference as a further building block towards a cross-cultural feminist understanding and appreciation of all our unique, diverse, uncontainable identities in this world-earth-home. The thesis is written in the hope that we may, out of this honoring of biological difference and its ecological/sociological effects, collectively move beyond multiple oppressions towards cross-cultural alliances in efforts to redefine the human journey of life on this planet. I thank all those women who have come before me and passed on their empowering legacy of strength and hope.

Set within an ecological feminist framework, this inquiry into Western cultural body politics and its effects on women is a multi-layered collage of intermingling textual analysis, creative writing and herstorical testimonies. Contextually appropriate poetry threads through the textual montage, linking the writer's personal experiences into the larger frame of women's experiences as evidenced in local and global feminist research. Through this unconventional format I hope to offer readers new paths of entry into the debate.

In summary then, the thesis explores how women-we can acknowledge our material bodies in ways that are affirming, celebratory, liberating and lead towards new expressions of self determination - an embodied self-determination which moves from personal body validation towards collective herstorical awareness of the stark socio-ecological consequences contained in Western masculinist devaluation/exploitation of women's bodies in corporate global politics.



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*to all women who love uncurling stories  
to all women who sun rise  
in places where water is pure idea*

*to all women who bare their courage  
because if they don't  
who will*

*to all women who are mothers and sisters  
daughters and lovers*

*to  
all women*

*and finally  
to my mother and all women who  
against strategic odds have always known this:*

*inside the rings of her vulva  
awaits merriment  
only vagabonds of love e~merge alive*

*laughing*

**women's**

*women's anecdotes*

*women's antidotes*

*women's*

***what?***

this is a proverbial flood of ancient tears

a pouring of rage

bursting into a love song

a prayer not a meditation and

though not a missionary

by trade

o/men will suggest I act like one

like the wor(l)d belongs to me also

attached to a definite nirvana

*writing is political*

*so is women*

organic bowels move

chest sound from within

mumble hideously

babble ghastly

nasty gossip

scheme vigorously on the sly

(with attention to detail the way only we are still expected to purr/form)

plot for an/o/ther escape

*I will insert my~selves*

*so help me women*

*I is real*

they are the steaming compost heap of my thoughts

which

having outwitted *their* objectifying gropings

slip past neurological control

jump from nerve end to pen

screen to paper

see how they dance across the page

love

how they

dance

into

body

space

## INTRODUCTION

### **Reader's blueprint, what the thesis is all about, and why**

Before I begin the story-telling, dear reader, let me quickly explain the technical blue-print of this narrative collage so you will easily find your way through the various layers of its journey. As I mentioned in the abstract, this thesis consists of a series of layers representing women's voices, taken from interviews, texts and personal poetry. Together, they build into a chorus of enthusiastic and determined voices, which then explores various aspects of herstorical body-recovery, never all at the same time, but taking turns, over and underlapping and continuing where others left off. I have alternated personal inquiry into certain issues with other women's comments and musings. The thesis topic is intense and I wanted to evoke the feeling of excited, dynamic conversation, of multiple voices carrying on at the same time or almost, just the way we might have them at someone's kitchen table. Citation clusters seemed an appropriate choice to approximate animated debate among the writers. They alternate with poetry clusters which chart my personal experience in this herstorical journey and guide my reflections along the paths of textual inquiry. I wrote this text in an effort to move out of the rigidly confined conventional scholarly research text into a more dynamic, textual hybrid in the hope that the subject matter – women and women's bodies – also becomes less confined and restricted, to me the writer as well as to you the reader. Thank you.

I am writing in the face of impending war between the United States of America, possible allied countries, and Iraq. The reason seems to be potential weapons of mass destruction in the 'wrong' hands. The cause may well be another chapter in the story of Western affluent nations fighting to maintain global supremacy – another round in Western imperialism.

I am writing in the face of growing tensions among Middle East nations. The reason seems to be extreme water shortage for downstream users of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, caused by irresponsible water commodification and export aimed at short term profits, Western-style, among its upstream users. The cause may be the adaption of grotesque Western neocolonialist strategies to reinforce *power-over*.

The human story is all about body. Indeed, there may not be a single theme in the total perceived/constructed realm of human storytelling that is not in some way linked to the human body. Its lack. Its desires. Its greediness. Its needs. Its rhythms and ticks. Its hunger. Its curiosity in other bodies. Its very search for further dimensions outside body contours. Its re:source-fullness. Its re:presentations. Its self-reflexivity. Its reflections on others. Its fear of its own potential. Its hope for the realization of its potential.

Bodystories.

This story also talks about bodies. Women's bodies. The main point of this story is to help bring bodies out into the open, into air, sight, text and consciousness. Why? Because women's bodies continue to be degraded and devalued in Western capitalist patriarchal societies, they continue to suffer and die, and through women's suffering, all of humanity suffers in unspeakable and unnecessary ways. Should the reader care? Will there be a tomorrow? If we believe in the need for a saner world, one which honors and embraces the diversity of women in all our different identities, then yes, the reader should care. I care. I am a woman. I want to help make women more visible, and because I see women's bodies as the most visibly exposed and suffering object of masculinist oppression, I choose to tell this particular story, using my body as entry point into the story. And my body-story informs me that certain rhythms of our bodies have just not been terribly popular. They are hardly talked about and for the most part they are ignored, even denied. Yes, among women ourselves. I should not say that the rhythms are denied as much as the bodies themselves seem to

conveniently disappear out of postmodern feminist discourse<sup>1</sup>. We may talk about body as text, image, as ingenious representation of an idea of who woman could be, and we profess a great amount of interest in visions of the female sexed body as a constellation all on its/her own.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I will confine my next remarks to a lengthy footnote, so it may *not* take up powerful space in the main body of my text. I am doing this to bring into relief her:historical subject matter, so that her:story may set the tone, the agenda and continue to empower our becoming (as my supervisor Si Transken suggested, I am not in conversation with Freud).

What is the fascination to the point of obsession which some postmodern feminists (I use the term loosely) exhibit as they interpret, reinterpret and second-guess male theorists and their discourse on the origins and /or nature of interrelational power systems particularly regarding class, gender and the politics of oppression? Why would women, why would we, out of our real experience living with-in-the-world, in our quest to define our identity and position in order to empower us, why would we even look at theory originated within male or masculinist experience? Especially when this carefully articulated experience so very firmly reinforces the status quo? Do we really think that we can simply take some of the formula and leave out the rest? Or are we earnestly trying to harmonize, blend and align our selves with the dominant, universal, male category? What can we hope to accomplish by consistently turning back as we walk forward? Chances are we end up stumbling, maybe even tripping – we may know we are different, but we still only have one pair of eyes, and those eyes need to look ahead for us to get ahead: deciphering men's inherently sexist monologues on who and how women are perceived and furthermore supposed to be in the eyes of men, seems a futile exploration if we want to locate our selves – see our own reflection for a change. This will not happen if we spend precious time trying to understand these monologues and fill in 'the gaps', nor will we ever affect a change in the way we are perceived, whether that is in theoretical musings or practical daily negotiations with real bodies. For, beneath it all, male theorists like Freud, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and oh so many others, wrote what they did because they believed it – and they happily and firmly pressed their writings within the ideological framework, again because they believed in it: because the logic of domination which governs Western patriarchal society quite simply seemed to make sense to them, and because it gave them satisfaction, nothing more, and nothing less. If we want to come up with something more inclusive, more egalitarian, less phallic-oriented, we truly need to jump off the phallus: trying to stay on for the ride, well, we get the picture....we continue to ride off into the sunset we know so well.

Somer Brodribb sums up the postmodern feminist quest to insert feminist theories into already established masculinist theoretical dogma: "As for the idea that feminists should be ragpickers in the bins of male ideas, we are not as naked as all that. The notion that we need to salvage for this junk suggests that it is not immediately available everywhere at all times. The very up-to-date products of male culture are abundant and cheap; it is one of life's truly affordable things. In fact, we can't pay not to get it, it's so free. So what we have is a difficulty in refusing, of *not* choosing masculine theoretical products...instead, I argue the best methodology for evaluating the practice of theory that is put before us as what feminists must attend to if we are really serious about social change is whether it originates from feminist politics and women's experiences. Not a tributary to or coincidence with male philosophy; women must be the matter and the energy:" (Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers*. James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Toronto: 1992, p. xxiii).

My concerns are these: By elaborating on masculinist writings we add to their prominence, maybe even popularity, yet scholars in areas other than the study of feminist critique are very likely to go on as before with little thought given to tangential writings from less conservative and therefore less weighty, less funded disciplines. Within the discourse of feminist critique however, these texts have taken on such overriding significance, that to express the desire to go ahead without allotting them energy and consideration has become almost a sacrilege. Not only that, these writings have already produced a generation or more of follow-ups. Revered feminists and their academic offspring have already spent much of their lives dissecting, twisting and turning in ongoing attempts to insert or uncover meaning. These secondary writings, by virtue of their reflective value, add to that upon a male experience, can never successfully compete with the original upon which they are based. Not only that, but to the woman searching for reflections on the original female experience, they will leave an unexpected sadness, and maybe a dawning conviction that many of us still prefer to remain held with/in the male gaze instead of working together as allies to produce lasting testimony of women's experience and thus begin a less contaminated process towards the formulation of a feminist politics. Is who we are not enough to justify writing our selves into the discourse?

But when the story gets to the point of biological subject matter, of our bodies' persistent biological determinism, what that looks and feels like, bodies continue to be disappeared, and we are taught to bemoan instead the entrapment of women into an essential idea and analyze the dangers of reducing the category 'women' to a (natural) essence. Whole books are written on the topic of female body essence. 'Women are made not born', says feminist foremother Simone de Beauvoir. Fair enough, considering that she was forever struggling toward a more liberatory understanding of her own self inside Sartre's intellectual universe. In the eclectic company of postmodern phalocrats, social constructionism won the day. I don't know all that much about men's bodies, but I do know that women's bodies are persistent, obstinately so. Mine is. How can I say 'I know'? Ever since my first period, my female body said hello in no uncertain terms, and since then she just refused to go away. Certainly, my mind intermittently succeeded in imagining it/her gone – the well practiced adage 'mind over body' - how else was I able to mimic my way through masculinist text, discourse and the rule of the fathers at home, school, the work place and in between? Curricula, work place legislation, societal perceptions and expectations, all encourage(d) us to pretend that we inhabit a secondary, less complete or defective (!) version of the normative male body. Even the first graduate seminars in gender studies (this was the mid 90's) still presumed that ideas about oedipal complex, penis-envy, women outside discourse – and not to be found anywhere, the paternalists' heralding of phallic signifiers and women's equation with (can you believe it) 'lack', that these ideas constituted a sort of illustrious, universal truth.

Deconstruction happened to come along just then, ready to defer, fragment, invert and keep this kind of truth from evaporating like so much hot steam. And my body? Was my mind ready to acknowledge my body back into existence? Not at all, no – in fact, had I been asked back then to attend the *Vagina Monologues*, I probably would have opted to train as a catholic nun. Imagine hearing "It's 10 o'clock at night – do you know where your clitoris is? ...After all, the Indo-European word cunt was derived from the goddess Kali's title of Kunda or Cunti, and shares the same root as

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<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to writers like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, and their postmodern fathers, as well as to Western feminist popular culture, in which the female body continues to be critiqued as a self-sufficient self-revolving sexed (adult) subject, yet its biologically fixed cyclicity remains curiously absent.

kin and country."<sup>3</sup> What preposterous truth is this you ask? I agree. Whoever heard of it: cunt and kin. All the phallocrats' anthropological theorizings on kinship and countries and no one alerted us to possibilities...Until now. Until I had come to live with the very real, very physical, long term consequences of my biologically determined body. In the process of conceiving, becoming pregnant and giving birth, I – my body – has undergone a very particular, very 'essentializing', transformation. Becoming a biological mother was my initiation into my female body, its physiological, 'real' biological, potential. It has been painful, painfully ecstatic, this journey into motherhood, because, in Nicole Brossard's words, "motherhood made life absolutely concrete for me."<sup>4</sup>

It is out of this experience and its immediate effect on all aspects of my personal/political daily life, that I find myself moving towards a more intersubjective understanding of how the biologically defined physical, shifting realities of women's bodies are forever deeply, - deeply – connected with/in/to all meanings of life on this planet. And what it means in this neo-colonial time of (criminal) global monoculturalization, when many women, Western(ized) feminists and ecological feminists in particular, still persist in questioning the relevancy (or even existence) of female biological determinism in the face of women's struggles to survive in the to-be-eradicated 'other' cultures on this planet. Their daily challenges to stay alive, vibrantly so. Within the contexts of their children, their families, their communities, their land, which through their intricately woven-togetherness shapes their cultures. Moana Sinclair sums up this interconnectedness inherent in her Maori culture: "We cannot go forward without our men and our children; we are a collective people linked to the land. We must liberate ourselves from our colonizer, together. This means much healing and an abandoning of colonized mindsets, by both men and women, now."<sup>5</sup>

The very process of collaging my experiences, sorting perspectives and putting them into words opened my self towards a growing desire to listen to the voices of indigenous women, the world over - speak out, speak the meaning of their material lives. Even as I write these introductory paragraphs, I know that this process has barely begun, that I am on the right track however, and that

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<sup>3</sup> Gloria Steinem in her foreword to *Vagina Monologues*, (Eve Ensler: 2001), p. xiv

<sup>4</sup> Nicole Brossard in conversation with Janice Williamson in *Sounding Difference*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 60.



through my own desperation at the ongoing capitalist patriarchal annihilation of planetary diversity of life, I become more receptive to the wor(l)ds of indigenous women and their determined fight for survival. And finally, I have begun to acknowledge that all the fight for survival begins in our very own bodies, the ways in which these our bodies are able to honor and be honored, through personal as well as collective, contextualizing body politics.

All these reflections may stimulate feminist and ecological feminist inquiry, even fulfill necessary academic requirements. Though this is part of the problem, because there my own complicity in neocolonial oppressions becomes blatantly obvious. Here I sit, at a computer which, while ready to collapse (from boredom and old age fatigue), still links me to cyber-hype if I so choose, which attaches itself to me as a neurotic, electronic, cyborgian extension so that I can, from a safer distance, establish my self as a legitimate scholar, the same scholar who writes passionately about the need to reaffirm oppressed women's lives while plunking away at a computer whose parts they assemble under harrowing conditions.

Realizing that one of the least challenged, contested and transformed sites – contested by feminist theorists - of patriarchal logics of domination is (still) the postmodern absence of the female body-experience in text/language, I explore this issue in the first chapter. In the second chapter I quickly discuss why I think stand-offish notions of essence and constructivism among feminist and ecological feminist writers are entirely redundant, even counterproductive if we intend to shape a women centred future. Through poetry I highlight personal body experiences of menstruation, abortion, pregnancy, childbirth and the beginnings of mothering, in rough chronological order, and emphasize the problematics of honoring the biological dynamics of the female body in a society that increasingly seems to hand it over to pathologizing medical institutions, still driven by masculinist assumptions of the female body's 'value' as an exploitable resource commodity.

Using my own reflections on women's bodies within feminist, ecological feminist analyses as a celebratory link, I then move into the third chapter, in which I explore my perceptions of how ecological feminist theories/strategies are vital to connecting women globally through the increased

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<sup>5</sup> Moana Sinclair, "Pakcha Land Legislation in Aotearoa: The Continuous Resistance by Maori Women." Diana Vinding, ed. *Indigenous Women: The Right To A Voice*. (Copenhagen: IWGIA Document, 1998), p.111.

understanding of their/our transformative, empowering practices, linked as we our~selves are to our own bodies, families, communities and the nourishing capacities of the land – regardless of the seemingly seductive visions/politics of masculinist technologies around female body control (technologies controlled by whom?). I also explore the necessary personal and collective consequences of this analysis – if it is to have any meaning at all. I reflect on feminist and ecological feminist allying, the complexity of culturally sensitive allying, the long way we have before us and the obvious rewards of practicing hopeful, cross-cultural, ecological feminist coming-together. In my conclusion I muse on the spiritual aspects of a consciousness anchored in a feminist ecological understanding of body politics, and the need to shape a different language morphology to express women centred meaning. Through these observations I spiral back to new, continued beginnings – feminist language as a creative strategy in the formulation of an exuberant ecological feminist ethics of care, that learns to express the keenly felt potential of women's bodies as precious source energies of life as well as their (biologically and culturally constructed) roles as mediating agents between land and its peoples.

I appeal to readers to appreciate the exploratory aspects of this thesis. There is a formidable wealth of exciting feminist and ecological feminist literature speaking in much more detail on each strand of my topic. My particular madness has been to reduce seemingly complex equations of the faltering human/planetary journey to what I perceive – and *feel* – to be our global (i.e. androcentric) failure (speak *unwillingness*) to acknowledge women's biologically anchored difference as the *womb* of interrelational possibilities, articulated in the areas of policy making and building cultural meaning. I have spoken out of the direct experiences of my own realized biological difference as a woman, feeling my way into/through the various stages of body experiences that mark me as belonging to the sex-woman, gender-female<sup>6</sup>. (To the feminist strategic, complex and confusing sex/gender debate, let

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<sup>6</sup> The entire notion of sex versus gender in the english-speaking discourse is maddenly irritating. Whereas feminist ambiguity of terms can be an empowering, liberating strategy, it is my conviction that when foundational terminology like *sex* and *gender* is tossed about uncritically in Western dominant feminist discourse while *presumed* to be fixed, feminist debate quickly disappears into meaninglessness. No one seems to be entirely sure of their own use of the terms, nor seems there to be an agreement among writers quite how to define the more intricate nuances of each, which again would mean for all of us to launch into the origin of the sex/gender debate...for further entertainment I heartily recommend Donna Haraway's essay " 'Gender' for a Marxist Dictionary: The Sexual Politics of a Word" as well as Monique Wittig's "The Category of Sex" and "The Mark of Gender" (see bibliography).

me only mention that speaking out of my *other* Mother tongue, german, sex and gender merge into the term "Geschlecht" which, as Donna Haraway puts it, carries the meanings of sex, stock, race, and family, while the adjectival form 'geschlechtlich' means in English translations both sexual and generic. How is this for confusion, and the obvious need for feminist theories to be respectfully attuned to a people's particular linguistically rooted cultural paradigms, most particularly those that have been marginalized and/or completely silenced?)

Out of this quite basic (inter)subjective re:defining, my text offers, therefore, a liberating bias. I don't presume this text to be a definite answer or a statement leading to a 'period', despite the enthusiastic fervor I express at times. Rather, I write out of a dawning conviction: I suggest, encourage, deplore, celebrate, and through the (hopefully) creative format of the textual collage, write in recurring spirals towards a renewed effort to understand respectful, integral ways of interrelational being within this world-earth-home. I do, however, rest my arguments on a definite, explicit bottomline, which pushes a very obvious ethical commitment throughout the unfolding of the subject form~matter. It goes something like this:

Who benefits ?

## Chapter One

### Who benefits, herstorical position, herstorical foremothers, grounding her body/language

Who benefits and who ought to benefit? Once those questions are asked, they can never be swallowed back and their repeated recurrence becomes a measure of our willingness to push ethical boundaries. I know that every time my friend tossed it into the consensus based committee of the Vancouver Women's Monument Project, we were able - in the middle of heated debate - to realign the potentially divisive multiplicity of our experiences and redirect our focus to what mattered: to write into existence women's names, to uncover the nationwide, institutionalized denial of systemic femicide and, finally, to forge alliances with Native Women's organizations from the Downtown Eastside.

Who benefits? Whose science? Whose knowledge? Where do I come from? How do I define my situatedness, that guides the ways in which I locate *knowledge*? Can I define my own complicity in the research I inherit? Who benefits? Linda Tuhiwai Smith voices her scepticism when she concludes that "taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively does not help people to improve their current conditions. It provides words, perhaps, an insight that explains certain experiences -- but it does not prevent someone from dying."<sup>7</sup> It is with this in my heart that I write: I am a first generation European immigrant to Canada, I fit the image of the neocolonial global citizen in many life style expectations; I am white, and, slowly recognizing my own raced colour, busy uncovering the multiple politics of neocolonial oppressions in their varied thin disguises. Until recently I had persuaded myself to be heterosexual, and being a recently single mother of small children, student, ecological feminist, spousal fugitive and living within mere sustaining conditions<sup>8</sup>, my life has become more precious and real to me, for my own worth as well as its possibilities to shape future

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), p.3.

<sup>8</sup> This needs to be qualified to mean: 'sustaining within Canadian expectations of what economically poor means.'

for the next generation. Now I have a stake where before I merely consumed my self through the next day, risking my voice at leisure.

And wherein do I situate my feminist epistemology? If I must answer this question – in accordance with academic rules – let me say that I am not at all certain of the correctness of these rules. I am neither informed nor believing enough to announce beforehand, in convincing academic terminology, *how* I must get to where I hope to go. I can suggest possibilities, entertain ideas and voice doubts, but I am wary of investing in any 'proven' research method. If I must label my explorative journey, I will say that it grows out of a conviction that we need to validate women's experience. As such, I believe in the need and legitimacy of feminist empirical research and, growing out of it, feminist standpoint theories, which point towards the lived, silenced, marginalized, dailiness of women's labor. I also take into account Sandra Harding's cautionary note that women's experiences per se do not necessarily imply feminist analysis, since "experience itself is shaped by social relations; for example, women have had to *learn* to define as rape those sexual assaults that occur within marriage"<sup>9</sup>. However, I differ from her assertion that these experiences do not provide reliable grounds for knowledge claims about nature and social relations. I suggest it is *precisely* our experiences which provide the fertile grounds for feminist epistemologies. What other grounds do women have if not our lived body-experience? While I agree with the need for a re-evaluation of these experiences within a feminist frame of reference, they and they alone provide feminist theories with material, 'raw' testimony. Furthermore, I think these lived, traversed 'grounds' of women's diverse lives need to be validated, brought into focus and visibility, so that feminist evaluation can take place in the first place. This is what motivates my writing.

Donna Haraway speaks energetically on the possibilities of partial perspectives and mobile positioning<sup>10</sup>. It is the 'properly' trained, postmodern Western scientist in her, I believe, who delights in such baffling, bewildering assortments of options, culminating (for me) in her almost convincing slogan "splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies

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<sup>9</sup> Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 123.

of scientific knowledge."<sup>11</sup> Almost. For myself, I prefer the idea of *being* as a verb – partial, strategic, accountable, resonating – enthralled in the process of being. His story has been entirely too full of split women, split bodies, split within themselves, within family and as a community. Splitting does not sound entirely whole, and whereas partial perspective – as in articulating my own experience as excruciatingly vital, personal testimony – adds another *part* to the becoming-more-whole, splitting takes away, promises further suffering. And yet, partial perspective also seems to be what Donna Haraway is after when she concludes, that "the moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision".<sup>12</sup> The quest then seems to become a meeting of partial perspectives towards the resonating landscape of feminist intersubjectivity. With regard to the androcentrically rooted, manipulative idea of Western research, however, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's speaks in a most serious tone of her people's experiences:

"The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research."<sup>13</sup>

So much for at least one creative link between poetry and research.

How about poetry *as* research?<sup>14</sup> I am thinking here of the serious business of Joy Kogawa's practice of poetry as "the sweeping out of debris between the conscious and the unconscious. It's engaging the

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<sup>10</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" from *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 190 - 192.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> I had initially planned to talk about my use of poetry in a separate chapter, but decided otherwise as the thesis grew. So let me briefly note a few key ideas as to why I feel so strongly about the incorporation of poetry in my writing. Or any feminist writing for that matter.

- in its total diversity, it is a perfect, malleable, transformational medium suited for the articulation of women's multiple, (strategically) lived experience
- as a minimalist voice it easily captures essences, multiple concerns and issues
- in its ability to float surprisingly free from linguistic structure, it promises a healing, evocative medium to bridge a writer's mothertongues.
- the unlimited creative 'categories' of poetry allow for accumulative expansion of thoughts, self-reflections, organic processes or dramatic, spontaneous statements, punch lines
- as a form of creative writing, its flexible, fragmentary nature fits into women's every day life, a few lines jotted here and there (Adrienne Rich's experience while raising children...)
- the visual body of a poem, its corporeality, is for me, personally, very intriguing because of its BODY, whose sum total feels more than the conventional run-on line of prose, whose body like the body of woman undergoes gradual, ongoing, profound changes emerging – like the poetic swellings – from the inside out
- as a creative language, it carries the structural potential to bypass, outgrow, the master's tools; poetry as a way of being remains open to women's hormonal fluctuations – in actuality and symbolically, in creating and mirroring her own body-rhythm curves, in poetry, I feel women finding themselves in certain circumstances can be true to themselves.

discipline of dreams.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, maybe it is her firm assertion on the rightful place of poetry that speaks directly to my own thoughts of the purpose-fullness of poetry in this thesis:

“I would like to write something that was real, too, and I was trying to do that in my poetry.”<sup>16</sup>

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- poetry as a language form links ancient forms of spirituality with neo-colonial postmodernity, since it was probably the most ancient form of human expression before written languages, as song and orally recited wisdoms. And the age-long tradition of fusing poetry as song with dance has been the acknowledged expression of individual and collective experience: we return thus to body~rhythm;
  - poetry as prayer, song, song/dance, proverbs -- poetry in its many guises has accompanied women through the millennia, from the lullaby to the grandmother passing on rhymes to her grandchildren --

<sup>15</sup> Joy Kogawa in Interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

## body-hum

here we are then.

lift your head  
your forehead  
your cheekbones  
lift your scalp  
rearrange your collarbones.  
now open your mouth,  
sing. no?  
ah  
can't hear  
all I hear is absence  
where your body resonates

close your eyes no point seeing  
again breathe in slowly  
that's it  
no use rushing things  
round them out

yes of course your breasts  
feel them lift  
softly rest there  
included  
let your breath travel through  
body fluid  
leisurely  
sound cavities you never knew existed  
detach knuckle joints  
expand pelvis, loosen it  
as when you hold your womb  
fan out those hipbones  
wide wider  
exhale your triangle  
release the fear in your knees  
let breath flow inside the contours of each toe

vibrate your body whole

feel  
spaces that touch you  
feel their swelling  
hear their swelling  
now sing

aaah  
you hear her? body-hum<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This description is a feminist reworking of the ways in which one of my voice professors encouraged me to consciously prepare to 'open' up my physiological body and experience the multitude of sound chambers which together vibrate into the totality of airwaves.....sound.....language.....



"Every gesture, every word involves our past, present, and future. The body never stops accumulating. And years and years have gone by mine without my being able to stop them, stop it....My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me. Younger than me, older than the humanized. Unmeasurable, uncontainable, so immense that it exceeds all attempts at humanizing. But humanizing we do, and also overdo, for the vision of a story that has no end, no middle, no beginning; no start, no stop, no progression; neither backward nor forward, only a stream that flows into another stream, an open sea – is the vision of a madwoman." (Trinh T. Minh-ha: 1989, p.122)

"If you look at a large subject through the medium of a little book you see for the most part something of such vague and wavering outline that, though it may be a Greek gem, it may almost equally be a mountain or a bathing machine." (Virginia Woolf: 1925, p. 64)

"...In women's writing we are asking 'What's reality' and 'What's fiction?' because the reality we live in is a fiction for women since we didn't participate in creating it. Reality has been created through men's fiction, through the imaginary men projected of themselves on reality. If women had built our cities, the architecture would be totally different, because we would have projected part of our bodies as men projected their penis in military arsenals and guns. We would have projected the shapes of our bodies, our minds and our emotions in the way we light up the cities, in architecture and painting. The question for women in playing with language is really a matter of life and death. We're not just playing for fun in a kind of game. We're finding our own voice, exploring it and making new sense where the general sense has lost its meaning and is no longer of use. If you want to grow, you've got to be at the origin of new meaning, somehow you have to honour your gender." (Nicole Brossard, interviewed by Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*: 1993, p. 64)

I am very fortunate to be able to explore issues of ecology and feminism within personal as well as global contexts while moving within an impressive (and rapidly growing) infrastructure of spiritually informing, critically sensitive and hopeful writings by extraordinary women. Trinh T. Minh-ha, Karen Warren, Val Plumwood, Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, bell hooks, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Anne Bishop, Charlene Spretnak, Susan Griffin, Maria Mies, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Nicole Brossard, Donna Haraway, Winnie Tamm, they and all the 'concrete' women in my own every day life, including my mother, have inspired me with their enthusiastic determination and guided my inquiry along various avenues of ecological feminist strategies. I am deeply thankful for their committed energies. They have articulated alternate ways of seeing and perceiving, conceptual frameworks, built out of shared desires of ecological grassroots movements and women's groups, linking themselves and each other into a giant network~web whose scope is as large as the planet itself. And while some of these writer/activists insist on the urgency to develop and implement a feminist ethics of care, others, like my mother, suggest an inclusive care ethics of all relations on this planet, born out of the combined strategies of feminist, spiritual and ecological feminist perspectives, practiced on a daily basis through the most trivial seeming small rituals. Their perspectives continuously push my self towards the realization of the necessary, hopefully reflexive interplay between theory and practice. Above all, they call on me to highlight the mutual

interdependency of any paradigmatic shifts that honor women's diverse ways of being as unique and different, as well as those that acknowledge the ecological interconnectedness of all planetary life forms and make it relevant to myself and others.

"The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. In Africa it is said that every griotte who dies is a whole library that burns down....tell me and let me tell my hearers what I have heard from you who heard it from your mother and your grandmother, so that what is said may be guarded and unfailingly transmitted to the women of tomorrow, who will be our children and the children of our children. These are the opening lines she used to chant before embarking on a story. I owe that to you, her and her, who owe it to her, her and her. I memorize, recognize, and name my source(s), not to validate my voice through the voice of an authority (for we, women, have little authority in the History of Literature, and wise women never draw their powers from authority), but to evoke her and sing. The bond between women and word. Among women themselves. To produce their full effect, words must, indeed, be chanted rhythmically, in cadences, off cadences."<sup>18</sup>

From the procreative powers and insights generated through women's bodied selves to the diverse wealth of women's communities everywhere as knowers and healers to each other, to women's care practices of the human collective and, finally, to women's tireless reaching into the soil to plant, harvest and manage the very basis we depend on for life itself: those are, to my understanding, four of the foundational areas that provide the nexus of women's lives on this planet.<sup>19</sup> All women may not encounter these experiences in their lives, nor may they even desire them. Regardless of Western feminist inquiry into essentialism or constructivism, however, they still are the most pervasive expressions, globally, of women's every day lives. They take place within the multitude of oppressions which help shape the particularity of our situated knowledges, and thus define the site of differences and commonalities which women everywhere are able to share and analyze for individual self-determination as well as collective empowerment.

I have several reasons for wishing to discuss these areas of women's experiences in more detail: as fundamentally gendered expressions of identity, these areas of women's epistemologies continue to be made largely invisible, and need to be brilliantly highlighted if we are to have a meaningful future in any collective, i.e. global efforts of women-coming-together, let alone survival

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<sup>18</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp.121-122.

<sup>19</sup> I purposely use the term 'foundational', since these are the most common areas of meaning for women everywhere, not merely a privileged few, (most of whom are situated in the Western societies) who are being

of the human species.<sup>20</sup> As contemporary, primary expressions of women's lived identity politics in so-called Third World countries<sup>21</sup> and among Western(ized) aboriginal fourth world peoples, these -- essentially care-taking -- practices must be acknowledged, honored and celebrated, because only then can Western feminists hope to be invited to become allies to women elsewhere.

Besides being primary expressions of most women today, these care-taking practices continue to provide the key to human existence on this planet, maybe even planetary life itself. As women's traditional and contemporary roles have been the care-taking of humans, non-humans and the soil, it is through the making-visible and honoring of those same roles that we can hope for a future of life on this planet. Lastly, my interest in highlighting women's multiple care-taking politics arises out of my own life experience as a female European immigrant to Canada, which has enabled my own understanding of the monstrous set of eurocentric patriarchal systems of oppression, which have been continued further to unexpected atrocities through North American politics of so-called 'global restructuring'. Coming into feminist consciousness in Canada, I have begun to see the inadequacy of current Western feminist theories as potential inclusive strategies for the empowerment of women globally, for as long as we insist on distancing ourselves from practices of caring and nurturing on our road to selfhood and self-determination<sup>22</sup>. So. Let me explore how women in their collective diversity shape the continuity of human life on this planet. Shape the continuity of all life.

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defined as privileged in the global systems of oppression based on class, gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, ability, geographic location, colonization and anti-semitism, to name a few.

<sup>20</sup> by that I imply, as a matter of course, the survival of planetary life *as is*, since humans are - we slowly begin to perceive this -- utterly dependent on the functioning interdependence of all diverse life forms.

<sup>21</sup> "To survive, 'Third World' must necessarily have negative *and* positive connotations: negative when viewed in a vertical ranking system -- 'underdeveloped' compared to over-industrialized, 'underprivileged' within the already Second sex -- and positive when understood sociopolitically as a subversive, 'non-aligned' force. Whether 'Third World' sounds negative or positive also depends on *who* uses it. Coming from you Westerners, the word can hardly mean the same as when it comes from Us members of the Third World. Quite predictably, you/we who condemn it most are both we who buy in and they who deny any participation in the bourgeois mentality of the West...." Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) pp. 97-98. This excerpt, part of a longer analysis of the term "Third World" in the politics of naming and who names, points to the difficulty of allying within a linguistic-cultural contextualization of domination politics. For myself, I am deeply ashamed of my own complicitness, yet I have found no acceptable solution to this ethical dilemma other than conceding my own growing consciousness around issues of complicit practices in ecological feminist discourse. After long deliberation I have decided to refer to 'so-called Third World countries', alternating with 'less-industrialized', 'nonWestern countries', and others, as opposed to 'mal-industrialized Western countries'. As Trinh T. Minh-ha so put it, it all depends on the value-laden context. Please also see glossary.

<sup>22</sup> As Trinh T. Minh-ha defines it, "Feminism in such a context may well mean 'westernization'". (ibid, p.106).

Through their giving, growing, shifting, absorbing, fluid, strong and loving bodies, which are different, *Other* – from the masculinist norm, and so richly diverse - in their individual beauty.

Since the theme of my thesis is women's bodies, their biological potential and their f/act of mothering as an hopeful, transformative, and at the same time grounding strategy towards allying within ecological feminist contexts, let me begin by saying that to retrieve women's bodies becomes a paramount task. For I believe that within the Western masculinist system of knowledge and knowledge production which the *his*/tory of Western 'civilized' thought has so artfully designed and successfully mapped throughout the modern world of capitalism, there lies embedded a great landscape of hegemonic dualism. This landscape is vast. Like a man-made desert it knows no boundaries and respects no *other* forms of life, no other systems of living. When once it has cov(her)ed this ot/her with its suffocating layers upon layers of dominant logic, has articulated, pres(her)ved and int(her)nalized its hegemonic thought-vocabulary in its patriarchal language and language structure, and has colonialized this *other* seeking to dis/appear its identity, the struggle to re~e/merge turns into a struggle for bare survival. For to re/appear, she must be~come visible, come into focus, become centered and subject to her claim of self. Become. As Nicole Brossard reminds us, "...patriarchal meaning cannot stand the visibility of women as a radical subject (my italics)." <sup>23</sup>

Yes, I am talking about the colonization of the female. Gender, sex, the body alone remains a constant visible reminder of the physical 'sexual' difference between male and female genders. Thus the body becomes the crucial 'target' to objectify, to negate and act out the entire *history* of sexual/textual exploitation. Through the consciousness forming, reflective f/act of language.

"The question for women in playing with language is really a matter of life and death. We're not just playing for fun in a kind of game. We're finding our own voice, exploring it and making new sense where the general sense has lost its meaning and is no longer of use. If you want to grow, you've got to be at the origin of new meaning, somehow you have to honour your gender." <sup>24</sup>

Language revolves with/in the center of meaning in Western thought-expression. The out~pouring and shaping of words into legitimated rituals of texts, linking and framing, organizing and re/organizing thought patterns through the act of ex/pressing them, language is being held in a

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<sup>23</sup> Nicole Brossard in interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

symbiotic cycle with the inception and realization of thought, at best a prosperous relationship, expanding the creative horizon of both, at worst a perpetuation of destructive paradigms, destructive because of their insidious ability to construct and re/present a logic of domination, of power-over-relations, which bends our perception of reality to such a degree that through the thoughts we formulate in/to the language we speak, we become witnesses and agents, and through the act of ex/pressing thought in the language of domination become corroborators in the careful maintainance of the patriarchal power structure prevalent in Western(ized) countries.

Looking through texts, living, reflecting with/in/through the lived shapes and contours of my body, living, reading, writing always in con/tact, I ask myself 'am I still following the propelling 'drift' of my thoughts and images? Do I believe in what I am writing or has it become a dangerous exercise, linking women's articulated experiences including my own, trying to provide these testimonies with what I perceive as a comfortable space, safe from sudden attacks yet open and accessible to encouraging commentary, constructive critique, and, yes, that hopeful element of criteria - a desire to understand and build commitment - towards which goal?: towards the re/creation of a dwelling-in-this-world-earth-home that is filled with meaning and respect for women, all relations and their diverse 'otherness'.

When I say 'dangerous exercise', I am talking about the risk of working within the (still) rather traditional confines of academic writing, particularly when situating a piece of representative<sup>25</sup> writing in the neighborhood of social sciences and affixing the, albeit occasional, label of 'qualitative research'. The danger lies in the 'choice' of tools: the language used, the restricted (and in turn restricting) points of view<sup>26</sup>, the type/direction of research 'chosen', the subsequent selection process of documented data, and the overall packaging of the final project as a work that is, after all, designed to win a vague nod of - if not approval, then at least acceptance by academic examiners. Piecing together, fabricating this collage I struggle with my/self as I-subject, initiator, manipulator of story-bits, and I-other, who finds her/self inscribed over and over

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<sup>25</sup> Representative as a reciprocal relationship: representing the academy per se to the 'outside world' as well as re-presenting the student - herself being to an extent the product of the academy - back to the academy.

in in the pauses, gaps, the re-connecting fragments and knots of their/our lived stories, who lives her/ self in/between the lines of women's faces and their narratives. How can I posit as subject trying to describe, no, enunciate women/them/her/ I/other without adding another spiral to the hegemonic cycle of word-thought-word power dance? "Is it not, indeed, always in the name of freedom that My freedom hastens to stamp out those of others? Is it not also in the name of the masses that My personality bestirs itself to im/personalize those of my sister-wo/men? Do the masses become masses by themselves or are they the result of a theoretical and practical operation of "massification"?<sup>27</sup> And more, because this is also what I intend: how to help re/claim the power of *Other-us* for them/herself - without adding to the *burden* of the *Other*, our burden; how to destabilize dominant language whose "claim to objectivity subjects words to a willed meaning-intention".<sup>28</sup>

Does the clue lie in the dance of *reclaiming Other-us*? For in reclaiming something I retrieve and re/place that which was deliberately lost, mis/placed, stolen and dis/placed outside the 'borders' of the universal. Reclaiming the *Other-us* then becomes a polylogous narrative process~dance of many voices and on many levels.

"It seems to me that woman 'derives', 'diverts', shifts meaning in such a way that meaning can be curved and redirected towards her experience and to *what matters*. [...] To me this also explains why women will link narrative fragments, poetical prose, autobiographical passages, and poetry in the same piece of writing. Because women's experiences is marginalized in life as well as in literature, women's subjectivity needs all genres at the same time. The way we re-route words to our own experience opens up entire zones of unknown and unspoken dimensions of reality."<sup>29</sup>

This is how Nicole Brossard explains women's choreographies of curving meaning so that it reaches the inner harbor of *their* meaning and becomes a radical tool. I was extremely glad when I came across this passage in her interview with Janice Williamson, because I felt validated in my desire to alternate critical analysis with interview text, poetry and self-reflexive prose. When the point of the story becomes the sheer survival of the storytellers, the diversity of women's testimonies needs to be displayed, and in the process legitimized. It is true that "[W]hen a feminist scholar selects a

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<sup>26</sup> Point of view here addresses the linear guidelines of 'proper' academic reading/writing, as well as the entire range of resulting paradigmatic schemata that accompany one's enclosure within the manual of academic thought construction, thought expression, i.e. one's 'Weltbild'.

<sup>27</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> Nicole Brossard in interview with Janice Williamson in *Sounding Differences*, p. 64.

particular method, she chooses a certain type of control over her subject matter and a certain type of focus,"<sup>30</sup> cautions Shulamit Reinharz, and in this instance talks about the conversational quality of oral herstory methods (she terms it *history*). I agree with the very special qualities of intimacy which can turn oral herstory into such a fundamental celebration of women's otherwise obscured lives.

Moreover, oral language is *ever* so much older than the written word, no matter how spontaneous the page becomes. When asked about orality in her Native *heritage*, Lee Maracle speaks about the tradition of the Big House speakers and storytellers as having

"a way of presenting story. In the Big House there are powerful people who know the history, the families, the relationships between everyone. And they're also the people who are asked to articulate whatever it is that people want to decide or discuss. They have a cadence and a drama when they speak, which matches up with our songs and story dances."<sup>31</sup>

As a Western European immigrant, the qualities of oral language are almost lost to me, and part of my personal journey towards honoring indigenous women (and their societies) has been to appreciate the significance of the various roles of orality in indigenous cultures, and in turn begin to understand the criminal strategies of colonialism designed to eradicate the cultural significance of oral story - and with it, the eradication of the threads of meaning that hold together the cross-generational fabric of indigenous cultures. As when Leonor Zalabata of the Arhuacan people in north-west Colombia, speaks of spinning as

"spinning life. Patterns are spin and thoughts are spun, and I believe that this is life. When one spins one thinks about the life of what one is doing. While observing how the sun moves each day, the earth turns around the sun and the sun moves creating the day...and the spindle by turning represents this movement and that function that the earth has daily, the passage of the hours, to turn and turn. When we move the spindle we make the same movement as Mother Earth: she is always spinning; she is spinning life and in spinning life she is selecting. She is creating the thread of life, the thread of history and that history is spun by us with the spindle."<sup>32</sup>

The contradictions inherent in a researcher's search to locate women's voices while using neocolonial research rules as a frame of reference seem insurmountable, particularly in the face of Western obsession with the more distanced, 'objectifying' written word, further dis/placed through the electronic devices we set up between our selves and the readers/listeners. What came as a revelation to me were Lee's next words on the connective links between poetry and oratory:

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<sup>30</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 132.

<sup>31</sup> Lee Maracle in interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 166.

<sup>32</sup> Leonor Zalabata, "Keeping Traditions Alive", from *Indigenous Women: the Right to a Vote*, Diana Winding, ed., (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 1998), p. 30.

"I suppose from my own background and the way we speak English and the things we look at and see and structure of Indigenous story comes a kind of poetry that's not poetry in the European sense and not story in the European sense either. I think Marlene Philip has termed it – oratory."<sup>33</sup>

Despite, or rather, because of her disclaimer on the difference she perceives between Indigenous and European poetry, I feel encouraged to move further into the direction of finding multiple ways to re:present women's voices.

Opening my writing space to women is one of the pleasures I feel in creating my thesis collage. Since all the citations selected are placed outside their own context, ethical considerations must be given priority to avoid distortions and dishonesty. One of the most pertinent questions becomes: does the placement of the excerpt answer to the general content of the original source text? As well, the custom to present small excerpt blibs seems to aggravate the risk of misrepresenting the author's original intent, and, like the punchline in ad campaigns, denies the very real textual/visual, space which *otherized*, marginalized voices often struggle to inhabit. Opening my space to these less-than-mainstream voices, I take initiative in moving forward in educating myself toward becoming an ally - and may be less of an oppressor, keeping in mind Lee Maracle's words:

"Always remember – I think it's a significant lesson – everything you do and every word you speak, either empowers or disempowers. And you have to always double think. I know I have to make these decisions every time I'm in a white audience because a momentary disempowerment in the end is a long-term empowerment...I decided on a January day in 1988 it's time to take on all this stuff out there in the public world and so I do. I started in Montreal in June of 1988 asking White women in the feminist movement to 'move over' – actually telling them to move over. In their own interest they must move over because half of them is missing and I'm that half. Not me personally, but Native women. There's no other way, there just isn't any other way."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lee Maracle in interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 168.



*: postessentialist good grief*

*either a cavity or a drill and  
what does it mean  
when you love*

*either speak or  
you are being spoken to  
maybe made to maybe  
listen  
who speaks  
now when you  
listen in  
to your  
hide-a-way self*

*stranded  
like jellyfish  
trance  
parent*

*poems wash  
a shore*

*only  
where they touch    you  
hurt*

## Chapter Two

### Women's bodies, women's texts, (Western) feminist dilemma of essentialism, images of women's biological cycle

"I know no woman – virgin, mother, lesbian, celibate – whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves – for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speeches, its silences, its changes, its mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. There is for the first time today a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power. Physical motherhood is merely one dimension of our being. We know that the sight of a certain face, the sound of a voice, can stir waves of tenderness in the uterus. From brain to clitoris through vagina to uterus, we are strung with invisible messages of an urgency and restlessness which indeed cannot be appeased, and of a cognitive potentiality that we are only beginning to guess at. We are neither 'inner' nor 'outer' constructed; our skin is alive with signals; our lives and our deaths are inseparable from the release of blockage of our thinking bodies." ( Adrienne Rich: 1986, p. 284).

"The clitoris is pure in purpose. It is the only organ in the body designed purely for pleasure. The clitoris is simply a bundle of nerves: 8,000 nerve fibers, to be precise. That's a higher concentration of nerve fibers than is found anywhere else in the body, including the fingertips, lips, and tongue, and it is twice...twice...twice the number in the penis." (Eve Ensler: 2001, p. 51).

"From the dominant group one can see a chain reaction that goes from 'you're talking nonsense,' to paternalistic listening, to guilt or irritability, then negotiation, then either acceptance, rejection, or neutralization of the dominated. From the dominated group: a burst of anger, followed by a shaping of an identity and solidarity, empowerment, then negotiation, then autonomy, resistance, or integration. Most of the time guns erupt in the process, and the discursive forms are simplified by a cycle of violence-revenge arguments. Most of the time dominator and dominated have their own culture, values, and traditions, but, in the case of women opposing men's domination, we have to consider that, because women live in the same culture as those they oppose, most of the time they are already 'integrated' or 'neutralized' by institutions such as marriage or heterosexism. [...] Uncovering lies makes space for a new sense and thereby transforms meaning. This is where I believe radical change can occur because then one has to take into account that new meaning. The new meaning also starts to produce new metaphors which change the way we see things." (Nicole Brossard in interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*: 1993, p. 67).

"what do you expect of your husband?"

"I want my husband to love me a lot."

"what does he expect you to do?"

"he wants me to do everything he asks me."

(Conversation with Fatoumata Toure, second wife. D'Aluisio, Faith, and Peter Menzel: 1996, p. 178).

What can I say other than that the politics of patriarchal heterosexism are at the source of gendered oppression. And it all begins in the private home where he still rules through ongoing politics of phallocratic legitimization. Regardless of contemporary reconfigurations of what the modern family can look like, Western languages of representations (media, law, religion, medicine) continue to presume the pater familias to be the only legitimate head of the family proper. Whether or not his physical form is manifest, his rule seems to be the only culturally validated.

*family bound - to an empty chair*

they talk of him  
as if life depended on complicated conversations  
that became mandatory  
no one remembers why

of his leaving that  
no one seems to agree on  
or maybe they do  
but who would know  
the way they go about  
arguing circumstances ignoring others that  
cry for attention because they tell an obvious story  
an obvious ending to a marriage  
a family  
even this one  
this combat zone  
this sophisticated infrastructure of strategic lies  
they don't look at each other as they talk of his sudden departure  
as they mention the years of  
his theatrical unhappiness  
the years of aggressive self-absorption  
we talk of this rather than

.the years of his concentrated ill will.

as if it made a difference to whitewash now  
after all that  
unless to live the same patterns  
maybe hide behind the same twisted values  
hide

and even though they often want to  
with a quiet helpless desperation want to  
leave him  
turn their backs as he turned his  
almost from the beginning  
they can't  
can't seem to turn him loose into his own life  
his own story only he can manipulate to suit  
as long as they refer to his room behind the closed door no one enters  
where among his bookshelves and the black radio on the windowsill  
the old desk continues empty  
in the cold corner where the sun always warms last  
and in winter fails to rise above the  
windowsill altogether.  
the only visible difference after two years:  
the chair

he used to occupy each night at precisely eight p.m.  
-while downstairs the family silently suffered dinner-  
his closed ear tuned in to german radio  
is gone.

*turning point visit*

*on this wintry day  
in the approximate center of the floorplan  
a smaller version of my bluish self  
I hesitate  
up above a flat sun breaks her rays  
against the too solid rafters  
flings my shadow back out over the vacant snowscape  
that swallows it the way it swallows other inarticulates  
like unequal love  
dormant hopes or careless promises  
into a wide silence concealed*

*disappearing I raise my eyes  
there            balanced against a turning wintersky  
your silhouette waits  
chain saw in hand  
the ambiguous measure of your (good) will  
                after what we have been through  
a silent visit  
bypassed exchange  
is as good as it may ever be*

*still                    even as I leave the site  
I would have preferred gentle fingertips  
talks finally melting away long nights  
fluid beginnings*

*for now  
this act of building house is your way of  
pouring sunlight all over my throat  
like kisses you cannot let go*

*for now  
this house you build is fair warning  
that you intend to inhabit  
together  
                why not pack up body and go  
outside of here  
bushland beside context  
                a broken porch door  
                fistfuls of hair  
                a smashed phone  
                a baby's whimper*

*bound up in two soft small bodies belonging  
I think this is a frightening question  
I begin to think  
at this stage any question is frightening  
simply  
because it demands an answer*

*I is real I is real I is real and don't you ever forget  
You*

*ophelia's reflection: barbie-lock 2003*

*then  
after all this ignominious treatment  
why is it that we still yearn for those flowing  
manes of hair  
those endlessly shimmering gushes of uncurled passions to help us  
remember the unmemorizable  
bleach-blond dance of maidenhood*

*through layers after layers of  
cosmetic elaborations  
polyester masking  
shaved girlie skin  
exposing the young wound that is she  
where everyone  
may glory in her bindings even as  
she is sealed away  
inside the cool selective gaze of  
a perfectly tranquil cultural bondage  
inside his gaze of malignant ownership*

*it will take all her young years  
her short frenzied life  
bearing down*

*to suffer the preferred conclusion*

*that every grasp of those punitive big hands  
their nightly grip on her coil of lush abandon  
was  
as truly  
love.*

"How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profaned by them." (Luce Irigaray: 1985, p. 212).

"By stating a partnership with nature in the politics of regeneration, women are simultaneously reclaiming their own and nature's activity and creativity. There is nothing essentialist about politics because it is, in fact, based on denying the patriarchal definition of passivity as the essence of women and nature. There is nothing absolutist about it, because the 'natural' is constructed through diverse relationships in diverse settings. Natural agriculture and natural childbirth involve human creativity and sensitivity of the highest order, a creativity and knowledge emerging from partnership and participation, not separation. The politics of partnership with nature, as it is being shaped in the everyday lives of women and communities, is a politics of rebuilding connections and of regeneration through dynamism and diversity." (Vandana Shiva: 1994, p. 142).

"He asked me if I was going to take the materials back and I told him, 'No.' He said, 'Then I'll have to charge you.' I told the RCMP, 'That's all right, but make sure you first find a babysitter for me.' (laughter) He looked down at the kids and didn't know what to do. The kids said, 'Mom, are you going to jail?' I said, 'No, he won't come back.' I was waiting for him the next morning, but he never came back. Maybe he couldn't find a babysitter." (Karen Perley in *Enough is Enough. Aboriginal Women Speak Out*: 1997, p. 116).

I am a woman. I am a mother. From my childhood throughout the years of my becoming-female-adult, my own body has always been my most intimate context. Increasingly, the thought occurs to me that our human body has always been – in its actual physicality – the most immediately visible, tangible site where culturally constructed meanings and biological functions meet and (forcefully) amalgamize into a more or less functioning realization of self. The story of western civilization, i.e. his:story, has long acknowledged this process in the explicit definition of the male as the norm, notwithstanding certain qualifiers such as able-bodied, white, heterosexual middle class. Simultaneously, so his:story goes, the female (body) has been measured against the male norm, and has – failed. The female body has been sized, packaged, tailored, resized, denied and denied again – as being in itself unique and of intrinsic worth - to the point of complete annihilation.

We may wish to assume that – having now entered the year 2003 – we have finally exposed this violent crime and reconstructed cultural meaning to include female difference. We know this is not the case. However we may differ on the labyrinth of meanings surrounding female sex/gender, however we may question and argue the myriad of ways in which his:story has encoded the female self, we know this at least: that the first and last site in this story-telling has always been the body. The female body. Self is connected to body. Lives are embodied lives. When I speak, regardless of electronic medium, geographical place or economic situation, I speak directly out the physical context of my embodied self, its boundaries and deep desires that is also always embedded within cultural context. We know this as well: that our walking, talking, laughing, crying, loving and delivering

bodies within Western(ized) society are far from being respectfully, unconditionally embraced as female difference. The same difference that, throughout ongoing (Western) feminist ambivalence towards biological determinism, is, as ever, solidly expressed in the biologically guided identity of women's own bodies. It is this situation I speak to: the continued – if hesitant - negation of the biological significance of the female body, its biological life-cycle and potential, which I regard as a deep and utterly unresolved crisis in contemporary feminist creativity.

Through my writing I hope to make female bodies more visible, I make visible the empowering qualities inherent in the biologically productive potential of female bodies. Anywhere. I have several reasons for doing so. First of all, I suspect I am acting out of a desperate, deeply personal and selfish need to maintain (or regain?) an acceptable form of sanity in my life. The very personal act of writing about what compels me, as Shelagh Wilkinson says, "holds a promise; the woman who claims the time, the freedom to work – to write – for herself, of herself, gains autonomy. Such a woman is finished with being 'nice.'<sup>35</sup> This holds true particularly with regard to feminist writing. From a feminist standpoint theory, the writing down of personal testimony enables the increasing validation of women's varied experiences. To say in Nicole Brossard's strong, purposeful words, "as a lesbian and a Québécoise, I belong to minorities, but I always write as if the world belonged to me, allowing my desire to shape around me the space I need to be what I am."<sup>36</sup> Through my writing I thus contextualize my self within the community of feminist experiences.

Secondly, I have completed at least half of my life on this planet, and could not help but experience my self (often quite against my will) moving through various intriguing phases of my physical, and very biologically determined, body. From this intimate experience and other women's told or otherwise documented sharing, I can – with a certain degree of conviction – say that the female body seems to show an obstinate disregard for 'rational' reasoning. Periods happen regardless. Even pregnancies. Feminist thoughts seem to be glide uneasily around these blatant - if fluid - manifestations of female biological body rituals. I am talking about not only the abstracted female

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<sup>35</sup> Shelagh Wilkinson, "By and About Women", in *Changing Pattern. Women in Canada*, by Sandra Burt, Lorraine Code, and Lindsay Dorney, eds. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993) p. 382.

<sup>36</sup> Nicole Brossard, in *Sounding Differences*. (Janice Williamson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) p. 66.

sexuality which feminist discourse frequently plays with, but about menstruation and potential pregnancy, and about the possible consequence of giving birth, lactating, nursing and child-raising. While I accept the difficulty of embracing what patriarchal strategy historically devalues, I – out of my body context - know that only when we retrieve the female body whole from the annihilating patriarchal censure, can we move closer to embracing the rich totality of our female experience. In writing about what I perceive as some of the hopeful and empowering meanings of female-body-becoming, I ease feminist thinking (starting with my own) into a more comfortable and mindful friendship with and acceptance of our own bodies - whose biological clock-ticking, after all, patriarchal domination politics has always - gleefully - considered the primary obstacle of the women's liberation movement.

Thirdly, my own levelling experience within my bodied self, followed by my attempts to tolerate, accept, and finally honor the intricacies of biological determinism, has led me to think that the female body is the one powerfully fragile, sourceful, common denominator of the female experience per se. Globally. No matter how the body may be contextualized, pampered with economic privileges, covered or uncovered, stressed, manoeuvred through the complexities of personal life, basic biological patterns seem to continue undeterred. Regardless of sexual orientation or preference, bodies menstruate, breasts become tender, bodies conceive, they swell, wombs expand, contract and *birth*, breasts lactate, stories continue. Artificial interventions like hysterectomies and vasectomies are, in my opinion, just that: artificial interventions. Menopause is the organic time of closure of women's biological productivity and is as such only evidence of women's intrinsic biological difference. Women's bodies are born with the complete number of ova (exceptions only prove the rule) and carry within the potential of biological production in all its intricate cyclicity. How this potential plays itself out over the course of our life time (through external and internal circumstances) is, I think, the stuff of each woman's unique, individual and precious journey. What I am attempting here is the great embrace: not to fragment, split, take apart, but to find ways to come together in all our wealth of diverse identities and join – in all kaleidoscopic colours, all shapes and nuances – toward recognizing a more concrete formulation of women's physiological commonalities.



Understanding the female body this way fosters in me a great hope that there may indeed be a strong, hopeful connection that overindustrialized, white Western(ized) women have with less privileged (although less body-alienated), more oppressed women elsewhere – maybe already next door; that the feminist call for allying and sistering can resonate through the vibrant, textured, multiply ritualized female body and its inherent biologism. What, I ask, have we to be afraid of? That patriarchal politics denigrates our body-biology? Recall, it has done so already, for longer than we care to remember. Is it not time to stand up for who we believe in, namely, for our selves as we move within the glorious bodies that continue to be part of who we are in this world-earth-home? Along this avenue lies, I am convinced, the possibility of a more sincere, *concrete* and hopeful coming-together, or mothersisterhood of women globally, regardless of, or let me say, *especially considering* race, class, age, ethnic background, sexual orientation and physical ableness.

I also talk about mothering and what it does, how it speaks in original, creative ways. I explore (limited as I am, since this *is* a two-dimensional re:presentation in its final version and since I *am* obligated to present my version of her:story according to academic specifications of the discipline of gender studies) the activity of mothering, its potential as healing, transformative, *real* story-living – I talk about mothering as feminist agency. More than that, through personal, reflective poetry I re:visit the experience of mothering as empowering, feminist-environmental strategy, ruthlessly benign, available, sacred, and probably the most prevaricated upon of all areas of feminist discussion. And why is that I wonder?

In the introduction to *Bodied Mindfulness* Winnie Tomm hints at the paradox of a cultural paradigm which demands that half of the human species only contribute to its meaning by withholding, or even denying, its own embodied experience:

"The dissertation had served as a sorting process. It was, however, a study of abstract ideas coming from men's realities. I did not learn anything specific about being a woman, even though I learned a great deal about theories of being a human being (from the perspective of males) in the abstract. Such abstract male knowledge was problematic for me. For example, I had given birth to two children and had spent several years raising them. None of the inspirational male authors whom I had been studying had anything positive to say about women, much less about having babies. As a woman, it was difficult to "get it together" with respect to the importance of giving birth and raising children in light of the alleged greater importance of intellectual knowledge, which implicitly denigrated the unique contributions of women. (Fortunately, I was conscious enough to choose for the dissertation only literature which did not explicitly disempower women)." <sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Winnie Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995), p. 1.

I would go so far as to maintain that most of the inspirational male authors of the traditional western humanist paradigm have nothing whatsoever (positive or otherwise) to say about women, let alone babies, having babies, and finally, mothers. I consider myself fortunate to have stumbled into the arena of women's and gender studies, and, like Tomm, for the purpose of my own writing as well as my sanity, I feel deeply the need to incorporate only literature which attempts to empower women – to honour their/our multitude of bodily lived experiences. I felt pulled towards authors whose writings on poetry, motherhood and bodypolitics have literally 'turned me on', in that they embody an honesty with words, an integrity and a fierce desire to push and prod social change to the point of no return. They are activists, poets, theorists, women deeply grounded in the belief that women~we must honor our body~stories to heal ourselves and, in doing so, the world around us. Their writing, their life stories expand me. Despite all the superimposed, theoretical stewing in the absolute necessity of the authority of the 'fathers' and oedipal make-believers, they have taken back their belief in women, not as a social category, forever and always already 'pre'scribed, but as lived experience, wading through the mud soup that is life and that calls on their strengths to give and share. Their writing is hopeful, because they believe women's lived and reflective story-telling is vital and foundational to the survival of our species on this planet. They are hopeful.

*from inside her we come unconquered*

*patriarchal virgin i was  
maligned at birth  
was drifted to post-neocolonial shores  
in the middle of my small years  
in the entering of pubescent dark ages*

*her (?) body hardly knew  
context*

*like lips moving  
hysterically  
roaming within her*

*context seemed the complicit upkeep  
of necessary strictures sacred scriptures  
his on y~our body tattoo*

*whose body she kept asking  
"Mutter  
whom ever for"*

---

*already curse lifted  
ink spilled*

*herstorical  
[no space in time could ever be set aside for this  
intriguing venture]*

*ink spilled continues to spill  
fluid  
of women she has been gifted*

*creative women fluid  
easing birth  
negotiating moments of intimate conversation  
lips with lips co~mingling  
words beyond words spilling from her mouth tongue body*

*lands  
ripe with intent*

*we may not have been born here  
this is unfurling her~m/y~our mother's tongue  
but  
like her clitoris  
finally found  
between lips of furious desire  
we were long before here  
conceived*

*in sacred ecstasy.*

The power which lives in women's body imagery. Reading Cixous for the first time I felt embarrassed – of being embarrassed at such straightforward, empowering metaphors as writing with our milk. Or Luce Irigaray's image of women's labia, the two lips already and always engaged in discursive, *meaningful* ecstasy. Postmodernity, that vague kaleidoscope of Western discourse analysis dealers, may have ordered the death of the metahistorical subject in the quicksand of power relations, hoping to deflect from the fact that unless women express their selves, cultural meaning will be business as usual. But we are here, and we will articulate our selves to give further meaning to what it means for women to move in text – for a woman to move text, beyond phallic understanding, and rejoice. For then we know that we have reached body. Meaning.

*as my body lives my words*

*know her body  
her words  
conceive intent*

*whose*

*words follow words design thought inoculated with images prescribed by a paradigm yielding words  
linked into the legitimately imposed coherence of particular syntax ... beware this? body of sentences,  
how they streamline into strategic calculations of paragraphs consolidated into thematic building  
blocks how they are 'objectively' bound, gartered, corsetted, veiled or unveiled by the imperious  
powers of parentheses, citations, footnotes – how their final, triumphant bibliographical codicil  
marks genealogy.*

*mine?*

*as my body lives my words, in thought/action, so my words live my body, are how I breathe and die*

*or survive.*

*"bodies live female  
such as we were      are  
will be*

*we re:generate time-  
spiral out of one's quaintly presumed linear space into our  
ever present bodyritual of voluptuous be:longing  
through our essential(ized) interest  
into precarious well being  
(her child's, my milk goat's, maybe her worn-out sliver of land)  
always              throughout stark interventions  
always  
our bodies among distant shores  
continue to rise passionately female  
feel y~our oceanic juices mingle in the  
saline fluids of your womb & the salt of your tears  
    feel hormonal blossoms in the velvet of your skin  
    feel their orgasmic tidal risings  
how they lift lunar  
memory waves irrespective of cultural male/volent  
higher & higher out of whose temporo-spatial coordinates  
out of the celluloid rubbles of his coincidental tellings  
into the biospheric belonging of genes  
into women's bodies  
into her unconditional dreams of being  
this is always has been body source food~for~becoming*

*all:women's steaming placentas*

*in the making of womb mana  
we know who can tell whose multiple truths  
& our meaning:full bodies' eternal release  
- powerful gushes of blood water milk  
is ever how we celebrate  
human happening"*

*as our bodies live our words so our words live our bodies, this is how we breathe, how we live*

*our body  
active moment of her  
DESIRE.*

As always, in this world we return to body, somewhere, someone's, sometimes mine. and as always, representing body in text becomes an uneasy event. Which discourse allows, disallows what body parts along which discursive conventions, according to whose permission, based on whose strategic mis/understanding?

Who benefits?

Part of the reason why exploring and creatively writing on the theme of mothering takes me longer than I had anticipated has, I think, to do with contemporary postmodern ambivalence toward the notion of mothering as a feminist experience. Because of its maltreatment and its strategic 'confinement' into carefully monitored spaces connected by absence rather than highlighted presence within patriarchal his:story, mothering and the ecology of motherhood as a transformative and empowering experience within feminist consciousness have been seriously neglected in feminist theories, even feminist body politics<sup>38</sup>. Though feminist theories explore the female body as patriarchal myth and as symbolic counterpoint to the male body, it is seen rather in terms of a biologically determined hazard to self-fulfillment and empowerment, the female self always already imprisoned through her body's hormonal blue-print. Outside her control. Outside her powers to control. As a result of this postmodern feminist unease with a presumed 'essentializing' definition (however vague), the female body, our actual physical manifestation of who we may be, has not yet been able to come into her own within western(ized) society. Has not been able to celebrate its~her~my distinctive, creative, transformative potential, throughout its life-cycle from the onset of puberty to the settling of menopause. And beyond.

While in the tumults of exploring arguments for my thesis I began to realize that the very idea of mothering as feminist transformative principle became not only intriguing but deeply compelling

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<sup>38</sup> Probably beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's notion of women's biological self as necessarily limiting woman/women in their feminist self-determination, I see avant-garde feminist psychoanalytical theorists in particular, both French and American, as extremely reticent about attempting to reveal women's bodies. One notable exception is Luce Irigaray, who, in her attempt to renegotiate the patriarchal myth of penis envy, presents us with the graphic and bold image of the 'self-sufficient' female genital lips (*This Sex*, pp. 205 – 218), thus attempting to countering contemporary historical presumptions of the female symbolic as lack. Yet she prefers to limit women's potentiality to heterosexual constellations. "I think that man and woman is the most mysterious and creative couple. That isn't to say that other couples may not also have a lot in them, but man and woman is the most mysterious and creative." (*An Interview with Luce Irigaray*, by Kiki Amsberg and Aafke Steenhuis (Transl. Robert van Krieken.) *Hecate*, 9, p. 199.

even: throughout conventional postmodern (feminist) discourse(s)<sup>39</sup>, mothering as a concept is confined to the particular biological terrain that defines the care a female takes of her offspring<sup>40</sup>. His:story has clarified the term of mothering to the extent that we better be aware of its malignant effects should mothering continue beyond a stipulated number of years. With considerable chagrin mothers have been found to last entire life times, but his:story (so far) still persists in declaring the very act of mothering easily stifling, deficient and domineering, tyrannical, too much of a female 'naturalized imbalance'.

My personal introduction into the postmodern reality of the patriarchal 'mothering' myth took the form of two consecutive abortions. It was probably not so much fear of the consequence of pregnancy and becoming a mother as much as the fear of how the act of mothering would – I was convinced – annihilate me as a feminist coming into consciousness. In other words, I feared the political implications of personal motherhood. It may have also been the (unconscious) stepping out of the catholic faith which had been poured over me from birth. Finally, in feminist retrospect, it seemed to have been a desperate retaliation against my own biologically 'determined' bodied self, which had grown up under the classic patriarchal victimization that, being a woman, I could – naturally – amount to little more than a mother. Years later, a small passage in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* alerted me for the first time to the painful truth of the situation:

"No free woman, with 100 percent effective, nonharmful birth control readily available, would 'choose' abortion. At present, it is certainly likely that a woman can – through many causes – become so demoralized as to use abortion as a form of violence against herself – a penance, an expiation. But this needs to be viewed against the ecology of guilt and victimization in which so many women grow up"<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> When using discourse(s) I am referring to the various (hegemonic) discourses designed and maintained within conventional academic disciplines, whose (deliberate) blending in the growing areas of interdisciplinary studies has become an exciting challenge for discipline jumpers.

<sup>40</sup> My point here is to emphasize conventional postmodern feminist discourse. However, I am well aware that in many indigenous cultures, caring for offspring is a collectively shared task.

<sup>41</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 269.

*post-abortive: upon realizing that i too possibly suffered somewhat*

*that's all i am now  
and barely  
trailing behind  
what  
is.*

*how I used to lift  
men, and other things  
which needed lifting  
like breasts and spirits  
yes, even my own  
how my eyes were clear then  
brimming with spite  
anticipation  
of the unknown*

*the worst part is over now  
and somehow  
i am still there  
you may not find me inside the growing bruise  
but that's all right  
i am also out there  
looking*

*maybe  
if i had a glass of rubyred wine  
i could  
simulate  
more tastefully  
at least  
until my blood returns*

*are you at all listening?*



*now*

*that I have run for the next abortion  
everything seems  
a lot  
easier now*

*now  
life  
is no more  
that a part time job  
really  
you ought to try it  
some time*

When I finally did become a mother, I was proven right regarding these fears: each day has posed a renewed challenge to realign patriarchal definitions of motherhood<sup>42</sup> with feminist visualizations and declarations of mothering. Is it now that I have become a mother<sup>43</sup> that I have begun to experience and acknowledge the – as I see it, deliberately formulated – tension between the western(ized) patriarchal definition of women's bodies as commodifiable sex objects while still 'only' potential mothers, thus 'able' to participate in the whims and manipulations of patriarchal fornication<sup>44</sup>, and now as asexual, disregarded, unpaid and culturally unrewarded janitors of human offspring. And whereas my development as conscious self within the web of human and planetary interdependence has unfolded and accelerated through my added perspective as 'biologically determined' mother, my day-to-day lived experience as mother struggling to survive has been narrowed, obscured, and devalidated to the point where at times I am hard pressed to find my worth as a functional being. Western(ized) society has designed a strategically contradictory paradigm which aims to confuse, bewilder and finally resign the females of our species to the 'fact' that our bodies have been accounted for – in the romanticized (whose construction of romance are we talking?) function as sex slave-mistress-whore, followed by impregnation and the *glorified* role as madonna-mother<sup>45</sup>, glorified to the point of being vanished beyond an impossible horizon.

Increasingly, women break out of the conventional paradigm by proclaiming their selves free agents, in control of their sexual destiny, and independent of male intervention and supervision. More women, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, celibates, are seeking to re/define their worth as women-mothers by side-stepping patriarchally colored relationship and raising children on their own.

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<sup>42</sup> I use the term motherhood purposely, in the sense of Adrienne Rich's motherhood as patriarchally structured, manageable, definable institution (1986), juxtaposed with the infinite, interrelational process of *mothering* as an ethics of intimate nurturing and care.

<sup>43</sup> While I fervently embrace the notion of mothering as an activity anyone can – and ought to – share in regardless of sex/gender, my interest and emphasis here is explore the commonality among women globally through their shared biological determinancy, and theorize on the linkages thus created among women everywhere, as well as the consequence of going through the very 'real', earthy, mess of conception, pregnancy and giving birth.

<sup>44</sup> I applaud women who actively challenge their enforced subordination by seeking to realize their sexual selves, their *jouissance*, within the miasma of culturally re/presented misogynist propaganda that tells us that women's bodies are, as of themselves, available regardless of our personal intent.

<sup>45</sup> I use the term 'madonna-mother' because of my own personal situatedness within western, predominantly christian culture. And while the world's diverse cultures may be unable to identify with the symbol of the –to all women- unattainable virginmom, the culturally constructed notion of mothers turning into somewhat asexual,

I had never thought of my self as taking this step. I had not had the courage to choose single motherhood, but in the process of leaving an abusive relationship for the safety of the children and myself, in the process of having had to re/define who I am as a woman/person and how I move within this world, I gained what I perceive now to be a less distorted insight into the ethics that provide the patriarchal scaffolding of our society.

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caretaking vessels, well past possessing value in and of themselves as sexual beings, this notion seems to exist cross-culturally. Strangely, women tend to disappear once they become mothers.

*a m/other escape 2001/02*

*or*

*domestic refugee sings to her raw heart beating small cradlesong home*

*throughout  
a stranger's winter  
seemed to pull us more each day  
towards the muffled edge of a waning town  
towards the wide mongolian plain of absorbing pause  
its alien selfcontainment  
felt in the growing disappearance of home steading syllables*

*and then made to  
witness the quiet  
humming of low temperature  
that slowly  
fell  
below arctic whalesong  
below the children's heart ache  
even below my caring  
the shifting of daily purpose  
in efforts to remember be~long~ing  
as (if) it mattered*

*for seven months (almost full term)  
we lit candles and huddled  
inside our makeshift shelter  
pressed into rambling coherence  
by furious dis-re:membering  
bruised memory bundles  
we kept the doors locked  
as if to protect  
the strangely composed darkness outside  
from intimately tormenting nightmares  
within*

*now  
on a transient's blossoming verandah  
I look up from my readings  
into  
    sundappled moments  
that focus into animate children  
streaking through and out of last winter's demeaning  
into midsummer's spirit fest*

*now  
after a tendril of green spring  
we cautiously return  
claim home shelter  
inside the amazon wilderness of our back yard  
that wilfully fertiles whole neighborhoods*

*in the deft circles of two dozen flower pots  
that push against worm-eaten railings  
their terra cotta smiles*

*trail small dreams of earthy longing  
summer night  
pulses*

*and although now barely past noon  
into this shimmering blue summer arc  
a slow darkening grows  
near my heart  
in that vacant region  
where my womb lives  
where now lies the promise of  
a life alone*

*unmolested*

From the margins of this existence which are paradoxically situated inside the patriarchal center, living becomes an eerie sensation, maybe like being inside the eye of a hurricane, where calm is deceptive, where, while the bleak noise of destruction surrounds you, always threatening to tear you a/part, you move cautiously within, held up, ignored, plotting your own liberation. And yet the image is wrong: having become a mother, I have left most fears behind, I have become the she-bear, daring anyone to interfere with the safety and nurturing of my young. I may be caught in a web of patriarchal intrigue that daily challenges my cunning as feminist and mother by exerting a myriad of pressures to raise my sons according to its patriarchal symbolic order;<sup>46</sup> compromise may be the only game there is; I may have great concerns regarding my sons' future acquisition of self-worth as feminist allies – but single motherhood has made me deeply aware of the need for feminist mothering – as an empowering, healing, culturally symbolic fact.

Patriarchal anthropology has explained the beginnings of earliest humanity in terms of its own his:storic design, that has served to explain man as the subduer and achiever and woman as the 'naturally' subdued and maintainer. This, patriarchal storytelling goes, has necessitated the strategic protection of women to ensure their potential as societal nurturers and bearers.

What does Adrienne Rich ask about the ability of motherhood to maintain feminist consciousness?

"I have often asked myself whether the experience of motherhood under patriarchy is finally radicalizing or conservatizing. In attempting to give our children the security, the stability, we know they need, or we become more obedient to a social order we know is morally bankrupt; do we give in to the pressures of convention, of schools, of jobs; are our children our hostages to the State, its real safeguard – and escape-valve- against the anger of women? Or do we discover, in motherhood, the coarse, bitter, bedrock truth of the way things are, the callousness of patriarchy, its hatred of women, its indifference to new life, even to youth itself, that supposed idolatry of American life?"<sup>47</sup>

Who better than Nicole Brossard to answer out of her experience:

"In fact, I became a feminist when I became a mother. Almost at the same time I fell in love with another woman. Suddenly I was living the most common experience in a woman's life, motherhood, and at the same time, I was living the most marginal experience in a woman's life, lesbianism. Motherhood made my life absolutely concrete for me, and lesbianism made my life absolute fiction in a patriarchal heterosexual world.

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<sup>46</sup> This thesis, particularly because its weighty and contentious subject matter affecting everyone, which easily dooms it to melancholic reading, is nonetheless expressly written in the hope that it may stimulate and empower readers (including myself) to reflect hopefully on their own ways of coming into consciousness as eco-mothers and eco-mothering allies. As explained in the introduction, I deliberately desist from inserting disempowering forefathers into the main text body. Their strategic in(ter)ventions have held many feminist theorists dutifully enthralled, and the logic of their presumptions has been a foregone conclusion, I think, precisely because of the very phallogocentric paradigm that designed the logic. For further clarification on definition of patriarchal symbolic order, see glossary.

<sup>47</sup> Adrienne Rich, "The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap" in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton & Company, 1979), p. 270.

Motherhood shaped my solidarity with women and gave me a feminist consciousness just as lesbianism gave me new ideas about almost everything and opened new spaces for me to explore."<sup>48</sup>

Motherhood, motHERhood, as coarse bedrock truth. If nothing else (as if there is much else), motherhood has grounded me – as bedrock- upon which to take a stand. The masculinist infrastructure that is determined to keep women tethered to the hearth and her numerous babies, has provided for a 'honeymoon' from the daily job grind, has insisted on the invaluable worth of our children, thereby creating the illusion of a mother's safety and nurturance within a participating and supportive establishment. And, fatigued as any mother, after the joyous ordeal of nine months and then some followed by solid pain, more pain, I gratefully leaned into it, both times.

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<sup>48</sup> Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, p.60.

*peaceable*

*he is full  
eyes close into me and my breast  
his dense little body uncurls  
small fist  
opens*

*for moments at a time  
fatigue like a slow white avalanche  
collapses the coilings in my mind  
gently  
limb by limb unhinges my locked body  
and in so doing finally pulls my stranded breathing  
softly  
softly eases back into audible rhythm  
so that lying there barely feeling body  
a dawning  
of writing poetry and other fine things  
becomes a distant truth i still cannot dream in colour  
yet all feels strangely easy  
and less pale*

*for now  
this promise matters and we slowly blossom  
together through the andante cantabile in mozart's string quartet  
allowed to bloom we are in this moment  
unattached  
unharmed*

*orchids in no one's garden*

*irony falls away unused  
pendulous silence leans into my weary bones  
leans with foreboding  
with conviction and returning  
with one final lean  
swings trembling back into the  
soft insistent cooing of my son Lars  
waking up again*



Having given birth, having been pushed by dripping breasts and generously filled diapers (the reusable kind) past the first two years, I have come into consciousness that is quite unlike the previous. Not keener, not even more lucid, at times even opaque, but the difference now is – it is always present. Before, I could go all the way, rant, bitch and be the outside queen of Monique Wittig's amazons. No strings attached, I could go to the movies at night and swoon with the rest of them over Tom-Dick what's his name. Maybe even, if the moon was right, you could watch me play the feminine, 'yes' routine and not even yawn. That was before mothering finally fixed my position. My feminist consciousness, oscillating between the radiating possibilities of social justice through inclusive feminism, and the de facto/a priori 'always already' inscription of what the idea of mothering means in a society where the burden of mothering lies on the female unrewarded and threatens to suffocate her because she is a mother/used up female, oscillating between those two causally related and practically contradictory perceptions of the *nature* of women and women's function, my feminist consciousness has become something like a magnifying glass which is only effective if positioned just so. It seems I can never quite hold it at the 'right' angle, the perfect distance from that which needs to be de/ciphered. My head hurts, I know I can read and I know that what wants reading is what I have in front of me waiting, glaring, sniggering. Ah, I say, so what if the lett~~h~~ers become blurred and I can't make out him/her, I need to fill out forms to apply for child care subsidy, where in 2003 apparently it still matters if I am a Ms., Mrs., Miss., (or Mr.- ha!). Mothering has turned me into a she-wolf. Nothing less will do.

Simultaneously freezing me within the evil constraints of patriarchal oppression and the liberating accountability of feminist consciousness, motherhood re/memb~~h~~ers me relentlessly. I must be accountable to the self within and without me, my parenting must reflect my feminist convictions, at all times. There is no more time off, relentlessly I must push to re/define boundaries that through the advent of -isms reveal hatred born out of fear born out of someone's power. Living by the rules of a reactionary, conservative government which attempts to chain and subjugate woman once again to the phallus, experiencing directly the many ways in which these funding cuts reshape the state of my physical, emotional and psychological well-being to the point where at times I catch myself beginning to wish that compromising my 'be-coming self' in favour of a financially secure home/lifestyle for the

children however patriarchal may not amount to suicide. And this after my understanding of motherhood within the patriarchal powerstructure had been affirmed yet again in a most traumatic and relentless journey.....

*children's hospital*

*years later and still through dreams  
ceaselessly my still bleeding body runs along endless  
corridors hallways back and forth through the same corridors or others  
i cannot tell up and down elevators marked emergency where  
no trespassing is ordered on the many doors  
my body pushes up against  
lost*

*to say this event must go untreated  
and that no one will recover who has entered into the  
sterilized economy of hospital wards  
where even as a visitor you want to be  
released from these impervious capable hands  
you long only to be laid down and forgotten*

*here  
nothing is left to chance or common sense and  
a newborn's mother becomes a gigantic blueveined breast and  
an infant may in the course of a thriving night turn blue and  
be taken down to  
ICU while  
specialists wearing street clothes and knowing foreheads  
silently appear out of nowhere it is three in the morning and  
discuss his condition in a vacantly busy manner that reminds one of people  
milling about at someone else's graduation while they wait for this tiny speck of body  
as i found out only later to stop*

*altogether  
before their gloved hands will administer extreme events*

*these hands  
these hushed up concealed suppressed  
anonymous contours of hands who  
had they shed their waxen masks  
could have  
softened the night  
made it pardonable  
but camouflaged as they are  
they become unbearable in their smug competency  
in the ways they elegantly point and prod  
and after a precisely allotted interval fold away again unruffled  
towards a coffee mug*

*to say this event must go untreated  
and that no one will recover fully  
is almost to wonder why we refuse to find other ways  
of healing where body and spirit know belonging  
where  
when we hold a body  
we also hold a spirit oh so tight<sup>49</sup>*

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<sup>49</sup> This poem remembers the time when, returning from the community hospital to my logcabin with my newborn son, I found him growing weaker every day; the public health nurse refused to come out, saying that I was a second-time mom and surely everything was all right. That night I saw that he had turned blue for lack of

It is at this point, when I talk about mothering sons and what it means, that I necessarily return to clarify and challenge my own understanding of mothering, simultaneously in the most personal as well as the broadest sense. For it is as a mother raising sons that I must be clear about my feminist vision: in raising the next generation of males within this patriarchal society. I may be raising potential possibilities, but I am undeniably raising future context. When Adrienne Rich asks the vital question: "what do we want for our sons" (1986: 214), this may sound like a logical spin on the quest for answers to feminist mothering. What do we want for our sons? I have to confess that—even though I have been thankful in many ways for not raising daughters—my reasons for feminist mothering have less to do with sons than with daughters, others' daughters, sisters, mothers, grandmothers; they have, in fact, everything to do with women. My question has always been: what do I want for women?

I understand a feminist alternative by definition as enabling a more sincere, hopeful, affirmative realization of self for all genders, including the male. Since the heterosexual (white) male has been decreed as the dominant gender in patriarchal western(ized) society, I cannot be concerned for the wellbeing of this same male (though this may be my own son) to the same degree as the wellbeing of the oppressed. Should he decide to follow in the footsteps of the conventional 'fathers', society's rule of the phallus will ensure his popularity among both males and male-centered females. Should he decide to clear his path towards becoming a feminist ally, he can be secure in the knowledge that, though unpopular among the majority of males, he will be the annointed champion of most women. I don't deny that the feminist parenting of sons within patriarchal society offers complex challenges on a variety of levels, however, I would like to remind us that in terms of hegemonic power relations the playing field has not been equal for the last three to five millennia.

Whereas for heterosexual men the path towards becoming a feminist ally ultimately is a choice (since feminism has not yet attained critical majority, and patriarchal infrastructure is still very

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oxygen; I took him (four days old now) out to the community hospital from where we were whisked via ambulance to Kamloops, then by plane to the Vancouver's Children's Hospital, where for three weeks I fought doctors and nurses (except one) on most issues regarding his proper, i.e. holistic care, the fiercest of which was: to maintain the right to breastfeed Lars, and when he was too weak to nurse on his own, to continue to tube-feed him, and when he was in a coma (due to this particular respiratory virus), to continue to pump my milk day and night and store it in the freezer so the milk would not dry up but be ready for his use at any time. His survival I attribute to my ongoing intervention into masculinist notions of care, and the ultimate triumph of mother's milk.

much in place) for women it is never a choice, and certainly never a game: for women in patriarchal society 'every man is a potential rapist'<sup>50</sup>, and it is out of this understanding that I have begun to raise two sons. I am raising them in the hope that they may learn to think, relate, behave and conceptualize throughout their developmental stages as boys, teens, adolescents and young adults in ways that I as a feminist can respect, so that women may be able to honor them as rightful partners in an (eco)-feminist society. Or, as in the words of Audre Lorde "our sons must become men – such men as we hope our daughters, born and unborn, will be pleased to live among."<sup>51</sup> She also writes "I am thankful that one of my children is male, since that helps to keep me honest. Every line I write shrieks there are no easy solutions."<sup>52</sup> Whereas I was deeply glad not to be the mother of a daughter – I still shudder at the thought of patriarchal mass-consumerist-cyber-pop culture and its pornographic mandate clawing at a daughter's self-esteem, her longing to do the right thing...the potential trauma of rape.....now I am continuously challenged to nurture my sons into caring feminists (and I am still debating whether a male feminist may not be a living paradox within postmodern patriarchal culture, particularly if he is heterosexual) who will actively embrace and internalize the quest for *alternatives* to patriarchy. Who will see themselves as part of the solutions. I have yet to meet the heterosexual man who can sustain a voluntary interest in feminist consciousness as a life-affirming active concept without at some point in time breaking off, escaping into His – (by definition of his being sexed heterosexual male) privileged role. What makes me think that as a mother and rolemodel I can pull it off? I am irrevocably dependent on my socio-cultural environment, there is no way out. (When) will they begin to see me as the problem rather than the cultural context we live in? Audre Lorde encourages us to maintain our social activism through a choice of parenting which is less bent on finding *the* one answer than on the ongoing process *despite* as in itself the very best we can do.

"It is as hard for our children to believe that we are not omnipotent as it is for us to know it, as parents. But that knowledge is necessary as the first step in the reassessment of power as something other than might, age, privilege, or the lack of fear. It is an important step for a boy, whose societal destruction begins when he is forced to believe that he can only be strong if he doesn't feel, or if he wins. " (Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider, 1993), p. 76.

<sup>50</sup> At the time, the phrase 'every man is a potential rapist' summarized the foundational paradigm in my volunteer training for safe houses and the rape crisis center in Vancouver, 1995, and thus opened the forum on feminist discussion among participants. It made for exciting debate.

<sup>51</sup> Audre Lorde. *Sisters Outsiders: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde*. (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 2000), p. 73.

<sup>52</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 2000), p. 78.

## *feminization of apron strings*

*from your first school day  
your experience under the banner of civilized learning  
becomes  
two small boys colonized into  
systemic statements of men  
segregated into pseudo-superior gender  
into the dis~emotionalized earnest choppers  
of apron strings wrapped around her softening waist that held  
that grew you from the inside out  
& still hold you while her hands are busy providing*

*those well-worn strings  
eventually will pose no risk  
their lingering smell of garlic-lentil casserole  
no longer claims building-block memories  
their permanent food stains  
don't recall daily hustle grind grain  
milk sheep set yogurt press cheese  
plant weed water garden knead dough    need*

*four nimble feet  
echo  
-happiness is wanting to be alive-*

*grubby fingers nibble succulent earth then  
hold on to strings that support her deflating womb  
sizzle broil feed bake hug fry  
diaper can clean move  
m-o-v-e  
into rolling pin rhythm  
& the legato soup~stirring release of postpartum anxiety  
playing your favorite game of sit-on-the-floor-mopping*

*mellow strings  
your softened seams  
frayed from the familiar tug of curious little hands  
sticky fingers pointing in wonder at eatable moose  
& trees & bretzels lifted from the oven  
happiness is wanting to be alive  
there is I know a reason why*

*as canada geese steadily return from somewhere blue  
in a bold phalanx they casually  
focus a diluted spring  
y:our fluid  
unknowing bodies live  
through daily purposeful happenings  
of an almost unconscious journey:  
where you live how you live what you eat  
in relation with who you may be  
with~in  
with*

*whereas I am no healer of wounds  
like the black widow malnamed  
who carries her brood on her back  
weaves their safety net and  
hovers at the entrance of their lives  
I intend to survive  
to watch weave  
welling words  
out of a screen where I sit a/part  
of the colonizeable silence*

*all I know:  
my breath continues its flow into your living  
continues to flow into  
out of the revelatory stream of creation  
where all beings reside  
where gender no more than  
compliments the marvel of diverse biology and  
women's bodies feed placentas feed bodies  
women's breasts inhale  
exhale to feed her child  
her child  
    stay warm to my touch*

*"Did you like my song?"*

*it was the song  
about my life-spring  
that's when I was with the  
wolves and they asked me  
do you want to wrestle?  
and so we went to the wrestle-maker  
and we wrestled  
that's how beautiful and friendly they were"* <sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Three-year-old Neil on the nature of wolves and interactive possibilities: thanks to the avoidance of Hollywood culture and European horror tales, he may yet live aware of the playful nature of wolves and the potential of respectful co-existence.



*she sees her love grow beyond the window fondly*

*under the  
spreading greengolden tree  
slip inside and out of sun rays  
two melting blueyellow toques  
play hide-and-seek  
skip through the cooling shadows  
of first autumn frost*

*and  
like their pumpkins  
ruddy and round they ripen  
& grow solid before plucking up courage*

*taking flight  
full moons sailing round the rising dusk  
beyond a peeling fence  
beyond the greengolden tree scattering her season's love  
recklessly sailing into the rising evening  
into the perils of this unsubtle world*

*settled cautiously inside her window shell  
she sees her love grow beyond the window fondly  
she sees:*

*two frolicking toques  
play hide  
and seek into the growing shadows of their lives into the  
slow yielding of their boisterous innocence that  
like the keen yet tender innocence of spring  
always*

*so far  
always*

*within her slightly weary heart releases a soft fragrance  
sprinkles again the jubilant seeds of love.*

*resolve*

*winding themselves around*

*lilies my name*

*even the trees suggest elaboration*

*a new year's wish*

*barely audible*

*nonetheless*

*wisps of grey hair sticking out*

*reminder of a*

*stubborn*

*will*

Let me talk of women. Let me talk of mothers and daughters and how mothers pass on the story of life, *how it means*, when...

"Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth.....There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood." <sup>54</sup>

Where does biologically determined kinship end and (sensual) desire begin? Or are the divisions socially constructed, and should we rather ask: who benefits? who benefits when mother and daughter are being taught to internalize and subsequently naturalize confrontation and division? Who benefits when they are being taught to compete, for the affections of the F/father? And finally, who benefits when mother and daughter have succeeded in accepting the inevitability of their relationship-in-crisis and go their separate ways to pass on in full despair this myth of mother-daughter schism? Who?

"Whether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad. Small wonder, since theology, art and social theory have been produced by sons. Like intense relationships between women in general, the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatened by men." <sup>55</sup>

The myth oftentimes explodes into the reflexive shards of feminist consciousness when women climb out of unbearable relationship crisis as survivors, and begin. Begin to remember. Selective memory has long been a tool for survival in crisis and many women spent the larger part of their adult lives practising selective memory games to survive the onslaught of male oppression - speak, violence. Some women, without the blinders to guide them in this minefield of patriarchal meaning, cannot bear to see/feel/know their own vulnerability as women and will not rest until another will hold and cherish for better and worse...but behold the woman who begins to cherish who she sees in the mirror, without the blinder, without the male gaze wrapping her into feminine paralysis.

Just as Virginia Woolf pleads on behalf of women for a room of her own and 500 pounds to follow her creative quest, so we must plead for time to regenerate her belief in her self, *to keep her remembering, uncovering the astounding details of those 36 years of her incarceration*, the life that had been a lie from the first day of my parents' acquaintance to the last. Given time, the ruptures women experience in their lives due to separation and divorce gain insights which slowly begin to peel off the patriarchally induced blinders and allow them to reflect on the interdependencies of all

patriarchal ideologies to preserve and reinforce the myth of male domination as *natural*. Unless the threads of insights are severed through a hasty retreat into the oppressive fold, mothers and daughters can begin the slow and painful, triumphantly rewarding pilgrimage towards a place where meaning in women-oriented kinship relationships is retrieved and where, once the space has been opened to accept all questions and question all the intricacies of taboos and stigma in our society which turn women into their partners' accomplices, the joy of true friendship is re/stored in a safe place, out of reach from corruption and corrosive, cultural insinuations, accessible only by mothers and their daughters .

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<sup>54</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*, 1982, p. 256.

<sup>55</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 1986, p.226.

*motherdaughterbreathing*

*if at times in our polished conversation-ceramics syllables seem to shake  
loose  
hurdlng sound fragments into/through fuming afterthought  
-off chance meaning?*

*usually with every breath we announce  
closure  
with every line of barren small talk we continue to  
listen away forever  
forever cancel what we just  
said and really how  
we meant*

*at the end of each visit  
and as usual  
our solitudes collapse with the fatigue of deliberate misreadings  
like controlled hugs hastily dropped in passing  
among polite strangers  
not quite a waste  
but brittle  
easily shattered*

*throughout as usual  
we struggle into breath wheeze gasp  
each crowded breath we catch  
lock in with the quiet fierce panic of the dying  
quick shallow gasps we suck from deep below our rib cage  
in a knotted space tightly contained away from our selves because  
a spillage would fill our throats  
fill them with endless life  
fill them with memories that boil to the surface  
hot purposefully alive  
pungent and keen like fermented compost  
or foaming yeast*

*and just as potential*

*until now we have managed our pain  
like feet bound to please  
our screams sucked back and like dried blood peeling away our throats  
and as our hips quiver indefinitely and sweat never appears under our armpits  
shoulderblades push back heave upward stick out  
manoeuvre these carefully staged breasts - in order to look the part with every breath*

*we suffocate -*

*- yet*

*as of late after all these years listening  
listening past  
layers lift loose with desperation*

*and  
meaning becomes*

*as  
in the middle of long prayer                      suddenly  
without warning  
like a flash of unwanted  
alarming insight that once released  
requires permanence  
and heals into the impervious boldness of a  
scar*

*now  
after all these years rituals of listening away conveying nothing  
now that she is alone  
a never before curiosity in her newborn gestures  
reaches for the smile  
(calm even)  
and as I watch my mother rise and  
quietly unwrap  
from the corners of her eyes  
quietly unfold  
her body              memory  
into a distinct  
sigh  
                enter  
motherdaughterbreathing*

Once the breathing is synchronized, we can begin to tell, re/tell, inter~tell stories. Reinscribe our selves, this radical new meaning we found, as old as the foremothers Trinh. T. Min-ha evokes when she talks of story-telling's cultural significance among women of colour.

"Tradition as on-going commitment, and in women's own terms. The story is beautiful, because or therefore it unwinds like a thread. A long thread, for there is no end in sight.. Or the end she reaches leads actually to another end, another opening, another 'residual deposit of duration'. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission – in other words, of creation. Every griotte who dies is a whole library that burns down. Tell it so that they can tell it. So that it may become larger than its measure, always larger than its own in/significance. In this horizontal and vertical vertigo, she carries the story on, motivated at once by the desire to finish it and the necessity to remind herself and others that 'it's never finished'. A lifetime story. More than a lifetime. One that will be picked up where it is left; when, it does not matter. For the time is already set. 'It will take a long time....', the grandmother ends; 'it began a long time ago...', the granddaughter starts."<sup>56</sup>

"The good news is that we have a lifetime, that I am writing this book, and that my mother has nothing to fear."<sup>57</sup>

"Since feminist subjectivity is already marginalized, it seems, unfortunately, that either we keep focused on the feminine subject, risking repetition - as if men never repeated themselves - or we neutralize ourselves into poetic subject.....For example I know that, as a writer, I cannot always use the word *woman* in a poem, but I also know that when, as a reader, I see the word *woman* in a poem, it does have a positive effect on me. I still believe that to write *I am a woman* is full of consequences. I also think that patriarchal meaning cannot stand the visibility of women as a radical subject."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 149.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution*, (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), p. xii.

<sup>58</sup> (Nicole Brossard, in Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, 1993), p.64.

*true/still asking*<sup>59</sup>

*how shall women become  
and friends  
how shall they we  
reach each other's  
longing how  
help to care free*

*as we flee  
each on her own relentless path of silent screams  
across hu/man landscape so broken deaf  
fragmented  
easy laughter would shatter  
her dying silhouette that is  
yielding into that forever act of rape  
a systemic happening*

*as we flee into  
a swelling exodus of porcelain smiles  
in which to reassure him, because it's all she knows  
the small of her loss*

*as we die each on her own locked  
into that stillborn  
flat out of control  
relentless gaze  
acquaintance, relative  
most often spouse ex  
and yet we  
unnamed lost twin sisters  
barely breathing  
convince our/selves for reasons why  
this could and should  
and obviously why we failed*

*how shall women  
how shall we become friends  
be come into each other's  
longing  
pronounce our selves for ever  
for each other  
without looking up why not.*

---

<sup>59</sup> This poem is a direct response to Nicole Brossard's reflections on the woman as radical subject.



"In 1993, I was walking down a street in Manhattan when I passed a newsstand and was suddenly struck by a deeply disturbing photograph on the front page of *Newsday*. It was a picture of a group of six young women who had just returned from a rape camp in Bosnia.... Inside the newspaper was another photograph of the young women, recently reunited with their mothers and standing in a semicircle in a gymnasium. There was a large group and not one of them, mother or daughter, was able to look at the camera. I knew I had to go there. ... When I returned to New York after my first trip, I was in a state of outrage.. Outraged that 20,000 to 70,000 women were being raped in the middle of Europe in 1993 and no one was doing anything to stop it. I couldn't understand it. A friend asked me why I was surprised. She said that over 500,000 women were raped every year in this country, and in theory we were not at war."<sup>60</sup>

So writes Eve Ensler in *Vagina Monologues*. When activists from fifteen European countries went to Zagreb to protest against rape camps set up in the Balkan War, the year was 1993, the Archbishop of Sarajevo had announced that raped women were "accepting the enemy into them as flesh of their flesh", and the Geneva Convention still had to rule that rape was a war crime. When we read that "in the USA a woman is raped every 3 minutes; a woman is battered every 15 minutes; two out of three reported violence cases occur in the home; eighteen out of twenty women are psychologically harassed on the job"<sup>61</sup> it is 1997 and the USA heralds itself as the most advanced democracy in the world. When dead bodies start turning up, a respected hog farmer is charged and debate centres on who pays for his defense, it is Canada in 2002. And when night after night Native women disappear in Vancouver's downtown Eastside and around the world, and we simply *know* that their rapists and murderers wake up the next day as proper citizens, it happens as I barely bring myself to write these words. How can I not weep? What is it about capitalist patriarchy that enables, allows, encourages men to even conceive of violent acts – and legitimizes their behavior, through pornography, 'prostitution' laws protecting the johns, 'joy-stick'-computer lingo, and the language of sexism acted out in myths and images of the military and the electronic vocabulary of the third millennia A.D.?!

Rape, the physiological f/act of rape, cannot take place without bodies, dominated, suffering, forced bodies. What – I ask – are we up to in Western feminist discourse, to deny to ourselves the truth that violence begins and ends with-in the body. Hers, yours, mine. His. Our children's. Can we please get down to basics?

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<sup>60</sup> Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, (New York: Random House Inc., 2001), pp. 59 – 60.

<sup>61</sup> Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, (New York: St Martin's Press Inc., 1997), p. 27.

*who I feel*

*not everyone is like me  
s/weeps through life  
regardless  
of careful occasions  
regardless  
of how one should*

*not everyone  
is  
and not everyone likes me  
ask if I care  
unless the years  
seep into my total sense of loneliness and  
rage  
that I am a body  
who must walk back the nights  
of your rape  
my small dying  
and the coercion that celebrates it  
in the numerous rounds of  
spousal assaults  
which  
as we know leaves us  
battered  
forgotten  
lethal  
survivors*

*tumultuous healing beginnings  
are mine forever  
but oh  
what miscellaneous world this is  
what sad unfolding  
event wounds*

*Please don't contact me if you have questions  
it would not be wise  
and I promise I won't look for  
solutions  
to the best of my expectations  
there aren't any  
unless we can get more funding  
c/old warfare*

Bodycycles. What threats are our bodies that we would rather not?

"I interviewed a group of women between the ages of sixty-five and seventy-five. These interviews were the most poignant of all, possibly because many of the women had never had a vagina interview before. Unfortunately, most of the women in this age group had very little conscious relationship to their vaginas. I felt terribly lucky to have grown up in the feminist era. One woman who was seventy-two had never even seen her vagina. She had only touched herself when she was washing in the shower, but never with conscious intention. She had never had an orgasm. At seventy-two she went into therapy, and with the encouragement of her therapist, she went home one afternoon by herself, lit some candles, took a bath, played some comforting music, and discovered her vagina. She said it took her over an hour, because she was arthritic by then, but when she finally found her clitoris, she said, she cried." (Eve Ensler: 2001, pp.23-24).

*my land my body*  
*learned to dance patriarchal*

*where emerges feeling*  
*solves resistance*  
*why were we absent from our own knowing*  
*how were we disembodied*

*in the dreams of fallen mothers*

*once upon a time she filled a large awkward shape*  
*a loping sfumato of growing hips and hand-me-down dreams*  
*ashamed to trail behind others*  
*whoever wherever they jostled*  
*spitting their keen youth onto the sidewalk triumphantly*

*she disbelieved*  
*in the padded bra her mother strapped on her before*  
*the entire store*  
*but really*  
*she only disbelieved her own innocence*  
*knowing blood would forever seep down her legs*  
*regardless*

*exactly what then happens in this story i can't yet remember*  
*this part seems the only landscape i unearth*  
*over and over a glowing dreamtide*  
*subsides slowly*  
*slowly returns into a body nightmare that washes her*  
*down a lonely stretch of road towards*  
*one more bloody attempt at being*  
*where*  
*everyone seems to mingle restlessly*  
*gorging on thighs lips*  
*more dead game*

-----  
*always she wakes up at this point*  
*sweat running down between my half moon breasts*  
*in this too heavy night under no moon*  
*i feel she wants to be alive and dance*  
*but knows not*  
*whose body*

This seems as far as I ever moved away from an ethic of self-love and self-determination that would blend in with a "view of self as unique and relational in an ontology of interrelatedness."<sup>62</sup> Not surprisingly, the moment I could begin to unravel the hideous politics inherent in masculinist culture and thus begin looking for words to uncover my painful search for self-in-body was also the moment I entered into feminist consciousness. After many years of locating the source of my determination in anger and sadness, a powerfully inspiring well of emotional energy, I see that little has changed in the way our culture denies women's right to *fully, bodily*, participate in the public sphere. Advertisements on menstrual pads and tampons notwithstanding – women obviously *do* have body enough to be a lucrative 'target' for consumption – women/we have little to say to each other, or the world at large, on the cyclically shifting, shaping, biological process of their bodies. I consider this one of the most bewildering mysteries of postmodern society.

How can we ever hope to empower ourselves *and* each other, if we have not yet found words to create a vocabulary that will embed our physiological selves, the way it/she affects our lives, within private and public spheres of cultural meanings? Did not the beginning of our monthly bleeding announce difference, even in the thrilling depths of unconscious girlhood? How did we *deal* with it? Or should I say, how was it *dealt* with, this unspeakable, exterraneous process? Few young women experience the onset of their menstruation as an event worth remembering, a celebratory, fluid body shift towards be-coming. Eve Ensler records some of these memories in *Vagina Monologues*. My personal memory is one of spending a lot, and I mean *a lot*, of time hiding bloody evidence, worrying over menstrual cramps, and the ways in which they upset my 'normal' life. And never ever did my mother's, my sister's or my own periods stain conversation around the dinner table. We made up 50% of our family, most of our household pets were females, so it seems more than reasonable to assume that at any given time one or more of us lived through menstrual experience, yet any conscious identification with the organic fluids of women's bodied selves were taboo. Winnie Tomm suggests that

"Menstruation is at the womb of self-love for women.... It is difficult to imagine a balanced consciousness that is upset regularly each month for thirty-five to forty years.... It is unlikely for male-identified women to identify

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<sup>62</sup> Winnie Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995), p. 178.

women to experience menstruation positively. The power of defining menstruation was taken over by men in patriarchal culture and internalized by both men and women. The power of defining the meaning of menstruation is symbolic of the power to define women's bodies. Experiencing menstruation positively is symbolic of experiencing one's body more generally in a positive way. It is to take it as normative rather than deviant....their menstrual cycles would be taken into account as a matter of fact in the workplace, the home, and among friends.<sup>63</sup>

Thinking of the implications of incorporating the hormonal influence of menstruation into all spheres of *being* gives me a vague idea of the enormous journey we have yet before us.

The absence of everyday, mindful vocabulary means that we as a society do not acknowledge women as a different and "normative form of humanity."<sup>64</sup> And how can you talk about environmental damage or health issues if you cannot talk about menstruation in the first place? Ironically, women in the affluent North are dutifully consuming and – consequently – actively contributing to environmental damage: (In the UK alone, roughly 13 million menstruating women dispose of plastic strips, applicators and sanitary protection, which contain pesticides, bleach and deodorant substances at the cost of 160 million pounds sterling annually.)<sup>65</sup> The persistent efforts of some feminist theorists to question issues of body-reality and how it affects our ways of being in the world, shows only how successful phallographic notions of the male gender as universal category have been – right through the postmodern proposal of the 'death of the author/subject', because now that we are encouraged to desist from theorizing the female body as different, unique, real and just as 'universal', prevailing notions in myths, the imaginary and language go unchallenged.<sup>66</sup>

How this affects women's every day lives becomes obvious when we consider that bulimia and anorexia are still predominantly female conditions, and that the absence of menstruation due to lack of healthy body fat is defined as a rather positive by-product in a society that obsesses women with thinness to the point of looking - and being – malnourished (we need only think of the gradual dis/appearing f/act in female models in the last 50 years, from Marilyn Monroe to Calvin Klein's Kate Moss). I vividly remember my friend's sufferings who, as a feminist and emerging lesbian, worked

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>65</sup> Helen Lynn, "Women's Environmental Network", Miriam Wyman, ed., *Sweeping the Earth*, (Charlottetown: gynergy books, 1999), p. 274.

<sup>66</sup> I want to note here that North American First Nations, and indeed many aboriginal peoples elsewhere are able to point to a long tradition of menstrual ritual, aimed at preparing the young woman through unique, celebratory fastings and spiritual-physical journeys for her role as sexually mature female. For further readings see *Life lived like a story*, a compilation of three Yukon elder herstories by Julie Cruikshank.

ceaselessly on behalf of women survivors of sexual abuse. The nourishing meals her (male partner at the time) fed her, kept her from overextending herself completely – until periods depleted her stressed body of iron and other vital ingredients, and it/she collapsed, and with shocking regularity was taken (again by her partner) to hospital. Besides it being one instance, in which a male has tried to help transform a woman's internalized denial, what stood out for me was that despite/throughout the recurring black-outs, Janine never seemed to feel her body as a concrete, unique, insightful expression of self that needed to be powerfully embraced and cared for. Beyond her body's performance and usefulness as a mature, sexed organism in the energy fields of sexual negotiations, she denied it an autonomous voice, and treated it as necessary medium for the purpose of transportation and sexual communication.

Yet, here as everywhere, I perceive subversive movements, small revolutions which help to re:define our body changes. Winnie Tamm remembers that the leader of a workshop on raising spiritual energy in the body owned a business in the USA in which the female employees have two days a month off from work, in addition to the normal off-time:

"The two days include the day before they begin menstruating and the first day of bleeding. The women are given those days to look after themselves, to go inward and pay attention to the changes that are taking place in their bodies. The owner of the business claims that it is cost-effective to give the women time to take care of themselves. The employees' level of production increased, the morale in the workplace improved, and there was less time taken for sick days."<sup>67</sup>

I remember that when my mother and I finally broke the taboo, not long ago, she spoke of the premenstrual time as the days of truth. The days of truth. This is new vocabulary, because it is not meant as ridicule but as liberation and celebration of female insights.

"Going deep into body consciousness during menstruation is a time of renewing elemental power and experiencing growth through change. The sloughing off the lining of the uterus is a condition for new growth and new possibilities. The body process is a metaphor for shedding old ideas and old patterns of behaviour to make space for new developments, just as the snake shedding its skin is a goddess symbol of the transformation through death to new birth."<sup>68</sup>

I will not talk about goddess symbolism –yet, and some of us may be more comfortable in imagining a butterfly instead.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 190/191.

Regardless, the need for expressing these vast, significant times in our lives - and how we are informed by them - is enormous, and growing in the face of growing masculinist, utilitarian, above all, global, interventions in women's bodies.

*monthly*

*earth breath stops*

*pulsates*

*exhale!*

*rhythm releases us*

*into forbidden landscapes*

*where memories continue to search for  
and shape*

*place*

*smooth*

*oblong*

*place that resides*

*in intervals of a time*

*immeasurable*

*intangible & so far away blue*

*where*

*the sound of ovaries singing*

*leaves*

*you*

*breath less*



*postmodern menstrual*

*i.*

*we are encouraged to talk about it  
after all we are postmodern  
women and this is what postmodern women do  
open up  
celebrate her pain and dammit  
let it flow  
tampax shopping  
you mean i  
you mean in front of -- over the counter  
just not me  
not now  
not ever never they beg and as  
their eyes fade into pastcenturyroutines  
isn't it funny how his grows bald and shrinks at the  
thought of cute little blood clots  
seeping from the cute little  
but I digress  
we are postmodern  
we are what's more  
we understand  
we shift the  
leaking tampon around the issue and continue to  
swallow  
advil self blood and all*

*ii.*

*sometimes  
I wander the city and  
all the women occur to me who  
vibrate urbanscape flood buses  
pale  
soaked wild with cramps  
thirsting for a clean sani or tampon to quench gushing red  
from violating painstakingly naked porcelain ankles  
made for  
unnatural men and their aftershave  
every hour every minute women around me  
release and join the fluid cycle  
a swelling tsunami of  
female everywhere  
a red tide of fertile sweat  
and the thought comes to me  
that men have always fled  
  
still do?*

*explorers*

*some times      and more  
when the waxing moon pulls our scattered memories  
and our periods remember  
we reach far*

*far back to an away oasis      where joy  
and other soft beginnings  
nestle together in the dampness  
between our musing breasts  
when curves  
landscape deep-throated watersheds  
arch mountain tops gasp cave hollows  
and pour fertility waves into seasonal essences  
like flirting summer breezes and  
unhurried pregnancies  
gaze fondling gaze  
until hands  
now luminous with love  
roam gently among pubic hair  
carrying all spice and innocence*

*no panic  
only  
the gorgeous birthing  
of  
female delight.*

*months 3 & 4:*

*she bends apart the bridges others build  
because the heartbeat that once housed her  
has lost its tender meaning  
has grown into the restless silence of unconscious bars*

*silently she stands a~part  
waiting begins inside her*

*quietly she walks  
through a hesitant line  
draws  
into a horizon no one knows not even she  
since her wide steps fall out  
out of a song uneven  
her listening eyes retreat & search  
& sink back into her waiting body  
and find no one  
no souls  
no curve to bend with her  
no womb to enter her  
sigh of longing  
as she wanders  
unseeing  
into the large pause of his idea  
of motherhood*

*month 5:*

*you breathe fire  
they say*

*true.  
now that pregnancy unleashed  
those deep inner terrors I thought  
surely were everyone else's  
I weep thick magma for nothing  
erupt into my solitude unaware  
that I am less alone*

*that  
like a surviving  
perfect shell  
oceanwashed  
I grow twofold now  
(one fitting into my m/other self)*

*instead  
my eyelids smoulder dry ashes  
nights  
when I stare at the ceiling  
see nothing*

*my hands tremble after  
sudden repeated attacks on the rising bread dough  
(I'm consumed by baking these days)  
as my dense body leans heavily into the  
kitchen counter  
stirring under the tremendous ache of sudden possibilities  
or*

*maybe*

*just  
a lump of fear  
growing under my heart  
that  
in the end  
there was only one road  
I chose*

*6th month: where I move*

*flowers I never saw nor smelled are holding me  
long after their  
still blossoms  
settled around my heartnest*

*too much within my body  
I linger  
too little around me that excites me  
or wants me to run for position*

*instead it moves*

*and the flutter of its tiny breath stabs me  
every time  
every time pulls me  
dissolves me back  
into the vagueness of my growing shape  
the large radiant oval of advancing Otherhood  
behind which retreats  
more with each passing day*

*my undeniably fierce will*

*only to burst  
suddenly  
with cause  
into the midst of meadows like  
apples ripe with sunshine  
falling beneath a sky's great purpose  
so bright, so luminous  
too luminous for the thrill of words even or  
a lover's fine touch  
but fearlessly beating the drum of  
a woman's moment  
a woman's song of birth*

*month 7: the path falls away from her*

*embraces  
remembered only  
even while they occur  
like lying in a dark night that never had a beginning  
listening to a storm tear outside  
knowing you are safe  
knowing you may die*

*hands flow along and through my body  
slowly flow  
endlessly  
as they have done in the beginning  
flow into a warmth I still recognize  
I dread  
because  
    where has it led me*

*he comes to me  
like one clinging for hope &  
a solid yes of belonging  
nor does my body contradict his search  
    -how can she possibly deny her bulging curve*

*undisguised  
her body ceases to resemble  
no longer feels remembered  
no longer welcome now that even he runs*

*forward she moves through this momentous time unpaused  
her only hope  
her spirits will retrace some outline  
some slim silhouette  
of memories held  
dancing*

*pregnant into this age I fell*

*really  
not this I wanted  
when I came.*

*segmental. concrete.  
steelwired sky corsets.*

*I'd rather cling to  
contemplative pasts of precambrian rock  
join humoring buffalos in their mid-afternoon rumbles  
trail behind gossiping pelicans on the South Saskatoon  
tactfully dance inside killerwhales  
and tiptoe migrating icebergs*

*being.*

*only I fell  
pregnant into this age  
uninformed  
less than prepared and  
to let you in on a secret  
at a loss  
how to tell my beluga stories*

*whom even  
unless a child -*

*pregnant night-life*

*in the wake of a comet  
at night she rises*

*glides past the trivial horrors of the day  
predictable trips to the bathroom &  
shrinking shirts and concentration spans*

*unfurls her memory  
like a fiddlehead first  
fresh  
tender  
but quickly curled up again  
while she gropes for  
& battles pillow mountains  
instead  
grows into a monstrous  
yucca forever sprouting solid yucca offspring  
at the many darting thoughts  
    there being only one midwife  
    where to have the birth  
    (what if it's true that I am really pregnant)  
&  
oh dammit she thought finally reaching the fridge  
in moonlight and trailing a comet  
    I was sure there was some celery left to go with the cheese*



*: six weeks to go*

*her legs hardly bear the weight of water and womb  
barely push across another uneven day  
robot-like  
alien hip bones stalk her wide body uphill  
knees locking into each small  
stiff*

*step  
precisely located to avoid  
strain on her loosened pubic bone  
& fairly dancing ligaments  
while inside one  
kicks her for all attempts to  
lift her self out of a stagnant presence  
she*

*beached whale  
straining to remember what it was that  
spun her outward beyond self  
beyond her solemn cocoon  
&  
for a moment made her believe  
life*

*birth mirage or a culture's appropriate imaginary*

who doesn't know  
blood

like water heavy with sea  
pushes down towards ground  
life's original mud

a strange body now filled with foreboding  
for bodying  
terrified & proud she holds enigma

when after eons of swellingtime  
comes bearing down  
you know this is woman ballet  
her giant she~blossom  
sways folding & unfolding body rhythm  
inside & out that pulls & pushes  
defies & finally welcomes the lure of gravity  
pulses a frenzied singsong of bloody livin' far far  
far into an unknown

only the augmented pounding  
she doesn't recognize as  
someone's ancient heart drums wearily  
to save all three

intermittently events subdue inside her

you return as  
pastoral openings re~ignite your desire  
warm water laps at your backbone  
sister's unhurried fingers trace soothing patterns  
unravel  
streamline the uncoiling labyrinth inside you  
(two umbilical cords linking two placentas to  
two seven pound babies inside water inside blood  
inside your unquestioning body)  
your mother's cool hands  
widen your forehead  
her remembering gaze touches yours softly  
gently  
your lover's thrilled kiss pours oxygen back into  
mermaid event  
that is  
your body~birthing  
body  
birthing

*twin birth earthreal: sister-witness*

*inside cosmic openings of a fleeting blue sky  
lives have begun*

*their lyrical flutterings a~rhythmic in tandem  
cellular continuum nurtured through stress & foods you eat & avoid air & blood you drink by then  
triple heart beats amuses disorients bewilders your daily struggle towards a passing sun  
(you have yet to feel her fluid passion during intercourse but as you now know even twins may be  
conceived in therapeutic permafrost & semidesert)  
your pelvis hums tilts ahead of your body  
a fruit bowl offering giant melon  
your disappearing body daily grows smaller & stronger & centered & tired pumps double the blood  
hourly exchanges amniotic fluid this swishing pumping stolidly eating mountain of purple-veined  
belly  
& dreamy pendulous breasts  
that has become you  
towards a final moment of  
prolonged breathlessness*

*utterly composed she listens & waits & plays Grieg violin sonatas  
in church her thoughts fully elsewhere  
& rests & suddenly  
— after nine ponderous months and five days-  
the vehement bulging of uterus~your~body  
closes & opens  
comes alive into mild agony  
into the cheerfully massaging hands of midwife & three attendants  
who move to your rhythm & yours only yours only yours  
trust your mnemonic breath*

*a mother stiff in her unused love (the enormity of it)  
faint with unlearning  
wipes your conscious forehead  
a husband whose ever-present request my love  
crushes you  
like a final curse*

*('don't lie on me' you plead & fold your self away  
into the privacy of your knowing  
your self forgiveness )*

*through the master bedroom your pain soars  
away from you towards the sunny backyard  
towards the singsong of hypothetically unaware children  
(yours mine the neighbors)  
fills this christian house with presumptive dread of  
what this possibly means  
this pagan ritual of homebirth  
nestling together of unknown women who have  
come together to  
be:LIVE*

*('midwife means with woman' she smiles at him suitably  
'it's what I love to do')  
push breathe push a final roaring*

*on crushed knees your arms tremble underneath preposterous weight  
never-ending pain gushes hot wet stringy sac of fluid  
to the women crooning  
dilated effaced her head is showing little sophia's  
glistening pink body squeezes then spills out  
'there you are sweet baby' while soft learning hands  
press down into the spilling uterus  
to hold a second one in place*

*you reclaim your name  
become conscious  
half blossom  
the heaving laughing shell you know will soon belong  
is gently rolled onto your back  
your daughter riding atop glimpses a vast illiterate world*

*while throughout this momentous event  
giving hands hold  
and lose!  
a seven pound body tumbles in amniotic tidal wave  
that floods his folded lungs inside your contracting uterus towards imminent danger  
towards breech birth*

*(whereas in the dis-encharmed age of mechanical forceps &  
a man's bulkier hands wearing their selfimposed disintuition  
this same event would -though with negligible regret- record two dead one almost and merely female)*

*now*

*five women synchronize as one familiar hand  
that silently moves on top around across bloodsoaked sheets  
from which growing rivulets of blood flow smoothly  
predictably  
into the waiting of death  
(your screams shatter my horizon beyond colour  
forever stain my soul)  
five women unbearably linked into their knowledge  
of what happens in seconds  
your tormented body being  
against your screams heaved over the bed's edge  
already her nimble hand moves inside your shuddering womb*

*(even now, in death's radical advance, a husband systemically adjusts the angle of his camera)*

*she finds rearranges turns & pulls twin B  
through a final explosion that is your pain colliding with his head  
out up  
into rescucitating hands  
soft satiny welcome  
tulips opening*

*witness  
whitewaxenshape grey skin  
turns blue turns greyish-pink  
here*

*in the deviant beginning of this millennia  
the reawakening of life begins for  
manuel  
& the original search for heaven  
a twin  
a mother's breast*

"Full Time Housekeeping \$380-\$450 per week or \$19,760-\$23,400 per year  
Childminding \$300-\$380 per week or \$15,600-\$19,760 per year."<sup>69</sup>

These figures, a rough estimate by an Australian insurance company, were calculated by adding up an Australian 'housewife's' estimated seventy hours of unpaid domestic labor (twice the hours of the 'standard' paid working week). None of this labour is included in a nation's GNP. Even the United Nations calculations cannot hide the "universal scandal of feminine marginalization, where women own less than 1% of all property and do two thirds of the world's work for 5% of all wages paid."<sup>70</sup> However, none of this includes the primary labors women *produce* which ensure the physiological survival and emotional balance of the human species: laboring for 9 months (if all goes well) for every child born, the life-death risk in birth-labor, the labor of childrearing in unrecognized capacities as nurse, counselor, educator, negotiating the uninterrupted, precarious safety of children throughout their unfolding.

It is with profound, recurring amazement that I began to realize this: only women conceive and become pregnant (apart from technological experiments in some of these masculinist-driven areas), only women give birth and nurse children. Only women are the *essential*, embodied source of life-production. Through their menstruating, and most often conceiving and pregnant bodies women engage in biological time and the organic mediating of inner and outer space, to the 100% exclusion of the male gender. Men, to the extent that their biological determinism is participating, are semen-providers. It is through biological processes like pregnant bodies that women become visible as biologically different others. It is the source-ability women personify which marks them life givers and it is through all the lived practices of nurturing and care attached to the process of giving life that women enfold humanity into the foundational spiral that *is life*. Is meaning. Here is where the question of essentialism becomes truly obsolete – and, I suggest, lingers in masculinist vocabulary to divide and define it as a viable resource, raw matter, to exploit and manage. I need to remember and write into my:story – men are never the biological bearers of life, and since this makes women the only ones who truly *can* produce in a most essentially competent, organically complete way,

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<sup>69</sup> Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, (New York: St Martin's Press Inc., 1997), p. 89

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 88., quoting from *The Human Development Report* (New York: UN, 1995).

masculinist constructs of domination must, by definition, negate any cultural, *autonomous* meaning of self-identity that belongs to women alone.

And this is what emerges: that the commonality of women's oppression under patriarchal rule lies in the fact that women are women, not men. This 'essential' (speak biological) difference underpins all others, I believe. Indigenous and Third World women under patriarchal (corporate neocolonial) rule may be raced 'others', yet their oppression becomes twofold: as one – the raced 'other' – they suffer in solidarity with their male partners, while as 'women other' they suffer under a further oppression within their own communities. It seems to me that the tragic irony of white feminist theories' failure to work together with indigenous and Third World women lies in the ways they identify women: away from biological determinism and the degrading, exploitative ways in which masculinism has equated women and nature. Yet, while we struggle to pretend that through technology women can liberate themselves from biological ties, capitalist patriarchal politics of transnational credit accumulation works simultaneously to reassert control over women's bodies through control of the technological medium and the laws governing its usages – while making us believe that it is all in our emancipatory interest - as well as push Third World and indigenous women further into traditional female roles under patriarchy, while taking away the structural, spiritual safety of their land, their men and their communities. And how can it be otherwise under capitalist patriarchy which draws on both life sources to 'fund' its oppressions?

*interdependent reflections: an immigrant's final coming out to both mothers*

did you know you would end up here  
across the hallway from the now abandoned master bedroom  
    where –back then- the double bed divided by a curtain so you could do bookkeeping into the  
night and not disturb his sleep  
(you are menopausal, you don't sleep; besides, he never helps with business)  
did you know you would end up fugitive in the tiny room of your eldest son who  
left before he entered feelings  
on the second floor in the southwest corner of this  
rambling loghouse that sits above the lake  
bursting with vegetables pets stored flower seeds teas herbs displaced memories  
    and that fancies you so much, mother, your heart aches at the thought of leaving  
even for a day?

probably twenty years ago to the day  
when snow still covered the northern slope  
(even though the early March sun already licked tender circles  
around budding cottonwood and poplar )  
we came together again dutiful, eager to please  
profoundly unconscious of the pain that swallows dysfunctional families;  
we came to work hard, furious  
to pull endless roots, burn slash piles dig trenches more trenches shovel deeper  
and always the house in mind

massive spruce logs roughly laid into one another  
growing and swelling into an amber home when we were gone  
always yours, to/gather, for bad and worse

and I remember how  
down the hill in the old homestead  
over the gleaming black and white enamel woodstove  
you leaned  
so tired, nervous, anxiously content  
you still believed we'd come together  
all the while stirring lentil soup streams of sweat running down  
your aching body,  
barely recovered from your illness  
you cooked five meals a day to keep us running  
just running.....

then sometimes  
as the evenings grew longer in late April  
after dinner and as if by chance we would gather at the plateau  
rest our breaths and then  
suspended in a collective tranquil moment  
ease into the vibrations of how all relations:  
    gaze slowly down the south slope where the heat still rose from sundried needles where  
blackbirds, chickadees and frisky robins strutted  
bearing the softest lichen and horsehair down  
    gaze further to the lake where the spring ritual of the loon's arrival caused tremors among  
smaller residents -- as it must have last year, the year before and always and beavers roamed  
according to their eternal rhythm of care and offspring  
    gaze up Baldy Mt. where purple sunset slivers ran across the alpines and  
into the retreating sky



then over and back down to where outlines of distant creek canyons suffused in a softly  
merging tinge of cottonwood greens, soft and hinting  
down to the old homestead where all white valley people had lived when they came  
since Cougar-Bill in 1908  
finally return our gaze to the new s~pace we planned to occupy  
this our plateau  
whose very air earlier this morning shrill with the lust of power saws  
hung  
stone    silent now  
and whose once soft soil - now upturned dried wounds  
a place gone deaf with fright  
left cluttered with great mangled cedar bones

and I remember  
as we sat on young and younger stumps in this tender bruise of a land  
lamenting every settler's manifesto  
and although we did not dwell we did care to submit  
    if for a brief moment of dubious unity  
to the perfect presumptuousness of hu/man's  
as they/we move within this hesitant landscape  
stupidly forlorn

and like the clearcutting  
in the end  
the consistency of abusive ritual that so precisely had eroded our family  
even as we/I scattered through the country  
in this green battle-weary land that I was beginning again  
had to -

    we left you behind!  
under siege from a husband's controlling gesture you so stubbornly  
anxiously  
mistook for love over and over in 37 years  
and still -       but how where we supposed to know  
in this broken syncopation  
time divided by space  
where all relations recite  
griefstricken  
    yet coming out through our

"where are you?  
    where have you been?  
        and who am I if I can't honor y:ours?"

## Chapter Three

### Debate of women-nature connection, ecological feminism as transformative politics for all; ecological feminist allies: our hopeful potential, what it means

"I got to some of the white women's conferences, like 'The Feminist Connection' in Winnipeg and a women and religion conference in Thunder Bay (sponsored by the Women's Inter-Church Council). Now, *that* was an interesting one, (laughs). I was amazed when we got there. They had a list of work shops to choose from, and a Native woman I knew went in just ahead of me. She identified herself as Native and gave her name. The registration woman replied, 'Oh yes,' and put down "poverty". So the Native woman took me aside and said, 'They're going to put you automatically in 'poverty' because you're a Native woman.' I said, 'They'd better not because I have my eye on something else.' They had things on power and I was interested in learning more about the power struggles women go through. Sure enough, when I signed in I'm obviously Indian, and the woman at the desk said, 'Oh yes, poverty.' I said, 'I've already marked off the workshops I'm going to attend,' and passed her the paper. She said, 'Well, the Native women are going in the poverty one.' I said, 'Really? Is that where you keep Native women?' She got all flustered, said, 'But we were informed...' I said, 'By whom? I never informed you. ... We were sitting there talking about it, getting very upset, when a woman from Latin America overheard us and asked, 'Did they put you in poverty too?' I said, 'Yes.' She swore in Spanish and said, 'It's not right, what's happening. Let's meet in my room later on.'" (Shirley Bear talking to Janet Silman in *Enough is Enough*: 1997, p. 192).<sup>71</sup>

"We would not be where we are, doing what we are doing, with the skills and access we have, if we did not have the colour, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, age, class, or physical abilities we have. Resources and power continue to come to us because we are members of the dominant group in relation to the particular form of oppressions where we seek to be allies." (Bishop, *Becoming an Ally*: 1994, p. 97).

"We are a group of mothers who were arrested on the morning of August 11th and 13th at the Kennedy River Bridge. Our ages range from 24 to 60. Some of us are new mothers, some are mothers of grown-up children... We come from a variety of spiritual backgrounds. Although we have different themes in our personal lives, our common experience of nurturing, and loving our children led us to take action to defend Cloquot Sound, one of the last remaining temperate rainforests on Earth... We did not want to find ourselves reproached in later years by children who asked us why, when the Earth was threatened, we did nothing. Being arrested and accepting the consequences gives a strong message to our children that we will do whatever we can to protect their futures. What is the use of raising our children with care, if the planet has no trees to provide them with oxygen? If our planet is to survive, we must each take personal responsibility for its survival, and we must model this responsibility for our children. We hope that our children, seeing us standing up for our beliefs, will learn from integrity and responsibility. We require the help of the world's peoples. We do not regret our stand on the bridge. We fear only that what we have not done will haunt us. Where there is no vision, the people will perish."

(MacIsaac and Champagne, *Clayoquot Mass Trials*: p.142)

Ever since I began on my academic journey of anchoring my self within feminist consciousness, and the wealth of lived, informed herstories, I have also been vastly amused, confused and bewildered by the preoccupations of theorizing feminists with the seemingly oppositional terms of 'essence' and 'cultural construct'. Entire seminars seem to construct themselves around the unresolvability of the two meanings. As Salleh puts it, "a postmodern academic retreatism has weakened feminism from within. The separation of head from hand,

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<sup>71</sup> Shirley Bear talking to Janet Silman, ed., *Enough is Enough. Aboriginal Women Speak Out. As told to Janet Silman*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1997), p. 192.

theory from practice, is what gave rise to destructive dualisms [...] in the first place. It is no surprise then, that salaried discourse theorists claim there is 'nothing natural' about the body"<sup>72</sup>. To my understanding, a belief in the divisability of these two terms is artificial and presupposes a belief in a patriarchal, value-drenched equation of essence and – *nature*. And therein lies – I think – the final answer to the success formula of patriarchal logic of domination. Because most (Western) feminists' fear that the (patriarchally decreed) devaluative qualities of anything *natural=essential* may attach themselves to any understanding of women's biological bodies has resulted in a triple 'wammy': many mainstream Western feminist theorists continue to shy away from any bold body-discourses on biological determinism, discourses which would help to bridge the necessary gap in formulating effective, transformative and allying feminist strategies that would benefit disadvantaged women in the Fourth World<sup>73</sup>.

And thirdly, this refusal to re:define, re:contextualize the celebratory, functional story of women's biological potential within the larger body of this planet, has resulted in Western feminists' unwillingness to incorporate the patriarchal story of ecological domination as the final piece of the feminist puzzle towards an all-inclusive honoring of women's difference. Beginning with body-difference – biological determined difference. Charlene Spretnak suggests that "now, as the natural world beyond human society has become critically degraded and dysfunctional, the possibility that the meaning of the human is anchored in the meaning of nature is frightening to many people."<sup>74</sup> She points to postmodern, deconstructionist declarations that truths are socially produced, saying that they are artificial, because truth

"is pluralistic in that it is relational and intersubjective – but humans are not the only subjects in the universe. ...When we cultivate sensitivity toward other forms of being, we begin to recognize the value, requirements, and movement toward satisfaction that are located in plants, animals, communal structures, events and place. In such a condition of receptive awareness, the truth we grasp has greater depth than that arrived through a denial of engagement."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>73</sup> I emphasize again that I do not refer to scholarly works on rape, breast cancer, women and aging and a myriad of women/health -related fields of study, but that I refer to feminist theorizing which focusses on biologically anchored gender difference and its socio-cultural consequences, particularly its meaning in corporate global politics.

<sup>74</sup> Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), p.212.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.212.

An ecological feminist perspective is by definition a long-term perspective working towards a sustainable, liveable future. Through uncovering Western(izing) patriarchal politics of oppression and their structural interlinkages, intra- as well as cross-cultural, its strategies aim to redefine the ways in which we look at the interconnectedness of all life forms on this planet. It is not surprising then that ecological feminist thoughts and practices concern themselves deeply with the oppressive politics of re:production, its masculinist mythology, its misogynist discourse, and their combined disempowering continuation in the contradictory experience of motherhood, designed to shape the growing person into yet another product of the Western(ized) logic of domination, while disempowering and absencing women-as-mothers in their roles as primary nurturers, educators and providers of immediate social environments.

Whether or not we agree that the focus ought to be on women-as-mothers instead of both biological parents, we need to acknowledge that globally it is women who carry the greater – increasingly sole – responsibility of caring for their children, and thus all the household activities attached to child raising. Regardless of the slow change in the way male partners share child care responsibilities, and regardless of some feminists' rejection of the 'essentializing' direction which the debate takes in supporting women's roles as the most immediate nurturers of children, let me say this: nothing will, no – can – change, for as long as women have the biological 'edge'. In that I am talking about a cluster of biological determinants which women's bodies inhabit, regardless of sexual orientation, which enable us to foster intimacy with the child growing within and the newborn in unique ways: we have 9 months (if all goes well) to connect to the growing child within<sup>76</sup>, to become – through actual body~experience – attuned to the new life; the crisis of birth (whether as a celebratory release or a painful journey) which, again through our bodies, unfolds in its traumatic extremes, provides further potential for the most intimate bonding; and finally our breasts which (if environmental and bodily toxins are at a 'manageable' minimum) are made for

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<sup>76</sup> I am not presuming that women are necessarily looking forward to pregnancy but am talking about the factual considerations of pregnancy a woman finds herself in. I am well aware that it takes time, patience, and the acceptance of commitment towards self and other in order to grow into and out of pregnancy. I went through depression and resisted knowledge of my second pregnancy. It took me until my son's struggle as an infant to survive a life-threatening respiratory virus, to accept this child – and, again, my self.

nursing babies in the most practically efficient, nourishing *and* nurturing ways, strengthen our intimate connection with the child for long after the actual event of giving birth.

For an ecological feminist perspective to become relevant it needs to acknowledge and work with-in actual life situations. Children are the weakest members of the human community and will therefore suffer most if we continue to regard motherhood and the experience of mothering as a negligible issue within both feminist and ecological feminist politics. Not only does the low economical status of mothers worldwide – particularly single parent-mothers – result in poor health, lack of education and high mortality rate for the children, it also perpetuates the mistaken notion that women are unable to care 'properly', thus justifying and reinforcing misogynist politics of domination worldwide<sup>77</sup>. Moreover, and especially in light of horrendous pressure put on less westernized cultures to perform according to multinational companies' dictates, the future of children growing up in these cultures (African, Indian, South American, East Asian) is – literally – being taken away as their homes and lands are being appropriated under new development and tenure laws and their physical, emotional and spiritual compensation lies in a consumer-oriented, displaced cultural self-estrangement in the rapidly growing Western-style cities. But we needn't go so far as all that. The Canadian Indian Act not only managed to turn white women into status Indians (through marriage to a status Native), strip Native women of their status (if they married a white man, even beyond divorce or widowhood), no, it (they/we colonizers) played out the paradox of preventing Native women's children from becoming status-Natives. In *Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out* a group of Native women from the Tobique reserve (another colonial displacement) remembers their campaign of several years to overturn certain parts of the Canadian Indian Act that took away their membership as status Indian. And everywhere they went, whether they were thrown out of their homes by their male

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<sup>77</sup> Within Canada, we can see these regressive perspectives take hold in several provinces, where liberal and conservative parties are able to slash away at the fragile health and welfare policies (reduced child care subsidies, less basic medical coverage, less access to health practitioners, reduced legal support in struggles around custody and child support, and many more) that have afforded single mothers – the majority of whom live well below the poverty line, a minimum of security, while enforcing further family disenfranchisement through work fare policies. Speaking here out of my own experience as a recent single mother with two small children, I can only marvel at how different the world looks from the bottom of the economic 'ladder'. How from one day to the next, legal aid evaporates, and the battle to secure even a minimally stable, marginally economically secure home for the children becomes so much harder.

partners, living in makeshift shelters, occupying the band office or running the campaign trail, the women took their children with them:

"When it got really bad, we had guns in the band office. We weren't going to let the objectors beat us up; we were going to protect our kids. We told the RCMP that we had guns and they told us that we shouldn't have them. But it wasn't their kids; it was our kids."<sup>78</sup>

My questions are: how can some feminist perspectives, purporting to speak on behalf of diverse experiences of women world wide, ignore the every-day conditions of extreme economic poverty that most women and their offspring face globally, as a direct consequence of Western patriarchal colonialism? How can Western middleclass feminists, responsible for producing, critiquing, teaching and consuming feminist theories institutionalized, (i.e. legitimized) and taught in academic institutions, how can we ignore the complicit practices of (postmodern) colonialism in our own personal every-day lives, ranging from food consumption to clothing and the celebration of our own continued fragmented high-tech life style, whose very technological 'advantages' contribute to the combined effects of poverty and cultural dissipatedness of women world wide in obvious ways? I agree that Western feminist politics have come a long way in linking various isms of domination towards a better understanding of the global feminization of poverty. We continue with our critique that the feminization of poverty is rooted in Western patriarchal politics which (through colonial and neo-colonial strategies) dominate the ways in which women take care of their children.

Recent feminist critiques on gender and environment have produced impressive information on the ever increasing burden women face in most of today's so-called Third World countries, due to increased difficulties in fulfilling gendered labor - gathering firewood, fodder, herbs, foods, collecting drinking water, struggling collectively against foreign (transnational or domestic, Westernized) take-overs, while caring for children and households - while men have switched from multiple tasks to performing mainly one role as paid laborer - if jobs are available - and most often outside the household. Alongside the neocolonial process of imported technology and 'land reforms', the gendered division of labour has become exaggerated, most often to women's disadvantages, and as a result has

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<sup>78</sup> As told to Janet Silman, *Enough is Enough. Aboriginal Women Speak Out.* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1997), p. 129.

"reduced the women to a state of dependency on those who control the land (the men) and this is very unfortunate particularly taking into consideration that they provide the bulk of agricultural labour in the country. Without ownership, women are unable to obtain credit for tools, equipment, and other inputs necessary to increase food production. Land is the only major resource, and without land to serve as security in acquiring loans under current arrangements, women will have difficulty improving their agricultural input."<sup>79</sup>

We are slowly beginning to name the many ways in which most women on this planet have been socialized under Western colonial rule to mediate between the land and their offspring, their families, their communities. We are beginning to trace the linkages between the continued oppression and exploitation of women and the exploitation of the land they/we live off. Both have been objectified as sources of labour and life, and both women and the land have been treated as exploitable commodities.

Western(ized) logic of domination does not happen in a vacuum but in a rich context of sight, sound, touch, in a physical, embodied context. Without bodies to dominate and exploit, politics of oppression have no hold. Body-hold. I believe strongly that it is this *essence* which we must uncover and talk about. The deadly effect any logic of domination has on the bodies which are sources of life and labor in this our world-earth-home. Women's bodies, earth body.

"Women have title to only one percent of the world's land. Yet they produce more than half of the world's food... Women produce more than 80 per cent of the food for sub-Saharan Africa, 50 – 60 per cent of Asia's food, 46 per cent in the Caribbean, 31 per cent in North Africa and the Middle East and more than 30 per cent in Latin America... Women make up the majority of subsistence farmers. In most rural cultures, it is their work which provides a family with its basic diet and with any supplementary food that may be obtained from barter or from selling surplus goods. Underestimating the amount of agricultural work done by women is very common, for statistics most often measure wage labour, not unpaid kitchen garden work. Moreover, in some cultures men do not wish to admit that their wives, mothers and daughters do agricultural work. For these reasons, the vital contribution that women make to food production is consistently under-represented."<sup>80</sup>

Women's work is thus doubly silenced: most of the information on women's situation is filtered through men, and a lot of the work we do know women perform, growing their own foods where possible, struggling through the daily work load that constitutes child-rearing and household tasks – including the immense amount of energy expended to search for fuel, fodder, water – this work continues to be made invisible in the country's GNP or GDP. When we recollect that "the top 100 TNCs accounting for about one third of foreign direct investment stock are all headquartered in

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<sup>79</sup> Barbara Thomas-Slayter and Dianne Rocheleau, *Gender, Environment & Development in Kenya*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1995) pp. 118-119.

<sup>80</sup> Irene Dankelman and Joan Davidson, *Women and Environment in the Third World*, (London: Earthscan Publications Limited, 1994), p. 9.

mal/developed countries"<sup>81</sup> we are beginning to see the picture of neo-colonial/eurocentric oppression emerge in all its capitalist patriarchal glory<sup>82</sup>. A further, perhaps more graphic understanding of Western/Northern, eurocentric policies emerges in this useful reduction:

"If we could at this time shrink the world's population to a village of precisely 100 with all existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look like this:  
There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from North and South America, and 8 Africans.  
30 would be white; 70 would be coloured.  
30 would be Christians; 70 would be of other religions.  
Half of the wealth would be in the hands of only 6 people, and all 6 would be from the United States.  
70 would be unable to read, 50 would suffer from malnutrition, and 80 would live in sub-standard housing.  
Only 1 would have a tertiary education."<sup>83</sup>

In the startling evidence of this comparison, our conviction in the rightness of our electronic global village must fade. In the end, the very concrete interlinkages of poverty, racism, naturism and sexism remain the stabilizing factors in today's marketplace. Women in Third World countries, and particularly indigenous women struggle under the consolidation of these multiple oppressions. And they, invariably, experience its imprint within/on their own bodies.<sup>84</sup>

"The annexation of women's work is reinforced with industrialization and consumerism, whether by computers, labour-saving gadgets, or new reproductive technologies. Meanwhile, in 'developing' regions, expropriation of farmlands for commodity markets, technocratic Green Revolutions, and now a gene patenting undercut the very means of women's labour of subsistence."<sup>85</sup>

I must mention here the hopeful theorizings of some feminist scientists, notably Donna Haraway, who also seems to lean in the direction of ecological feminist politics when she concedes that "ecofeminists have perhaps been most insistent on some version of the world as active subject,

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<sup>81</sup> Gillian Youngs, "Breaking patriarchal bonds: demythologizing the public/private. Marianne H. Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan, eds., *Gender and Global Restructuring*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 57.

<sup>82</sup> I stubbornly cling to my idea that capitalist patriarchy has done a 'better' job in exploiting earth resources, human bodies, and all forms of life, while maintaining the illusion of justice, sustainability, freedom and an ethics of care for everybody. One obvious example is Germany, where, with regard to childcare, Maria Mies documents that upon the reunification of East and West Germany, East German women had to give up "creches for children, job security for working mothers, the right to send a child to a kindergarten, a year's paid maternity leave, the guarantee of a flat for single mothers and paid leave for mothers in the event of a child's illness. In addition, the GDR's abortion laws had been more liberal than in West Germany. East German women could have an abortion – on demand – up to the third month of pregnancy." Upon reunification, "West German laws were simply extended to East Germany." Maria Mies, "Women have no Fatherland". Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, (London: Zed Books, 1993), p. 117.

<sup>83</sup> Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*. p. 103 (NativeWeb-Glen Welker: gwelker@mail.limi.org, 30 May 1995.)

<sup>84</sup> for further references on the devious strategies of TNCs, sanctioned by governments, in extracting indigenous peoples' traditional knowledges in order to patent them and monopolize their use – whether it be plants or human DNA samples please see bibliography.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 87.



not as resource to be appropriated in bourgeois, Marxist or masculinist projects."<sup>86</sup> I say 'hopeful' not so much because I have been persuaded by her suggestions as because her theories have been perceived with enduring and endearing enthusiasm. And they do make some effort to bring into feminist analysis the advent of cyber technology. But again, I am rather baffled by the consistent absence of any inquiry into the possible meaningfulness and applicability of so-called cyborgs towards more economic/ecologic stability in the lives of the 'less privileged', in other parts of the world, as well as in our very own affluent nations. Most of them, again, women. And I continue to be surprised at the prevailing popular status her essay enjoys. But then, neither can I pretend to satisfactorily comprehend the meaning of Haraway's essay, nor quite the direction of her creative theorizing, though I read the signs and skim the surface for clues to how she arrived at her findings: I ask myself - have I missed an important introductory message to all of this, is the notion of the cyborg still in the imaginary or are we there already and I have missed a step? Am I supposed to stumble along through the twilight codes of creative myth versus mythical creation, mumbling inarticulate contradictions, madly resisting this scheme of glorification of the technoscientific fusion of organism and machine? And what does she mean by cyborg, where is the definition, and how does she know the story of the creation of the cyborg down to its (second to) last detail?

Because the cyborg, it seems to me, has attached to it not only its story of origin, but the story, the final one, the last recorded phase in the evolutionary his-story of man/kind. Because the cyborg IS the extension of man, though, sadly, not of woman, nor of woman and man, but an extension of his power over, his lost conscience, thus, his alienation from his own context, from the very basis of his existence. How has Haraway managed to conceptualize a constructive role for the cyborg with/in the strata of oppressions around the globe? Or has she? Is the idea of the cyborg in itself not the very incarnation of a triumphant system of oppression, and has it not been diligently founded on generous presumptions offered (and heartily insisted upon) at various insightful periods throughout the turbulent story of creation of Western Civilization? To name the two most thrilling and pervasive: the driven, coercive theory of domination of Judeo-Christianity in its legitimization of man's superiority to all, and women's to all but man, and 15<sup>th</sup> century improvements in the way the

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<sup>86</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 199.

exploitation of non-human life can be satisfactorily justified by removing the spiritual context from organic matter, taking the soul out of this planet, setting the stage for none other than – cyborg, the ultimate blend of all that patriarchy has achieved.

Cyborgs, being the essence of programming sophistication, will do exactly what they are supposed to do: that's what machines have been for, after all. And machines do break down, of course, but there's really no surprise to it: replacement of parts or the whole is all that's required, even the need for counselling or funeral service needs to be put into its database. Yes, Haraway is correct in saying that cyborgs do not dream of being saved, or of community in the traditional sense – but only, I think, because they are not supposed to: they are, after all, the direct, executive extension of the patriarchal signifier, and good little computer-soldiers that they are (provided the microchips are functioning and dusted regularly), they will keep operating exactly the way we remember them: high-tech predictability is crucial to the intended outcome.

What is so amusing about this idea of the cyborg? I can laugh about it and throw a tantrum at the same time, since the privatisation of this planet is the end result of the story of creation as told through the 'code' of honour of the cyborg, the most precise gesture yet - of men of power. At one point Donna Haraway remembers his:story, as a scene we seem to still enact globally, and she stops her frivolous chatter and admits that "the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism."<sup>87</sup> But before the reader regains her senses and shrieks 'ho, ho, try *legitimate offspring*', she tosses out her next words, thinking to gloss over the damaging findings: "But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential."<sup>88</sup> And here we arrive at the crux of her cyborg equation. Which it is no equation at all, because cyborgs, their fathers' offspring, are anything but illegitimate, they come complete with copyright, provided one finds oneself in the fortunate economic bracket to pay those outrageous sums. And the cyborg's *fathers* (for example the CEOs of the 500 or so TNCs that govern 'global restructuring') continue to let us know that they are not inessential, not at all.

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<sup>87</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 151.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Am I a cyborg? I wear glasses, I drive a car, I rely on technological/electronic expertise in a myriad of ways to help me through the day, through life. And yet, if this is so, don't we need to question our own complicity in a system of knowledge production that is so cleverly rooted in the continuity of neocolonial hegemony and the illusion of electronic *disembodiment*?<sup>89</sup>

Donna Haraway, I need to ask - where are the women as equal, mentally, psychologically, spiritually released, actively participating agents in your story? You androgenize the cyborg's sexuality in an effort to make them - him- palatable, less threatening, easier to confide in and imitate, or follow - where to? What is it that ought to make the cyborg an attractive idea? Without addressing questions of social oppression with~in the daily, lived experiences of women around this planet and readjusting paradigmatic conventions of domination to redistribute cultural wealth, how do you think that women can possibly look forward to a level- playing field.....? So far, the mechanization of this world has meant accelerated exploitation of all who do not belong to the masculinist order - particularly all non-human life forms.

The irony of course is that the non-human environment - including air, water, soil- as our existential DNA - ought to be at the top of the list if we are planning to live a future at all. And who, so far, has suffered most from patriarchal inventions, cyborgian models designed to probe, eliminate, extract and intervene in the most far-reaching places on this planet? That's right, women have had to suffer physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally in ways that are continuously illuminating and continuously suppressed. And women have had to locate themselves and each other in various pockets of this planet, and fight this juggernaut attempt of silencing those who do not belong to the superior signifier. For women to take the cyborg seriously as an alternative vision out of present politics of oppression, its ideological make-up would need to be revolutionized, followed by the notion of individual accountability contextualised within an ethics of care. The question then becomes: who owns and programs the cyborg? By what unforeseen change of insights into the

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<sup>89</sup> In *Ecofeminism as Politics* (p. 87), Ariel Salleh tells us that "some 500 transnational corporations account for two thirds of all trade. Of the world's 24 largest companies 8 are in electronics, 5 are in oil, 5 are in motor vehicles, 2 are in food, 1 is in building materials, 1 is in chemicals, 1 is in tobacco - hardly life-affirming activities. (as quoted from UNCTAD, *World Investment Report*, New York: UN, 1995).

possibilities of interrelational nurturing would there be desire located which would then lead to a permanent and irrevocable invention of a contextualized sense of cyborgian self-with-in community?

In its preparatory and foundational his:story, the cyborgian model has answered to one quest only: how to maximize power-over and reinforce it on all planes of human inter/relations. The cyborg IS the master's tool, and as such possesses all the characteristics to maintain the power-over, and none to comprehend and execute the power-with, the deliberate sharing and commitment to a caring respect for diversity of all human and non-human life forms on this planet. I propose that the story of the cyborg is the Harlequin romance of the electronic age. It uses a certain alluring vocabulary, which hides the same ideology of the phallus, reinforcing male superiority on all levels imaginable and then some. It serves to amuse, distract and further manipulate those who need to be distracted and/or reassured. And finally, the story of the cyborg may well act itself out as a charming masturbation tool for the master: there's nothing like a daily dose of self-glorification to boost one's ego<sup>90</sup>.

The consequences are beyond serious, however: I suggest that if cyborgs are the combined identity of machine and human body, then it is not only women in malindustrialized countries who can boast of cyborgian identities but most definitely women in the so-called Third World. What about Western politics of birth control in Third World countries, the forced implants of IUD devices in women's bodies, their festering, and the suffering attached to it?

Mira Shiva draws attention to the total lack of accountability that characterizes the drive for women to undergo tubectomies, for which financial incentives are on offer not only for those who accept sterilization but also for the family planning workers. In a social context where little change was attempted in other areas, coercion was the one stick seen as a means to beat the population growth rate. The costs borne by women were all too apparent in a violation of their dignity and a denial of their right to unbiased information, to safe and effective contraceptive care...Curiously, long-acting, injectable contraceptives are considered safe and effective for anaemic, malnourished and underweight Third World women, while in the North, recognition of the hazards of hormonal doses have led to minimizing their use in the contraceptive pill.<sup>91</sup>

Coercive depopulation policies seem to have been devised, not because of ridiculous claims of overpopulation in Third World countries, but "to serve the commercial interests of the

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<sup>90</sup> Further readings on critical inquiries into cyborgian identities as the fusion of human self and technology can be found in Melanie Stewart Millar, *Cracking the Gender Code* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1998), Carole A. Stabile, *Feminism and the technological fix*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

<sup>91</sup> Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (1993), p. 292.

multinational pharmaceutical companies;"<sup>92</sup> In addition, it seems that in Bangladesh "sterilization is performed without prior examination; even pregnant women are sterilized."<sup>93</sup>

What about the effects of the cyborgian worldview, that needs Third World countries as a raw energy source (again women, nature) to ensure supply? What, I ask, are the ethical implications of needing the cheap labor pool and *knowing* that we live off the increasing misery of other people?

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

*free enter prize! :virgin maid-in-thailand*

*our sanity slit open at the mindful rate of 3000 images a day  
advertising carefully monitored mainstream  
pornography*

*is this what you feared  
is this what you saw  
& feared for your daughter-child  
the one -even if lesser-  
small-island that anchors your worth  
that receives all of the strangely thrilling love you thought you lost  
when you yourself as a young child were disappeared  
from your mountain village  
thrown amidst the heckling of male lust*

*is this what you see now  
when you look at  
your daughter's budding breasts  
butterfly silk of her skin  
tight pink orchid of her unfurling bodyself  
soon to be slowly undone before evil  
like soft petals falling before a male/violent god  
do you fear her selling her skinny junkfood-starved self  
for so far less than the way she may feel precious  
cocooned awhile in the bare faith of your arms*

*how do you weigh the commodification of your labor  
the monotonous seamless daily fatigue  
your frenzied need to heap love somewhere whole  
maybe made accessible  
all this for less of your life and more of ours  
like  
the affordable label on our shirts  
the label on the shirt he wears regularly on his legitimate flights  
to your world that has become his also for several nights  
concluding an/other successful foreign transaction*

*how do you weigh the repetitive re:productive labour you are hired  
and paid for in smaller coins  
against the sanctioned commodification of your m/other dream  
your other indigenous creative truly productive one  
whose exotically packaged otherness  
the smell and subsequent grasp of young bodies  
stirs more delightful memories of his perverse orientalism  
drives more of someone's industry, drives the  
smile on certain men's smooth faces  
drives the eager sale of 'forbidden' luxuries  
that has become  
your daughter  
sold to the man who prudently wears the label  
you will die for*

*- you and I both know  
this may also be the man who gently reminds his wife of nothing in particular*

*never fails attendance at proper events  
who knows his: story and gratefully seeks none better -*

the rape of your daughter  
will occur  
at no specific world time  
in a precisely forgotten location  
where it will satisfactorily add to your country's gnp  
and ours  
should business prove worthwhile

*and while I await his return  
and your tired hands perfect the endless sewing sequence  
perhaps reach the quota for bonus*

like dying coral reefs  
the truth of cataclysmic knowledge remains  
in the deepening sore of her vagina  
in the indomitable grace of her fleeting back  
bent over the toilet ring  
and eons previously  
when

- in the frozen shock of her closed eyes  
trying to see nothing and seeing still and for ever a man's figure advancing  
& upon her & in the spreading of limbs & naked fear  
& the formulaic sequence of calculated paid-rape  
sticking out at her & read in the microscopic accuracy inherent in shock  
inside the sweaty collar of the shirt he did not bother to remove -

she glimpses her mother's label

*how do we live inside the seething certainty of this wisdom that binds us  
you and I mothers born of mothers born of more and all mothers*

*all mothers*

*how do I keep from stealing your precious labor over and over  
how from crushing your love your life  
how do I keep my sons from crushing  
because they know they can*

as we witness  
we risk becoming accomplices to  
whatever image may relieve itself upon killing minds  
unless  
with-in-through our witnessing she tells her story  
and we learn to listen  
into our telling

Evidence is accumulating on the affluence of northern countries at the strategic cost of southern, dependent neighbors' social and ecological plight. I will mention only a few examples which represent the nature of this particular phenomena while informing us once more on the interconnectedness of all people as well as all of life on this planet. One such example is the 'accident' at a Union Carbide factory in Bhopal, India, 1984, owned by a US company, which, according to documentation cited in an essay by Indira Jaising and C. Sathyamala<sup>94</sup>, was no accident at all but perfectly preventable. Until today, the company has not had to disclose the exact nature of the toxic gases (hiding behind laws governing trade secrecy and patent laws) which killed thousands and injured hundreds of thousands through a deteriorating disease. Women are most immediately affected by human disasters such as this through their reproductive system:

"A few months after the gas disaster, I had a son. He was alright. After that I had another child in the hospital. But it was not fully formed. It had no legs and no eyes and was born dead. Then another child was born but it died soon after. I had another child just one and a half months back. Its skin looked scalded and only half its head was formed. The other half was filled with water. It was born dead and was white all over. I had a lot of pain two months before I delivered. My legs hurt so much that I couldn't sit or walk around. I got rashes all over my body. The doctors said that I will be okay after the childbirth but I still have these problems."<sup>95</sup>

All over the world, evidence repeats itself in the powerful knowledge that women are the first to suffer through the very biologically determined difference of our female bodies. Joni Saeger talks of the continued health problems of Vietnamese women after the Vietnam war, who pass the toxins through their breast milk. Because Dioxin is a birth-deforming chemical, Vietnamese woman today "have the highest rate of spontaneous abortion in the world; birth defects occur at alarming rates; 70 to 80 percent of women in Vietnam suffer from vaginal infection; cervical cancer rates are among the highest in the world; in Vietnam, fetal death rates in pregnancy were 40 times higher in the early 1980s than they were in the 1950s."<sup>96</sup> It is probably worthwhile mentioning here that dioxin is also found in the whole array of pesticidal tampons and sanitary napkins Northern women use as part of their/our monthly protection. And so the loop closes once again and links North and South, women and the environment, women *through*

<sup>94</sup> There are several accounts available of the tragedy, but one of the most detailed is Jaising & Sathyamala's essay "Legal Rights and Wrongs....Internationalizing Bhopal", *Close to Home*, Vandana Shiva, ed., (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1994), pp. 88-98.

<sup>95</sup> Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, (Halifax: Fernwood Publications, 1993), p.83.



environmental pollution. Curiously, women's bodies everywhere on this planet suffer the consequences of direct environmental pollution, contained as they/we are in the finite cycle of air, water, soil and all other life forms.

The debate around the women-nature connection takes on new and horrific meanings: as women's bodies suffer, so do their children's, families, and finally their communities. The increasing incidents of breast cancer provide one evidence for how the human body tends to store environmental toxins in fatty tissues. Why is it that breast cancer is, *essentially*, a woman's disease? Is the answer really to cut off our breasts and deny the wholeness of our bodies rather than move towards radical socio-ecological change? A change that would demand the direct, respectful participation of oppressed women in the Third/Fourth World, and would thus mean a thorough re:vision of how we must live-in-relation to ourselves, each other and all forms of life. It would also mean West/Northern feminist re:visioning of the way in which we corroborate the sufferings of women elsewhere. And unless we learn to incorporate our bodies fully as different, unique other embodied selves of humanity, we will – I think – never quite learn the coming-together of partial perspectives the way ecological feminist politics suggest we could.

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<sup>96</sup> Joni Seager, *Earth Follies*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 18.

*tell a dream not light-years away*<sup>97</sup>

*it cannot be I~woman  
who threatens the moonsnail  
into extinction  
but that the space i was told to occupy  
in verdant unconsciousness  
has itself marked  
scene of the crime*

*scarcely have i turned witness  
to this demoralization of a capable world  
when the meaning of a question  
unfolds itself into me and mine  
slithers past unseasonal bodyscapes  
into the riparian zones of our existential gropings  
into our vagrant heart  
where like sudden unforeseen sunrise in midday  
it bursts lemon upon consciousness*

*no sweeter more pungent moment  
than to open into the  
uncontrollable bursting forth of unalienable truth  
a revelation unto itself  
irrespective of our menacing utterings  
where so far we fancied our selves  
standing on the thresholds of our orchestrated mysteries  
dismissing planetary contours as inadvertent landscapes  
her cyclical healings  
as more of her unpracticed charms  
largely insolvent*

*so answer me this  
in the occasional hot flashes of language  
only you and I~woman can sometimes promise each other  
and not lie*

*how can we destroy what we love best  
how can we destroy what we must love  
how    destroy what makes us  
this small lavish round of colored earth  
its aqueous becomings  
that turns us into  
infinite dreams of a more luscious divine*

*as ever we dare*

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<sup>97</sup> As with all other arts, so does music compel sudden inspirational moments; I lament the orchestrated absence of female composers within mainstream representations of Western music history, but since music opens up in all genders such a critical 'other' dimension of perceiving and responding to what we call life, and is able to transcend directly into emotion, I find some of its revelations irresistible. Here, Debussy's *Rêverie* and my reading of Adrienne Rich's thirteenth of her "Twenty-one Love Poems" (*The Dream of a Common Language*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978) mingled with urgent ecofeminist concerns and caused this poem. Like much of Debussy's music, I found this piece meditative in its serene ambiguity, its desire to stretch languidly beyond bars into the very air that surrounds us and only then let go.

As ever we dare. So. How do we get where we should be going? How do we – Northern, white, middle-class – women begin to ally with Third World and indigenous women? Maybe, just maybe, bell hooks has a lovely idea when she calls for the need to interrogate white privilege, proposing that

"one change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness. It would just be so interesting for all those white folks who are giving blacks their take on blackness to let them know what's going on with whiteness."<sup>98</sup>

She continues to outline the need for a "persistent, rigorous, and informed critique on whiteness", saying that "many scholars, critics and writers preface their work by stating that they are white, as though mere acknowledgment of this fact were sufficient, as though it conveyed all we need to know of standpoint, motivation, direction."<sup>99</sup> She describes how many feminist professors used to resist suggestions to examine racism and sexism, and asks, now that so many of them have shifted their emphasis and produce writings on race and gender:

"What process enabled their perspectives to shift? Understanding that process is important for the development of solidarity; it can enhance awareness of the epistemological shifts that enable all of us to move in new and oppositional directions. Yet none of these women write articles reflecting on their critical process, showing how their attitudes have changed."<sup>100</sup>

Already in the interest of my own salvation as feminist and ecological feminist, I need to work towards becoming an ally. Becoming feminist allies and eco-allies seems to be the only solution left to guide us towards a revisioning process. It may be time to peel back the layers of whiteness in critical reflection, with the help of bell hooks and Trinh T. Minh-ha, and begin, predictably with this:

As a white, middle-class-educated woman with European heritage (vibrant his:story of colonization/oppression culminating in holocaust, coupled with contemporary neocolonial-eurocentric idolization of Native North Americal culture) my relationship with Native North Americans has been problematic from the start. Ever since I came to Canada, I have made some effort to connect with First Nations people, either in the work place (then silviculture) and later, working for social justice issues in the urban environment of the Vancouver Eastside. I became acquainted with single Native women and their extended families, falling off the edge of economic

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<sup>98</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990), p. 54.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

subsistence. Being an immigrant myself (ha!), working with (note the condescending 'with') First Nations people in the city and living in the same neighborhood (uphill) gave me – initially - the illusory feeling of moving on the same level, of sharing with them this central urban dis/place, strange and alien to them and myself. And so, for the moment we were all in this together – I thought - ....in this home away from home that's not mine.

But how can I talk to Natives about the very reason for their displacement? How can I sit there and ask them about this their sourceland that they do not recognize anymore it has become so mutilated, so dis/covered by white folks like myself?

I cannot.

Imposing myself on someone Native, I feel the fake I am – even before my/self. My heritage is deeply and irrevocably flawed by default, my life consists in white/washing and cover-up.

I am forever being reminded of the impossibility of asking Native women to open their hearts and minds to me. It is the audacity of the neocolonizer imagining she can do something, like 'use her colonizer's privilege' to help heal and change. Who? Myself surely?! There have been times when I believed that the truest help I could offer was to be quiet and *not* open my mouth i.e. turn on my tape recorder. I cannot speak/write 'for', I can only speak/write my/self and forever babble on why it is I cannot in true consequence speak for her/them.....

"With each sign that gives language its shape lies a stereotype of which i/I am both the manipulator and the manipulated. Transposed onto another plane, such is the relation, for example between we, the natives, and they, the natives. From a voluntary to an enforced designation, the distance is plain but the appearance remains intentionally ambiguous. Terming us the "natives" focuses on our innate qualities and our belonging to a particular place by birth; terming them the "natives", on their being born inferior and "non-Europeans."<sup>101</sup>

The problem is furthermore compounded by the fact that I am first generation immigrant into Canada, and came with my eyes at least half opened to the torturous past and present of the Native peoples in this country. Cowardly, I fear exposing my white, colonizing face to them: it is that I still act in my daily life as an accomplice to the present-day situation of powerlessness and oppression of Native people. And I am! I am! Because I came here, into this great country as part

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid..

<sup>101</sup> Trinh T Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other*, p. 52.



comfortable Native...and to read and contemplate, the far-away Native then blends comfortably into the eloquent, the heroic Native, turns into the intellectual *pursuit* white people are so fond of.

But Trinh T. Minh-ha, bell hooks are not far away. Nor are they comfortable. When I read them I *become* the white *he*, as the whiteness of my skin seems to override my sex. I can no longer hide behind *her* curves, the curves of womanhood, and while I deliberately, thoughtfully and with great sadness wade through their outpouring of reflections, rage and grief, I cannot proclaim allegiance to (*her/their*) sisterhood. *He* has firmly established me in the discourse of dominance where I sit as backdrop-*other* and listen to her, Trinh, tell me with a cynical bend in her voice, of what it is like - always - to be inscribed as *Native: Native*~she. I want to cry 'I do, I do understand some of what you say, I empathize, I bear witness', but then my prison does not suffocate, does not collapse me in its manyfold combinations of sex-race-class--. I read Trinh's accusations of *him* as a reflection of my/self, the traitor, the convenient by-product of *his* indulgence.

What must I do? Is it then, Janice Williamson asks Lee Maracle, "up to me and other women like me to try to work out in ourselves a space which is self-critically enabling and doesn't appropriate."<sup>104</sup> To this Lee Maracle responds: "I can't answer that question for you, you see, because I'm not undoing the dilemma you've been caught in, and being deprived of me is a serious thing for you to pursue and undo."<sup>105</sup>

While bell hooks says, in "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness"<sup>106</sup>: "I am waiting for them to stop talking about the 'Other,'" Lee Maracle's response suggests something else: to her the colonizers' intentional deprivation of the Native *other* is extremely serious, not merely because of the elemental injustice but because the entire idea of the *collective*, the potential of eventually reaching the affirmation of *collective* stays forever unattainable for as long as we deprive ourselves of the enabling diversity of what we term *other*. It is an urgent appeal to begin to consider past and present colonization of Native peoples from a (w)holistic perspective, nurturing

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<sup>104</sup> Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 168.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.168.

<sup>106</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness", (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 145-153.

in ourselves a deep desire for inclusiveness and the corresponding celebration of diversity.

Depriving ourselves in this way is serious indeed.

I contend that we – the descendants and still active agents in direct and indirect colonization- we are not trained to become allies. Public institutions – through a complex web of politic dynamics- may have been forced into presenting, 're~presenting', the written testimony of the colonized, but we who are being trained within these institutions cannot lay claim to being trained as allies. Rather, the purpose of these educational 'boot camps' still seems to lie in the ability to aggressively critique: to presume each text some *thing* which we must *either* take apart without putting it back together, *or* re/present it in such manner that it now fits in with and proves the theorizing notion of the day, echoing however little of the original voice. As a consequence, we find that we lack the skill and oftentimes even the interest to pause and think what this text means, what/who it appeals to, what/how its voice speaks. And what about its tone, its complicated gestures and mimicry, its ideological 'unspeakability'? They are more than text to be dissected, reformulated, scratched to see what happens to those words, see if 'I' and 'Other' disappear and we can go on to the next one. What are we to do about this business of 'other'? How are we to read such a text and not perpetuate its sad truths of colonizing oppression?

How can we read and work through text as less of a colonizer and more of a thoughtful ally? Or does bell hooks already preclude such possibilities in 'simply' saying that "I am waiting for them to stop talking about the Other."? How can I meaningfully understand this text and not immediately fall into the seemingly bottomless hole of 'othering'? I am not a black woman having had to fight oppression in those all-consuming ways: thus I lack the experience as well as the foundational understanding of what it could possibly mean to grow up with-in-through continuous struggle to be seen and heard. A multitude of dimensions is missing which would facilitate a meaningful (this word is the only one I find I can use to convey something like respectful attitude towards the speaker/writer) response. And yet I would like to! I think I would truly like to engage with these writers and learn reflective courtesies and a desire for critical self-reflection that would be welcomed by writer, reader and audience, because it transcends deconstruction beyond mere play of ideologically sensitive, self-contained semiotics and seeks to promote social change.

What has social change to do with anything? Everything. Why did bell hooks feel compelled to write this text? Even I readily admit that the entertainment value of a writing like this has yet to be found. It seems analytical, descriptive and reflective without being speculative as to future place(s) of chosen marginality.

By being who I think I am, I have already engaged in 'othering' this text. Without meaning to, I am reinforcing the hegemonic patterns of domination since I am only slowly groping my way towards becoming an ally. What can I do as potential ally to facilitate bell hooks' desire, unless it be ceasing to talk 'other', ceasing to talk - at all?

And yes, reading bell hooks' text I am suffering for her, her people, for, once again, the colonizers' calculated deprivation of diverse difference, and recalling Lee Maracle's words, I suffer for my own incomprehensive loss, and feel that one significant step towards demonstrating my appreciation and limited understanding must be the voicing of humility<sup>107</sup>. As the articulated gesture of my desire to become her ally. While I appreciate that she is waiting for them-me to stop talking about the other-her, I want her to know that I cannot just *not* talk, since not talking will guarantee the status quo. I need her to suggest alternative ways of talking, but that wish, once again, stamps me the colonizer. In her essay "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", Audre Lorde summarizes this oppressive strategy:

"Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. I am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children's culture in school. Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> While the notion of humility to bridge chasms of otherness is as old as humanity, we find not a trace of it throughout the entire range of postmodern discourse analysis. Each analysis of power, reason, authority and difference undertaken by dominant discourse is obsessed with claiming space, asserting itself even to the tune of endless deferral. Even dominant, i.e. Western, feminist discourses threatens to get lost in the rules of the deconstructive game, their valid points disappearing in the shuffle of fragmentation and strategically inconclusive interrogation of potential subjectivity. Any personally emotional and seemingly submissive notion like humility has been regarded with the keenest distrust by those whose theorizing efforts are unwilling to link theory to the working process of social change. Whoever sets out to become an ally in any area of oppression, is deeply aware that it requires all those emotional investments and unwavering commitments much of postmodern discourse sets out to avoid. In this instance I was thinking of my own surprised and gratified response to Marlene Nourbese Philip's mentioning of humility as the ingredient in Margaret Laurence's short story collection *The Tomorrow Tamer*. "That sense of humility is what has been sorely lacking in the deluge of justifications that have poured forth in support of the right of the white writer to use any voice." ("The Disappearing Debate", *Language in Her Eye*, Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990), p. 219.



I agree that it is significant and vital that the 'marginality of privilege' bell hooks finds herself situated in, be familiarized and thoroughly economized, but only, I would suggest, as a transitional zone, on the hopeful journey towards the shaping of a language which situates itself as a place not so much of struggle but of bridges, of pleasures, and of comparative peace. Challenging by all means but in a rewarding sense of restoring self, of cultural and cross-cultural home-coming.

Looking at bell hooks' positioning in her chosen margins, I – speaking as granddaughter colonizer and want-to-be ally- question what the long term effects may be by 'choosing' to stay with/in those margins permanently. How does this then affect those whose margins are imposed rather than chosen, whose struggle for articulation precedes hers - moreover, whose struggle for articulation may have priority because of debilitating economic poverty, which annihilates choice? By settling into this validated (by the colonizer) 'margin of privilege', by electing herself and being elected as a spokesperson for those of the imposed margins, by growing into the role of mediator who (un)fortunately becomes accustomed to satisfy her bodily and many of her mental needs within the life arena of the colonizer, will she not forget? Who is there to remind her in this chosen space where the daily grind has shifted into the world of comfort and (complacent) language of the colonizer? Can her identity span such diverging sense-of-self polarity without internal fragmentation and/or external distortion of the whole notion of struggle against oppression as it plays out among those less 'fortunate', who inhabit the 'other', imposed margins? Those she is, in reality, speaking for?

Hooks also writes of suffering within the chosen margin, of never truly arriving, thus never staying. She writes of dying there, too, due to new forms of isolation and the severing of links to the "downhome" life. Throughout all, she emphasizes the notion of "language as also a place of struggle". In a circular reading of her text I return to this phrase as a potential catalyst for a reconceptualization of language as not only a place of struggle for the dis/possessed and colonized to articulate their selves, but also as a place of continuous struggle and welcomed challenge where language is being strategically designed by colonizers and colonized in a collaborative effort to allow for a coming-together. Foundational agreements must be reached to the effect that the colonized must be the ones to decide on process and content of this collaboration. A transformation of the colonizers through

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<sup>108</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 2000), pp. 114 – 115.

guiding parameters set out by the colonized seems a basic requirement if language is not forever stigmatized as eternal re/enactment of stalemate. Maybe we need to recall Lee Maracle's encouraging words to remind ourselves of the hope that lies in becoming allies.

"I think it's a devotion to be critical of White feminism. I think it's a kind of love and devotion we have inside us, and it's not seen as that. It's seen as pain and rage. And it's not! Otherwise I wouldn't bother talking to you if I didn't *feel* you were prepared to listen."<sup>109</sup>

To become an ally requires passionate desire to shift paradigm and keen listening skills. To train someone to become an ally requires passionate desire to shift paradigm and teaching skills. Maybe what we need to do is reflect on whether we have what it takes, then hone the necessary skills and in the meantime always, always keep our ears and hearts open for the voices which talk about *how* the shift can be accomplished. Could be we are not there yet. Could be we are at the beginning of the process, where writers like bell hooks and Trinh T. Minh-ha need to establish their first stronghold, the 'chosen margins', to explore and envision, and where we-the-colonizers need to do more critical thinking and listening in/to with respect to our desire for change, and begin the ritual of practicing allying, maybe similar to the deeply attentive ways in which Arhuacan women in northern Colombia crochet shoulder bags, that ancient custom of "crocheting life."

"Based on my own experience, one always has a thought, a dream when crocheting a shoulder bag. At first, one thinks of how to make the first knot to start connecting and then the stitches and then where to go in order to make the shoulder bag the right size. One is always occupied with these thoughts. When we make a shoulder bag we think about who it is for. It is a very special event when you make a shoulder bag...for someone to whom you want to show a lot of love and happiness. You think about the pattern according to the person. You think about something that fits in with the person, which has the appropriate texture, colours and pattern for the person. One thinks of all this and continues crocheting and crocheting until the combinations of colours for the particular person is achieved. Each shoulder bag is essential and marked by anxiety, aspirations and dreams."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Lee Maracle, in interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, p. 169.

<sup>110</sup> Leonor Zalabata, in "Keeping Traditions Alive", from *Indigenous Women: The Right to a Vote*, p. 32.

*on your own terms women: let me know each of you*

*in truth  
shall i ever know you  
know you the way you trust your self just so  
surviving within yours  
outside my markings*

*shall i ever commit all efforts  
needed that convince you  
i care  
beyond a feminist blush*

*in my dreams  
my body steps closer to yours  
in my dreams  
while yours keeps bending  
my body bends down with you  
wordlessly we collect firewood  
a bit of harvest  
dried dung  
together we may set out on the daily five mile walk  
to collect clean water  
do washing in the sewers nearby  
the Ganges  
or a pure mountain stream  
grind corn  
play with our children  
laugh with them  
teach them  
give birth to them  
walk our bodies through the crucial necessities in  
your life that also becomes mine  
when i dream of you*

*and  
when i dream of you  
i see your face  
and feel your body  
bend only slightly away from me*

*as of late  
we are so close in my dream  
i smell the sweat on your skin  
and know that at least that has changed  
that into my waking hours  
i am also learning to sweat  
under the rising moon of consciousness*

*if  
words  
must fall  
let me ask you this*

*have we entered a moment*

*in which you can even stand to hear me say  
that i want to  
am learning to resign  
my role as accomplice in this colonizing evil  
that i want to  
and will find ways to honor  
what you know  
has always been yours*

*and feel  
that you and i and she and she may  
side by side  
settle down our different selves  
limp  
in mutual  
splendid ease*

*wade through rivers together  
through rivers together*

There are many other forms in which women come together in the mutually validating experience of allying. The area of genital mutilation is one example, where women within one specific cultural context can find surprising ways to ally with each other in quietly subversive ways. According to a documented report from the US Center for Reproductive Law and Policy and quoted in Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, the chief 'cutter' in the Capital of Guinea, Aja Tounkara Diallo Fatimata, confessed that she had never actually cut anybody. "I'd just cinch their clitorises to make them scream," she said, 'and tightly bandage them up so that they walked as though they were in pain.'" <sup>111</sup> Allying strategies are – to my understanding – the most hopeful and determinedly transformative ways in which women – cultural re:sisters – support each other and begin the journey away from patriarchal mutilations of female sexual and spiritual body-consciousness.

There is also the ally who – instead of explicitly forming networks and alliances – works under cover, quietly and cleverly, who uses her talents and energies to subvert, re:define meaning and reattach what was denied in the first place. These are the herstorical re:sisters, who left their signature as proof – as if they had known that his:story would pass them over. By un/covering the lives of women, learning their names – all necessarily attached to bodies- throughout his:story we gradually bring into relief her~story, not to give superior meaning to but to ground our selves, to highlight, to emphasize, to celebrate, to expand paradigmatic horizons and consciously cross thres/holds of new and wiser beginnings. Digging up my own herstorical, cultural garden, I find the work of Gisele von Kerssenbroek (around 1250 – 1300) who lived in Westfalia as a nun, author and scholar. She also taught calligraphy and wrote the *Codex Gisele*, a richly decorated and painted book containing in chronological order the music and lyrics of the church year. Inside the initial P – starting the text "Puer natus est nobis"- she painted a delicate miniature picture of the virgin Mary reclining in the foreground, reaching out to claim her newborn son from Joseph. The gesture expresses mutuality, the infant is drawn in the exact center of the oval, and Mary is most emphatically filling out a solid front third of the picture, drawn larger, in fact, than her partner. But what is most remarkable in this picture is Gisele's signature, small but definite, painted as if sown into the folds of Maria's bedding. While

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<sup>111</sup> Eve Ensler, *Vagina Monologues*, p. 92.

Gisele still re/presents the earthly image of the Madonna-Virgin, albeit in a self-confident style, she has managed to insert her~self, her physical insignia, into the images she in turn creates to reinforce the status quo, though with an ever so slight feminist rearrangement. Here we are looking at testimony of a woman's body and intellect. In our quest to unearth women's stories, we are reminded again and again that without the body, there would be nothing to un~cover, we would be left with only the phallogocentric recipe for what woman ought (not) to be. That dimension alone propels us toward an appreciation of what women's bodies are capable of. Of the body we cannot do with/out. And what about the mother-daughter reconfiguration? Particularly in today's increasingly divisive social environment, mothers and daughters hold together much of the worn fabric of family and community. As ever, women – young and old – are the caretakers of men's, families' and communities' physical and emotional, psychological and spiritual infrastructures, and – on top of their many other tasks – must work hard to regain and/or maintain any sense of connection and intimacy with each other. The following examples taken from interviews with women around the world convey the serious issue of mother-daughter allying in patriarchal conditions, always precarious, ready to disintegrate into distrust and isolation.

"I was abandoned by my mother. I would not do this – if I had to live under a bridge, my children would go with me. I am not only a mother to them, I am a friend and a clown. I worry a lot about their futures. I do not want them to marry at an early age. I want them to take advantage of life. I want [my daughters] to study more than I did and not be dependent on a man. I want them to become people able to support themselves and the families that they will eventually have; to have their own proper houses; and to provide a better life for their children than I am doing for them." <sup>112</sup>

"The Chinese character for peace is a woman under a roof, My mother's life was harder. The family lands were too small to provide much comfort. We had enough food, but not much clothing. And my mother had bound feet. Because her feet were so short – about three inches long – she found it hard to work in the fields. She was always in pain from the wrappings that bent her toes under her foot, and could not do what she wanted to do. This tradition was not good, very cruel. When I was a young girl, I did nothing to help her. I didn't help her clean her feet. I just wanted to do farm work." <sup>113</sup>

"The children work very hard, especially Like (the 10-yr. old daughter). I never saw her play. She will never get to go to school, although I think she wants to. [Zenebu finds her daughter indispensable at home, where she helps to watch the younger children, grind grain, collect firewood, patch the house, and fetch water.] It's hard not to wonder what will happen to her in ten years – will her life be exactly like that of her mother." <sup>114</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Conversation with Maria dos Anjos Ferreira/Brazil, in D'Aluisio, Faith, and Peter Menzel. *Women in the Material World*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), p.48

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., conversation with Guo Yuxian/China, p. 50

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., authors' reflection on Zenebu and her daughter Like/Kenia, p.81.

*re/sisters: out of somewhere I am loath to name she steps delicious*

*for in this spectacular moment of his defeat -  
when he began to realize  
his image of her reflected in his penetrating gaze  
refused to arrive as a broken body  
wearing a set of black lacy underwear  
she was to parade  
before  
he violated her*

*almost in the moment of his defeat  
she turned her self  
and finally  
with crucial care  
enamored by her certainty of too many  
years yielded in eloquent misery  
woman cautiously stepped beyond  
the reality of a phallic cult's crumbling facade  
beyond sadness  
and appeared  
out of the idee fixe of her dis/appearing condition*

*it was then  
in this moment(ous) space  
she and I began the continuity of  
perceiving her  
mother  
confidante companion sister even towards  
the caressing honesty of critical friend  
at times I embrace  
the daughter I never had*

*dare we say  
that it is also her scars which remember  
the multiply fractured embodiment of  
her who she herself defines  
in a continuous  
delicious  
unraveling of mutinous intent*

## CONCLUSION

### **Musings on a more hopeful future, curving the meanings of language to affirm embodied difference, continuing their~our tellings**

"We as Indians have given a lot. The whites have been here over two hundred years, and when they came we treated them well. They would never have survived if it hadn't been for the Indians nursing them along. We have adapted a lot – mastered the white language, education, technology, but for what price? We live in push-button houses but have polluted rivers; fly in airplanes but have polluted air. We have mills that make paper and kill the fish, then the white people turn around and tell us Indians not to fish! There is no end to it. People call it all 'progress' but to the Indian it is a set-back... You can't be traditional and live in the white man's system at the same time because you are helping to destroy the earth. Even me, sewing with my sewing machine, I'm partaking of that dam! When I cook supper on the electric stove, there's a hidden cost. Eventually we have to get away from that dependency – I do for my sake, anyway, though I don't know about the younger generation. They might find it too difficult. I was raised in very poor conditions so it doesn't bother me if I don't have fancy eating." ( Juanita Perley, talking to Janet Silman, in *Enough is Enough*: 1997, p. 225).

"It's twice as hard for us young ones to hold our ground, and maintain our opinions, in a time when all ideals are being shattered and destroyed, when people are showing their worst side, and do not know whether to believe in truth and right and God.... That's the difficulty in these times, ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart." (Anne Frank: 1989)<sup>115</sup>

Today, Safeway has cautiously expressed its waxing interest and potential commitment to a more humane treatment of Canadian livestock which its chain purchases in the quest to fulfill every consumer's dream. It would mean slightly larger pens for animals to facilitate a useful degree of socializing.

Today, 15,000 people in Australia took to the streets protesting their nation's participation in a potential war against Iraq.

Today, the Canadian government announced its new budget aimed at exploring the effects of a potential fall out over Canadian territory from chemical and biological warfare in the Middle East – or anywhere.

Today, a mother and her four daughters aged seven to seventeen are reported to have taken refuge in Calgary's St. Cecilia church after a stay of four years in Canada , hoping to avoid deportation to their homeland, West Nigeria and its active tradition of female circumcision<sup>116</sup>. Threatening to kill herself

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<sup>115</sup> Barnouw, David and Gerrold van der Strom (ed.), transl. A. J. Pomeranz and B. M. Mooyaart-Doubleday. *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*. (New York: Doubleday, 1989). This quote was taken from the 1989 edition of Anne Frank's diary cited above and requoted in *Anne Frank: Beyond the Diary*. (Van der Rol, Ruud and Rian Verhoeven, New York: Puffin Books, 1995), p 84.

<sup>116</sup> "Genital mutilation has been inflicted on 80 [million] to 100 million girls and young women. In countries where it is practiced, mostly African, about 2 million youngsters a year can expect the knife –or the razor or a



if forced to return, the oldest daughter apparently has not managed to overcome her grief at the death of her best friend following the procedure<sup>117</sup>.

Today, I mentioned to my mother how I hope my sons will open themselves to the necessary serenity and wisdom of self as feminist allies to realize alternatives to patriarchal intrigues. After a moment of silence she said: "But you know, after all, eventually they will need to prove they are man enough."

Into her sigh I cried bewilderment.

Today, I am again glad my womb has retired.

"In the recognition of loving lies an answer to despair"<sup>118</sup>

In the face of man-made, man-directed atrocities, which scar this planet and devour all that is innocent and Other, the desire for a liveable future sourced by love seems both hysterical and inescapable. Simply to hold on to composure and daily routine becomes no small feat in the accelerated unfolding of patriarchal politics. And yet. And yet, even this state of personal paralysis, this lack of initiative is in itself an abomination, it is a silent agreement with the way things are, and thus in itself a spectacularly horrific answer to patriarchal power politics. Why did I not join the local protest against Canadian participation in another middle east war, a few days ago? Did I really think that it may have posed a safety risk for my children? Or could I not be bothered, because maybe I have surrendered already to my own feelings of powerlessness as a single mother with two small children well within the Canadian poverty line, in the daily struggle for even a shred of lived integrity? Have I thus already actively bought into the myth that this crisis does not affect me, never has, that I am not complicit in any of this, that western phallogocentric logic with its inevitable conclusion of modern warfare is virtual, sterile, focussed and inevitable, therefore perchance respectable? Or maybe, just maybe I believe that I belong to the globally few who – because they live

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glass shard- to cut their clitoris or remove it altogether, [and] to have part of the labia...sewn together with catgut or thorns. Often the operation is prettified as 'circumcision'. The African specialist Nahid Toubia puts it plain: In a man it would range from amputation of most of the penis, to 'removal of all the penis, its roots of soft tissue and part of the scrotal skin.' Short-term results include tetanus, septicemia, hemorrhages, cuts in the urethra, bladder, vaginal walls, and anal sphincter. Long-term: chronic uterine infection, massive scars that can hinder walking for life, fistula formation, hugely increased agony and danger during childbirth, and early deaths." Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (Toronto: Random House Inc., 2001), p. 68.

<sup>117</sup> CBC Radio 2, 10:00 AM News, Saturday, November 30, 2002.

off all others<sup>119</sup> - waste themselves in decadent overabundance, and that the capitalist (christian) patriarchal paradigm entitles us to hold on to it, at the cost of the earth?

It all comes down to accountability and ultimately a question of desire. But who would raise this question, where from would a longing for this desire present itself? Why would we *want* to care? What original forces encourage our individual sense of responsibility toward a larger collective well-being, a well-being-in-relation-to? If my existence has indeed been reduced to an emotionally distanced rationalization of have and have-nots, what is the compelling motivation to care beyond single-mindedly grasping what can be made mine? What spark ignites relational insight? Is there one? And, speaking out of the proudly insisting partiality of feminist truth-seeking, do I abandon this same truth-seeking if I, heterosexual woman and mother, insist on the human species' rightful obligation to live in a biospherically sustainable manner, in interrelational grace?

Even though the term 'grace' may have been shamelessly exploited and worn out by Christian worship, it seems – within the symptomatic limitations of the english language- one of the few terms able to convey the almost physical sense of spiritual uplifting we sometimes experience when we let our selves immerse into the larger awareness of planetary interdependence. Spretnak speaks of grace as awareness of cosmological interrelatedness which in turn propels forth through its recognition of responsibility. So that we may experience the transformative powers of grace like John Seed, a defender of the rain forests in Australia, who entered his conscious self into the planetary unfolding, and thus changed from saying: 'I am protecting the rainforest' to 'I am part of the rainforest protecting myself.' As a former christian emerged into a nonchristian, I find the use of 'grace' in this context

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<sup>118</sup> Lorde, Audre. *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*. (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1982.); part of the introductory dedication.

<sup>119</sup> A pertinent summary of this type of patriarchally embedded, oppositional, theoretical entrapment I am referring to can be found in Charlene Spretnak's *States of Grace* (1992) pp.157, 158.: "The philosophical notion of the Other as meaning any and every individual other than "I", came into popular parlance through the existentialist works of Sartre. He built on Hegel's peculiar perception that one grows into selfhood only *in opposition to*, in antithesis of, another self-consciousness." She then contextualizes this notion of otherness: "Existential otherness, or unique subjectivity, is not an absolute dimension of our being, but a singular aspect of our larger reality. Each of us exists in a matrix of being that is the universe. We are constitutionally connected with the manifestations of being that surround us. None of us exists in isolation from the vast web of relationships that are gravitational, genetic, vibratory, and much more. Everything that appears in the cosmos emerges into this web. A manifestation of being is a concentration of energy, allurements, elemental communion. The subjectivity of each being, its depth and interiority, is a face of the ultimate mystery of the universe. Each of us is unique but not apart. Our differentiation yields otherness, while our unitive ground of being is dynamic oneness."

empowering as well as painful in its efforts to subvert traditional meaning. At the same time, I remain hopeful that we may find other terms that are less contaminated in their patriarchal appropriation, more activism oriented and yet undeniably hopeful in the naming of a spiritual coming together of planetary consciousness and feminist identity.

In the recognition of loving lies an answer to despair.

To this my friend (who cares) answers: "why would we want to care? Because nothing else satisfies. Because it is the only way I can go to bed in the evening and await the coming morning."

Furthermore she suggests that humility needs to play a formidable and, she insists, rewarding role in the process of planetary caring.

Why?

"Again, my friend repeats, "because nothing else satisfies."

How then do we--women move from the interlocking chains of despair, fear and hopelessness at the negation of embodied life experience, the result of several millennia of masculinist paradigm, to a fearless, bold re:visioning of women's embodied consciousness? One that names women's biological difference, and in respectful naming, celebrates the meaning of women's diverse identities, in all their/our sexualities? And, in so doing, offers a radical recontextualization for the entire human species in our planetary journey? We start, I believe, with/in our very own body consciousness.

In *Bodied Mindfulness*, Winnie Tamm muses at length about the significance of language to empower ourselves and each other. "It is a truism to say that we attempt to express ourselves through language.

What are we expressing when we express ourselves?" She reminds us that language can never *be* the total meaning of reality. That it can only, "in a flat way" attempt to convey a reality that is "round and spiralling"<sup>120</sup>. And that it is

"always the product of embodied consciousness...If we agree that no person's consciousness can be said to be entirely disembodied, then it follows that every person's consciousness includes body consciousness. It is reasonable to conclude that language includes the expression of body consciousness...If the logic of our language is to be reconstructed more favourably for women (and for men), it is important to take bodies seriously as agents in consciousness. Just as it is important to reclaim women's bodies in positive images and concepts, it is also consequential to make explicit the ways in which men's bodies have actually influenced men's ideas. Language as we have it today is not healthy for women. It is mandatory for women's health to develop linguistic expressions which facilitate women's health. Self-determination requires a healthy mind and a healthy body, both of which are largely constructed through language...To emphasize women's bodies in language is not to fall back into a depressing biological determinism. Rather, it is to celebrate the reality of

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<sup>120</sup> Winnie Tamm, *Bodied Mindfulness*, p. 123.

women as embodied knowers...Acknowledging sex-specificity is to accept female and male bodies as sources of knowing...it is to open up the interactive process of dialogue by introducing strong subjectivity."<sup>121</sup>

This passage is vital in illustrating the causal relations between body, consciousness, language as expressing this consciousness (however tailored through cultural paradigms), and the effects this experienced articulation has on embodied health. Women's health, on all levels of being. Susan Griffin relates language to body in a direct, concrete, physiological way, when she says that "essence...precedes existence. But this is also true of language. The sounds of words have been determined thus by the shape of the human mouth, the capacities of the human tongue, and the range of the human ear."<sup>122</sup> Through language we name. In naming, we – the human species – give meaning to our selves and the world around us. When I carefully consider that "the Maori term for land and afterbirth are the same word, *whenua*" and "used to be buried in the land"<sup>123</sup>, when I read that "the Okanagan language has no pronouns for 'he' and 'she',"<sup>124</sup> then I begin to open myself to the existential significance of naming. Let me quote Susan Griffin again – the loving attention she gives to each word, each phrase, feels like poetry deep into my body consciousness, feels true: "The question of meaning is vital. One of the bleakest consequences of the social system we share is that we cease to be able to experience the meaning of existence. Of what *is*."<sup>125</sup> Through language and the radicality of naming, we move towards articulating a frame of reference in which our words form images form ideas form herstorical connections and - amidst laughter, pain and more laughter, re:create women's body consciousness.

In our quest for naming sex-specific, empowering symbolism we are oftentimes attracted to indigenous people's cultural/spiritual imagery. However, I am reminded of Lee Maracle's powerful advise on white people's appropriation of indigenous myths to give life-affirming meaning to their self-alienation: "The fact is that a white person appropriating our stories because they lack imagination or knowledge of their own is still telling a European story. Use whatever you like to

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., pp. 124 – 125.

<sup>122</sup> Susan Griffin, "Ecofeminism and Meaning". Karen Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism. Women. Culture. Nature*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 217.

<sup>123</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* p. 101.

<sup>124</sup> Jeannette Armstrong, in interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, p. 13.

<sup>125</sup> Susan Griffin, "Ecofeminism and Meaning", p. 91.

ground your story, intellectual Canada, but be honest. It is your story – it is not about me."<sup>126</sup> And so, loving First Nations meanings of celebrating women's energies, and listening in/to their stories and songs, I force myself to dig into my own Eurocentric roots and see if I can find evidence which un/covers women-centered meanings. And I arrive back in neolithic times when pre-IndoEuropean cultures seemed to express life-meaning that celebrated women and men in mutually complementary ways within a concretely expressed spirituality that saw meaning in life, not death.<sup>127</sup> It is a long way back, but at the same time, myths and symbolic imagery have a way of merging cross-cultural differences the further back we travel in the human story-telling. And I read feminist testimony that revises archeological findings, I read Marijta Gimbutas interpretation of evidence.

"The main theme of Goddess symbolism is the mystery of birth and death and the renewal of life, not only human but all life on earth and indeed in the whole cosmos. Symbols and images cluster around the parthenogenetic (self-generating) Goddess and her basic functions as Giver of Life, Wielder of Death, and, not less importantly, as Regeneratrix, and around the Earth Mother, the Fertility Goddess young and old, rising and dying with plant life. She was the single source of all life who took her energy from the springs and wells, from the sun, moon, and moist earth. This symbolic system represents cyclical, not linear, mythical time. In art this is manifested by the signs of dynamic motion: whirling and twisting spirals, winding and coiling snakes, circles, crescents, horns, sprouting seeds and shoots. The snake was a symbol of life energy and regeneration, a most benevolent, not an evil, creature. Even colors had different meaning than in the Indo-European symbolic system. Black did not mean death or the underworld; it was the color of fertility, the color of damp caves and rich soil, of the womb of the Goddess where life begins. White, on the other hand, was the color of death, of bones..."<sup>128</sup>

And I consider Gloria Steinem's reflections on the connections between ancient neolithic and contemporary Christian worship symbolism:

"In the 1970s, while researching in the Library of Congress, I found an obscure history of religious architecture that assumed a fact as if it were common knowledge: the traditional design of most patriarchal buildings of worship imitates the female body: Thus, there is an outer and inner entrance, labia majora and labia minora; a central vaginal aisle toward the altar; the two curved ovarian structures on either side; and then in the sacred center, the altar or womb, where the miracle takes place – where males give birth. Of course, I thought. The central ceremony of patriarchal religions is one in which men take over the yoni-power of creation by giving birth symbolically. No wonder male religious leaders so often say that humans were born in sin – because we were born to female creatures. Only by obeying the rules of the patriarchy can we be reborn through men. No wonder priests and ministers in skirts sprinkle imitation birth fluid over our heads, give us new names, and promise rebirth into everlasting life. No wonder the male priesthood tries to keep women away from the altar, just as women are kept away from control of our own powers of reproduction. Symbolic or real, it's all devoted to controlling the power that resides in the female body."<sup>129</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Lee Maracle, "Native Myths", from *Language in Your Eye*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990), p.186.

<sup>127</sup> In *All about Love*, bell hooks writes on the worship of death, pp. 191 – 205.

<sup>128</sup> Marijta Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), p. xx.

<sup>129</sup> Gloria Steinem in her foreword to *Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler: 1994, pp. xvii – xviii

And I begin to re:create meaning.<sup>130</sup> Emerging through the millennia, from the spectacular remembering of herstorical earth/goddess spirituality through the waning of Minoan culture, which honored cultural imagery, through the horrors of the witch-burning, into today's longing to re:connect earth/body-consciousness and responsible knowing.

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<sup>130</sup> Gloria Steinem gives other examples of the recurring cultural symbols still found in patriarchal religions: "Gnostic Christians worshiped Sophia as the female Holy Spirit and considered Mary Magdalene the wisest of Christ's disciples; Tantric Buddhism still teaches that Buddahood resides in the vulva; the Sufi mystics of Islam believe that *fana*, or rapture, can be reached only through Fravashi, the female spirit; the Shekina of Jewish mysticism is a version of Shakti, the female soul of God; and even the Catholic Church included forms of Mary worship that focused more on the Mother than on the Son. In many countries of Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world where gods are still depicted in female as well as in male forms, altars feature the Jewel in the Lotus and other representations of the lingam-in-the-yoni. In India, the Hindu goddesses Durga and Kali are embodiments of the yoni powers of birth and death, creation and destruction." (Gloria Steinem in her foreword to *Vagina Monologues*, Eve Ensler: 1994, pp. xii – xiii)

*divine vulva mine: below the softness of bedrock*

*grievously starved emotions  
bedrock wells  
drilled below scientific predictability  
thrust upward & out each time  
I decipher the coded directions  
in a man's speculative gaze  
each time they pull me  
suck me back into a cave*

*am I reborn once more*

*time slushes intertidal  
breasts grow galactic  
soft seafloor moss spreads into  
my glowing armpits  
languorous kelp seeps between  
solid paleolithic legs  
raises the golden goddess triangle  
launches her cosmic womb  
source of aquamarine waters of life  
eternal giving of birth*

*am I  
30.000 years ago  
birthing bodies  
& so when your tactical ego  
approaches mine in today's market place  
unless he eagerly learns to welcome her great design*

*beware of vermilion lust  
once unleashed  
her bloody passions may flood  
his detached cool meanings  
small spaces  
you still had reserved for us*

*beware now  
my supernatural vulva will interpret you  
swallow your aim  
whole*

## *Medusa*

*At times  
the world rains sibyls and other  
small creatures of the strange  
- don't know what I would do  
without their promiscuous laughter  
as they chase all my preconceptions  
as they beckon me into their voluptuous space whose throbbing sometimes even I can feel  
Inside their nonchalant I will move to be  
long ago        where  
lived with a wise woman whose frothy hairdo  
even for those times is  
shall we say - a bit on the riotous  
and her perceptive smile we know so much about  
(the smile he fears) so what  
her petsnakes,  
lovely bunch all glistening orange and lemon peel,  
who secrete ovaries and  
copulate habitually,  
babble soft secrets into the luminous folds of her large  
mother-of-pearl ears  
secrets that turn her on  
for ten thousand years*

*still turn me on  
whenever I listen  
into my own  
body song*

*when ever I bodysing*



*unfinished stories*

into  
our great-grandmothers' sacred moonbowl we nightdream  
swirl  
pass 'round  
swirl  
dipping fingers into red  
we pull out  
stories  
hairy stories  
s/low tales of whi(t)ch hunt  
soft naked bodies strangled  
nailed to the insidious laughter of European church bells  
burned at the stake of misogyny  
women's spirits tossed by flat minds      male glee  
tossed across centuries that were unremarkable  
sat in total black except for the cracks

and the fierce fire that kept burning, burning  
and their ashes shunned

the harassing wale of trumpets heralding  
sixhundred years off key  
push into our finger tips  
until spurts of untamed blood  
knowing spirits of yours and mine  
wild great great-grandmothers

we  
                continue to inhabit

throw armfuls of dare  
also longing  
towards yellow-ripe moons

they had markings and so  
have we whether we can heal there are stories to tell  
oh yeah

*So there have been a number of women*

*a round  
we gather and  
into a circle  
we spill  
laughter and noisy promises*

*they may mean nothing. they may mean more than ever.*

*so.  
around  
we gather and  
into a circle  
we spill.*

*silent mountains rise within us.  
tree roots grow quietly through  
our feet  
nameless  
and small  
and  
into earth womb.  
dark. alive.*

*almost at the end of our story we begin.  
right now this is all we need  
right now all we need  
is to feel        mountains rise  
within and  
trees share their roots  
with our random feet  
right now all we can ask for  
is  
listen        listen to earth  
             share  
earth story    Our story  
  
this means everything.*

Why is it so unfashionable to read – and seriously consider – Gimbutas' explanation of what she found? Are we still so far removed from imagery that honors rather than negates women's othering difference, rooted as it will always be in the biological determinism of their-our bodies. Why is it that Western capitalist patriarchal culture seeks to objectify the female body into 'manageable', exploitable body parts which can then be resourced within the context of global restructuring, all the while re:creating the illusion that masculinist dis/embodyed consciousness is the *desired* name of *our* game? Well, is it? So what does it mean to us – privileged, middle-class, ecological feminists – when we *know* that the the combined aggression of re:productive technologies and biotechnologies mean suffering for women on all levels of existence – and with it, suffering for their families and their communities? The answer surely lies in our body-political re:definition of commitment, committed love, commitment to becoming an ally, to our own selves, to each other, and to all planetary life. Susan Griffin's words ring again: "The question of meaning is vital. One of the bleakest consequences of the social system we share is that we cease to be able to experience the meaning of existence. Of what *is*."

Joy Kogawa's articulation of particular spiritual moments opens us to her own particular, cross-culturally grounded understanding of the interconnectedness of all relations:

"There is an identification as woman, as a Japanese Canadian, the identification with trees, with creatureliness. The search, if there is one, is from moment to moment through all those different identifications for something that is either at the base or that is a single focal point. For some reason human beings seem to be intent to finding single points, like searching for but never finding the ultimate building block of matter. In my search for a primary identification, I come to what I would call a spiritual point, a sense of unity like a spiritual explosion of joy, which I don't experience often. I experience despair as much as other people but inasmuch as I lose sight of those moments of joy which are very powerful antidotes to despair, the discipline that I would most seek for myself is a more accessible awareness of that spiritual resource below the surface of consciousness. It's like a stream that goes by as you sit on the bank. Fish come down that stream and one is nourished. One can be constantly nourished by whatever goes through this life. From time to time, there is an amazing experience of allness, of complete belongingness. What makes it recognizable to me is the emotion of very great joy that attends it. The only feeble things that seems appropriate to say at such moments is 'thank you'. That moment's identification is the one I wish would inform all my other identities, especially when the others become as heavy and painful as hair shirts you want to get rid of. If you have to put the shirt back on again, you can struggle and *survive* because of this other, for want of a better word, 'spiritual' identification."<sup>131</sup>

It is out of those moments that we may feel a loving commitment to work towards socio-ecological change along the guidelines Anne Bishop provides, as she encourages us to listen, listen, listen, and

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<sup>131</sup> Joy Kogawa in interview with Janice Williamson, *Sounding Differences*, pp. 153 – 154.

know that "when they trust you and know you well enough, they will ask you to do something specific to support their efforts."

"Our bodies are a source of power. They carry us through our tasks and actions, give us pleasure and warnings, tell us directly the state of the earth we live on, and provide us with a wonderful thinking, feeling, moving, sensing instrument for carrying out our will in the world. Our experiences of oppression teach us to hate our bodies for their gender, their colour, their connection to nature. If we can love and appreciate our bodies, we can regain a source of power." <sup>132</sup>

It is how we use this power. We can reject and negate women's biological determinism as something which will bind women forever to the politics of Western capitalist patriarchal heterosexism. Despite the innovative and very many ways attractive description of an amazon utopia/Monique Wittig, the belief in a forward-looking ecological feminist re:visioning of women coming into earth/body consciousness means that we must find ways to become allies, to ourselves and each other, across cultural divides. Our body experiences must become the most visible and sacred tool in our lives with which we achieve new meaning and work towards the celebration of all life. It is in this understanding that the textual collage I have presented here has not been about comparing, juxtaposing and critiquing theories, neither about coveting one particular theory, but about building, supporting, shaping in women's-our collective efforts to honor embodied consciousness as an individual and global ethics of care through the living and herstorical telling of women~body~experience. We need to get on with it. In the spirit of Joy Kogawa I wish to toss my self out into this becoming, with special hope for all children as they come into their own intimate body-consciousness while continuing their/our journey on this planet, and a parting prayer of hopeful anticipation: that we may find a way to celebrate sustainable meanings of life.

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<sup>132</sup> Anne Bishop, *Becoming an Ally*, p. 85

*immigrant's minne to the pacific north west*

*when  
I eavesdrop  
into my bones  
the feeble breath of my human grows*

*rumbles  
like thawed permafrost consciousness  
roar down skeletal caverns  
exhale*

*drift  
glide upward  
along  
sun-carved ancestral bones parched faces  
up up until she spits from  
high above the bulging trunk of a*

*colossal hemlock busy tearing cliffs and  
swaying into tides  
shaking with the uproarious laughter of  
mad sea lions*

*when I eavesdrop into  
my green bones  
belong.*

*children go sing where the sun*

*children  
you are still there*

*let me hear the soft heart beat of  
your voices we lost once  
already in the traumatic arena of birth*

*for you see  
recently  
I felt old as if spirits who had  
    tumbled through the once indigenous memory~events  
    I secretly kept in my brittle bones  
decided to emigrate & surface  
    into distant reflections lukewarm to touch*

*I no longer dare reach  
for their approaching absence  
fear  
they may leave me altogether  
already my hearing strains to tune out  
of the cluttery noise we term living*

*children my hearts  
but  
    there is yet something  
maybe you will hear  
maybe you are present  
maybe the presence has not left you  
as it has me and all others  
escaped the nervous flutter  
the perplexing arrangements  
of our lunatic thoughts*

*but in your bright moments  
children  
splash through mud puddles & cross oceans  
or down by the creek  
lean into the grooves of the old cottonwood with your eyes closed and  
your smooth foreheads curled thoughtfully  
your curious fingertips  
travel bark  
your smiles enter into her tellings  
enter your meaning  
feel her stories*

*a song children because what you may hear  
is into a single curve  
more than altogether complete  
a sheer almost-never-presence whose vibrations  
still relax  
atmosphere  
steadily bend the futures of  
being*

*whose luminous aura lives  
within the  
light beat of a tenderly  
pulsating treefrog membrane  
hides inside  
raspy singsongs of a cricket elbow  
gossiping a summer's evening  
it cautiously a-waits  
between the lithe caresses of  
snake scales  
correspondingly  
quick line*

*sun  
ray gone  
grass shifts  
barely no whisper of  
origin*

*children my hearts  
go  
enter this truth into you also  
children my hearts go sing where the sun  
when  
you are there*

*I hope.*

*:out of the past and into distinct possibilities*

*a woman's hopes  
are many and long lived*

*that her body not disappear  
that her partner could be her lover  
that someone be her lover  
a love be welcomed  
that between her tears and her laughter there be no hate  
that this her love for all life not be madness  
and if she is  
    that they won't pierce her body in a quest for no blood*

*that one day  
an immortal will step out and declare herself  
or shut us up  
that poetry always be like dream's soft sigh caressing our softer borders  
that tomorrow will grow organic  
and the air turn blue again with curiosity and forgiveness  
that this night be danced in and made bearable  
and her family sleep well into a connectable future*

*a woman's fears are many and outlived only by her dimpled hope*



## Glossary

The brief glossary serves to inform on some of the umbrella-terms used in the thesis. Most of the vocabulary is part of the larger contextual arena of Contemporary Literary Theory/Cultural Studies, and as such links the various fields of linguistics, philosophy, ethics, environmental studies, women's studies, religious studies, sociology, social geography etc. Within each discipline, terms have a tendency to reappear within slightly altered fields of meaning. The definitions I chose are taken from various texts and encyclopediae which more closely reflect the general context of my own writing, anchored as it is in the partiality of subjective experience. They are incomplete in so far as they do not pretend to represent the entire definitions given in the texts cited. Yet I have tried to catch some of the persistent underlying 'essences of meaning' which seem to overlap particular discipline boundaries and thus move texts further into interdisciplinary, intersubjective areas of debate. As such, this glossary has become another strategic tool to position my own text as one 'other' source of meaning.

**Cyborg:** "A term from science fiction used by Donna Haraway (1985) in her famous paper 'Manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology and socialist-feminism in the 1980s'. Haraway was looking for a metaphor that could redefine the potentialities of both embodiment and technology by relating each to the other in a more positive way and, for her, 'cyborg' signalled some of the 'ways that the things many feminists have feared most can and must be refigured and put back to work for life not death.'" (Haraway, 1991, p. 4). [Johnston, R.J. et al. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001, p.147]

"A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction...." (Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall Inc., 1991, p. 149)

**Ecofeminism:** "Ecofeminism is more than an identity politics, it reaches for an earth democracy, across cultures and species. It reframes environment and peace, gender, socialist, and postcolonial concerns beyond the single-issue approach fostered by bourgeois right and its institutions." (Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1997, p.x)

**Ecology:** "Ecology brings together issues relating to ontology (being), epistemology (knowing), and ethics (living humanely). A person's ontological reality is the central point of their identity, which is constructed within the process of ontological interrelatedness. From a holistic perspective of being, each person's identity is inseparable from their way of participating in the changing world." (Winnie Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995, p. 280)

**Essentialism:** "Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity." (Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*. London: Routledge, 1990, p.xi)

**Feminist spirituality:** "feminist spirituality is not about god language. It is not about a single god as the spiritual creator, usually symbolized by images associated with male power. Nor is it about including female symbols in traditional theologies. Including so-called feminine imagery in god language is, in my view, an activity that trivializes female power. Feminist spirituality is most importantly about women living as self-determining persons with spiritual creativity that is imaged predominantly in female symbols. Women's spiritual power, in this view, is integral to their existence as human beings...Spiritual feminists are motivated by both an attitude of love and one of ethical outrage." (Winnie Tomm, *Bodied Mindfulness*. pp. 3 - 4)

**Third World, Fourth World:** So-called Third World, Fourth World, North and South, colonized, Western, Westernized, non-Western, malindustrialized, over-industrialized countries – those are some of the prevalent terms used by various feminist and ecological feminist writers to differentiate between the countries which exert, maintain and increase global control – through legalized measures in the arenas of economy, military and/or 'Third World' aid packages, and those countries which find

themselves at the receiving end of neocolonial, dominating politics. All of the terms are questionable, and always open to critique, particularly by those who are being analyzed and otherized in the process. While most often the terms presume a geographical location, anyone using the terms must also remember that Western, Northern, over-industrialized nations perpetuate within their own nations more or less visible strategies of domination and invest in the ongoing cultivation of marginalization of indigenous peoples. One pertinent example in Canada is the fact that many of Canada's aboriginal peoples – particularly those seeking self-government - refuse to see themselves as Canadians. The social, geographical, spiritual implications of acknowledging this 'disposition' in the country's constitution are, as yet, 'unthinkable'. As well, there is a North within the North, since northern rural communities are usually less affluent, less connected with other communities (those in the more southern regions) and usually less supported by provincial health and welfare politics. Typically, in the (global) North, the most northern communities are also the ones made up of colonized, racialized and marginalized aboriginal peoples.

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