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Abstract
Full text of issue.
KUNAPIPI

Special Double Issue
Colonial and Post-Colonial Women’s Writing
Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet, and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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Kunapipi refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
CONTENTS

FICTION

Marian Eldridge, Tourist 18
Agnes Sam, The Dove 97
Nadine Gordimer, What Were You Dreaming? 99
Sheila Roberts, Carlotta’s Vinyl Skin 132
Suniti Namjoshi, The Fortunate One 138
Marion Halligan, Lunch 163

POEMS

Diane Fahey, Battery Hens 47
  Late Summer Garden 48
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Between Women 80
Grace Akello, Encounter 90
Abena Busia, Counter-Coup 121
  Liberation 121
Betsy Warland, The Shape of Things 144
  ‘The Map Is Not the Territory’ 145
Gillian Hanscombe & Suniti Namjoshi, It Takes a Lesbian 146

ARTICLES

Ann Curthoys, Women and Class 11
Elaine Campbell, Aphra Behn’s Surinam Interlude 25
Brian Matthews, Australian Colonial Women and Their Autobiographies 36
Susan Sheridan, ‘Temper, Romantic; Bias, Offensively Feminine’: Australian Women Writers and Literary Nationalism 49
Aritha van Herk, A Gentle Circumcision 59
Bev E.L. Brown, Mansong and Matrix: A Radical Experiment 68
Lauretta Ngcobo, The African Woman Writer 81
Lauretta Ngcobo, My Life and My Writing 83
Grace Akello, We Too Have Hands 87
Agnes Sam, South Africa: Guest of Honour Amongst the Uninvited Newcomers to England’s Great Tradition 92
Kirsten Holst Petersen, Unpopular Opinions:
  Some African Women Writers 107
Gillian Whitlock, ‘Have you read the one about the angry women who laughed?’ 123
Betsy Warland, untying the tongue 140
Bronwen Levy, Women Experiment Down Under: Reading the Difference 169

INTERVIEW
Barbara Hanrahan 152

BOOK REVIEWS 187

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 195
FOREWORD

The colonial world was no place for a woman, let alone a lady; it was a man’s world, demanding pioneering, martial and organisational skills, and the achievements of those in the shape of conquered lands and people were celebrated in a series of male-orientated myths: mateship, the mounties, explorers, freedom fighters, bushrangers, missionaries. At a later stage the same skills were used to overthrow colonialism, thus reinforcing the ethos of the colonies as a predominantly male domain, both in reality and in the popular imagination which was both formed by the myths and in turn shaped reality. This male ethos has persisted in the colonial and post-colonial world long after the reality which formed it had ceased to exist. The effect of this on colonial women was no longer a question of ‘no place for a woman’, since they were palpably there, but of a place denied in the imagination. With regard to literature, the myths are paramount, and female achievement does not fit readily into them. As Aritha van Herk writes: ‘The pun of virgin on version is deliberate. This essay stems from my position as a woman writing in the west, the need for alternate readings of our texts. Before I can write, I have to rewrite the male virgins.’

The African and Caribbean women suffered from a reflection of this ethos. Regardless of what role or status they had in their own traditional society, inclusion into the expanding Western sphere in their countries usually meant loss of status, as this inclusion took place mainly through the medium of education which was given primarily to boys. African and Caribbean women writers therefore exist as writers against enormous odds and under pressure of a double set of myths which seek to deny their creative existence. They are literally fighting for visibility. The difficulties of the black women writers in England are further exacerbated by the problems of racism and immigrant status.

This book is concerned with the process of mapping out the areas of women’s subjugation and invisibility in the colonial situation, but much more importantly, it goes on to discuss and invent strategies of dealing with the myths and denials in a creative way so as to bring about a new consciousness which is the precondition for changing present attitudes.

One way of doing this is by retrieving lost, dismissed or maligned early women writers. Elaine Campbell discusses the unjust treatment and the arrogant dismissal on the part of male critics of the first woman writer to
make a living from her writing, Aphra Behn, and Kirsten Holst Petersen discusses the clash between nationalism and feminism in the writing of the Sierra Leonian writer Adelaide Casely Hayford who wrote before the turn of the century. Sue Sheridan deals with the same topic in an Australian context in her contribution.

A moving section is the personal statements from three African women writers, all now living in England, two of them in exile. Grace Akello, Lauretta Ngcobo and Agnes Sam outline their personal difficulties in realizing their ambitions to become writers in their own countries and their continued difficulties to be recognized and published in England.

A large section is concerned with devising strategies for a new aesthetics which could form the theoretical and mythical background for a new kind of writing. Bev Brown juxtaposes Brathwaite’s male-orientated ‘sun-aesthetics’ with works by Jean Rhys and Zee Edgell and shows how Brathwaite’s theory, if applied to these writers, turns out to be invalid. Gillian Whitlock explores the possibility of using laughter as a weapon, and the creative short story by Sheila Roberts exemplifies this approach. An important aspect of feminist writing has been (a) recognizing that language itself has been colonized by the male experience, and (b) trying to find a language which can describe female experience adequately. Betsy Warland in her contribution discusses the necessity and the viability of a specifically lesbian language, and the creative contributions by Betsy Warland, Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe show this in practice. On a more theoretical level Bronwen Levy discusses questions of difference in women’s writing and the various and at times opposing opinions and strategies in present-day Australian and New Zealand women’s writing.

The book contains a large range of concerns, opinions and strategies about women’s writing, and we hope that it will be a valuable contribution to the general critical debate on the subject of women’s writing and feminist strategies. We also hope that the book will make enjoyable reading.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN & ANNA RUTHERFORD
Women and Class

Views of society based on a contrast of the position of ‘women’ with that of ‘men’ have a different way of organising our understanding of social life than do views which rest on a notion of class division. In current political terms, feminists and socialists have different starting points. Yet socialists have had to come to terms with issues of sexual inequality, while feminists are faced with the problem that while they posit a common ‘oppression of women’, they must recognise also the very great differences between women according to their social class. This problem is not a new one for feminism. It bedevilled First Wave Feminists, especially those attracted to socialist ideals and organisations. It bedevils modern feminism. No matter how exhaustively and endlessly feminists discuss it, the issues raised under the heading ‘women and class’ continue to emerge as important and worrying.

Until about four or five years ago, I did not, actually, find it especially worrying myself. I would argue that women’s oppression and class exploitation were both deeply embedded in our society, and that one had to take both into account, seeing a complex interrelationship. In practice my analyses concentrated on working class women, for here both systems of domination could be seen to be operating. In the area of the sexual division of labour, for example, one could suggest how the identification of women, and not men, with childcare formed a basis for a sexual division in the workforce which in turn reinforced that identification.

But around 1981 I began to find these formulations inadequate. The often-heard charge — that the women’s movement is essentially a middle class phenomenon — which I had earlier dismissed as a basically sexist attempt to dismiss the importance of the women’s movement and the issues it raises, I now began to take more seriously. I was influenced, I suppose, by my changing social environment. As I grew older, and gained greater job security and a higher level of pay, I saw my feminist friends around me experiencing the same process. We were the baby-boom generation, the first post-Hiroshima generation, who had experienced the educational expansion and the plentiful job supply of the
1960s. Now, by the early 1980s, we were in our mid to late thirties, had completed our education and training, gone through the difficult early years of uncertain employment, and had become established. We became public servants, journalists, teachers, academics, librarians, social workers, and so on. We published magazines, saw the correct films, attended the correct meetings, and had consciousness-raised ourselves to think correct thoughts. We were more often than not mortgaged to the hilt buying houses, and many of us had travelled for a time overseas. We became the kind of people who were asked to give papers at conferences, and had at last acquired sufficient confidence to do so. The women's movement which we had helped to build had given us much — a perspective, moral support, friendships, and an avenue through which we could act for social and political change.

The women I'm speaking of were, then, in terms of the society they lived in, highly privileged people. They had been born at the right time, had had access to education, and now had a relatively high degree of job security and material comfort. Yet how did this group, these friends of mine in the women's movement, see themselves? They saw themselves as oppressed, as victims, as underdogs. They would complain bitterly about the pain of being women, about the men they worked with or knew, about relationships. They would go to all-women parties and conferences, and complain. My God how they whinged! Life was a dreary round of problems and defeats, pain and disillusion. As they drank their pretty good wine (no more of the red rot-gut of student days) and helped themselves to magnificent food, they told themselves how much they were suffering the pain of being women. They recognised their material advantages in some ways, but at bottom identified themselves as part of an oppressed group — women. As their conversational diet moved from relationships and exams and lectures, through to relationships, children (or alternatively how horrible children were), and divorces, and through again to relationships, mortgages and renovations, operations and female diseases, their underlying theme was their own oppression.

Around 1981, the contradictions in all this suddenly overwhelmed me. How self-indulgent this all was! How closed, how spoilt, how pampered! These women might ironically refer to themselves as the 'spoilt generation' but they seemed unable to recognise how spoilt they were. And I began to wonder how this was possible. For the people I'm talking about regarded themselves as socialists of some kind, as opposed to capitalism, to Fraser (Australia’s conservative Prime Minister at the time), to imperialism, to the nuclear arms race. If most were not Marxists in any very serious sense, then most were at least aware of class exploitation and
the ways it is produced under capitalism. How could socialists so easily identify themselves, the relatively privileged, as oppressed? How could socialists have become so blind to the exploitation and struggles of working class and colonised men? How had they come to identify the relative privilege and power of the middle class men they combatted in their working lives with the position of all men?

One answer, of course, is feminism. Feminism, even in its most class-aware pro-socialist varieties, had enabled these women to blind themselves to where so much privilege lay. It enabled them to locate themselves on the side of the oppressed, and working class men as at least the collaborators with, but more likely as themselves among, the oppressors. And so I began to think that some very basic questioning of feminist propositions was needed. I began to think that the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’, as so commonly used in feminist discourse, needed some deconstructing. It seemed to me that what had in the early 1970s begun, for us, as a very necessary analysis — namely that the individual problems many of us experienced were in fact products of social distinctions and structures — had developed into an absurd level of generalisation. Women feel or think such and such, men don’t, and so on.

But if the categories needed deconstructing, then there was the problem of not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I didn’t want to go back to the earlier Left sects’ denial of the importance of the issues feminism raised. I didn’t want to reject feminism on the grounds that it split the Left, that all would come good after the revolution. I didn’t want to return to a situation where issues like rape, domestic violence, abortion, sexuality, sexual exploitation and harassment, the sexual division of labour, notions of masculinity and femininity, housework and childcare, and all the rest were legislated back off the radical socialist agenda. Not that they ever had been entirely absent from it, especially in the cases of equal pay and childcare, but they hadn’t been very firmly on it either. I recognised that the women’s movement had achieved something of profound importance in creating all these as issues, and in pursuing them through trade union, state, and other institutional, ideological, and cultural channels. So the problem was, for me, how to retain these very real gains and insights, and yet restore a more truly socialist awareness of the manifest and hidden injuries of class. How, that is, could we return to that older socialist problem of the possibilities for middle class support of a working class revolution?

The issues seemed complicated for a particular reason. This was how to understand the changing class structure, and nature of capitalism itself. One strand of thought was to argue that the people I’ve here been
referring to as ‘middle class’ are actually the upper layers of the working class. They earn a wage, they have nothing, more or less, to sell but their labour power. If they lose their jobs, they face poverty (perhaps after a time) like anyone else. This seems to me useful, for there is indeed no basis for these salaried members of the ‘middle class’, or in some arguments the ‘new middle class’, being regarded as structurally distinct from the working class. Rather, what we have is a large working class, internally stratified. Yet if we accept this form of analysis, we need also to accept that within this large working class, the differences in job security, rates of pay, and access to positions of institutional power, are absolutely vast. It is politically important, I think, for teachers, academics, social workers, journalists, and public servants to define themselves as workers, and to develop a trade union and political consciousness accordingly. It is equally important, though, not to lose sight of the fact that such groups of people are significantly privileged in contrast with the bulk of the working class. While it is true that many groups formerly thought of as ‘middle class’ — such as clerical workers — have been proletarianised, it is also true that the having or not of the kind of skills which can earn a secure and interesting job and a reasonable wage is still an important and profound source of differentiation amongst the non-owners of this society. Educational qualifications, in particular, still count a great deal. And this differentiation is made even sharper by the fact that unemployment hits the unskilled by far the hardest.

A second common way of thinking about how the class structure of advanced capitalist societies has changed has been to say that, given the post-war advances in the pay and conditions of employed working class people, the real oppressed are not the working class per se, but special categories, sometimes referred to as the marginals. These groups include women, Aborigines, non-English-speaking migrants, prisoners, the unemployed. Any employed Anglo-Australian male is thereby deemed as not to be exploited, no matter how tedious, insecure, or low-paying his job may be. The argument is that this male employed working class has been bought off, and no hope for radical change can be found there. The institutional creations of this group — the trade unions — are to be dismissed as conservative, racist, sexist, etc. without any real reference to whether they are Left or Right, or what kind of politics they pursue. In this view, quite well-established women, and migrants of non-English-speaking background, are to be seen as more oppressed, and more politically trustworthy, than unskilled working-class Anglo-Australian men.

Such a view has certain strengths. It points to the ways the working class is divided, and to bases for social inequality and domination other
than class. It recognises the degree to which trade unions lie in danger of incorporation, co-option, and collaboration. But it has some key weaknesses too. It fails to see how many of these specific oppressions are tied in with the class nature of capitalism, that they acquire the character they do as a result of: colonialism (in the case of Aborigines), of the uneven distribution of capital bringing forth a necessity for the international mobility of labour (in the case of migrants), the repressive role of the capitalist state (in the case of prisoners), the inability of capitalism in periods of recession to provide jobs for all (in the case of the unemployed), and the fact that capitalism rests on a particular family structure whereby domestic labour and childcare are only partially drawn into the wages system (in the case of women). This analysis fails to see that many of the so-called marginals are in fact working class, whether they are employed or not. It fails to see also that some people within these special categories — such as middle class women and migrants of non-English-speaking background — have considerable resources with which to combat the specific discriminations and inequalities they experience. What it does is to move from a very necessary recognition of conflict and diversity within the working class and within other classes to a denial of the validity of class itself. It forgets how capitalism works, how it is based on fundamental distinctions between capital and labour, owners and non-owners, managers and workers, and secures its hegemony through the provision of grossly differential material rewards and degrees of control and power to the populations who sustain it.

There is another factor affecting degrees of privilege and perceptions of it. And that is age, especially as it affects those I have described as in the upper strata of the working class. Life for the young members of that group is not a bed of roses. Students are very often exceptionally poor. Many of the students I teach do not eat properly, and live in grossly overcrowded and run-down shared houses. Entering the job market is not easy, even when you have marketable skills. It is only after a period of time that the benefits incurred from having those skills start to be realised. It is partly for this reason, I think, that so many radical movements depend for their troops on young people in the process of acquiring professional skills — people who experience immediate difficulties but who have the freedom which flows from an awareness of a long term future. For young people not undergoing this process of preparation for salaried secure jobs, the spectre and reality of unemployment, and the knowledge that any long term security will be an exceedingly long hard battle, very often militates against organised political radicalism. For women what this difference means is that whereas young women in the
less privileged sections of the working class devote enormous energies to establishing a marriage, and saving for a house and so on, young women from its privileged sections devote similar energies to acquiring skills, resisting marriage, family, house-buying and so on, and seeking a lifestyle which allows space for alternatives, and in many cases for political and cultural activity.

And so I get back to feminism. Why do the relatively privileged women I began by discussing become blinded to the fact of their own privilege, and the lack of it in many working class men? Why are sexual inequalities seen not so much as complicating the effects of class exploitation but as replacing it altogether? I've suggested several answers — first, the concept of 'women's oppression' allows us to define ourselves as victims, however relatively privileged we may be. Second, the extension of the category working class to include salaried, higher-paid workers, allows us to forget the very real differences in material rewards and access to power within that working class. Thirdly, the politics of special categories of oppression obscures a recognition of class differentiation within some of those categories — especially women and non-English-speaking migrants — and so obscures an understanding of capitalism as resting on class exploitation.

We need to recognise that the differences in class and sub-class position between women deeply affect responses to feminism. These differences are, I think, based on women's differing perceptions of the position of men in their own class, or sub-class. Women from the more privileged sections of the working class see their male equivalents as having levels of wealth and power which are denied to the women on the basis of sexual discrimination and the realities of a sexist society generally. They battle with these men for a more equal share of the cake — job opportunities, career paths, levels of pay, and influence in policy-making within public and private organisations. Women from the rest of the working class do not, on the whole, see it this way. They see the men of their own section of the working class as exploited, as not earning enough to support a family at the desired level, if they are earning at all. Such women frequently seek work opportunities and greater rights and remuneration in the workplace and thus a greater measure of material comfort and financial independence for themselves where possible. They also seek greater negotiating power within a family context. But they do not perceive themselves as locked in a battle with men for these things, and will, when questioned, assume that men have greater rights to a full-time secure job than they themselves have. They see themselves struggling for husbands to get secure jobs, themselves to work where they can and be
sufficiently supported if they cannot, for a reasonable material level, and for alternatives if the everlasting battle for secure family life is temporarily or permanently lost. To the extent that feminism provides them with the weapon to achieve their aims they welcome it, but a feminism which describes ‘men’ as the enemy, as Sydney feminism in particular so often does, does not speak to their situation. I do not think the feminist critique of the family is attractive to these less privileged working class women; what most of them seek is adequate conditions for securing family life. It is for more privileged women, on the whole, that rejection of family life has proved an attractive option. And the reasons, though complex, have one clear element: such a rejection is more feasible if you can expect, on the basis of recognised skills, to earn a reasonable wage throughout your adult life. There may, of course, be periods of unemployment, especially now and especially for younger women, but by and large your chances of self-support — and thereby your interest in transient (communal) rather than semi-durable (family) households — are heavily conditioned by your class position.

So feminism needs to come to terms more than I think it has with several basic features of social life under capitalism — with the differing positions and therefore relation to feminism of women in different classes and sub-classes, with the very real exploitation of less privileged working-class men, with the problems of building working-class unity in a society which hands out its benefits and rewards so grossly unequally. Socialist feminists need, I think, to remember more strongly than many of them do, the production of inequalities other than those based on sex or gender. It is only when these issues are grappled with seriously that feminist critiques and analyses and demands — most if not all of which I regard as profoundly important — will be able to be fought for in a way which not only reorders gender relations within classes but also reorders class relationships altogether.

This is a revised version of a paper delivered to the Marxist Summer School, January 1984.

This article will appear at a later date in Angry Women to be edited by Carole Ferrier and to be published by Hale and Iremonger.
Tourist

But which shower to choose? There are two on your floor of the pensione, each curtainless, one so small and steamy that you have to leave the door ajar and risk a stranger bursting in — a stranger, probably, who will squawk at you in Italian — the other so eccentric that water sprays all over the walls and your nearly new dressing gown and trickles into the passage. Which shower shall I try today? you would like to ask someone... Which shower shall I try today? you say in your head, jokey, so that whoever is listening can have no inkling of the small panic that underlies the silly question. Perhaps, after all, you should have played safe and booked into a hotel? But, as you put it to them back home in the tea room during one of those sessions when you examined your plans from every angle, hogging the tea break probably but that is a traveller's privilege, of course I can afford a hotel, you said, but a pensione in Rome sounds more fun. Well of course a pensione is more fun! came their prompt reply. More fun. More real. Let your hair down properly while you’re about it — and you saw them exchange smiles. Be a devil! Take the plunge! Where’s your sense of adventure?

So, when you are showered and dressed in your sensible dark blue, that gold ring from your Christmas bon-bon slipped onto your wedding finger, your handbag slung travel-wise over one shoulder and your camera over the other, all ready to plunge, you ask yourself what to look at today. They were full of advice, of course. The Forum. The fountains. The churches. Yesterday, because it was close to your pensione, you looked through an ancient Basilica with a magnificent ceiling of plundered gold. Today you have a craving to be outdoors, to throw yourself into the Roman throng. The Via Veneto is a must! they told you. (They pronounced it Veneeto, and so do you.) That’s where the Beautiful People hang out, they said. You sit at a sidewalk café on the Via Veneeto and you drink a leisurely cup of coffee and you watch the passing parade, imagine! an Italian film star straight off the set, or a fashion designer, or an oil baron jetted in from the Gulf. If you don’t see the Beautiful People you haven’t seen Rome, they smiled. You look up
‘Rome at Night’ in your guide book and it is just as they said. It sounds so simple you almost believe it possible. ‘On the Via Veneto spend a few evening hours simply sitting,’ says the guide book. ‘You’ll be glad you did.’ The Beautiful People beckon; they brush you with elegant eyelashes. You swan downstairs from the floor with the idiosyncratic showers and in the chair in the tiny reception room you practise sitting.

The manager, a young man less good looking than your preconceived notions, is speaking on the telephone in rapid Italian. When he has finished he switches to English as easily as he clicks down the receiver. ‘Good morning, Signora. Can I help you at all?’ Thank you, I am just putting my courage together — ‘I’m just checking my map’ is what you actually say, unfolding the map and turning it this way and that. ‘Let me know if you need any help, Signora,’ he repeats, turning his attention to a young couple who have just arrived. Dropping rucksacks almost onto your feet, they begin ‘Guten Morgen —’ then laugh tiredly and try in Italian. ‘Guten Morgen. Ich spreche deutsch,’ he says gently. An English-speaking guest you exchanged nods with at breakfast asks if there’s anywhere close by to get a good, cheap lunch, dinner as well maybe. ‘Turn right and right again and you’ll find an excellent locanda,’ says the manager, adding ‘Tell Roberto that Giovanni sent you.’ The guest hurries out, the Germans make their way upstairs, the manager busies himself with his books. You warm towards this Giovanni, so helpful, so reassuring, and you search your mind for some request of your own. On your map you can locate the Trevi Fountain (the most romantic in Rome, they swooned, teasing you about what to wish), but the Via Veneto isn’t so easy. You are about to ask him to point it out when he suddenly looks up. ‘Signora, your bag and your camera over your shoulder like that — not a good idea. In Rome unfortunately at this time of year we have many scippatori, young men on motorpeds on the lookout for women such as yourself, a tourist, that is, with valuable articles on straps which they seize as they ride by.’ He leans towards you, his eyes like boiling black coffee. ‘And if you imagine to hang on you will be dragged along the pavement and your knees smashed!’ What are you to do? As you stare at him in perplexity he adds ‘Only a suggestion, of course, but can you not carry what you need in a body belt? Then you are not quite such an obvious target.’ Oh but you hate a body belt! It is so awkward and clumsy — so sweaty — unfeminine. How could he be so insensitive! You slump in your chair.

Somehow, finally, your camera gets locked away in the pensione safe, someone whom in your fluster you forget to thank holds the lobby door open for you, and you pass out into the street, your shoulder bag clamped
to your stomach and your ears attuned to the put-put of the scippatori. Everyone rides a motorped, it seems, even a priest with flat black hat and swinging crucifix. In the streets is a babble of tongues. And you are part of it all! How you wish someone could take your photo to send them as proof! You keep away from the Metro, of course, because of the gipsies — those women, they warned you, their eyes lighting up at your consternation, those great dark women on the Metro stairways who will crowd you into a corner, thrust a plate of cassata into your face, and rob your pockets! Murmuring those phrases in capitals in the Berlitz guide: STOP! AIUTO! POLIZIA! and stepping carefully because of all the dog dirt, and the rank streams fanning out from the corners of buildings, you turn in the general direction of the Trevi Fountain.

In a small square you come unexpectedly upon the Fountain of Tortoises, four graceful naked youths each supporting a tortoise that is scrambling to drink at the upper basin. As you watch, one of them flips his tortoise right into the pool and, hopping down from his shell-shaped perch, says Come Signora, together you and I will see Rome. Upon which the second jumps down: Come with me, Signora... then the third, and the fourth. What are you to do? Which one to choose? You twist and twist the gold bon-bon ring, trying to decide, and when they catch sight of it as it glints in the sun, each murmurs Mi dispiace, Signora, and leaps back onto the fountain. The water flows, the tortoises clamber, you walk on alone.

As for the Trevi — you feel a shock of disappointment. It is so grandiose, the water so sluggish and green, the marble youths twisting the necks of the seahorses so cruel. In the great pool at the foot of the fountain real youths, loud and suntanned, paddle and kick and grimace at cameras. Coins glitter. You shoo away a pigeon and sit down, feeling rather silly at having to push through all the families and the couples just to toss away a good coin. In a dry grotto to one side of the fountain a man lies asleep, the full strength of the late summer sun beating down on his face. You sit for a long time, wondering what they would have you wish, and still he sleeps on.

At last, deliberately not wishing, your heart beating because you have in a sense defied THEM, you turn back towards the centre of the city. There, somewhere, the Beautiful People are beginning to stir. You wonder about that red-faced sleeper — should you have wakened him? Although it is early September, autumn already, Rome surprises you with its heat. Soon, striding along the Via del Corso, the Via Quattro Novembre, the Via Nazionale, you feel as embarrassed as a schoolgirl as great dark patches spread under the arms of your dress. You would like
to throw it away. Buy yourself something new! they groaned. Get a new image! they shrieked. But when you venture into one of the dozens of little shops with the dazzling window displays, all your carefully rehearsed Berlitz phrases desert you; at the assistant's courteous 'Posso aiutarla?' you do not look up, you go on fingering the garments, you actually pretend to be deaf. The ease of this out-of-character dissembling so shocks you that you hurry away in search of some quiet place to collect yourself. You walk swiftly past several fountains, along a steep street and into the very bowels of a large dark church. And it is not a church at all, you discover, but a charnel house.

An old, old man in the brown robe of a religious order welcomes you towards a gallery. Here, arresting as any fashion window, are grottoes of human bones, centuries of bones, skulls, ribs, pelvises, layers of arm bones, layers of leg bones, all painstakingly selected for length and shape and worked into exquisite designs. Electric light filters through a criss-crossing of fingers. An arrangement of pelvises clasped within a rectangle of arm bones suggests a motto that you puzzle to decipher. A hooded skeleton in brown dusty garb grins at you over folded hands, inviting you to admire his artistry. From the wrinkled monk at the desk you buy a postcard picturing the soaring rose-patterned ceiling fashioned from vertebrae and thin, delicate ribs, and learn that you are in the Cimitero dei Cappuccini, the Capuchin Cemetery.

Outside, shivering a little although the sun is still powerful, you hurry into the first bar you come to and, thrusting thousands of lire at the cashier, order un cappuccino. 'Un cappuccino,' you repeat, and begin to laugh, remembering those old dusty men amongst the bones, i cappuccini — a woman laughing alone in a public place in a foreign country.

'Just a touch of the sun,' you say to the person standing next to you at the counter, a woman carrying an English-language guide book. The woman smiles. You like her face; she has good bones. She is about your age, a bit younger, five or ten years maybe. 'I've been out walking,' you explain. She too looks as though she has been walking; she is wearing blue and white running shoes with pink laces. 'There's more bite in the sun than you think,' you continue, feeling terribly glad that you've met: two fellow travellers, sisters almost. 'For this time of year,' you add, noting with surprise that she doesn't bother with a protective ring on her finger. Unobtrusively you slip yours off and drop it into your half-empty cup.

'That's true,' says the woman.

She finishes her coffee. Hastily you say, 'I've been walking since daybreak and still there's so much to see!'
'There certainly is,' she agrees, pushing her cup across the counter. 'What have you seen today?' you demand before she can move away. 'Well!' She widens her eyes, remembering. 'I started with the Forum—'

'And the churches!' you take up. 'Have you seen the gold ceiling of Santa Maria Maggiore? No? Well, the Trevi Fountain, then? Everyone goes there! What about the Capuchin Cemetery — you haven’t seen the Capuchin Cemetery? Why, you haven’t seen anything!'

Into the little silence that follows this, you pour a wonderful idea that has been frothing up in your mind since you got rid of that ring. 'Listen, I know just the place to go at this time of day. The Via Veneto. You know about the Via Veneto? It's where people go with their friends to drink and eat dinner and then sit over coffee to watch the Beautiful People go by, the Aga Khan’s grandson, Gucci, Sophia Loren, all that crowd. It’s not expensive,' you add, glancing at her running shoes. 'All the tourists go there — all my friends — if you don’t see the Via Veneto you haven’t seen Rome!'

'Well!' she says again. 'It does sound rather fun, doesn’t it? Where is it?'

'Oh it’s quite nearby.' But when you spread out your map, and she spreads out hers, you can find the Via Veneto neither listed in the index nor on the map itself. 'Scusi, Signor,' you read carefully from your phrase book to the Italian standing on the other side of you. 'Dove Via Veneto? Si Signor, Via Veneto! ... Never mind,' you say to your new friend. 'I’m sure it’s this way.' In the Via Quattro Fontane you accost a young man, 'La Via Veneto, please, per piacere?' but he shrugs and walks on. At the Piazza della Repubblica — where you are only a few minutes’ walk from the Metro and your pensione, you realize — your friend says 'Well, these Beautiful People seem pretty elusive, don’t they, and I’m just about wacked.'

'Of course, because you need to eat!' you encourage her. 'I know the very place, just a few steps from here. And Roberto will know all about it. And then we can go there together, you and I, for coffee.'

But the woman shakes her head. 'Some other time, maybe. But you go, the Via Veneto sounds fun.'

'Well of course it’s fun!' you snap. 'But I can hardly go alone, can I?'

'Why not?' says the woman. Why not? How stupid this woman has become! You part then, and when you have had a second shower at the pensione (in the other one this time) and changed your dress and taken a headache powder, you turn right and right again and find Giovanni’s locanda. It is, as you anticipate, a very ordinary place, clean, but with
nothing notable about its lighting or ceiling or anything, an anonymous place. A waiter whom you assume is Roberto motions you to a table on the pavement with a grace that reminds you of the youths with the tortoises — except that he wears clothes, of course, and has a petulant mouth. He is so slow in bringing the menu that you decide to keep quiet about Giovanni’s commendation. His manner becomes positively disdainful when you order the only familiar dish on the menu, *spaghetti bolognese*, instead of being adventurous and starting off with *soppressata* as he suggests. When he is not taking orders he is hanging around a table where a young woman is sitting alone. She has an American accent, and you overhear Roberto saying, ‘I lika to practise, the Eenglish, when, the occasion, presents.’ The *locanda* becomes busy, the young woman is joined by a young man, and Roberto moves away. At the table on the other side of you sit two girls, sixteen or eighteen perhaps, who do not eat but drink cup after cup of *caffe espresso*. The young woman talks earnestly in Italian to the young man, telling him her life story, you decide, telling him about the husband who isn’t with her, the boss who won’t promote her, her wedding ring flashing as the words pour. She has all his attention. An enormous motor bike roars past, turns, and stops opposite the table with the two girls. Roberto appears at the doorway and stands transfixed. At last he looks down at you, his eyes warm now, responsive, and murmurs, ‘Is magnificent bike, is Ducati, can do more than two hundred and twenty!’ The cyclist, leaning back with his feet propped on the ground, calls out. The girls exchange glances, then the one with her back to the street lights a cigarette, inhales and blows a smoke ring over her head. The cyclist waits. The young man on the other side of you is now holding the American woman’s hand. The second of the two girls beckons Roberto and orders more coffee. Still the cyclist waits. And then the girl with her back to him jumps up, runs across to him, speaks, he guns the engine and is gone. The noise of it, even as it grows fainter, pierces the ordinary traffic. The two girls stare at each other. At the first table the woman has retreated, the man is leaning towards her, she is shaking her head. And then you hear the familiar throb of that motor bike. The girls jump up as it circles, both of them climb onto the pillion seat and away they blast. The American woman has dropped her head, her body quiescent now, it is he who is talking, talking, still she shakes her head but now both hands are holding hers, his fingertips move along her arms.

The *locanda* has become crowded. A waiting couple fidgets near your table. Roberto makes it clear with an impatient swish of his serviette that he would like you to pay and go. Surely this day can not end so inconclusively? You make one last frantic effort. ‘Scusi, Signora? Perhaps if the
Signora writes — ' and he hands you a pencil stub. 'Ah! Si, Via Veneto, Signora! Via Vittorio Veneto. You have the map, Signora?' And with a lofty smile he points to it at once, so obvious now, Via Vittorio Veneto (only your eye stopped at Ve in the index), Via Vittorio Veneto, the street of the Beautiful People, no more than a few minutes from where you actually were earlier, at the Capuchin Cemetery.

'Molto grazie! Una tazza di caffè, per piacere,' you say, deliberately using Italian so he can't practise his English. To drown your terrible disappointment you take out your souvenir postcard and using Roberto's pencil stub you write, very small so as to fit it all in: 'Hello back there! How's this! I'm at this very moment sitting amongst the Beautiful People at THE place to be. Name? I Cappuccini. You should see my shocking pink laces. My friend Roberto speaks English German Italian, he's so easy to talk to, he must have got my whole life story just over the soppres-sata. His hobby's Ducatis and he looks like —' You make a wild guess. '— looks like Gucci.' As Roberto hovers, anxious for that table, you continue, 'He's so persuasive. So I'll have to stop now. Chow!'
Aphra Behn’s relatively obscure literary reputation is not so much a result of the vagaries of fate as it is the product of an effort to discredit her literary career at a time when considerable interest in Behn’s canon was exhibited in England and in the United States. It is the purpose of this essay to review what I call the Behn-Bernbaum case in order to demonstrate that the primary ground upon which the campaign against Behn rested is untrue. It has not required very strenuous research to compare the texts of Behn’s *Oroonoko* with George Warren’s *An Impartial Description of Surinam* in order to discover the lack of similarity between the two pieces; however, twentieth-century editors have preferred to accept without question Ernest Bernbaum’s accusation that Behn had ‘stolen’ her *Oroonoko* materials from Warren rather than to suspect the querulous tones in which Bernbaum’s judgments against Behn were issued.

My contention is that the unique inspiration for *Oroonoko* was derived from Aphra Behn’s short residence in Surinam. In the absence of a firm and reliable biography, the Surinam sojourn is clouded by conjecture as are Behn’s experiences as a royal agent in Holland, and, what is even more perplexing, the details of her parentage. Her origins have been reviewed by various biographers and the results are confusing. For example, the Countess of Winchilsea, Anne Finch, roughly contemporary with Behn, in a handwritten note stated that ‘Mrs Behn was Daughter to a Barber, who liv’d formerly in Wye.... Though the account of her life before her Works pretends otherwise; some Persons now alive Do testify upon their Knowledge that to be her Original.’

Aphra Behn’s Surinam Interlude

For I have heard that most of that which bears the name of learning, and which has abused such quantities of ink and paper, and continually employs so many ignorant unhappy souls for ten, twelve, twenty years in the university (who yet, poor wretches, think they are doing something all the while) — as logic, etc. and several other things (that shall be’ nameless, lest I should misspell them) — are much more absolutely nothing than the errantest play that e’er was writ.

*Aphra Behn, The Dutch Lover, 1673.*
sufficed as authority for Sir Edmund Gosse (in an article published in the 6 September 1884 issue of *Athenaeum*) whose faith in the accuracy of Finch’s information led to the attack by Bernbaum upon the authenticity of Behn’s Surinam experiences and of her use of them in *Oroonoko*. Professor Bernbaum contended that a barber would never have received an appointment as Lieutenant-General of Surinam, that Behn never lived in the West Indies, and that her conception of *Oroonoko* was fictitious. Behn’s deft and determined manipulation of verisimilitude lies at the core of Bernbaum’s attack. His hypothesis was that if one could prove Behn went to Surinam, then *Oroonoko* might be based on fact and could be authentic. If, on the other hand, Bernbaum could demonstrate that Behn never visited Surinam, *Oroonoko* would be simply a work of the imagination supported by Behn’s myriad forms of verisimilitude. That the novella could be considered a work of greater creativity if it were entirely fictional was a consideration lost in Bernbaum’s preoccupation with Behn’s veracity. And although it is basically immaterial whether Behn’s verisimilitude in *Oroonoko* is founded upon fact or upon imagination, it is important to realize that Bernbaum’s charges of mendacity damaged Behn’s literary reputation.

Parental identity is not the sole problem of Behn’s biography. Her husband’s identity is another, but the mystery that concerns us most surrounds her Surinam years. The tangle regarding her parentage relates directly to the authenticity of her Surinam experiences. Behn says in *Oroonoko* that her father died during the sea voyage to South America. If he did not live to fill his post, then there could be no official documents from the colony bearing his name or giving an account of his activities. Neither are there documents from a succeeding British administrator because Surinam changed from British to Dutch jurisdiction shortly after the time when Behn’s family might have been there. As the ship bearing Aphra and her family to the new post in the West Indies would continue to its destination despite the death of a passenger, the family would have landed in Surinam in an ambiguous situation. If we can rely upon *Oroonoko*, they were, nevertheless, greeted with consideration and they stayed in the colony.

Surinam was a relatively new British possession at the time of Aphra Behn’s youth. An Englishman by the name of Marshall made the first settlement in 1630, and in 1662 Charles II gave the entire colony to Francis Lord Willoughby of Parham. It is believed that Willoughby made two voyages to the West Indies — in 1650 and again in 1663. It is known that he was lost at sea in 1666. There is repeated mention in *Oroonoko* of the Governor’s expected visit, and on that basis it is possible
to conjecture that Behn lived there prior to Willoughby’s second visit. Further, in *Oroonoko*, Byam is named as the deputy-governor. William Byam was lieutenant-governor during the years 1662 to 1667, which fact helps place the time of Behn’s possible residency. As Behn’s letters in the British Government Office prove that she was on an intelligence mission in Antwerp by the summer of 1666, she had evidently left the West Indies before the end of Byam’s term of office.

Victoria Sackville-West uncovered an enlightening passage in James Rodway’s *Chronological History of the Discovery and Settlement of Guiana*, published in Georgetown, Demerara, in 1888:

> Lord Willoughby, having been released from the Tower with permission to proceed to Surinam, deputed a relation of his named Johnson as governor of that colony, and also to look after his lord’s interests in the West Indies. Taking with him his wife and children, and also an adopted daughter named Afra or Aphra Johnson, he sailed for Surinam towards the end of this or the beginning of the following year. He did not, however, live to reach his government, but fell sick and died on the voyage. His widow and the children proceeded to Surinam, where they remained for two or three years, living on one of Lord Willoughby’s plantations which was under the management of Mr Trefry, who acted as estate attorney for the lord proprietor.

Walter and Clare Jerrold’s research discloses that Willoughby was released from the Tower of London in 1656. This date helps place the year of his deputy’s voyage to Surinam. If he left England in 1656 or in the beginning of 1657, and if his adopted daughter returned to England sometime after Byam’s investiture in 1662 but before 1666 when she was in Antwerp, we might conclude that Aphra Behn would have been in Surinam for about six years. This takes into account the date of Willoughby’s second voyage to the West Indies. Until a reliable birthdate is discovered for Behn, it is impossible to state how old she was during these years, but it seems likely that she lived in Surinam during her late teens and her early twenties. Besides aiding the placement of Behn’s Surinam residency, the Rodway passage helps to authenticate *Oroonoko*. That the character in the novella (Trefry) who seems most to retain the narrator’s trust should be cited by Rodway as an actual historical personage lends extraordinary credibility to Behn’s novella — a novella too easily dismissed as the romantic musings of an old woman in London.

Ernest Bernbaum based his charge of mendacity upon the text of *Oroonoko*. He thought it very unlikely, for example, that a party of young colonial men and women would entertain themselves by searching for tiger cubs in the jungle. He was incapable of understanding the vitality of British pioneers. In his paper delivered on the occasion of Professor
George Lyman Kittredge’s silver anniversary as a Harvard faculty member, Bernbaum quibbled that the name of Behn’s hero was not African but was rather an alternate spelling of the great South American Orinoco River. He found it singular that ‘such an obvious slip has not aroused remark’. With an emphasis upon truth in literature that confuses art with reality, Bernbaum only saw in the author’s creation of a fictional name the grounds for questioning her veracity. He could not see that Behn’s adaptation of the Carib word meaning ‘coiled serpent’ into the black prince’s name was a stroke of creative writing. Bernbaum was further annoyed that Behn did not mention the date of Caesar’s captivity in her novella although he was forced to admit that ‘Mrs Behn’s allusions to historical personages and political conditions prove in some respects quite correct’. In fact, the correlation of actuality to fictionalization in the novella far exceeds what ordinarily might be expected in an artistic creation.

There are other arguments that Bernbaum advanced to repudiate Oroonoko, but he rested his case primarily upon a pamphlet entitled An Impartial Description of Surinam which was published in 1667 by George Warren, an Englishman who had lived in Surinam for three years. Bernbaum claimed that this pamphlet provided all the background materials for Oroonoko. He stated that Behn described only what Warren described and that ‘when differences appear, they show Mrs Behn not independently observing but inaccurately amplifying’. Bernbaum cited a description of armadilloes by Warren to which he compared Behn’s description of the same animal. He quoted Warren’s description of the torpedo or numb eel as the source for Behn’s description. He offered a general paragraph from Warren on the inhumane treatment of slaves and then sarcastically queried: ‘Is it not significant that this little outline emphasizes the very traits that constitute the realistic elements on the larger canvas of Mrs Behn?’

Behn’s description of Amerindian dress, ornament, weapons and customs were all credited by Bernbaum to Warren’s descriptions. He merely scoffed at Behn’s remark that she had sent to the King’s Theatre the Indian clothing which had been presented to her. He dismissed this item of verifiable detail with the words, ‘To think of Nell Gwynn in the true costume of a Carib belle is indeed ludicrous.’ George Woodcock points out that Dryden, the co-author of The Indian Queen, was still alive when Oroonoko was published, and he as well as many others could have disputed Behn’s claim that it was the costume she presented that was worn in the production. And, finally, Bernbaum attacked Behn’s description of the Amerindians who came down from the mountains
bearing gold dust as just one more echo of the Elizabethan search for El Dorado. Although the gold of Central and South America was plundered by the early European explorers and adventurers, there is still, in the twentieth century, alluvial gold in the mountain streams of the Surinam interior. Without a Bernbaum biography we do not know if the Harvard professor ever visited the West Indies or the Spanish Main, but his sketchy knowledge of the area seems limited to what he could glean from old colonial histories.

Actual comparison of the texts of *Oroonoko* and of the rare *Impartial Description of Surinam* reveals that Bernbaum’s accusation is untrue. Some examples from Warren’s work illustrate the falsity of Bernbaum’s charge that what was included by Warren was used by Behn with the associated implication that what was missing in Warren was likewise missing in Behn. Warren’s first chapter describes Toorarica as the chief town of the British colony. Behn uses neither the name nor the description, but, instead, employs her own geographic orientation. Warren notes the many cataracts and waterfalls of the Suriname River and mentions the sport of cataract shooting. Behn, whom Bernbaum slanders as ‘romantic and sensational’, does not include this exciting detail in *Oroonoko*. Warren’s enumeration of provisions includes yams, plantains and cassander, not any of which Behn notes, and he describes the planters’ use of cooling sugar drinks which Behn ignores. He lists tortoises and beef and remarks that the hogs do not increase because the bats bite off the nursing mothers’ teats. This curious detail does not appear in *Oroonoko* although the Kittredge paper maintains: ‘The only animals in connection with which Mrs Behn relates any incidents are the «tiger» and the electric eel; the same is true of Warren.’ Warren’s work describes the howling and screeching of the tropical birds and Behn’s realistic detailing does not mention this item. Nor does she use Warren’s lengthy explanation of the peculiar type of local hare caught for food. Warren’s enthusiastic expression of his personal preference for pineapples over guavas, bananas, oranges, limons and femerrimars is missing from Behn’s story. Particularly remarkable is his description of an apple tree transplanted from Europe which observed the changes of the seasons despite the lack of significant seasonal change in Surinam. This curiosity appears nowhere in Behn’s novella. In summation, there is little material in Warren’s pamphlet which *does* appear in *Oroonoko*. The scant parallels were carefully collected by Bernbaum and exhibited as representative. They constitute only a few items that could have been observed by any visitor to Surinam and they hardly establish Warren’s pamphlet as the definitive source for *Oroonoko*.²
Bernbaum's campaign against Behn was continued in a second paper entitled 'Mrs Behn's Biography A Fiction'. His penchant for citing himself as authority is also evident therein: 'The absolute untrustworthiness of the first of these sources [Behn's autobiographical statements in Oroonoko and The Fair Jilt] has recently been revealed, however, by the discovery that Mrs Behn in Oroonoko deliberately and circumstantially lied.' The source for this 'discovery' is footnoted as his own prior paper on Oroonoko. The second paper is riddled with such pejorative comments as: 'Indeed, since Mrs Behn's autobiographic remarks are untrustworthy...', 'Mrs Behn's pretended journey to Surinam', 'her description of the colony was stolen from George Warren's Impartial Description of Surinam', 'Mrs Behn's frequent falsehoods in Oroonoko', and 'Today we know that she never was in Surinam...'. As H.A. Hargreaves says regarding Bernbaum's vocabulary: 'This was rather strong language', and one wonders what priorities the MLA supported in 1913 to cause it to print such strident prose.

That no scholar appears to have examined the Warren pamphlet for verification is lamentable, but that succeeding scholars have permitted themselves to be influenced by Bernbaum's rhetoric is unconscionable. An early example of Bernbaum's influence appears in Arthur Tieje's Theory of Characterization in Prose Fiction Prior to 1740 in which Tieje cites Madame Scudéry as anticipating 'the now much-admired opening of Behn's Oroonoko, wherein that mendacious «realist» [Tieje's quotation marks] expounds the distinction between Moors and negroes'. The fact that Tieje's book was published soon after Bernbaum's two papers along with his use of the particular word 'mendacious' points to Bernbaum's authority. Another example of Bernbaum's influence, this time from a British publication, states: 'It is believed, on good authority, that Mrs Behn collected the «facts» [Henderson's quotation marks] and the local colour, which is inaccurate in some points, for her novel Oroonoko from books and acquaintances in London.' The 'good authority' to which this 1930 work refers is Professor Bernbaum, the first critic to claim that Behn never lived in Surinam. Bernbaum next published The Mary Carleton Narratives in which he 'proved' the non-existence of a Mary Carleton upon whose alleged biography some Restoration writings had been based. The Carleton book contains the author's irrelevant assertion that 'It has lately become known that the supposedly autobiographical portions of Mrs Behn's Oroonoko are mendacious'. The basis for this information is footnoted as Bernbaum's own publication of 1913.

Bernbaum's influence has not exhausted itself; it persists in current literary evaluations of Behn as in the introduction to a new, papercover
edition of *Oroonoko* published in 1973. In a parenthetical aside, the editor faults Behn: ‘Like many of her contemporaries, Mrs Behn does not distinguish between Negro and Moor, freely mixing African and Oriental habits.’ This comment reflects Tieje’s post-Bernbaum comment on *Oroonoko* but it has also become a commonplace of modern criticism. Actually, neither Shakespeare nor Behn were so ignorant as some later day literary commentators would make them out to be. The Islamic black tribes of Northern and Western Africa could well have produced an Othello or an Oroonoko. Elizabethan and Restoration literary creations of black Moors were not necessarily the result of cultural confusion. But Bernbaum set the fashion of denigrating Behn’s reliability and here Lore Metzger follows the fashion with a hackneyed observation.

Not to be outdone by Bernbaum’s argument that Behn raided George Warren’s *An Impartial Description of Surinam* for all the descriptive details Behn used in *Oroonoko*, Ruth T. Sheffey in 1962 saw fit to propose ‘Some Evidence for a New Source of Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko’. Writing in *Studies in Philology*, Sheffey credits Bernbaum with having ‘discovered’ Warren’s pamphlet: ‘a work striking in the similarity of its passages descriptive of the flora and fauna of the province to Oroonoko.’ Like other Bernbaum disciples, Sheffey did not pause to examine Warren’s pamphlet nor to compare it carefully with Behn’s novella. She continues:

An analysis of these parallel passages led Bernbaum to conclude that we must abandon the idea that Mrs Behn actually saw Surinam and knew Oroonoko. Moreover, he maintained that the details in the historical background were provided by the contemporary accounts occasioned by the war with the Dutch and that the rest of the local colour was taken directly from the Warren account, Mrs Behn’s regular method being an exotic transmutation of Warren’s report.

Sheffey concludes: ‘For today, after almost fifty years, the conclusion that Mrs Behn had probably never seen Surinam is still incontrovertible.’ Needless to say, the ‘incontrovertibility’ of the conclusion has not been demonstrated. But in order to promote another source for *Oroonoko*, Sheffey relegates Behn’s experience to the category of myth — an unscholarly solution to a research problem. She proposes Thomas Tryon’s *Friendly Advice to the Gentleman-Planters of the East and West Indies* not only as the source of information which Behn used to write *Oroonoko*, but also for the ‘vigour of the humanitarian statement in *Oroonokoo*’. The cruelty of Sheffey’s effort extends beyond the fact that she follows Bernbaum’s lead in order to introduce her own proposition. She goes beyond repudiating Behn’s veracity to strip from Behn credit for the very senti-
ments that illuminate *Oroonoko*. Whether Sheffey's proposition has any validity is not the concern of this essay. Its concern is that Sheffey should find it necessary to stand upon Bernbaum's flawed foundation in order to introduce her own thesis.

It is ironic that the contemptuous attitude towards Behn's writing that Bernbaum promoted should travel from Boston to the West Indies. Prior to the 1970 appearance of Kenneth Ramchand's *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, the Ramchand anthology *West Indian Narrative* was published 'to take the West Indian writer into the West Indian schoolroom and into the homes of West Indian schoolchildren'. The anthology opens with a selection from *Oroonoko* accompanied by a reproduction of Sir Peter Lely's portrait of Aphra Behn and a two-page commentary upon Behn's execution of the novella. In a manner which is by now painfully familiar, Ramchand denigrates Behn's achievement:

Mrs Behn wrote with a great deal of sympathy for oppressed Negroes, but in the story, the hero is so perfect and the events so spectacular that we, today, recognize the tale as sheer invention.... In inventing an African hero, she makes him an ideal European courtier. He is a scholar, a linguist, a soldier of great valour, a gentleman and a prince. This suggests that although Behn believed that a black African could be a prince, a scholar, a soldier and a gentleman, Ramchand might not.

Ramchand's faulting of Caesar or Oroonoko as foolishly romantic in conception is not a new charge. For example, George Woodcock was dissatisfied with the characterization because

his typical Negroid characteristics are purged almost wholly away in adapting him to the traditional hero. His face, although black, is Roman in contour, his hair is straightened artificially to hang to his shoulders like a periwig ... in general he shows the exaggerated chivalry and endurance which were the attributes of the heroes who had figured in romances since the late middle ages.

On the other hand, Evangeline Blashfield looked past the physical characteristics of the hero and found that Oroonoko was not a white man painted black. 'There still was much that was fierce and untamed in Aphra's hero.... He was not the gentle savage who illustrated the superiority of Nature over civilization, dear to the eighteenth-century philosophers.' Blashfield's intuitive insight is supported by Wylie Sypher's more rigorous scholarship. Having studied the British slave trade for his book *Guinea's Captive Kings*, Sypher wrote 'A Note on the Realism of Mrs Behn's *Oroonoko*' in which he examines Behn's assertion
that both Imoinda and Oroonoko came from Coramantien. Sypher identifies the Koromantin tribes as chiefly Akims, Fantins, Ashantees and Quamboos and says that ‘no one unacquainted with the diverse characters of Negro slaves is likely to have embodied in Oroonoko precisely those traits which differentiate the «Koromantin» from all other Gold-Coast Negroes’. Sypher cites Bryan Edwards in describing the Koromantin black as different from all others in ‘firmness both in body and mind; a ferociousness of disposition; but withal, activity, courage and a stubbornness ... of soul ... which enables them to meet death, in its most horrible shape, with fortitude or indifference’. Edward Long (History of Jamaica, 1774), described the Koromantins as being ‘well made, and their features are very different from the rest of the African Negroes, being smaller, and more of the European turn. Their dances serve to keep alive that military spirit, for which they are so distinguished’. Further reports of the specific characteristics of the Koromantins are offered by Sypher from the St. Christopher island physician James Grainger, Antiguan planter Christopher Codrington, and Vathek Beckford’s father William Beckford, the owner of Jamaican sugar estates. All these first-hand witnesses to Koromantin physical and behavioral traits draw a portrait strikingly similar to that of Behn’s hero. Sypher concludes in rebuttal to Bernbaum: ‘one has the impression that if Mrs Behn did not draw on personal observation, she must have relied upon sources reaching well beyond Warren.’

Professor Bernbaum spotted the structural interest of Oroonoko in his remark, ‘If we ask why Mrs Behn writes romantically about Coramantian, and realistically about Surinam, we are reminded that she had visited the latter country but not the former.’ Derisively stated, the remark nonetheless contains an essential truth. Oroonoko comes alive when the action moves from the African Gold Coast to the interior of Surinam. The first portion of the novella resembles Behn’s twelve other prose fictions with the exception that the cast is predominantly black. The African tribal court depicted in the first section is as stylized as the settings of Behn’s continental fictions while the second part of Oroonoko vibrates with the colours, sounds, scents and activity of the West Indian equatorial forest. But the excellence of the novella depends not so much upon whether it had a basis in actual fact as upon its superb execution and its transcendental quality of compassion. It will prevail despite the sexual chauvinism of critics like Bernbaum and the racial assumptions of critics like Woodcock. However, Bernbaum’s charges of mendacity and plagiarism must be categorically denied so that contemporary critics will
not continue to pattern their commentary upon his flawed methodology. Only then will the new feminist critics like Maureen Duffy and Angeline Goreau be successful in ‘Reconstructing Aphra’. 23

NOTES

1. Angeline Goreau claims that those critics ‘who chose to argue with him concentrated on comparison of the two texts’ (Warren’s and Behn’s); then she questions such a technique. I argue that, to the contrary, neither Bernbaum’s critics nor his supporters compared the two texts; they simply assumed that Bernbaum had reported upon them accurately. In other words, his critics questioned Bernbaum’s conclusions but not his scholarship. In fact, both were flawed. See Angeline Goreau, Reconstructing Aphra (New York: The Dial Press, 1980), p. 43.


5. Ernest Bernbaum, ‘Mrs Behn’s Oroonoko’, Kittredge Anniversary Papers (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1913). This and all the Bernbaum citations in the surrounding three paragraphs are from the Kittredge paper.


7. Bernbaum and I doubtlessly both worked from the Boston copy of the Warren pamphlet; consequently, edition variations cannot be invoked to explain the discrepancy between what the writer found the Warren pamphlet to contain and what Bernbaum reported it to contain.


Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was the first woman in England to earn a living by writing. She claimed her right not only to work on equal terms with men but as Lore Metzger writes 'to include in both her private life and public work the same right to social and artistic proprieties and improprieties that Restoration London accorded to male dramatists'.
What moves people to record things about themselves? One of the really
great autobiographies written in Australia in recent times, Albert Facey’s
*A Fortunate Life*, begins like this:

I was born in the year 1894 at Maidstone in Victoria. My father left for Western
Australia just after this, taking with him my two older brothers, Joseph and Vernon.
The discovery of gold in the west had been booming and thousands believed that a
fortune was to be made. At that time, there were seven children in our family: I had
four brothers — Joseph, Vernon, Eric and Roy — and two sisters — Laura and
Myra. My mother stayed at Maidstone with the younger children and my father
arranged to send money over to support us until he could find us a home.

The tone of this clearly prefigures the book: a marvellous modesty, lucid
simplicity in the telling of a story which Facey is not egotistical enough to
think is special, but which he hopes will be of interest for the reverse
reason, because it is characteristic. You know from the first few sentences
that Facey is going to tell it straight and in sequence; he doesn’t know
any other way. Vincent Buckley’s justly celebrated autobiographical
study, *Cutting Green Hay*, sets up different expectations. ‘It is a book,’ he
says,

about the society, the habitat constituted by human beings and their doings. The self
of the narrator does not need stressing, for it can be deduced, or seen in silhouette as
the falls on the places where he lived with others. I prefer also to be free of chronol-
ogy and of whatever bonds’are entailed by autobiography and its trendy successor,
the ‘memoir’ … both of them too full of obligation and temptation.

It was when I read that, in 1983, that I realised what it was that was in-
triguing me about certain autobiographical documents of the colonial
period written by women (I’d come across some of these in the course of
being interested in Louisa Lawson’s unfinished autobiography). And
what I realised had to do with that word ‘self’: that whereas both Facey
and Buckley in their very different ways are presenting the 'self' and not guarding or masking it, autobiographers like Louisa Lawson and Georgiana McCrae — grandmother of the Australian poet Hugh McCrae — seemed to be both guarded about the revelation of the true self and struggling with the sense that that self was somehow dislocated (to use the only word that seems to come near it), out of its element, without spiritual or metaphysical bearings or relevance. It struck me that this characteristic — if it was one — of colonial women’s autobiographical writings might suggest that the life experiences of many colonial women were different to those of men in really crucial ways, ways which would give rise to a quite different kind of literary expression or embodiment. ‘Australia,’ says Judith Wright, in her memorable introduction to *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*,

has from the beginning of its short history meant something more to its new inhabitants than mere environment and mere land to be occupied, ploughed and brought into subjection. It has been the outer equivalent of an inner reality: first and persistently, the reality of exile; second, though perhaps we now tend to forget this, the reality of newness and freedom.

But what if it was different from either of those as perceived in the inner life of many colonial women? What if they sensed neither exile nor freedom but something else? Towards trying to talk about that 'something else', I want to describe, interpret and present some aspects of *Georgiana’s Journal*, as it has become known; and, in less detail, some points about Louisa Lawson’s unfinished autobiography.

Georgiana’s Journal, to use the name Hugh McCrae gives it as its editor, is really quite a curious piece of work because it appears at first and maybe even second glance as attractive but rather trivial. The journal starts in September 1838, in London. In that month, Georgiana McCrae gives birth to her fourth son and, because of complications and illness that follow, she is unable to embark as planned on the voyage to Australia which she and her husband, Andrew Murison McCrae, had planned for November. He sails as arranged, she remains behind and in fact does not leave England until October 1840. Her husband, meanwhile, had settled in Melbourne which in 1840 had a population of 300 for whom there were five churches, two schools, two banks and an indeterminate number of pubs.

As we have it, Georgiana’s journal begins in that fateful September, 1838 and runs through, very fully and completely — that is, showing a substantial record for every month — to August 1845, after which the journal continues, but more scrappily and with nothing like the continu-
ity. Several things allay any initial sense we may have of triviality: first, though many entries are very brief and inconsequential there is a real sense of a life being recorded, or rather, a crucial period in a life; second, the personality of the author emerges tantalisingly and attractively though it is never foisted upon us or dwelt upon; third, there is an under-current that grows in the record which is somehow disturbing though very difficult to identify or keep squarely in focus. Perhaps it is a way of making all three of those observations at once to say that, while Georgiana McCrae seems intent only on recording external and often quite ephemeral facts and events, she manages nevertheless to inject a kind of problematic tinge, to adopt a detachment that often becomes fleetingly wry or ironic and to imply emphases which are easily missed first time around but which in retrospect take on some interest. To take a fairly neutral example and not by any means one which best embodies my point, here is the very first entry in the journal. It is preceded by an epigraph quotation from Samuel Butler: ‘She was going to a strange country: «supposed to have been a comet dropped in the sea»’ and then continues:

*Augusta Place, Clapham Road, September 1838*

It is irrevocably decided that we are to sail for Sydney per *Royal Saxon* from Gravesend November 13. Mrs Robertson’s brother, Dr Johnson and his two boys are to be our fellow passengers, and, as they are residing at Gravesend, Mr McCrae will take lodgings there for two months before we sail, so that I may have the doctor to attend me in my confinement and be spared the land journey afterwards.

What is interesting here, at least in retrospect but also, I think, at first sight, is that the decision is ‘irrevocable’ and that it has been taken by someone but, it would appear, not necessarily by Georgiana herself. That this irrevocable decision, by its timing, potentially complicates her approaching confinement — indeed, has been arranged for almost the worst possible time as far as she is concerned — is information also drily made available to us to ponder on, but without any guiding comment. The entries for September 6th and 7th, by the way — just to follow that up — have a similar kind of subdued, withdrawn interest below the level of the innocently recording pen:

6th

Sent Jane and the boys with the greatest part of my luggage and all of their own, to the lodgings engaged at Gravesend. This to enable me to complete packing the chests of drawers for our cabin, to follow at the end of the week.
7th
Awoke at 4am, aroused Sybella, got a cup of tea, but found myself worse not better for it. Sent Sybella for Simpson and despatched him for a spring-cart to take my ... other luggage and drive me to Billingsgate in time for the first trip of the Gravesend steamboat.
Perry born at 9pm
Mr McCrae congratulated me on my speedy despatch of the packing.

These are some of the early indications — there are others — that Georgiana’s attitude to the whole move is ambiguous; and that her private self will emerge in this journal only obliquely, but it will emerge.

As her journal carries the record of events through the chaos of arrival and settling down, it is only slowly that the reader, and indeed the diarist herself, realises the true enormity of the step that Georgiana has taken. Her new home, in Little Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, consists of

one tolerably large room, with four closets, called bedrooms, opening out of it. The walls of wood, about half an inch thick, and the ceiling of the same. The building raised on stumps about two feet from the ground, and three wooden steps like those of a bathing machine, lead up into a French window which is the front door of the dwelling. At a little distance from the back door is a kitchen hut. And for this accommodation a hundred pounds a year rent!

Beyond the house, grandly called ‘Argyle Cottage’, Melbourne’s streets are few, unpaved, famous for their crooked, limb-endangering gutters. In winter, these streets invariably flooded: several people drowned in flash floods in the centre of the city and on another famous occasion a horse and dray were carried on a flood wave down Swanston Street and into the river. Elizabeth Street was actually a tributary of the Yarra and often unfordable and Bourke Street was so unrecognisable because of thick forest through which it meandered that a sign was erected which read ‘This is Great Bourke Street East’. After a dinner at which Georgiana, as she ironically puts it, made her debut, the town’s only attorney, Mr Meek, drove them home in his trap: ‘a fearful experience — the horse sent at top speed through the worst country in the world. At one minute we were completely off the ground, at the next, suddenly down again — gutters three or four feet deep everywhere, jagged tree stumps interspersed with boulders.’ These are the exotic differences, shocking enough at the time no doubt but the sort of thing you can joke about later! They are to be distinguished from, though of course they help contribute to, that deeper sense of difference — a feeling of dislocation as I’ve called it — which begins to manifest itself in the journal
not through explicit reference or documentation but rather, subliminally, by means of certain images and certain tactics in the writing. One of the images proves to be Georgiana’s recurrent concern with the weather!

Of their arrival at the entrance to Port Phillip Bay, after months at sea, Georgiana writes: ‘As we were trying to enter the heads of Port Phillip, we encountered a fierce gale from the north west. Sky as black as ink.’ No doubt it was — it often is over Melbourne’s grey, oily looking bay — and there is no further significance to the observation. In retrospect though, it turns out to be a peculiarly apposite way for her to characterise her first glimpse of the new homeland, because more and more, as the autobiographical record proceeds, Georgiana uses a comment on the weather to intimate a state of mind or an atmosphere which she either refuses to recognise outright herself or which, for the sake of loyalty to her husband’s enterprises in the new colony, she will not commit baldly to paper, however clearly it may exist in her own consciousness. Her comments on the weather gradually accumulate, they nag at our attention, and they begin to have a force in the account beyond their status as simple observations. References to fine weather, we gradually realise, are rare; references to tumultuous, or oppressive weather, to livid or black skies, to terrifying thunder and heart-stopping lightning, proliferate. Partly, this is simply realism: it is Melbourne we’re talking about, after all, and Georgiana McCrae might well be the first person ever to record that Melbourne is the only place in the world where you get the four seasons in the one day: ‘Sept. 5, 1844. Cold heavy rain, succeeded by sultry heat; and then thunder ... with frost in the evening. The weather of four seasons in twelve hours!’ But more seriously, any attentive reader sees as page follows page that there is a message in these images of rough or oppressive or terrifying weather: it is a message which the autobiographer herself is only half willing to admit, hence its revelation obliquely by way of images that are on the face of it innocent enough. Here is an example which seems to me in any case a fine and moving passage, but also one in which interspersed references to what were undoubtedly real weather conditions current at the time, are made to serve as signs of profounder and more complex emotional reactions than the surface of the record is willing to admit to:

April 1st
Heavy rain and wintry sky. This morning, because Lizzie had given Mr McLure the purse she had netted for him (his old one being useless), Mr McCrae took it into his head that this token is proof that poor Lizzie wishes to delude his tutor into the toils of matrimony. ‘This,’ he said, ‘would deprive us of his services, as he might easily establish a school.’ Nothing could be further from the girl’s mind. I had given Lizzie
the purse-silk, and out of sheer good nature she had worked it for the safety of Mr McLure's silver.

After breakfast, Lizzie was told to get all her traps ready to be sent in by the dray tomorrow as she had better go out to her mother and uncle at 'La Rose'. Lizzie was dumfounded ... and I could not tell her why.

April 2nd
I sent ... poor Lizzie's trousseau by the dray; Lizzie herself rode in it as far as the top of Great Bourke Street. With her, I have lost my right hand helper and companion, while she, by her own wish, would much rather stay here than at 'La Rose'.

April 5th
Farquhar not at all well. Heavy rain and a gale of wind at night.

April 6th
A tempestuous morning.

April 11th
Cold and rainy. Baby very cross, and no Lizzie to carry her about and amuse her...

April 13th
Dr Thomas came. Willie fell over this morning while he was playing with my bunch of watch trinkets and broke my small black-water marble heart, made for me in 1826 by Jamie Robertson as a keepsake of Gordon Castle. Tout passe, tout casse, tout lasse...

This is a marvellously effective passage; it is also absolutely typical of her in a number of ways. First, the use of the weather, which I've mentioned. There are more trenchant examples of that elsewhere in the autobiography, but here, wintriness, dullness, coldness are observations which, by their placement and emphasis, overflow into the human conflict barely hinted at. Not to mention the ambiguous 'A tempestuous morning'. But there are other tactics here which are worth noticing. For example, the use of the passive to muffle the fact that a decision of which she deeply disapproves, was actually made by her husband and remained uninfluenced by herself. And again, the withdrawal into French by way of a kind of sad summary, more revealing than anything so far hinted at. In moments of stress — a stress which, as in the passage quoted, we can only just glimpse — she frequently reverts to French: the French phrase is almost always used as a climactic statement; it is always dramatic, even romantic; and it usually is more revealing, simply because it's there, than the normal journal text. Remember Alice in Boyd's The Cardboard Crown, recording the most revealing and crucial of her diary entries in French.

The escape into French is one aspect of Georgiana's reticence. She often records incidents or observations that seem to cry out for a comment from her, but she offers nothing. For example: at a time when
they were in terrible financial difficulties — ‘August 12th Letter from Sydney saying the clerkship Mr McCrae applied for was already disposed of’. We know, from the context of that part of her account, that this would have been a devastating disappointment; but she makes no comment. At a less important level: ‘Lyon Campbell’s three boys and the two Montgomerys came to spend the day. While I was sketching the house from the west end, Mrs Lyon came and carried off her boys sans façon.’ The half-ironic, half-amused French phrase is the nearest we get to any enlightening comment on Mrs Lyon’s odd behaviour.

This reticence, re-enforced by watchful and cryptic interpolations in French, builds up as the journal proceeds. As Marjorie Barnard says, ‘Lonely women have something to guard,’ and Georgiana’s guardedness becomes, like her carefully orchestrated references to the weather, a focus of our attention and a shaper of expectations. Every now and then, we get a clearer sight of the tension that seems to underlie her often extremely innocent-sounding record. It might come as a straight, brief revelation: ‘Head very bad: the result of perpetual worry.’ Or, a loaded, selective reference placed without comment or preamble: ‘Sunday 29th: Sermon: «In the latter days, perilous time shall come.»’ This submerged tension builds finally, in the very last pages of the autobiographical journal, to an uncharacteristic but totally unambiguous outburst: ‘I am most unhappy.... The last six months of suspense, worry, hurry, delays, packing and unpacking, detention in town, and now this scattered way of living in huts till the completion of our house has worn me out.’

I want to fill in one more corner of this picture before making some general and concluding observations. There is another recurrent though characteristically very subdued strain in Georgiana McCrae’s journal-autobiography — namely, an ever-present hope of return to Scotland, return home. It’s ever-present not explicitly — there aren’t in fact all that many references to it — but again, atmospherically: when she does mention possibilities of returning home, it is with such seriousness and hope that her desire subsequently pervades the whole account. At one point, when their fortunes are seriously flagging, it looks likely they will give up and go home. Georgiana remarks: ‘Felt thankful at the prospect of returning home, even on small means, as the boys’ prospects in the old country should be greatly superior to any that may offer for them here. Hope on ... hope ever.’ But some months later: ‘Mr McCrae, in a desponding mood, tells me (what I had a suspicion of two days ago) that, after all my outlay and preparations, our prospect of leaving Australia Felix is becoming day by day more indistinct.’ This is incidentally, another marvellous example of reticence, the absence of comment. This
news was undoubtedly a crippling blow, but she says nothing at all of that kind, unless in the use of the relatively unusual Australia Felix we see just the ghost of an irony! Thereafter, the hoped-for return becomes more and more a dream. On April 25, 1844, she quotes the lines

Pilgrim be patient: yet once more  
Shall you retrace the watery way  
And end your days on Britain’s shore.

[This] ‘shall I trust prove true’. But years later, she added to that entry the words: ‘For many years, I believed the ... verse would be prophetic; but now — qu’importe?’ In a letter to a friend in 1852, she concedes sadly, ‘Those who can do so are arranging for their immediate return to the old country: as for myself, without Aladdin’s Lamp, I can never see Scotland again.’ And she never did.

Georgiana McCrae emerges from her autobiographical journal in several guises: it is obvious that she is a very lonely woman; surrounded by people and family but nevertheless lonely. She is dutiful and submissive but perceives clearly the injustices that this causes her; even in her diary though, she won’t state such intuitions baldly — they remain the subject of hints, evocative images and snippets of French. She undoubtedly feels displaced, capable of coping under harrowing conditions in the colony, but longing to see home again and to stay there. Above all, though, she conveys a sense of something that runs deeper than displacement — what I have called dislocation: which is to say that she seems to perceive no secure place for herself in the events and developments going on round her; she does not belong. Now, of course, this would be powerfully contributed to by exile, but I think a major contributor also was the fact that she was constantly involved in activities which were the results of decisions in which she took no part and could take no part. I began by quoting her remark that ‘It is irrevocably decided ... we are to sail for Sydney’. The passive voice and the subsequent context strongly hint that it is neither her decision nor one which greatly appeals to her. Her account is full of such moments, moments when important decisions, uninfluenced by her, nevertheless affect her significantly. For example: when they are leaving Melbourne to go bush:

If I had a free choice in this matter, I should remain at ‘Mayfield’ until the house is sold or let. There is a living to be had here through my art of miniature painting, for which I already have several orders in hand, but dare not oppose the family wishes that ‘money must not be made in that way’!
Two deep grievances surface here: she has no say in a move which will cause her great upset and discomfort (it duly did); and her individual talent, recognised and in demand, must be stifled, again as the result of a decision in which she has no part. On another occasion she refers to this same matter, deftly indicating with more precision the source of the interdict (and incidentally, providing us with another excellent combined example of her evocative use of remarks on the weather and her habit of resounding non-comment): ‘April 6th A dark morning.... Lucia returned with a note from Mrs Howitt to say she «regrets exceedingly Mr McCrae’s opposition to my wish to employ my professional talent to profit».

Georgiana is just aware enough, we would say today just liberated enough, to recognise the impositions being made upon her; but she could not, understandably, act upon this awareness and she could only externalise it — and then only obliquely — in an autobiographical journal. Her problem is thus larger than displacement or exile; it is the suspicion that she is at the mercy of events and not relevant to them, in the wrong place at the wrong time; dislocated.

Very briefly, Louisa Lawson’s unfinished autobiography makes an interesting sort of test case. Because Louisa, of course, was not an emigrant, she was native born. Yet her account of her own life, at least as it was until she was in her mid thirties, has elements exactly similar to those I’ve pointed out in Georgiana’s Journal. Louisa too felt at the mercy of events, somehow irrelevant, without a personal destiny; she too felt she had talents which should have been allowed scope and use and not have been subject to the will and decisions of others (she was a magnificent singer but her mother steadfastly stood in the way of European training, being opposed to any public career for her children). Louisa too was profoundly unhappy much of the time, emotionally exhausted by events that she was simply supposed to endure silently and never influence.

Now while this of course doesn’t prove anything and isn’t supposed to, it does become more interesting and somewhat more persuasive when I add that this same strain surfaces often in the autobiographical writings, fragments and letters of Australian colonial women. (Ada Cambridge provides only one of several interesting examples.) And that adds up to at least a credible, even a quite strong suggestion, that the life experiences of many colonial women were more suffused with a sense of irrelevance, of waste, of powerlessness and of being at the mercy of events — more suffused with those sorts of intuitions than with a sense of exile or the oppression of loneliness, important though both those were. When, in 1888,
Louisa Lawson launched *The Dawn*, the first woman's journal in the country, she was inundated with correspondence from women who wanted to establish greater control over their own lives — by gaining a measure of financial independence, or by education, or by self-sufficiency or etc. *The Dawn*'s campaign for the vote was of course central to such aspirations, but its even longer term preoccupation was with marriage and divorce law reform and, above all, a whole range of stratagems whereby women might begin to control and direct their personal destinies. The overwhelmingly enthusiastic response to these emphases by *The Dawn*'s readers is evidence that it was tapping into a rich source of lively concern and continued interest among the nation's women.

Exile, envisaged in one form or another, is a preoccupation in the work of Marcus Clarke, Rolf Boldrewood, Christopher Brennan, Hugh McCrae himself — even, in a mild and conveniently remediable form, in Kingsley’s *Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*. It is not the central concern in the works of Catherine Helen Spence, in Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* or in Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies*. All of those works are concerned with, among other things, locating fictional heroines meaningfully in a world in which they had little real power and no credible sense of personal destiny unless they actively set about remedying their own sense of dis-location, their own profound worries about role and potential. And therein lies something like the beginnings of a case for a partially separate literary history for women in the colonial period — a separation which might more interestingly explain the emergence on the one hand, of a kind of ‘sport’ like the young Miles Franklin and the fierce, briefly flowering passionate utterance of Barbara Baynton (not to mention the failure of both of them ever to follow up on those first successes), and, on the other hand, an official literature as it were, in which women play a subsidiary part and are often idealised and in which there is a continuing preoccupation with the question of what and where is home. The separation no doubt merges in the new century, when *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, written of course by a woman, though an expatriate woman, and the novels of Martin Boyd give very heavy weight to the presence of a sense of exile in the Australian psyche. But even at that, it strikes me that there are important differences of emphasis and perspective — differences connected to ideas I’ve been canvassing here — to be found in women writers like Katherine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark, especially Marjorie Barnard, as against many of their male contemporaries.

Of course, great writers always smash theories to pieces. It is another way of coming across the truly revolutionary nature of the work of
Lawson and Furphy, to note that they easily encompass the two strands of this theoretical dual development. For, though in his decline Lawson did idealise his women characters pathetically, did he not at his best portray women in a state of dislocation — women like the drover’s wife and Mrs Spicer battling desperately to inject *meaning* into their lives, to re-connect themselves with remembered values, rituals and structures? And might it not also be the case, as Julian Croft has recently argued, that the true and serious ‘heroes’ of Furphy’s three novels are Molly Cooper, Kate Vanderdecken and Mrs Falkland-Pritchard?
This is their provenance. This is their grave.

A cage roomy as a banquet hall, filled with row upon row of cages, three hens to each. Heads, black-feathered,

red-combed, poke through wire down the hangar's length: eye after identical, staring eye. As at a rest home,

sunblinds that can be raised for air. But not today.
In the green dimness, mounds of grey droppings multiply

like sponge: their only history — archeology of chicken after chicken into hen — and their only product, except for

untold eggs and, at the end, their own numbed flesh, its loss their one clear memory... But it is the sound

that wedges open the mind — so few ordinary farmyard squawks above that low swelling surge: one corporate cry

hovering, pressing out into the day. A throatless bird trying to sing; a wingless bird trying to fly.
LATE SUMMER GARDEN

The butterflies make no sound, seem always to be travelling away from sight.

Copper and alabaster keys, they have the freedom of the garden.

One quivers like a nerve against my thumb's blue base,

its wings ragged and veined, pressed like petals between clear leaves of air.

What nectar has sustained that forthright orange, chameleon brown?

A dust of pollen radiates from where the wings, almost unhinged,

touch the body haloed in dark hair.
The eyes of the wings have opened and closed a million times.

Air quickens, drifts the butterfly down into grass sewn with yellowed leaves and buttercups — glossy, unfading suns...

Above, the bright fluttering green of trees that have breathed and sung

with all the strength of summer.
‘Temper, Romantic; Bias, Offensively Feminine’: Australian Women Writers and Literary Nationalism

My title, I have to confess at the outset, does not signal the discovery of a long-lost feminist literary manifesto. You will probably have recognised it as an appropriation of Joseph Furphy’s famous claim for his novel of 1903, *Such is Life*, that its temper is democratic, its bias offensively Australian. I have changed its terms for two reasons. The first is to draw attention to the pejorative characterization of women’s writing which emerged in the 1890s — in particular, of the fiction produced by the so-called Lady Novelists who were well-known at the time: Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, and ‘Tasma’. All three (though only Cambridge still lived in Australia by then) continued to publish popular romantic novels, variously drawing on the domestic romance, the Gothic and the novel of manners, during a period when the masculine forms of romance (stories of convicts, bushrangers and station life) were fading in popularity — were, indeed, coming under concerted attack. So romantic fiction came to be associated exclusively with women writers, and to be defined by its traditionally feminine forms. This shift in the meaning of literary romance was particularly disadvantageous for two younger women writers who began to publish at the turn of the century, Barbara Baynton and Miles Franklin. Despite their association with the newly-dominant literary institution of the *Bulletin*’s Red Page, features of their work were attacked in the same terms as that of the ‘lady novelists’ I have already referred to. They too were deemed to be limited by their ‘romantic’ temper and ‘offensively feminine’ bias.

The second reason for changing the terms of Furphy’s dictum is to show what happens when the excluded terms of the dominant discourse on cultural nationalism are made explicit. Furphy’s phrase, ‘temper
democratic, bias offensively Australian’ employs terms from the political end of a spectrum that runs through to the specifically literary; the obvious substitution in political terms would seem to be ‘temper aristocratic, bias offensively British’, signifying the class-bound colonial culture which the nationalists set themselves against. However, I would suggest that to substitute terms from the less political and more cultural end of the spectrum serves to show up the link between ‘good’ politics and ‘good’ writing which is assumed in the cultural-nationalist discourse of the Bulletin in the 1890s, and to show up the suppressed association between these positive terms (democratic and nationalist politics, realist and vernacular writing) and masculinity.

What the Bulletin and its associates defined during the 1890s as the distinctively Australian literary mode has been fairly constantly scrutinized and refined ever since. But throughout all the debates about the significance of literary and (more generally) cultural nationalism, the dominant critical discourse has mobilized the following set of familiar oppositions:

- independent and original vs. conventional and derivative
- egalitarian and democratic vs. class-bound and ‘aristocratic’
- Australian nationalist vs. British colonial
- vigour and action vs. emotion
- outside (the bush or the city) vs. inside (the domestic, the home)

Plus two pairs of terms which were especially salient at the turn of the century but which have by now formed a scarcely noticeable sediment of common sense about what constitutes literary value:

- realism vs. romance
- vernacular or folk vs. popular or commercial

These are the oppositions I want to look at more closely here, and to suggest that in this period of debate during the 90s, they come to be cemented into the suppressed opposition between masculinity and femininity, thus defining the distinctively Australian tradition as masculine.

As feminist deconstruction of such sets of binary oppositions repeatedly demonstrates, the set of terms associated with masculinity is characterized as normative and positive — evaluations which depend for their force on the projection of the deviant and the negative onto the feminine side. But both are constructions within the same social space, and it can be seen that the norm — in this case, the egalitarian, the
realist, the vernacular Australian culture — requires as a condition of its articulation the suppressed Other — in this case, the class-bound, the romantic, the popular ‘colonial’ culture. In this paper I am concerned with ‘the feminine’ as an ideological construct and with the historical moment at which it seems to be fixed as the repository of a whole cluster of attributes which have been of necessity displaced from the mythology of Australian literary culture, and indeed of national culture in the broader sense, the terrain of that endless debate about national identity.

POPULARITY AND POLITICS

Women novelists of the 1890s like Cambridge, Praed and ‘Tasma’ were ‘popular’ in the sense that their fiction was published in accessible forms and widely circulated. The usual pattern was: serial publication in an Australian weekly newspaper or journal, followed by book publication with an English company — usually the newer and more enterprising ones like Heinemann (which established a series called The Colonial Library of Popular Fiction). Book publication then put their novels into the big English circulating libraries like Mudie’s as well as finding them a large consumer market. But the often-repeated charge that they ‘wrote for an English audience’ is easily refuted by pointing to the fact of prior serial publication in Australia.

This charge makes more sense, though, when ‘English’ is interpreted in class terms, i.e. ‘English’ meaning ‘ruling class’. Weekly newspapers of the period like the Australasian and the Sydney Mail were designed for country readers by their publishers — which were, respectively, the Melbourne Argus and the Sydney Morning Herald. So the weeklies may be seen as representative of the conservative squattocracy. Their period of growth and decline confirms this supposition: beginning in the mid 1860s, they continued to appear until the 1930s, dwindling away finally with the shrinking of pastoral capital in favour of industrial manufacturing development. But established, hegemonic interests can afford to be generous, even liberal, and in their heyday in the late 19th century the weeklies featured large literary sections, flexible enough to accommodate, as the Australasian did, the ‘cosmopolitan’ journalism of Marcus Clarke as well as Ada Cambridge’s early novels about the colonial marriage market. (In fact, she had nine serials published there in the twelve years between 1874 and 1886.) Clearly, these weekly literary sections in middle-class family newspapers, with a growing urban as well as country readership, were the major local publishing outlets for fiction
— at least, until the *Bulletin*'s Red Page and similar literary magazines appeared late in the century.

Though it became known as The Bushman's Bible, the *Bulletin*, as has often been remarked, was produced by and largely for an urban educated population. The figure of the Bushman constructed there was a touchstone of the nationalist egalitarian progressive values which the *Bulletin* espoused and explained to urban readers. If anything, the *Bulletin* was a mouthpiece of the liberal urban bourgeoisie as opposed to the conservative pastoralists, whose power was already declining after the financial crash of 1890. The shifting of power between these two major groups in the ruling class was the wider context of that struggle for literary hegemony which occasioned the *Bulletin*'s diatribes against the intellectual decadence and ostentation of the Sydney and Melbourne literary establishments.

In this conflict, the 'popular' fiction of the period was associated with the establishment weeklies and thus with the older pastoral ruling class, on the one hand, and with English commercial publishers on the other. Against this the *Bulletin*, in its bid for literary sovereignty, mobilized an association with the vernacular or folk culture of the Bush — most notably in its promotion of the ballads of Paterson and Lawson. At the same time it demonstrated allegiance to literary innovation, to a new mode of 'realism' in particular, to set against what it designated the stifling conventionalities of colonial writing. And this was an allegiance lent considerable sophistication by the literary editor, A.G. Stephen's, Arnoldian belief in literature as a high calling, to be distinguished sharply from popular fiction. Sylvia Lawson indicates its range:

> The *Bulletin*'s ways of seeing were possible through lenses made available by Dickens and Balzac, Zola, Henry Kingsley, Mark Twain — and Flaubert. More than one kind of presence haunted the *milieu*; while social realism was both literary and political principle, so was the exercise of style for style's sake. *Punch* and Labouchère were there, with all their journalistic kind; and Beardsley collided with Hogarth.

**GENDER AND GENRE**

The position of women writers was a paradoxical one in this scenario. Excluded by their gender from the all-male clubs and societies of the colonial literati, they were nevertheless associated with that establishment by default. Their work was damned with faint praise by the urbane and gentlemanly comments of luminaries like Desmond Byrne, Turner and Sutherland and Patchett Martin. The 'lady novelists', it was
said, dealt quite properly with social life and relations between the sexes — after all, this was woman’s domain and (it was implied) fiction was after all a lower branch of literature, providing edification and entertainment, but making no claims to art.

They fared even less well with their radical nationalist contemporaries. Here, the recognition that they were working in the sub-genres of romance (domestic, Gothic or novel of manners) was not accompanied by chivalrous praise of their proper womanliness. Because literary nationalism wanted to claim a high place for fiction, there was no room there for a separate sphere for the romance mode: fiction was becoming an art. In Furphy’s *Such is Life* various kinds of romantic fiction are satirized mercilessly — the feminine romance, by his narratorial ironies at Tom Collins’ expense about Ouida and the ‘tawny-headed tigress’; and its masculine form, the ‘romance of station life’, by his string of mocking allusions to the conventions of character and plot popularized by Kingsley’s *Geoffrey Hamlyn*. In this text, and in much literary-nationalist critical discourse, popular forms of romantic fiction — no matter whether they looked back to Walter Scott or to Jane Austen or to Gothic and sensationalist fiction — were marginalized. And ‘feminized’ at the same time.

It’s instructive to notice how, in later accounts of the emergence of a national literature, the 19th century masculine romances like *Robbery Under Arms* and *For the Term of His Natural Life* have been redeemed. H.M. Green, for instance: ‘Whereas Boldrewood’s romances of brisk action and out-of-door adventure call to the spirit of youth in man and women, Mrs Praed’s romances have not so wide appeal.... They are «a girl’s hammock-dreams of love».’ So: love is merely girls’ business, while adventure has ‘universal’ appeal.

Later John Barnes, discerning literary as well as historical interest in the novels of Kingsley and Boldrewood, found that in the hands of women writers the Anglo-Australian romance had *dwindled* into ‘the novel of romantic love’. In his view it is the love-story genre which ‘compromises the individuality’ of these women writers and ‘limits the conception of human nature’ which they employ.

Much more recently Adrian Mitchell, in the *Oxford History of Australian Literature*, uses the epithet ‘romantic’ primarily to express dissatisfaction with the ‘love interest’ of these novels, while granting them some degree of historical and sociological interest in their social observation.

However, as I have argued in an earlier paper, the apparently unchanging conventions of the love story are themselves used in these novels to *mediate*, precisely, *social* comment on the colonial marriage market and its cultural implications — for women.
Back in the 1890s, in the spirit of Furphy’s later call for writing that was ‘democratic and offensively Australian’, the critical discourse of *Bulletin* writers excluded women and all those unAustralian cultural phenomena attributed to ‘the feminine’. Yet they were engaged in defining an ideological position which *on the face of it*, had nothing to do with gender difference. Here are two examples where women writers are praised — but only for transcending their female qualities and preoccupations. In both cases, praise is given to their representations of ‘The Bush’ — and ‘The Bush’ comes to signify nationalism, literary originality and, by implication, masculinity.

First, Lawson, in his Preface to *My Brilliant Career*, distinguishes between the ‘girlishly emotional’ parts of the book (which ‘prove’ it was written by a ‘girl’, despite her masculine name) and the authentically Australian aspects of the book which portray ‘bush life and scenery’ and which make it ‘true to Australia — the truest I ever read’.

Secondly, A.G. Stephens, reviewing Barbara Baynton’s novel, *Human Toll*, accounted for what he took to be its unintentional power in this way: ‘Mrs Baynton is palpably interested in her heroine, and yet — possibly unconsciously, possibly owing to a woman’s inherent inability to express himself [sic] — instead of a heroine she has given us the Bush.’

Clearly, women can only be admitted to the ranks of Australian literature despite their gender — they cannot be writers, Australians, and women all at once. Only if they contribute to this masculine construction of ‘the Bush’ can they be redeemed from the frailties of their gender and from the limitations of their chosen genre, the romance.

**NEW DIRECTIONS IN WOMEN’S WRITING**

The likelihood that both Franklin and Baynton were working critically with the conventions of female romantic fiction was not considered. But if the new contenders for cultural hegemony had looked back at what was being published in the ‘90s by their despised female predecessors, they might have recognised some links with the new and more rebellious women writers. For there are signs of dissatisfaction with the ideology of women’s separate sphere that is inscribed in the conventional romance of courtship and marriage.

Catherine Spence, whose early novel *Clara Morison* had set the pattern for this genre in Australia, had pretty much given up writing novels after her future fiction, ‘Handfasted’, was rejected by the *Sydney Mail* as being ‘too socialistic’ and ‘calculated to loosen the marriage tie’. Ada Cam-
bridge, having published and then withdrawn a volume of outspoken verse called *Unspoken Thoughts* in 1889, then found a fictional form for articulating her religious and ethical doubts in several novels featuring a male protagonist. The best-known of these, *A Marked Man*, looks back to Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* but it could fruitfully be read inter-textually with Richardson’s later *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Cambridge also produced an ironic gloss on the conventional pieties of marriage and motherhood, a novel called *Materfamilias*. Also in the ‘90s, ‘Tasma’ was writing problem novels about unhappy marriages, in the vein of her English feminist contemporaries. Rosa Praed’s interest in the occult enabled her to begin, however melodramatically, to focus her later novels on the theme of female desire.

These signs of dissatisfaction, and even of radical new perspectives straining the limits of the conventional ‘woman’s novel’ did not, however, indicate the opening up of new spaces for a feminine literary discourse to develop. This much is evident from the mess that Miles Franklin got into over the reception of *My Brilliant Career* (it was read as artless autobiography) and the failure of the two novels which she published subsequently — and pseudonymously — with Mills and Boon in the U.S. It’s also evident in the extreme oddness of Barbara Baynton’s only novel *Human Toll* (1907) — which was also taken to be autobiographical, despite its Gothicisms. This suggests that any writer known to be female who *did* break or at least bend the much-criticized conventions of literary romance could only be assumed to be writing direct from her own experience, the only alternative for a woman.

New directions in women’s writing in this period were muted by the tumult and the shouting of cultural nationalism and marginalised by its newly dominant literary standards, standards of ‘high culture’ which left no middle ground for those negotiations with generic conventions and social ideologies that have been so important in women’s fiction.

**FEMININITY VS. AUSTRALIANNESS**

However this was not an exclusively literary matter, not just a question of women writing outmoded kinds of books. The problem was, in the *Bulletin*’s scheme of things, the offensiveness of femininity. ‘The Woman Question’ was of great concern at the time, but the *Bulletin* was not inclined to support feminist demands because women were ‘innately conservative’, class-bound, irrational, and this was why democrats should not support their demand for the vote. An editorial accused:
‘Tories champion the alleged cause of women because the women of today are, as a rule, Tories; almost every woman is a queen-worshipper, a prince-worshipper, a parson-worshipper’ (1 October 1887). And another declared: ‘Female suffrage, [the Bulletin] still maintains is a present danger to the cause of Democracy’ (9 March 1889). And as the cause of Democracy was identified with that of Australianness, it was clear that women could have no place to speak in an Australian national culture. Women were scapegoats, in nationalist discourse, politically, socially and culturally.

Sylvia Lawson, whose account of the Bulletin’s dealings with the Woman Question I have drawn on here, sees this prejudice as contradicted by other expressions of sympathy for women’s limited opportunities and by Archibald’s fulminations against a Puritan double standard of sexual morality. She quotes the following comment to illustrate this apparently pro-woman line: ‘The cause of nine out of ten of our girls «going wrong» is just this — the misery of their homes, the meanness and tyranny, temporal and spiritual ... [they] succumb ... from the disgust and despair of the weary and dreary Australian middle-class home life.’ But the culprit in this account is easy to spot: it’s the home, the middle-class home which oppresses ‘our girls’. And ‘the home’, in the Bulletin’s view, was identified with female influence, that is, innate conservatism and the denial of masculine pleasures. It was women exclusively who were wowsers and puritans — and all of them, it would seem, were middle-class.

As Marilyn Lake argues in a recent paper entitled ‘The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context’, the cult of domesticity was at once the bugbear of the masculinists and the ideological underpinning of late 19th-century feminist campaign. She argues that for historians to depict feminist ‘concerns with temperance and social purity in terms of «respectability» is to ignore the sexual politics’ in a situation where ‘masculinist values had been elevated to the status of national traditions’. Feminist campaigners were venomously mocked, and indeed all women were seen, at times, as conspiring to establish a single ideal of Domestic Manhood to tame men and deny their pleasures.

She argues that ‘The Bulletin was prominent in expounding, in opposition to this, the separatist model of masculinity which lay at the heart of eulogies to the Bushman’, and continues: ‘When the «nationalist» school of writers represented the pastoral workers as cultural heroes they did so because in their apparent freedom from the ties of family, in their «independence», these bushmen were closely approximated to their masculinist ideal.’
Lake's paper goes a good way towards explaining the explicitly and insistently masculine — indeed masculinist — tenor of that cultural nationalism which became the dominant discourse constructing 'Australianness' during the 1890s, and which has survived in some quarters ever since. That, of course, is a much longer story.\(^{21}\)

So I want to conclude by returning to the women writers of the '90s, both the 'lady writers' (so called) and the associate members (part-time) of the Bulletin club. Neither group directly contested the whole cultural nationalist baggage that excluded them as women and marginalised their writing — they did not produce a feminist literary manifesto, or align themselves openly with the suffrage and social reform movements.\(^{22}\) But it could be said that the subversive elements of their fiction, questioning the dominant ideology of masculinity and femininity, working within and against the narrative conventions of popular romantic fiction, constituted a literary counterpart to the activist women's movement in its challenge to the masculinist definition of Australian culture.

NOTES

8. J. Furphy, Such is Life (1903); a useful edition is The Portable Joseph Furphy, ed. J. Barnes (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1981).
9. T. Davies, 'Transports of Pleasure: Fiction and its Audiences in the Later Nineteenth Century' in Formations Editorial Collective, eds., Formations of Pleasure (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) argues that 'romance' came to have exclusive reference to women's fiction (novels of love, marriage and domestic sentiment) in the later nineteenth century in Britain and was simultaneously relegated to
the status of the 'popular' by the 'ethical-aesthetic preoccupations of literary criticism' (p. 56).


13. See note 7.


19. Ibid., p. 196.


21. J. Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974) includes a discussion of the male-centredness as well as the ethnocentricity of Vance Palmer's influential *The Legend of the Nineties* (pp. 95-6). However, most recent discussions of the nineties pay no attention to its masculinism; a useful survey of debates can be found in the concluding chapter of D. Walker, *Dream and Illusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity* (Canberra: A.N.U. Press, 1976).

22. Although Miles Franklin was later to do so. See D. Modjeska, *Exiles at Home* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981), pp. 156-190.
I come from the west, kingdom of the male virgin. I live and write in the kingdom of the male virgin. To be a female and not-virgin, making stories in the kingdom of the male virgin, is dangerous. You think this kingdom is imaginary? Try being a writer there. Try being a woman there.

This west is a kingdom of discontent. This, the promised land, still regrets Eden, and in that regret edges toward Apocalypse, denying the pastoral fiction that has been imposed upon it from outside. This west is a fiction disintegrating: a kingdom of male virgins who have never forgiven Eve for seducing them.

Genesis: In the beginning, God made Adam and Eve. God said to Adam, 'Do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' Eve wasn’t around yet, according to the story. When the serpent beguiled Eve, and Eve, being a curious woman, ate of said fruit and gave some to Adam, he didn’t resist, although it was to him that God had given the explicit instructions. Look it up. I could enter into a protracted discussion of the intelligence of the curious person, but that would interrupt the story. The long and short is, when God started asking difficult questions, Adam said, 'She gave it to me. Not my fault.' This displacement of blame is a key to the large question of virgins and kingdoms and gardens, but I would like to deal with it specifically in relation to the west and its fiction.

Regret for Eden is peculiar to the fiction of the west, and for good reason. Johnny Backstrom, in Robert Kroetsch’s *The Words of My Roaring* says,

Christ, you have to dream out here. You’ve got to be half goofy — just to stay sane.

I’m a great one for paradox. My reading of the Bible, I suppose; dying to be born and all that. But really, it isn’t an easy place to live. Like when the wind blows black, when it’s dry, you drive all day with your lights on. Great electioneering weather. The fish lose their gills in this country. The gophers come up for a bite to eat, and they crawl right into the air.
Almost all male tales (tall) attest to drought and death, the quixotic viciousness of the weather, as a counterpoint to the lost garden. And to compound the difficulties of such dyslexia come the definitions imposed on us from outside. We are referred to as the frontier, the wide open spaces, the glorious wilderness, the *region* of the west, labels always breathed in a properly worshipful tone, this incantation of difference anointing and cursing us at one and the same time. The result is an image of 'contemporary primitivism, a world of romance that sorts oddly with our seasonally-adjusted social order'. And this contradiction has aggravated the kingdom of the male virgin.

There they go, those men of the west, riding horses into the wind, praying to the first rays of dawn, going nobly forward to be hanged: courtly, bashful, foot-shuffling, plowing, plowing, suffering, suffering, yearning, yearning for Eden. The only way to regain Eden is through innocence, abstinence, purity. Just try getting one of them by the belt buckle, let alone getting him off his horse. He’s laced up into the chaps of his own myth so tightly that he could just as well be a cowboy who hasn’t undressed all summer. And if you think you’ll get that oil-rigger’s hard hat off his head, you’re wrong. Even if you do, he’ll consummate the business with his eyes clenched shut and his face averted; afterwards he’ll go out into a thirty-below snowstorm and pray to the spirits to cleanse his soul. This is the kingdom of the male virgin. I did not make this up. It was first defined by Robert Kroetsch in a review of *Petrigo’s Calgary*, a book that attempted to delineate the innate character of that city of male virgins, my home:

Petrigo captures magnificently the failure of sexuality in this new-created city; as if it came into being without anything so gross as a good fuck. Success and money don’t get you laid in Calgary, they get you a big new car. Petrigo is obsessed with the circle, but only at the farthest remove of metaphor is it ever the great vagina that lets us into or out of true being. The world phallus is the city-centre, the world vagina, at its worst, has in its iron centre a huge machine, at its best, a pair of skyscraper teeth or a forest of fern. For Calgary is ultimately Christian in its sexual posture: women are the source only of man’s fall.

Try being female and living in the kingdom of the male virgin; try being female and writing in the kingdom of the male virgin. Women must come to a place in this kingdom themselves but until now it has been dominated by a romantic fiction that is disintegrating like a paper cowboy put into water. This kingdom boasts adventure and chivalry; it proudly displays all the characteristics of romanticism: innovation, spontaneity, sensuous nuance, limitless aspiration. This is big sky country;
both the fiction and its criticism have relied on endless landscape as a metaphor. But it is also a kingdom which practices a kind of perverse courtly love: don’t touch the lady. She’ll sully your purity.

Of course, male virgins take many shapes. Cowboys and Indians, politicians and martyrs, preachers and farmers and studhorse men. In my search for a female place within western fiction, I uncovered the Protean shapes of the male virgin, the grandfathers of this literature.

Virgin Frederick Phillip Grove. Necessarily the first one who comes to mind in our quest for origins and ends. He says in his note to the fourth edition of *A Search for America*:

> Imaginative literature is not primarily concerned with facts; it is concerned with truth.... In its highest flights, imaginative literature, which is one and indivisible, places within a single fact the history of the universe from its inception as well as the history of its future to the moment of its final extinction.  

This is prettily put, except we know that for Grove ‘the imaginative process is not a mirroring of experience ... but the creation of a self or an identity’. Grove created his own personal fiction:

> F.P. Grove is a writer of great moral intensity because he is himself a sham, a liar, a criminal, a fraud. Out of the terrible pressure within himself, he creates moral predicaments and explores in violent and new ways the connections between autobiography and the novel, between fiction and reality.

Here is the virgin imposter, virgin because he re-creates himself pure and chaste, his life created by his fiction. And look at Niels Lindstedt, in Grove’s novel *Settlers of the Marsh*. Virgin incarnate, Niels is a character completely pure, ‘chaste to the very core of his being’. His innocence is more burden than attribute because it prevents him from seeing clearly. He is easily shocked and his fear of passion or desire is underlined by his dedication to an ascetic ideal: work, a homestead, and yes, a wife, but a wife in the genre of the Virgin Mary, a mother who conceives without the messy business of sex. Every aspect of his life is devoted to this ideal. He rises to work at three-thirty in the morning and he works with stolid passion, all the passion he otherwise subverts. He yokes desire with sin and guilt. When he does, finally, give in to desire, he does so unwillingly; in literal and figurative darkness he is enveloped by the arms of a woman and he yields. Of course, the male virgin pays dearly for the loss of his virginity. He marries his seductress because he is so innocent he cannot ‘bear the thought of having gone to bed with a woman who was not [his] wife’; not knowing — or more likely refusing to recognize — that this
woman is the local whore. Their marriage is nothing less than macabre. ‘Niels felt as if he must purge himself of an infection, of things unimaginable, horrors unspeakable, the more horrible as they were vague, vague...’ And he does purge himself, finally, by murdering the woman, his wife, and paying for that murder in jail. Only then can he return to his beloved land pure, re-virgin, and set about realizing his chaste ideal. In the canon of western Canadian literature, *Settlers of the Marsh* is considered to be of germinal importance, indeed, almost sacred. In Grove, we find the implacable prairie imposing on its men the implacable demand of purity. Grove has been foisted on us when in reality he is a virgin imposter, renewing his innocence with every fictional lie.

Virgin Sinclair Ross. In *As For Me and My House*, the failed artist virgin, virgin because he has never and will never consummate his desire to be an artist. He is artist impotent and thus virgin, isolated from his wife, who is the narrator of the novel and whose protective nurturing of her husband has been critically decided as predatory. This novel too is regarded as a bench-mark in western Canadian literature, but not as an articulation of the silenced woman; rather, it is lauded as a eulogy to the hero as thwarted artist.

Phillip Bentley is a preacher, a small-town, down home preacher, not by choice but by necessity, fortune’s implacable hand turning him into a solid wall of restraint, restraint, white-lipped frozen restraint. Most of what we see of this would-be artist, failed preacher, is a closed study door, metaphor of a cloistered monk. Virgin — this character is not only virgin but bloodless. The closest he comes to expressing emotion is a wince, and the most usual physical image of him is one of a man solitary, hunched over a table drawing impotent pencil sketches of the dust-driven world of prairie he lives in. He and his wife are childless; in the whole novel they make love only a few times. That the seed of Phillip’s one outbreak becomes the consolidation of his pitiful position as a failure only underscores his innately virgin soul. This man ought to be a monk, totally removed from secular life, especially the wild and unpredictable life of the prairie. The garden that the silenced Mrs Bentley plants withers and dies. There will be no return to Eden for either her or her husband. In his implacable solitude and restraint, Phillip Bentley remains very much a male virgin; his bastard son only serves to emphasize his virginity by representing dead love. Ross’s writing fits all the preconceptions of the prairie as arid dustbowl, dead garden; he is a virgin refusing to be seduced by the wild artistry of the prairie.

Virgin W.O. Mitchell. The virgin as hired man. The eternal prairie becomes a Wordsworthian pastoral of innocence and experience in *Who
Has Seen the Wind and Jake and the Kid. The presence of the hired man acts as a counterpart to the disappearing father that Harrison has identified in Unnamed Country. The father is always gone, dead or away. Instead of hanging around and displaying the progression of age, he vanishes, leaving behind his youthful, romantic image. He is never going to be caught sucking his gums, incontinent; he remains virgin unviolated by age. And in his place, the hired man: story-maker, myth-maker, infallible forecaster. '«Jake says...»' is the kid’s most common refrain. Jake has knowledge beyond all ordinary men and the source of that knowledge is his priest-like celibacy: he don’t have nothin’ to do with wimmin.

The hired man may be selling his services for remuneration, but he is the surrogate of the disappeared father and as such he is omnipotent, historian and soothsayer rolled into one. He is the real interpreter of the prairie and thus represents the romance associated with the 'feeling of the prairie': 'The feeling has something to do with simple natural beauty, with the basics of life embodied in the prairie rhythms and with the sense of man’s insignificance and responsibility in the midst of vastness. «You do a lot of wonderin’ on prairie,» says Jake.' Jake’s purity enables him to interpret the mystery; only a virgin shaman can preside over the kid’s coming of age.

Virgin Rudy Wiebe. Wiebe rejecting history, implicated by history, writing visionary virgins. The protagonist as rebel: hero, villain, outlaw. The glory of imperfection; the epic failure that attests to the grandeur of the visionary, the prophet’s aim. Visionary virgin Big Bear foretelling the future, refusing to be seduced by treaty or white man or fine words, wives only to keep him warm at night, no swerving from vision. Recreated virgin pacifist riding through the changing prairie without swerving from his vision/version until at last, a long cold virgin ride into death and Big Bear returns to the earth naked, pure:

what he saw was the red shoulder of Sun at the rim of Earth, and he closed his eyes. He felt the granular sand joined by snow running together, against and over him in delicate streams. It sifted over the crevices of his lips and eyes, between the folds of his face and hair and hands, legs; gradually rounded him over until there was a tiny mound on the sand hill almost imperceptible on the level horizon. Slowly, slowly, all changed continually into indistinguishable, as it seemed, and everlasting, un-changing rock.

Virgin prairie, before the white man.

And Riel, trained to be a priest, become an outlaw, refusing to sully the purity of the Metis vision, the Metis cause. Praying through a hail of bullets, never firing a gun himself, finally led to the scaffold a sacrificial
Virgin to appease a nation. Clenched against women, Catholic celibacy despite wife and children, recipient of God’s word, divine disciple, the holy fool of Wiebe’s Canadian west crucified for his virginal, naïveté. Both Big Bear and Riel are imposed by Wiebe on the west as historical, archaeological, archetypal virgins in not lie but schism, the wrenching of art into actuality. No wonder Toronto sent out troops.

Virgin Robert Kroetsch. The male virgin with the perpetual hard-on, screwing himself into oblivion. Philandering virgins who are re-created virgins each time they succumb, their reluctant acquiescence always beyond their control. ‘I was framed,’ he says, unzipping his fly, his pants around his ankles. In The Studhorse Man the male virgin carries the grail of his calling, to ‘get hold of a mare’.¹⁵ That Poseidon, the horse, never does, is ironically reflected by the promiscuity of his owner, Hazard Lepage. Hazard plays the reluctant virgin again and again seduced by lustful and devouring women. Because every human capitulation is for the sake of his virgin stallion, he is over and over again resanctified, free to resume his quest for the perfect mare. ‘There are virgins and there are virgins,’ says the narrator.¹⁶ Hazard’s fiancée Martha is an inaccessible virgin; Demeter (the mad narrator) is a virgin too, who, when he feels Hazard has abandoned his sacred destiny, takes it over. Hazard’s capitulation (when he and Martha unite) is of course the cause of his death; he has remained intact (!) only through profligacy, and when he betrays that celibate calling, he must die. By death re-virginized, his memory is preserved by his virgin biographer. This is the ultimate example of the kingdom of the male virgin, virginity coupled with the male world in a baroque overstatement of Edenic homesickness.

This kingdom, like most chaste and idealistic worlds, needs some re-evaluation. Those male virgins need to be ravished. Only too readily has literary criticism accepted the facile genealogy of Grove, Ross, Mitchell, Wiebe and Kroetsch. Perhaps there is a lesson to be distilled from one ravishment that is not the west as a fiction but this fiction as a west: The Double Hook.

In Sheila Watson’s The Double Hook there are no male virgins, in disguise or otherwise. This is the kingdom of coyote, the trickster, a true (not Hollywood) western figure, seldom seen but often heard as a shivering song across an expanse of prairie bluff and slough.

James Potter, at the beginning of the novel, having murdered his mother and impregnated Lenchen, is man fallen, already not-virgin. He tries the old virgin trick of running, but is robbed (by a woman) of the money that will buy him a train ticket out, and is thus ‘freed from freedom’¹⁷ He returns to his levelled home to accept the world he is part of
and to accept woman and child. 'I ran away, he said, but I circled and ended here the way a man does when he’s lost.'

This is not a case of the disappearing father (although he tries) and the male virgin that we have seen before. This is the kingdom of coyote, the trickster, who forces the reader beyond the personal into the universal, who shoves our noses up against art as more than a tease. It is only too easy to deal with the west as the kingdom of the male virgin, but that kingdom is insufficient. It leaves characters awkward and foot-shuffling, holding their pants up with both hands — or holding something else. Caught in the act. It’s too easy to fall into: we’re the west, that strangely regional region of storytellers manqués. When it would be better to take the following advice from, ironically, one of the virgins:

the artist him/her self

in the long run, given the choice of being God or Coyote, will, most mornings, choose to be Coyote:

he lets in the irrational along with the rational, the pre-moral along with the moral. He is a shape-shifter, at least in the limited way of old lady Potter. He is the charlatan-healer, like Felix Prosper, the low-down Buddha-bellied fiddler midwife (him/her) rather than Joyce’s high priest of art. Sometimes he is hogging the show instead of paring his fingernails. Like all tricksters, like Kip, like Traff, he runs the risk of himself being tricked.

Only coyote can seduce the male virgin, give him experience, sight. Make an honest man of him.

Still, there is something charming about the clumsy manoeuvres of the honest male virgin, the one who does not pretend to be something else, for whom virginity is no ficelle but a real and unfortunate condition which is difficult to cure. Compared to the male virgins created by the senior fictioneers of the west, his voice quivers authenticity.

Calgary Lover

And me,
I shoot roses.

Holding the barrel to each blossom,
I touch the trigger.
as if it might be a thorn.

The petals take flight at the whispered blast.
I protect myself from the tongues of outraged women

:by wearing a parka
:by growing pineapples in Pincher Creek
:by hanging a black cape over the canary's cage
:by sleeping in a highrise
:by eating peanut butter

(It must contain no words. It must be pure.
I must allow nothing.)

I carry a gun on the rack in the cab of my pickup.

I shoot roses on sight.

I recognize this one. He comes from Calgary; he's authentic. I am an outraged woman. I like him. I'll take him.

NOTES

5. Frederick Phillip Grove, 'Author's Note to the Fourth Edition', A Search For America (Toronto, 1971).
10. Settlers of the Marsh, p. 149.

The pun of virgin on version is deliberate. This essay stems from my position as a woman writing in the west, the need for alternate readings of our texts. Before I can write, I have to re-write the male virgins.

This article will appear at a later date in *Trace: Prairie Writers on Prairie Writing* to be edited by Birk Stroxton and published by Turnstone Press.
Mansong and Matrix: 
A Radical Experiment

This article is an experiment. I shall conduct an exercise towards a new approach to feminism in a Third World context with special attention to a concept of 'adaptation'.¹ I wish to apply Edward Kamau Brathwaite's theory of Caribbean creolization as a process of adaptation based on 'sun-aesthetics' to writers Zee Edgell and Jean Rhys, with specific reference to Edgell's *Beka Lamb* and Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*.

It is an experiment prompted by two things: first, my curiosity regarding radical comparative studies of the New Literatures in English, and second, the context within which Gayatri Spivak cited Xavier Gauthier in a comment on an 'international feminism'. There Spivak argues that French Feminisms based on male-centred ideologies are inadequate because one must examine the fact that 'at the crossroads of sexuality and ideology, woman stands constituted (if that is the word) as object. As subject, woman must learn to 'speak «otherwise»', or 'make audible what ... suffers silently in the holes of discourse'.²

With this idea from Spivak as my starting point, I shall show that adaptation according to Brathwaite is male-centred and inadequate for interpreting writing by Caribbean women. Zee Edgell's fiction holds the key to an emerging woman-centred creolization/adaptation theory such as Brathwaite attempts to address. Where Edgell differs from Brathwaite is that she allows women to voice what remains silent in the holes of Brathwaite's discourse.

The main thesis of Brathwaite's creolization theory is presented over a ten-year period in his non-fiction, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* and in the first two parts to his poetry trilogy, *Mother Poem* and *Sun Poem*.³ His definition of creolization reads:

[Creolization] was ... a cultural action — material, psychological and spiritual — based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and — as white/black, culturally discrete groups — to each other. The scope and quality of this response and interaction were dictated by the circumstances of the
Though Brathwaite spends much of his time presenting creolization as a cultural adaptation process within the special racial context of the Caribbean, his broader emphasis is on the place of sexuality in this adaptation: "...it was in the intimate area of sexual relationships in this adaptation that the greatest damage was done to white creole apartheid policy and where the most significant — and lasting — inter-cultural creolization took place." He further insists that 'the development of creole society in Jamaica must be seen within this context and dimension', that is, the visible and undeniable result of these [sexual] liaisons [e.g. between a white attorney and his favourite black or mulatto girl] ... acted as a bridge, a kind of social cement ... thus further helping to integrate the society. ...admissions of this interaction which, as the 'mulatto culturalists' hold, must have had not only physical, but metaphysical effects as well.

The link between sexuality and ideology as noted above by Brathwaite is further translated into a male-centred memory of the history of this creolization/adaptation, and developed more fully in the later poetic works. In the introduction to *Mother Poem* Brathwaite writes:

...my mother, Barbados: most English of West Indian islands, but at the same time nearest, as the slaves fly, to Africa.... My mother having to define her home as plot of ground ... and the precious seedling children planted for the future. But that plot and plan is limited and constantly threatened or destroyed by the plantation and the fact that the males of her life have become creatures, often agents of the owner-merchant. Hence the waterlessness of 'Rock Seed'.

*Sun Poem* is based entirely on the sun-god myths, emphasising patrilineage and privilege, and hinting at an Eliotic attitude toward tradition in its 'water/Rock' stylistics. Gordon Rohlehr tells us in his review of *Sun Poem* that 'the arc which the sun seems to describe from east to west ... the most conventional metaphor of man's life' is the central consistent metaphor in this poem. Rohlehr offers the following interpretation of the link between male/patriarchal-based creation myths and the sun/son/sum metaphor in the poetic expression of the adaptation theory.

The sun is presented as a source of mythology, and as one reads one is aware of Dahomean, Akan, Egyptian, Dogon and Judeo-Christian creation myths.... The mention of 'sunsun' (personality/experience) alerts us that this poem will be about spirit and essence transmitted, as the Akan believe, through the fathers, and becoming part of the bloodline of family and nation.
Maureen Warner Lewis's analysis of Brathwaite's extensive use of Akan creation myths shows that Brathwaite allows for androcentric birthing, so that even foetal blood may be credited to a male figure and the sea is the recipient of Father-Ancestor rivers. The female element in birthing is inactivated to a nominal figure as in the identification of Barbados as mother(land) of dispossessed slave/sons or waterless seedlings. Tracing the beginning of Brathwaite's use of Akan philosophy in an earlier trilogy, *The Arrivants*, Lewis clarifies this complex relationship for us by explaining that blood red and gold are male elements associated with birth and immortality.

That Onyame ['the ultimate, irreducible Godhead', a Sky-God] means the Shining One, probably the Sun, seems quite plausible from the fact that red and gold are the colours symbolic of Onyame and of the sun — the male element in society. Silver, on the other hand, is symbolic of the moon and womanhood.... Like the kra of Nyame, gold is believed to be 'life-giving'.

Brathwaite extends his interpretation of Caribbean history by localizing the odyssey-archetype to Barbados in particular. This odyssey-archetype is relegated to chiefly male experiences of adapting, or, to use Brathwaite's own key word, 'man/oeuvring'. As Rohlehr discerns: 'This constant «man/oeuvring» is really [about] a betrayal of both self and masculinity'. 'The second major theme [i.e. Son poem] concerns the consequences of a society's continued disconnection from the past. We first see it in the absence of an indigenous hero-archetype on which the boys can pattern their games.'

Despite objections of a one-sidedness in Brathwaite's creolization theory (for reasons other than the one I now argue) by Walcott, Bethune, Harris and Hearne, for example, Brathwaite's hypothesis, especially in its poetic form, is lauded rather than queried, and critics such as Lewis, Rohlehr and Brown write about Brathwaite's poetic technique with enthusiasm in their Caribbean and Afro-American contexts.

In the experiment I now conduct I want to apply *Sun Poem*'s expression on adapting to Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*. I wish to see what metaphoric shift occurs if/when the 'female subaltern' speaks. This phrase is to be understood in the context of Gayatri Spivak's paper 'The Literary Critic as Native Informant' with examples of the depersonalization of the Suttee as a means to male deification. As in that context, 'subaltern' denotes the relation of one proposition to another as in female to male/man/mankind, when 'the first is implied by the second but not conversely'.
Brathwaite's sun theory relies on the male-female metaphor, the mother-offspring relationship. Adam-identified, it is an account of re-breeding, re-production.\(^{17}\) His seeds/sons worship sun and sun-heat, demanding like the 'man-faced seeds' they plant — botanical and human — a nourishing and prominent place under the sun, aiming to be possessors of land and men like their enslavers, the 17th and 18th century Europeans.\(^{18}\)

Brathwaite's newly adapted New World inhabitant is a man who relates to the patriarchal colonizer/emerging merchant class, and the sun. These comprise the elements which will now afford him his own man'scape, sons on his own terms. It is clear in *The Development of Creole Society* that this imitative possessiveness is another essential element in the creolization or adaptation process. Manipulating and man/oeuvring or patriarchal creationism is discerned also by Rohlehr as the wider significance in the development of Brathwaite's theory as it appears in the poetic works.

Out of the sea emerges coral, the 'Rock/Seed' with which *Mother Poem* begins. *Sun Poem* ... thus describes a circle back to the genesis of its progenitor, *Mother Poem*, and the children who rise up with the new sun, the adams and esses [i.e. feminine essence] are also Brathwaite's poems and the creativity of the [Caribbean] region at its renaissance.\(^{19}\)

In contrast, the novels of Rhys and Edgell centre on young women whose personalities are seen to develop through their identification with woman-centred experiences, a process I shall refer to as woman-links. In order to clarify 'woman-links' I must go back to Brathwaite to show, by contrast, that 'son-links' offer very different terms of reference so that in Brathwaite's value system woman-links are non-existent/nullified. In Brathwaite's theory, woman is the 'subaltern' and thus voiceless as Spivak argues. However, in Rhys and Edgell we see what happens if/when 'she' speaks. 'She' in fact does not nullify the sons but sets them up in a different structure. What I intend to show is how solid and logical the woman-links structure is in Rhys and Edgell and how Brathwaite's theory, if applied to these writers, turns out to be invalid.

A summary of the 'general plot' of *Mother* and *Sun* poems shows that there are no woman-links of either physical or metaphysical relationships among women that are comparable to creolization mystified as masculine, creationist theory. According to Brathwaite, 'son' does, 'mother/woman' is. On one hand, 'son' can move in time and space to remember, to manoeuvre his process of adaptation. On the other hand, 'mother' is part of that which 'son' manoeuvres.
sun have you forgotten your brother
sun have you forgotten your mother
sun who gave birth to shango my uncle
who was fixed in his place by ogoun the master of iron

sun who blows the elephant trumpets
sun whose hot nostril bellows in the bull
testicle birth-sperm love-shout origin

Rohlehr’s summary is useful here to explain my point. His statement that ‘mother’ is to be seen as ‘principle of renewal and rebirth’ should be understood in the light of Lewis’s assessment of the life principle figure used by Brathwaite as masculine yet with female creative power as in birthing.

Mother Poem owes its dimension and structural coherence to the fact that the ‘mother’ is identified with the island itself, the sea surrounding it, the limestone caves and subterranean water beneath it, and all of these are metaphors for anima and muse....

Sun Poem unites three distinct themes ... the biographical ‘Son’ poem ... the historical theme [about] the leader of a nineteenth century slave revolt, to suggest ways of rewriting the history ... and to describe the island’s loss of myth and a sense of the meaning of the hero-archetype.... Third is ‘Sun’ poem in which the micro-cosmic histories of both Adam, universal man, and Barbados ... are placed in a framework of cosmic principle, in which movement is simultaneously towards the waste and void of entropy, and towards the sunlight and rainbow of renewal.

Further examples from Sun Poem clearly demonstrate the son-links emphasis in Brathwaite’s adaptation theory which scarcely hints at any female individuation outside of being men’s wives, prostitutes, mothers and sisters. The following illustrations could not be related to a woman-centred vision/memory which we find in Rhys’s and Edgell’s works. To describe local and sea-sensual experiences, Brathwaite writes of ‘mangroves’, ‘manacles’, ‘manial membranes’ and ‘manawar jelly’, for example. Tamarind trees grow from the spot where a man was reported to have died and bear seeds ‘with the face of a man’. It is a male, seed-centred experience where ‘sticks seeds pebbles’ inspire ‘forgotten divinations’.

Examples from ‘Yellow Minnim’ celebrate black sons rising from the sun: ‘the sun made patterns on the water that gave birth to children’ and ‘eyes bright as sapodilla seeds are black/crack open with the suns glaze’. The active male principle is reiterated often as in: ‘hens scuttled and clucked in the seaside sun while slowly and tall/ly above them turned and man/oeuvred the golden galleon cocks’. Sections of Sun Poem appear to be quite self-indulgent in debating male sexual potency:
do not seduce the headman's wife but his cook:
what he loves he will flart: look
to it: your cock might depend upon

Adam, tapping his mythic past, is likened to 'Ra ... son of Nu, the primeval «who gave birth to himself»', or like the life-force Ram in the Dogon creation myth, like 'a rasta of water with rumbelling muscles and turrible turrible hair'.

*Sun Poem* concludes with what Rohlehr interprets as representing Ra's sun-ship preserving its light during the twelve hours in the underworld:

but suns don't know when they die
they never give up
hope heart or articule

storing up their megalleons of light
colliding with each other, hissing heir
white sperms of power
and continue to steam, issue heat, long
after their tropic is over

Jean Rhys and Zee Edgell present us, however, with a different pattern. There, the historic-witness is not defined as a virgin (in the patriarchal sense). Neither is she Adam’s counterpart, in the Judeo-Christian sense, an Eve. She chooses to be a non-reproducer of sons, is uncomfortable in sun-heat but enjoys sunlight especially where associated with the sea. She is a haunter of seascapes and finds physical and metaphysical security in a female homosociety advised by worldly seed-matriarchs. The historic-witness, here, questions the patriarchal God and marriage. These women’s process of adapting as expressed largely through the seed-matriarchs (contrasting with Brathwaite’s male seeds) relegates men’s affairs to be secondary to those of women, but not to passiveness or mere essences as Brathwaite’s female elements appear.

Unlike Brathwaite’s sun- and rainbow-cycles, Edgell’s are derived from circular sea-strolls. *Beka Lamb* begins and ends with Toycie’s wake. Toycie is Beka’s best friend, and her wake also signifies Beka’s adolescent awakening. *Voyage in the Dark*’s narrative is patterned on Anna’s material and psychical, subterranean cycle related as memories of and relationships with the Caribbean sea and with the women who help shape her life-decisions.
The women writers’ treatment of sunlight is very different from Brathwaite’s. In Edgell, the sun is shunned not revered. She writes of ‘ragged sunlight’ on ‘hot sticky’ days. The sun is a harsh element not credited with special powers of regeneration literally or symbolically; the sun ‘hits Beka’s eyes’. In *Voyage in the Dark* Anna says ‘the sun at home can be terrible like God’. Anna hates trees in England where they appear ‘symbolic of a masculine world’. There the trees ‘are all wrong’ she says. ‘All Rhys heroines hate the sun and Sundays’, Anna particularly disliking going to Church and wearing ‘gloves in the heat’. And when in a contemplative mood, Anna concentrates on ‘sad suns and shadows’.

A coming to terms with the past as a West Indian person is not set within a myth of a masculine inspired sun-god in the way that Brathwaite extends it to himself, other sons or seedlings. The coming to terms for Rhys and Edgell is generated also by *seeds*, but these ‘seeds’ are older sisters and mothers. In *Beka Lamb* the identity of seed-matriarchs is quite clear.

Beka is given a historic-vision, such as Brathwaite’s Adam exercises, through lessons of domestic to political survival taught by the Great Gran seed-matriarch. References to the past are always preceded by ‘See, ... according to Granny Straker’. Gran Straker’s face or anyone resembling the Gran is said to be like a seed, for example, the ‘cashew seed’.

In this description of resemblances among the women, there is an emphasis between Beka and her Great Gran, which provides the metaphysical continuity in Edgell’s work, a continuity which Brathwaite seeks in suns/sons/seeds of the immortal Akan sun-god, Odomankoma. The physical connections felt by the women are subtle and memorable compared with the aggressiveness of Brathwaite’s metaphoric debates on male im/potence in *Sun Poem*. In Edgell’s novel, and in Rhys’s, as I shall soon show, the female homosociety is itself a source of historicity, with the chief authority being the Great Gran. This female homosociety is specifically concerned with women’s adapting within the general West Indian adaptation process described by Brathwaite as a wider ‘West Indian cultural process’. The women have the ability to re-view creolization and to direct, even predict, the changes in their lives. That was the job of a male homosociety in *Sun Poem* and *Mother Poem*. In *Beka Lamb* Edgell writes:

...at the wake [for Toycie, Beka’s best friend], later that evening, everything appeared to Beka as Granny Ivy had cautioned it might....

Beka followed her mother ... towards a table beneath the bottom of the house, where Granny Ivy and several women stood filling bowls ... [while the] men [were] drifting towards the bar.
Beka’s greeting to the guests at the wake is a bright ‘good evening everybody’, but she specifically addresses the women: ‘Aunt Tama, Miss Eila, Miss Flo!’ And their replies to Beka’s greeting is an excellent example of the kind of woman-linking to be found in this novel.

‘She is the picture of my Mama Straker, no?’ Aunt Tama’s body felt like the soft pudding Beka had been eating. . . .

‘Beka shure resembles her Greatgranny Straker,’ Miss Eila agreed.

‘To the life!’ a scrawny yellow faced lady called Miss Jamie said. ‘We can hope she grows with Mother Straker’s ways.’

The sea also functions in an apparently similar way to its role as passage and regenerator of new West Indians in Brathwaite’s theory. However, there the similarity ends. The women identify with the sea as a part of themselves while in Brathwaite’s work, the sea surrounds the mother-island and spawns sons. In Brathwaite the sea is associated with masculine action. In Edgell and Rhys it is associated with female personality.

There is one experience Beka finds pleasant during her years at high school. It is that of being in Sister Gabriela’s classroom because ‘it overlooked the sea to the horizon and posters of exotic places’. When disturbed by one of her most unpleasant experiences of having to defend her beliefs which had been reinforced by the Great Gran’s tutoring against Father Nunez’s identification of ‘woman’ with patriarchal images of Eve and the Virgin Mary, Beka’s sorting out of her ideas is associated with seawater. The musing process is described as one where if she could ‘lay it on the desk and look at it … the roar of seawater in her head…’ her understanding of it would be speedier.

The sea is active as a symbol of female imagination, not receptive/receptacle for the spawning of sons. Beka’s frequent sea-scaping forms the larger action of the novel. She and Toycie ‘would pause self-consciously by the sea-wall’, wander through carefully chosen streets between the town and the sea, ‘then they were again by the sea…. Beka usually sat on the wall, her feet dangling above the sea … [and she] gazed across the water’. Here there is an ‘exhilaration of sea air’: ‘I am going live right da sea-front, hurricane or no hurricane’ says Toycie. ‘Me too, gyal’ [replies Beka].’ The most memorable of no less than a score of Beka’s sea/see-viewing is that of her mother, Lilla’s eyes appearing to be a picture of water rushing over brown stones.

In Jean Rhys’s Voyage in the Dark, colour plays an important role in the protagonist’s self-identification within the process we have been discussing called ‘creolization’. Anna is a fifth generation creole of predomi-
nantly European descent, though she has been called ‘Hottentot’ by her London acquaintances. Her continual recall of life in her West Indian island home is carved out of her memory from two central elements. One is the culturalization aspect of Brathwaite’s definition of creolization — social music and dance — and the other is her relationship with a childhood friend, Francine, a creole of predominantly African descent. The ever-threatening memory of her Aunt Hester, élite white creole, spurs Anna on to new horizons, forces her to make her own way in the world, defines for her what she must not become. And to a large extent one aspect of Brathwaite’s creolization theory rings true here. It is that where he believes that it was where ‘black-creole’ traditions damaged white creole apartheid policy that ‘the most significant — and lasting — inter-cultural creolization took place’. Anna’s looking back is further set in a subterranean scape so that the Caribbean sea is a kind of looking glass — that is a transparent glass through which to see and look at past and present relationships, especially with her female relatives and friends.

In Beka Lamb there is an absence of the Brathwaitian manscape. In Voyage in the Dark there is an additional element. In Rhys’s novel, islands are ‘dolls’, lifeless in Anna’s fast slackening grasp on her creole home as she battles with the contradictions of the London landscape and its men. Instead of red/son/sun rising, Anna can be held to signify the mythic ‘Anna rising from the sea’ which in turn ‘reinforces the mythic overtures ... of Venus, rising from the sea’.33

See/seascaping is internal, unlike the sea which is externally determined by the sun-god in Sun Poem. Manscape is replaced by ‘the room, female archetype’, a different sort of spacing altogether. Anna spends a great deal of her time, between abortive love affairs with men, ‘remembering all the rooms of her life’. According to Helen Nebeker’s Jungian analysis of Rhys’s novel, ‘these memories coalesce in a marvellous symbolic review of all that is at the root of Anna’s conflicts: creole culture, female individuality and sexuality’. In her analysis, Nebeker also notes that remembering is juxtaposed with the ‘smell of the sea (female archetype of life, the unconscious); [and] the rotting smell of the earth and water’.34

The differences in the metaphoric shifts between the male-centred writing and the female-centred writing discussed here with specific reference to Brathwaite’s creolization contain the seeds to many possible arguments regarding difference, writing, gender and perception. However, I hope that I have shown here one basic problem posed by a literary-critical theory which aims to speak about a region and its history
as a whole by using a male-centred ideology or philosophy. It seems to me that Gayatri Spivak’s question relating to French Feminisms is very relevant to Brathwaite’s literary-historic theory regarding the West Indies. Beka and Anna, as subjects, can and do speak ‘otherwise’, making audible what suffers silently in the holes of Brathwaite’s discourse - according to Adam — on the adaptation of the ‘New World inhabitant’ to the West Indies.

NOTES

1. Edward Kamau Brathwaite is Professor of History at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. His previous trilogy, *The Arrivants*, concentrates on the African sources, which are explored as ‘transformed’ or adapted to the West Indies amidst European influences in the second trilogy, which begins with *Mother Poem*. My discussion of Brathwaite’s creolization/adaptation theory will be restricted to the first two parts of this second trilogy and one non-fiction work.


5. Ibid., p. 303.
6. Ibid., p. 305.
9. Ibid., p. 85.
10. See Maureen Warner Lewis, ‘Odomankoma Kyrema Se’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No 2 (June 1973), pp. 56, 72-73. Also cf. p. 60 where Lewis, citing Danquah, notes that the word ‘Nana’ may be male or female, and can mean begetter, root, seed, producer. Nana, however, also signifies ‘grandfather’.
14. John Hearne reviewed Development as 'the impression of men and women heaped indiscriminately and intimately, like jigsaw pieces in a box'. Hearne says there that Brathwaite 'is dealing with the elements in a developing style rather than a distinct culture. 'The Jigsaw Men', Caribbean Quarterly, Vol. 19, No 2 (June 1973), pp. 143-49. Following the controversy ignited by social scientists such as Mintz, Handler and R.T. Smith regarding the presentation of 'Contradictory Omens' (Savacou, Monograph No 1, 1974, rpt 1985), a work which precedes the ideas in the book Development, Lebert Bethune argues against Brathwaite, I believe, ironically. Bethune writes: 'The question raised is how can the dominant reality of acculturation, typified at the outset, by the contact of two cultures in subordinate/superordinate relationship be debasing at one and the same time as being reciprocally enriching — a contradictory omen indeed.' Book Review of 'Contradictory Omens — Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean', Caribbean Quarterly, Vol. 21, No 3 (September 1975). See also Lloyd Brown, West Indian Poetry (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), pp. 139-58.
15. 'Does the female subaltern speak?' is the core question of Spivak's lecture 'The Literary Critic as Native Informant', The Stephen Roberts Lecture Theatre, University of Sydney, 1 August 1984. What happens when the Caribbean female subaltern speaks on 'woman's sphere' is documented by Yolanda T. Moses in 'Female Status, the Family, and Male Dominance in a West Indian Community', Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society, Vol. 4, No 4 (1979), pp. 142-53.
17. Wilson Harris has linked such 'sun worship' to an 'American pioneering idealism', seen to be destructive in Caribbean. See his essay 'The Question of Form and Realism in the West Indian Artist' in Tradition, the Writer and Society (London: New Beacon Books, 1973).
18. Note that if we consider the link between Akan culture and Brathwaite's adaptation metaphor along with inherent androcentric owning, the significance of the linguistic ties between the words in Akan meaning 'life' and 'plantation': 'Nkwa' and 'ekwa', respectively, illustrates the bonding between landowning and self-esteem in the colonized, New World man.
20. Sun, p. 53.
23. Ibid., p. 49.
24. Ibid., p. 42.
25. Ibid., p. 93.
26. In pre-hellenic Matriarchal societies (with special reference to gender, religion and myth) 'physical virginity ... meant simply «unmarried»'. Patriarchal preoccupation with the motherhood aspect of women interprets 'virgin' usually as 'she who refuses to be impregnated by men'. See Barbara G. Walker's The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 1048. My central argument against an application of Brathwaite's theory to Edgell's work, for example, is the basic difference in the interpretation and function of the word, 'seed'.


30. In this paragraph, quotes are taken, respectively, from Beka Lamb, pp. 70, 72, 73.

31. Ibid., p. 91.

32. Ibid., pp. 15, 29. See also pp. 47-59 for similar examples.

33. See Nebeker, op. cit., p. 55. For a supporting reference work, see Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia*, p. 1043: Venus was the 'Roman name for the Great Goddess in her sexual aspect, derived from the eponymous mother of Venetian tribes of the Adriatic, after whom the city of Venice was also named'.

34. Nebeker, op. cit., p. 68.
BETWEEN WOMEN

One day I shall write about you —
taller, tougher, curved Amazon
(you queened it in every show,
twelve-year-old woman, men like fleas
jumping into your skin-stretched pants;
queer pedigree, an empress chou
appalled by the hovelled family
under heel in the common bed:
brute and vulgar spirit as
only immigrant Hakka have bred) —
and I, the stray dropping by,
with my mongrel tongue, to be burned
in the shadow of your assertive
flesh and flashy hair. But in my mind
the damned secret of seeing double,
fiction's poisoned perspective,
painted you in lesser colours
than mine. You have never forgiven
this. One day I shall write about us
when the cracked and acute glass
no longer shows your grimace
rivalled on my uncertain face.
The African Woman Writer

At the African Writers' Conference in London in 1984, there was a special forum on the African Woman Writer. This forum was chaired by Lauretta Ngcobo, and what follows were her opening remarks.

It is of great significance that there is such a presence of African women writers at this conference. Women have always played vital roles in our oral literature, but the written form has tended to ignore the women. Until recently, it was a male preserve and women featured in this literature as cardboard characters that answered to the images that male writers have of their mothers on the one hand, and their wives on the other. It is true that Africa holds two contradictory views of woman — the idealised, if not the idolised mother, and the female reality of woman as wife.

If this is the case with our male writers, what can we expect of the rest of the world? For many, the African woman writer creature does not exist. One shudders to think what happens to all those born artists among African women — what bottled lives they must suffer, and what talents lie wasting within. In some cases, of course, they lie collecting dust in some kitchen cupboard.

Many of our women lack the confidence to confront the world. For us, nothing in our social life encouraged the inner strengths required to develop in the changing cultural patterns. In our male dominated societies our oral traditions extolled the virtues of humility, silent endurance and self-effacing patterns of behaviour for our girls, while young boys received all the encouragement to go out there and triumph and survive. On top of the traditional patterns, the schools that our girls attend or do not attend make it hard for them to express themselves in writing.

Ours is a fledgling literature, fighting for its survival at all levels. Not only do we have to contend with the problems of writing, but we have problems communicating with publishers, with critics, and even with the
institutions of learning — very few in the British Isles concern themselves with the views of African women.

Yet, women have views, vital points of view, which differ markedly in certain respects from those of our male writers — perspectives that reveal how women perceive their societies and their roles in those societies. Some of these writings are burdened with protests which powerlessness and frustrations engender. Some bridge the gaps of incredulity that exist between Africa and the world in a way that few male writers might do — reinterpreting experience in the way Africans perceive it. I call to mind a lesser known woman writer, Aquah Laluah of Ghana, who Africanises the Christian story in her work entitled 'Nativity'. Not only does she give it an African cast, but the Virgin Mary and the Black Christ are visited by women in place of the male visitors like the wisemen and the shepherds in the Biblical story. The story of the Nativity as it is traditionally known is remarkable for the absence of women; and yet in the African context it is inconceivable to have such a situation — indeed, in many parts of Africa, men keep away from the place of birth until the baby has grown a little.

Our women are caught up in a hybrid world of the old and the new; the African and the alien locked in the struggle to integrate contradictions into a meaningful new whole. Women whose concern has always had to do with customs and traditions have the task to salvage what they can of our way of life, while dissenting strongly from those customs that they feel we have outgrown or ought to outgrow.

There is no doubt that not only Africa but the whole world stands to gain by letting these perspectives come out in the writings of our women.
I find, writing about myself, does not come easily. Addressing the world about the little swirls of little events that loosely gather, tangle and disentangle — in short, my life, seems of very doubtful consequence. When at birth I was released into this motion of swirling little events my life was also set on rails and predetermined — free within the confines of turbulent change in South Africa. It was to take another thirty years for me to break loose, to burn the bridges, to leave South Africa and go into exile.

I was born in the twilight of a spring September morning in rural Cabazi in South Africa, fifty three years ago. It had been a difficult struggle for both my mother and me, I am told. On the night of the second day, my grandfather, who knew the white doctor personally, had managed to persuade him to venture into the black reserve, by night, to save the life of his elder daughter and her unborn child. And so he did. I have often wondered at the nature of the relationship between these two men, Dr Bowen and Nyoni Cele, a black and a white, a professional and a peasant. I never understood it, even though I saw quite a bit of it when I grew up, a sickly child, who often visited the only doctor around. But to go back to that September dawn, I understand the doctor emerged from my grandmother’s room (the labour room) and stared straight ahead, past my grandfather’s questioning eyes (a reluctant friend across the many barriers) and gave a sideways nod, to indicate his success. In response to the taciturn doctor, my grandfather swung round with no acknowledging fawning smile. He quickened his steps as he tore the silent dawn with thunderous family poetry recitations, recalling the ancestors, generations of them, reporting my arrival and thanking each one and all for my birth. He then switched back to the living, starting with my mother, thanking her for my safe delivery and welcoming me as he went round encircling the whole homestead. He had done it with each one of his grandchildren and was to do it with many others who followed. Needless to say, the doctor was forced to turn around enthralled and watch, for the first time perhaps, the practitioner of the authentic African
literary expression. At the end of the performance my grandfather stopped next to the car and, staring the doctor in the eye, he murmured words of gratitude, a man to his equal. He then walked quietly to end the vigil of the two nights in his room in deep sleep. Dr Bowen drove off. He had just witnessed an age old tradition.

Poetry for us remains the only expression that translates and informs all occasions. It is performed to honour kings, to welcome newly born babies, and to rock them to their sleep. It is sung at weddings, at funerals and at war. It even heralds peace. I have vivid memories of peace offerings between my mother and my grandmother. Often my mother would be the first to relent. And when she did, she would approach the ‘great house’ and a hundred yards from the door she would start reciting the maternal family line first, followed by the paternal line, pass the doorway without stopping, walking in measured steps, another hundred yards to the end of the yard, turn back again and finally walk in. By the time she would sit down, still reciting, my grandmother would be nodding in concurrence and that would mark the end of the discord.

Over and above this general heritage, I had the fortune of being born into a family of story tellers. And my great-grandmother was a great composer of family poetry, for in my traditional society every child has personal poetry which will identify them even as adults within the family. Some of course, is composed in youth or upon achievement. My great grandmother was one of many wives and the least loved. She gave of her burgeoning spirits in compositions to her children — her three sons and one daughter. Her poetry reveals, in achingly beautiful words the depths of her pain and her desperate loneliness. Her only comfort must have been her children.

Unfortunately, this great literary tradition has been steadily subverted with the introduction of the scripted form of literature. The script has tended to divide society into the educated élite and the uneducated mass of the people. In this way it has become a source of alienation. But the reasons for the literary inhibitions do not lie with the script alone. We, in South Africa, have suffered an even greater cultural dislocation in our dismembered societies in the service of industrial development. People were bludgeoned into the cities with no alternative but to graft a new culture, a patchwork of the old, the new and the borrowed — a people forced, in the end, to frown upon their former selves, their heritage and their past. The migratory system in Apartheid South Africa has altered beyond recognition the structures of our societies. This has particularly affected the position of women, who traditionally played a very prominent part in the transmission of oral literature. Left alone in the
country areas, while their men work in far away cities, they are cut off from the cultural adaptations that their men make in the cities; they are left to hobble along, single-handed, transmitting the old traditions. Never has a system created such hardened divisions between men and women. In other words, the cultural mode in which literary life prospered has been splintered. The traditional literary forms have been replaced by the pale culture of the cities.

For me, having been brought up in the country, I had enjoyed a life that approximated the 'real thing' much more than the young people from the cities, whom I was later to meet in boarding schools and colleges. It was here that I slowly sensed the silent disapproval of the barefoot life-style and art that was part of my whole way of life. I was in the majority but I endured the status of a minority power which was loaded on the side of those who had made strides away from tradition. I felt even then that the whole ethos of the school projected more the borrowed culture of the city girls. I enjoyed learning in school, but I soon felt that I was caught up in a tug of warring cultures. Seeing myself through the eyes of others, I began to feel a disfigurement of outlook, a mutilation within. The conflict persisted even against the most arduous efforts to strike a balance. Purity of culture may not be possible anywhere nor be the ideal, but emotional conflict about one’s practice of a culture, be it pure or not, can result in hybrid art. That is how I feel about my writing at times.

But this was not the last time I was to look at myself as others saw me. My father had died when I was barely eight. I was the first in a family of four. My mother was determined to have us all educated, regardless of sex. She was the sole bread winner of the family and the strain of paying for books, fees, stationery, fares was evident to all. The public openly condemned us, girls, who ‘demanded’ the same privileges as boys. In a family where mother had never made us aware of the preferences, the remarks were not only hurtful, but created a throbbing consciousness of one’s burdensome value. Soon I began to feel that as a first born girl in the family it was best to leave school and let others get the opportunity. Girls in any society are seldom ever in the minority — yet I felt strongly marginalised because I was a girl. This was further exacerbated when I got to University — with a ratio of thirty five women students to five hundred men in those days. In some classes the preference given to male students was disarming. We joked about it, but we felt it keenly because at high school we had enjoyed equality of attention in our girls’ school. At University there was sometimes the feeling of doing things on sufferance. It was as if black men could be understood to desire to filch away for
themselves some high education; but the black women — what need had they? Education was a preserve. To those who ventured close enough there were clear signals warning us what we could or could not take. Flashed in neon brightness were the professions such as teaching and nursing. Beyond that, on sufferance you could be admitted to medical or Law schools at some white Universities (later there was established a medical school for black people).

Writing or jobs in the media were not only unavailable but were clearly ‘dangerous’ unless the writers intuitively kept away from serious areas of journalism and confined themselves to popular writing. Writing had always been a fascination for me, but I had accepted earlier on that it was beyond bounds. I can even say I accepted it without bitterness. I convinced myself that it was not possible and that no one would have any interest at all in what I could say — not the men, not the white people, and not even the other women, for years of conditioning had taught us that only men have a voice and are worth listening to. This, over and above the intolerance engendered by Apartheid South Africa in all spheres of life. That tutored feeling of ‘less-worthiness’ has been a crippling factor in all my creative thinking. I wrote a number of articles and half-finished books which I discarded, burned as refuse each time we packed our bags for a new destination in our mobile exiled years.

When I came to Great Britain I felt very much alone — a minority of one against the world. In a strange way this isolation removed the social factor from my life. For a short while the majority/minority scale was discounted in my social calculation. Yet this social condition also conferred a beautiful feeling of release. For the first time I was just me. I wrote what I liked. Not that Britain conferred this on me — it was a temporary mental adjustment I made to my solitude. Up until then my life had been lived behind barriers and I had been demeaned even when I had been in the majority. In the minority/majority ratio I had accepted that it is not numbers that count; it is power. In this sea-saw, I had been permanently high on the powerless end. In Great Britain I was not only powerless but I was in the minority for the first time. And up to now, I am very much a member of this minority and I find a lot of my energy is consumed in the effort to gain admission into the greater society. I am back where I started.
We Too Have Hands

When ‘My Dear Brother’ was published in *Viva*, I spent a lot of time feeling that I had committed a serious crime. My friends feared for my marriage. My senior officer was reported to have said, ‘This means divorce, doesn’t it?’ It did not mean divorce. What it did mean was that I started from then on to realise that telling the truth, even disguised truth through poetry, short stories, or even folklore, alienates you. My friends at *Viva* were of course delighted with the poem, especially as it generated quite a number of letters to the editor for a number of issues after it appeared.

I started writing poetry as an avenue for release, for pain and tears and for love. ‘My Dear Brother’, for example, was my reaction against the oppressive manner in which most of my friends, myself included, were treated by their husbands. It was not, as some people came to say later, exclusively written as a challenge to my husband. If there was any challenge in it at all, it was aimed at making him and other men see that women were their sisters, the other child whom their mothers gave birth to. Unlike them, this other child did not have a penis. And this was the only difference between men and women.

I was brought up by a grandmother who was, among many other things, a midwife. I remember particularly one child that she delivered. It was my cousin. As the time drew near for my young mother (as we call our uncle’s wife) to give birth, my grandmother and aunts were all obsessed with the sex of the baby to come. One thing was certain, they all wished that my young mother should have a son. You see, up to this time, she had only had two girls. Although girls were grudgingly accepted as children, there had as yet been no child who would carry on the lineage. This was very sad indeed. My mother had just died and left my father with three girls! His elder brother had only one child: a girl! If my young mother did not do something at the next birth, our lineage was likely to die out. I remember feeling sorry for grandma because she longed so much for a grandson to name after her dear departed husband.
When she was in her philosophical mood, grandma would concede that whatever child my young mother gave birth to, it would still be a child. I got the impression that she was steeling herself in the event of a girl being born.

The night my cousin was born is among the most exciting memories I have of my childhood. My young mother went into labour and grandma was at hand to assist her. We all gathered into her hut, four anxious little girls. Perhaps our anxiety was heightened by grandma’s mutterings as she wiped our young mother’s brow. She kept re-assuring her to work hard and give birth to her baby. Gone from grandma’s thoughts was the obsession with a male birth. All she wanted to see was that this groaning woman gave birth and rested from the agony. She kept reassuring her that she was squatting right. Grandma’s hands were trembling, but ready and waiting for the little head of the new arrival. My young mother gave birth to a boy. We all rejoiced. Our lineage would no longer be a laughing stock. We had a man who would continue the lineage. All of us girls would look upon him as our protector, even though he was our junior in years. Need I tell you that grandma called him after her late husband. Or that we were (and still are) very proud of him.

But my cousin could easily have been born a girl. For a mother, the pains, fears and anxieties that she has before giving birth are the same whether the child is a boy or a girl. From the moment her child is seen to be a boy, however, the mother gains in status within the lineage. The child itself does not know, of course, that by arriving with that sex, it has fulfilled a role predetermined by the society into which it is born. From then onwards, that child is brought up in such a way that he fulfils these expectations. Hence my cry in ‘My Dear Brother’, and in all the poems where I cry out against female oppression, is really a cry against structures in society which continue to perpetrate this damaging categorisation of humanity. I cannot find peace in myself so long as girls are considered a less worthy creation than boys. As a mother of four sons, I know that.

I have made it to my people’s most honoured and envied position. But what am I to teach these four children who happened to be born by me, a lesser creation than they are? Having struggled in my life against the destructive consequences of upbringing which gives the male a licence to oppress and degrade the female, am I to encourage my own children to continue to believe in this system? In my case the question is rhetorical. In many women’s cases, it is not. It is a pertinent, burning question. You see, they believe in the system under which they are bringing up their
children. Wicked, I think, is the word the Bible would be inclined to use against a system which deliberately and methodically denies the female child and person the dignity which God gave her in creation.

The other frightening aspect of this female denigration is that society sets about in an organised manner to rob itself of the many resources which women have. Who loses? Who gains? Is social short-term gain, manifested in total female subservience, to be preferred to longer-term gain, provided women are given the same opportunities from birth as men are?

I have been accused of being anti-male. This accusation always hits me most when it comes from otherwise open-minded African men. Once I was a panel discussant on a BBC programme on marriage in Africa. One of my male discussants accused me of being too far removed from the reality of African marriage and life. What was it that I had against men, he demanded to know. Another 'enlightened' African male told me once that my problem with men was that I hated them. Now, that really was hitting below the belt, to borrow a graphic male expression. I have always been deeply attached to my father, my uncles and to all my male kin. I was deeply in love with my first husband, until he died, despite the fact that we had parted. I am deeply attached to my second husband. He gives me as much strength as I hope I give him in our daily struggles through life. I have four lively boys from whom I could not be parted for the world. Who hates men? Even God knows that I am a good enough person to entrust male children to. No, I certainly do not hate men, but men alone do not make society. Men and women do. If society belongs to all human beings, but some human beings cling on to it with their fingertips, then they must tell society that they too have hands. Women too want to hold society in the depth of their palms, to feel it, to nurse it, to savour it, and to know that it is wonderful to be alive!

NOTE

1. *Viva* is a women's magazine in Kenya.
ENCOUNTER

Teach me to laugh once more
let me laugh with Africa my mother
I want to dance to her drum-beats
I am tired of her cries
Scream with laughter
roar with laughter
Oh, how I hate this groaning

Africa groans
under the load of her kwashiokered children
she weeps
what woman would laugh
over her children’s graves

I want to laugh once again
let me laugh with you
yes, even you my brother who blames me for breeding...
I laugh with you
even you who sell me guns
preserving world peace
while my blood, Africa’s blood stains Earth
let laughter be my gift to you
my generous heart overflows with laughter
money and vanity harden yours
clogged in your veins, the blood no longer warms your heart
I will teach you yet

I am not bush, lion, savagery
mine are the sinews which built your cities
my sons fighting your wars
gave you victory, prestige
wherein lies the savagery in Africa... 
Your sons in Africa looted our family chests 
raping the very bowels of our earth 
our gold lines the streets of your cities... 
where are pavements in Africa

Laugh with me 
Do not laugh at me 
my smile forgives all 
but greed fetters your heart 
the nightmare of our encounter is not over 
your overgrown offspring 
swear by the western god of money and free enterprise 
that they are doing their best for Africa 
indeed, Africa the dumping ground 
Africa the vast experimental ground 
the army bases in the developing parts 
enhanced military aid in the loyal parts 
family planning programmes in the advanced parts

My son built your cities 
What did your son do for me...
South Africa: Guest of Honour
Amongst the Uninvited
Newcomers to England’s Great
Tradition

South Africa occupies a place, not to be envied, with regard to her literature. On the one hand she poises, uncomfortably, in African literature: her discomfort caused by our knowledge that her internationally recognized writers are White. On the other, we occasionally see her artfully forcing her way in with Commonwealth literature in the unabashed manner of Israel’s participation in the ‘Song for Europe’.

The dilemma of where to place South African writing is caused by an unusual response to her writers. While White South African writing is constantly placed before the reading public (through interviews and reviews for newspapers, magazines, radio and television, adaptations for film and sound, and distribution of books in shops, public and university libraries), Black South African writing poses an awkward problem for librarians, booksellers, and teachers of literature. A walk around university and council libraries, chain-store and community bookshops provides evidence of the ‘guest of honour’ and the ‘uninvited guest’ handling of White and Black South African writers. Publishers have to be commended for the first. But what do we say to them about the second? Should the market for literature continue to be assessed on such obviously racial lines?

Virginia Woolf writing in *A Room of One’s Own* almost a century ago, suggests that the three factors which deter women from writing are a ‘lack of education’, the ‘lack of access to publishing’, and the ‘certainty that women would not make a living from writing’. Have these deterrents been removed for women writers in the 1980s? For Black women writers? For the exiled Black woman writer?

Once we recognize that publishers believe the Black writer to be
writing for Black readers, the question of earning a living from writing, a
universal problem, is exacerbated for Black writers in exile. White South
African writers who live and write in South Africa are guaranteed an
audience there and here. Black South African writers who are in exile
know that their works are not circulated in South Africa, and that any
market basing itself on the Black reading public in England will restrict
publication of their work. The situation of the Black South African
woman, *writing to earn a living in England*, has never been touched upon by
any discussion of women writers’ or African writers’. Because it is the
situation I am coping with, it is of concern to me.

I am an Indian and a Roman Catholic. These two facts were my
passport out of South Africa and into Pius XII University College in
Lesotho: there was no separate university for Indians when I matricu-
lated, and the Separate Universities Bill was already in force.

At sixteen I travelled to Lesotho, then on to Zimbabwe, and finally to
Zambia. These decisions were made without interference from my
family, though they knew I’d be going to each of these countries without
accompanying friends. The experience of ‘Roma’, in Lesotho, next to
the freedom which the women and men in my family allowed my sisters
and me, influenced my perspective of South Africa, and my attitude to
male dominance. Ten years in independent Zambia added to what is
now for me a matter of principle never to subscribe to the apartheid
system by my mere presence there. Coming to England was a decision I
opposed, but I was faced with the alternative of returning to South Africa
— as a man’s unaccompanied baggage?

In Zambia I’d been teaching and writing articles for young people
intended to provide them with a background to African history before
colonialism. The usual procedure for any teacher coming to Britain is to
apply for qualified teacher status. The Department of Education and
Science withheld this from me ‘for the time being’, while granting it to
some other South Africans. The effect on me was one of a tremendous
loss of self-confidence.

Any woman forced to live in an environment where she is a foreigner,
and then frustrated in her attempts to find employment will find herself
in the isolated world that leaves writing as an only option. Since she can’t
make a living in any other way, she will hope to make writing pay. Is it
possible for a Black South African woman to make a living from writing
in England in the 1980s?

At some stage I’d begun working on the ‘Bells’ manuscript, but my
situation was such that I had almost no contact with English-speaking
people. My mother-tongue, long since lost to me, isolated me from my
community. Still entertaining hopes of teaching, it occurred to me that I had a Biology degree, and those teachers who were now actively teaching were Arts graduates, rather despised in Africa, but obviously thought highly of here. With this simplistic notion in my mind, I applied to the Universities Central Council for Admission to do a first degree in English.

At one university, I offered the rough draft of the ‘Bells’ manuscript to be read before the interview in place of ‘recent essays’. The interviewer made flattering comments, but if I expected to have to appear knowledgeable about any literary work or figure, I was to be disappointed. I was questioned at length about the arrangements I would make for my children, travelling in winter, how I would cope with a full-time course while caring for my children, and ‘did I think that doing a degree was an easy thing?’ It didn’t require a supreme effort to realize that a man would never have been asked similar questions, and that my African degree counted for nothing.

At the second university the interviewer, confidently blunt said, ‘The university will expect you to do A-levels. After all you will be competing with English students who have just taken their A-levels.’ In retrospect, I excuse these remarks with the hope that the interviewers may have neglected to read the UCCA form. At the time their remarks seemed so typical of what I had come to expect that I risked the offer of a place by responding with anger to both interviewers. I ended the second interview with the words, ‘I already have a university degree’. Three universities made me unconditional offers.

At the university I chose to attend I faced three separate incidents of tutors not believing that the written work I was submitting was my own. They said, because I rarely spoke during seminars and tutorials. I believe, because criticism has become an area for arrogance, and there is a notion prevalent amongst English teachers today of the ‘native speaker of English’ distinct from the rest of the world of English speakers. At the time the incidents caused me considerable distress, since I was lacking in confidence, aware of my accent, and I bore constantly in mind the fact that I was in fact competing with teenagers who had no other responsibilities and who were fresh out of school. My writing, however, never reflected my lack of confidence.

The experimental novel What Passing Bells was completed while I did the English degree. The original draft was impressionistic, it’s form suggestive of a fractured society, of people in an apartheid system isolated from each other. It combined poetry with prose. It’s purpose was to frustrate the reader’s need for continuity because this is precisely how we
are frustrated in our understanding of the South African situation. I’ve seen other works published which are experimental and this reinforces my view that it isn’t simply that publishers determine what is acceptable for some prescribed market, but they have a stereotype of how one should write if belonging to a specific group. One publisher’s representative asserted very firmly that Black women write autobiographically. A Black woman experimenting with language and form has no business writing.

In the new Commonwealth, those writers who do not conform to these stereotypes are said to have been influenced by Western tradition, to have had an ‘English’ as opposed to a ‘Bantu’ or ‘Third World’ education, or they are said not to be writing for the ‘people’. These views are in current circulation amongst researchers and critics today. I’ve heard this said of Salman Rushdie, Dennis Brutus, Arthur Nortje, Chinua Achebe, etc. It is an evil. On the one hand it persuades us not to read certain writers; on the other it deprives us of sharing in our writers’ achievements. But the crunch comes when we disregard Western tradition and publishers’ stereotypes, and attempt to experiment — this isn’t tolerated.

Two degrees and a teaching certificate made no difference to my prospects in the job market. I accepted work as a secretary for a large institution where I experienced racism and male dominance. It was inevitable that I should want to avoid these situations.

1984 was my first year as a full-time writer. In that year I completely revised the ‘Bells’ manuscript, wrote an article about prejudice in education, most of the essays on ‘Woman’ and three short stories in a series ‘African in Exile’. Each of the three stories is associated with a European work of art. I had in mind an African in exile wandering through the galleries in Europe and reminded of situations at home. ‘Poppy’ is associated with ‘Field of Poppies’, ‘The Seed’ with Van Gogh’s ‘Old Woman in a Field’, and ‘The Dove’ with Picasso’s ‘Child and Dove’.

Except for the one-off publications that have appeared in Kunapipi, I’ve had nothing published in England. When I submitted the ‘Bells’ manuscript to a South African publisher, it was returned by the Customs.

A writer needs encouragement and a reading public. Encouragement for the writer is neither praise nor flattery. For the writer, encouragement can only come in the form of publication, whether in newspapers, magazines, journals, or books. Nor does publication mean what it appears to mean to numerous presses and publishers: writing for nothing. Publication in newspapers, magazines and journals, for a writer who expects to earn a living from writing means regular payment for short pieces of work while a longer work is in progress. How can a woman justify writing
for nothing when she has children to support? Should a publisher or editor expect a writer to contribute to a book without having budgeted for payment to the writers? Yet this is exactly how many publishers and editors do budget. In all the economic considerations for publication, the publisher, the printer, the stationery, the typesetter, the editor, receive remuneration, while the writer is not accounted for.

Why has it proved impossible for my work to be published in England? Is it a question of not being good enough? I like to think not. Many articles that appear in newspapers paraphrase what is published in scholarly journals. Women’s magazines and the women’s pages in newspapers feature articles that are without any depth. And a great deal of mediocre fiction is published by some English literary magazines.

The treatment of new writers in England has resulted in an increasing number of writers coming together to assess, perform and publish their own work.

The situation of the Black woman writer in England has not gone unnoticed. I am now in contact with a group of Black women attempting to set up a publishing company with the purpose of correcting this imbalance. And the experience I’ve gained from dealing with racism and male dominance at work (and in schools) has resulted in the ethnic minority community inviting me to chair a group that promotes good relations between the races and equal opportunities for minority groups.

I have neither a room, a table, nor a corner of my home that I can call my own in which to write. After twelve years in the colonial atmosphere of York — (York is to parochialism as Art is to the Louvre, Music to Vienna, Philosophy to Greece) — I have to decide whether it is better for me to return to South Africa and write within the confines of censorship but with the support of my family, or remain in England.

At no stage in my life did I make a conscious decision to be a writer. Nor can I remember ever entertaining the notion or desire to be one. I write out of a deep sense of frustration.
The Dove

It's raining softly through the night. The rain falls swiftly. Shot, like silver needles from the sky. Striking prostrate figures, on the ground. Splattering off rigid surfaces in the dark. Spilling over and across the sloping roofs. Rain falling with frenzied insistence. Water running alongside the eaves. Tumbling into drainpipes. Rushing downwards. Spurting to the ground. Swirling around stones. Eddying through the metal bars of grates. Flowing quietly in the eroded sluits. Soundlessly deepening a myriad of tiny lines etched into the ground. Throughout the night. All night. A steady drizzle hovering opaquely in space.

All night crouching beneath the car. Easing her body fearfully into changing positions on the muddy ground. The machine-gun patter of the rain. The choking gurgle of the water. All night. Muffling the warning stamp of men's boots. That dare her to come out.

With hunger cramping her abdomen. Cold stiffening her limbs. Hair, matted and wet, filtering out the running mud. Her school blouse like a sponge soaking up the running water, that washes away the stains, of blood, that is not hers. Would others dare come out? To cloak her female terror of these men?

Who were these men? Who are these others? Whose is the agonized scream she hears each time she closes her eyes?

Losing hold of her surroundings then coming back to the sound of rain falling softly on the wet ground. Strange music. Filtering through her conscious nightmare. The playful swirl of water. The pretty eddying circles. The wanton tumbling to another level. Fading in and out of her slackening consciousness. Fainting and waking throughout the night. All night. Trying to grasp hold of who she is. What had brought her to this fearful place? Who are they who would dare to come to her?

Abruptly the rain stops. As if a voice dictated, 'Cut!' and the frenzied, mindless activity froze into censored silence. In the betraying stillness listening confusedly to the large drops falling without inhibition to the wet ground. Each time with an amplified 'Plop!' Each time reacting as if a gun had sounded. Bruising her body in the confined space.

Then surfacing from a succession of timeless absences to find the water...
that had escaped along the gutter to the storm-drain down the street, gathering in trembling puddles around her feet; hiding in the lifeless hollow she had shaped for her head; laying trapped by the angular curves of her young body.

Was she fainting? Or dying? No-one would find her.

Conditioned like a moth careless in its attempts to reach the light she finds herself crawling out of the wet with a crippled, sideways motion, to just within the outer edge of the abandoned car. Flakes of rusted metal catching hold of her hair as she moves; metal dust raining onto her face. From her hiding place disorientated beneath the car, she stares up at this place where she has taken refuge, then slips away into unconsciousness.

It is still night. The same night? Or a succession of nights later? She doesn’t know. But intermittently, like still shots captured by a camera, the light before sunrise flashes weakly on dim shapes in the surrounding dark. Something white. Rigid with water. Hanging in space. Something solid and shadowy. Sloping up. To a prison-like wall. Low, deformed outlines. Other abandoned cars. A huddle of dustbins. Empty bottles. Glinting in the light. And windows in a threatening building emerging higher and higher as the night retreats. Should she have left this place?

Somewhere above the ground she sees a movement that brings a further rise of panic. To move back or to stay? It becomes the movement of little feet padding down towards the space in which she hides. Little feet in ballet shoes. The hem of a nightdress? Reaching down to the ankles. Soft grey. Like the pursuing day. Frothing softly around the ankles. A child comes into view, pointing a soft-clad foot to the step below.

Had she seen the child last night? Waiting to come down? Was she to come all the way down? Now in the lightening day? All the way down the steps. Close to where she lay, some part of her at peace, some part of her frantic beneath the car.

Imprisoned in the cage formed by the child’s fingers she sees a dove. The child’s face, as she descends, piquant and sweet, nestling close to the dove. The dove, quiescent against her breast. All grey like the morning sky. The dove, the dress and the dancing shoes.

The child and the dove touch the ground. The child tiptoes over the puddles with the dove nestling in its prison. Pirouettes on her toes. Releases the dove. The dove floating to the ground. Coming close to where she lay, straining not to lose consciousness. The dove watching timidly near her hand. The girl feeling the impulse to touch it. Needing to feel its warmth and softness. Missing the comfort of a human arm about her shoulders. Reaching out and feeling the cold hard stone wall. All around her. The wall. Four paces away from her. On every side.
What Were You Dreaming?

I’m standing here by the road long time, yesterday, day before, today. Not the same road but it’s the same — hot, hot like today. When they turn off to where they’re going, I must get out again, wait again. Some of them they just pretend there’s nobody there, they don’t want to see nobody. Even go a bit faster, ja. Then they past, and I’m waiting. I combed my hair; I don’t want to look like a skolly. Don’t smile because they think you being too friendly, you think you good as them. They go and they go. Some’s got the baby’s napkin hanging over the back window to keep out this sun. Some’s not going on holiday with their kids but is alone; all alone in a big car. But they’ll never stop, the whites, if they alone. Never. Because these skollies and that kind’ve spoilt it all for us, sticking a gun in the driver’s neck, stealing his money, beating him up and taking the car. Even killing him. So it’s buggered up for us. No white wants some guy sitting behind his head. And the blacks — when they stop for you, they ask for money. They want you must pay, like for a taxi! The blacks!

But then these whites: they’re stopping; I’m surprised, because it’s only two — empty in the back — and the car it’s a beautiful one. The windows are that special glass, you can’t see in if you outside, but the woman has hers down and she’s calling me over with her finger. She ask me where I’m going and I say the next place because they don’t like to have you for too far, so she say get in and lean into the back to move along her stuff that’s on the back seat to make room. Then she say, lock the door, just push that button down, we don’t want you to fall out, and it’s like she’s joking with someone she know. The man driving smiles over his shoulder and say something — I can’t hear it very well, it’s the way he talk English. So anyway I say what’s all right to say, yes master, thank you master, I’m going to Warmbad. He ask again, but man, I don’t get it — Ekskuus? Please? And she chips in — she’s a lady with grey hair and he’s a young chap — My friend’s from England, he’s asking if you’ve been waiting a long time for a lift. So I tell them — A long time? Madam! And because they white, I tell them about the blacks, how when
they stop they ask you to pay. This time I understand what the young man’s saying, he say, And most whites don’t stop? And I’m careful what I say, I tell them about the blacks, how too many people spoil it for us, they robbing and killing, you can’t blame white people. Then he ask where I’m from. And she laugh and look round where I’m behind her. I see she know I’m from the Cape, although she ask me. I tell her I’m from the Cape Flats and she say she suppose I’m not born there, though, and she’s right, I’m born in Wynberg, right there in Cape Town. So she say, And they moved you out?

Then I catch on what kind of white she is; so I tell her, yes, the government kicked us out from our place, and she say to the young man, You see?

He want to know why I’m not in the place in the Cape Flats, why I’m so far away here. I tell them I’m working in Pietersburg. And he keep on, why? Why? What’s my job, everything, and if I don’t understand the way he speak, she chips in again all the time and ask me for him. So I tell him, panel beater. And I tell him, the pay is very low in the Cape. And then I begin to tell them lots of things, some things is real and some things I just think of, things that are going to make them like me, maybe they’ll take me all the way there to Pietersburg.

I tell them I’m six days on the road. I not going to say I’m sick as well, I been home because I was sick — because she’s not from overseas, I suss that, she know that old story. I tell them I had to take leave because my mother’s got trouble with my brothers and sisters, we seven in the family and no father. And s’true’s God, it seem like what I’m saying. When do you ever see him except he’s drunk. And my brother is trouble, trouble, he hangs around with bad people and my other brother doesn’t help my mother. And that’s no lie, neither, how can he help when he’s doing time; but they don’t need to know that, they only get scared I’m the same kind like him, if I tell about him, assault and intent to do bodily harm. The sisters are in school and my mother’s only got the pension. Ja. I’m working there in Pietersburg and every week, madam, I swear to you, I send my pay for my mother and sisters. So then he say, Why get off here? Don’t you want us to take you to Pietersburg? And she say, of course, they going that way.

And I tell them some more. They listening to me so nice, and I’m talking, talking. I talk about the government, because I hear she keep saying to him, telling about this law and that law. I say how it’s not fair we had to leave Wynberg and go to the Flats. I tell her we got sicknesses — she say what kind, is it unhealthy here? And I don’t have to think what, I just say it’s bad, bad, and she say to the man, As I told you. I tell
about the house we had in Wynberg, but it's not my grannie's old house where we was all living together so long, the house I'm telling them about is more the kind of house they'll know, they wouldn't like to go away from, with a tiled bathroom, electric stove, everything. I tell them we spend three thousand rands fixing up that house — my uncle give us the money, that's how we got it. He give us his savings, three thousand rands. (I don't know why I say three; old Uncle Jimmy never have three or two or one in his life. I just say it.) And then we just kicked out. And panel beaters getting low pay there; it's better in Pietersburg.

He say, but I'm far from my home? And I tell her again, because she's white but she's a woman too, with that grey hair she's got grown-up kids — Madam, I send my pay home every week, s'true's God, so's they can eat, there in the Flats. I'm saying, six days on the road. While I'm saying it, I'm thinking; then I say, look at me, I got only these clothes, I sold my things on the way, to have something to eat. Six days on the road. He's from overseas and she isn't one of those who say you're a liar, doesn't trust you — right away when I got in the car, I notice she doesn't take her stuff over to the front like they usually do in case you pinch something of theirs. Six days on the road, and am I tired, tired! When I get to Pietersburg I must try borrow me a rand to get a taxi there to where I live. He say, Where do you live? Not in town? And she laugh, because he don't know nothing about this place, where whites live and where we must go — but I know they both thinking and I know what they thinking; I know I'm going to get something when I get out, don't need to worry about that. They feeling bad about me, now. Bad. Anyhow it's God's truth that I'm tired, tired, that's true.

They've put up her window and he's pushed a few buttons, now it's like in a supermarket, cool air blowing, and the windows like sunglasses: that sun can't get me here.

The Englishman glances over his shoulder as he drives.

'Taking a nap.'

'I'm sure it's needed.'

All through the trip he stops for everyone he sees at the roadside. Some are not hitching at all, never expecting to be given a lift anywhere, just walking in the heat outside with an empty plastic can to be filled with water or paraffin or whatever it is they buy in some country store, or standing at some point between departure and destination, small children and bundles linked on either side, baby on back. She hasn't said anything to him. He would only misunderstand if she explained why one
doesn't give lifts in this country; and if she pointed out that in spite of this, she doesn't mind him breaking the sensible if unfortunate rule, he might misunderstand that, as well — think she was boasting of her disregard for personal safety weighed in the balance against decent concern for fellow beings.

He persists in making polite conversation with these passengers because he doesn't want to be patronizing; picking them up like so many objects and dropping them off again, silent, smelling of smoke from open cooking fires, sun and sweat, there behind his head. They don't understand his Englishman's English and if he gets an answer at all it's a deaf man's guess at what's called for. Some grin with pleasure, and embarrass him by showing it the way they've been taught is acceptable, invoking him as baas and master when they get out and give thanks. But although he doesn't know it, being too much concerned with those names thrust into his hands like whips whose purpose is repugnant to him, has nothing to do with him, she knows each time that there is a moment of annealment in the air-conditioned hired car belonging to nobody — a moment like that on a no-man's-land bridge in which an accord between warring countries is signed — when there is no calling of names, and all belong in each other's presence. He doesn't feel it because he has no wounds, nor has inflicted, nor will inflict any.

This one standing at the roadside with his transistor radio in a plastic bag was actually thumbing a lift like a townee; his expectation marked him out. And when her companion to whom she was showing the country inevitably pulled up, she read the face at the roadside immediately: the lively, cajoling, performer's eyes, the salmon-pinkish cheeks and nostrils, and as he jogged over smiling, the unselfconscious gap of gum between the canines.

A sleeper is always absent; although present, there on the back seat.

'The way he spoke about black people, wasn't it suprising? I mean — he's black himself.'

'Oh no he's not. Couldn't you see the difference? He's a Cape Coloured. From the way he speaks English — couldn't you hear he's not like the Africans you've talked to?'

But of course he hasn't seen, hasn't heard: the fellow is dark enough, to those who don't know the signs by which you're classified, and the melodramatic, long-vowelled English is as difficult to follow if more fluent than the terse, halting responses of blacker people.

'Would he have a white grandmother or even a white father, then?'

She gives him another of the little history lessons she has been supplying along the way. The malay slaves brought by the Dutch East
India Company to their supply station, on the route to India, at the Cape in the seventeenth century; the Hottentots who were the indigenous inhabitants of that part of Africa; add Dutch, French, English, German settlers whose backyard progeniture with these and other blacks began a people who are all the people in the country mingled in one bloodstream. But encounters along the road teach him more than her history lessons, or the political analyses in which they share the same ideological approach although he does not share responsibility for the experience to which the ideology is being applied. She has explained Acts, Proclamations, Amendments. The Group Areas Act, Resettlement Act, Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Act. She has translated these statute book euphemisms: people as movable goods. People packed onto trucks along with their stoves and beds while front-end loaders scoop away their homes into rubble. People dumped somewhere else. Always somewhere else. People as the figures, decimal points and multiplying zero-zero-zeros into which individual lives — Black Persons Orderly-Moved, -Effluxed, -Grouped — coagulate and compute. Now he has here in the car the intimate weary odour of a young man to whom these things happen.

'Half his family sick ... it must be pretty unhealthy, where they've been made to go.'

She smiles. 'Well, I'm not too sure about that. I had the feeling, some of what he said ... they're theatrical by nature. You must take it with a pinch of salt.'

'You mean about the mother and sisters and so on?'

She's still smiling, she doesn't answer.

'But he couldn't have made up about taking a job so far from home — and the business of sending his wages to his mother? That too?'

He glances at her.

Beside him, she's withdrawn as the other one, sleeping behind him. While he turns his attention back to the road, she is looking at him secretly, as if somewhere in his blue eye registering the approaching road but fixed on the black faces he is trying to read, somewhere in the lie of his inflamed hand and arm that on their travels have been plunged in the sun as if in boiling water, there is the place through which the worm he needs to be infected with can find a way into him, so that he may host it and become its survivor, himself surviving through being fed on. Become like her. Complicity is the only understanding.

'Oh it's true, it's all true ... not in the way he's told about it. Truer than the way he told it. All these things happen to them. And other things. Worse. But why burden us? Why try to explain to us? Things so
far from what we know, how will they ever explain? How will we react? Stop our ears? Or cover our faces? Open the door and throw him out? They don't know. But sick mothers and brothers gone to the bad — these are the staples of misery, mnh? Think of the function of charity in the class struggles in your own country in the nineteenth century; it's all there in your literature. The lord-of-the-manor's compassionate daughter carrying hot soup to the dying cottager on her father's estate. The 'advanced' upper-class woman comforting her cook when the honest drudge's daughter takes to whoring for a living. Shame, we say here. Shame. You must've heard it? We think it means, what a pity; we think we are expressing sympathy — for them. Shame. I don't know what we're saying about ourselves.' She laughs.

'So you think it would at least be true that his family were kicked out of their home, sent away?'

'Why would anyone of them need to make that up? It's an everyday affair.'

'What kind of place would they get, where they were moved?'

'Depends. A tent, to begin with. And maybe basic materials to build themselves a shack. Perhaps a one-room prefab. Always a tin toilet set down in the veld, if nothing else. Some industrialist must be making a fortune out of government contracts for those toilets. You build your new life round that toilet. His people are Coloured, so it could be they were sent where there were houses of some sort already built for them; Coloureds usually get something a bit better than blacks are given.'

'And the house would be more or less as good as the one they had? People as poor as that — and they'd spent what must seem a fortune to them, fixing it up.'

'I don't know what kind of house they had. We're not talking about slum clearance, my dear; we're talking about destroying communities because they're black, and white people want to build houses or factories for whites where blacks live. I told you. We're talking about loading up trucks and carting black people out of sight of whites.'

'And even where he's come to work — Pietersburg, whatever-it's-called — he doesn't live in the town.'

'Out of sight.' She has lost the thought for a moment, watching to make sure the car takes the correct turning. 'Out of sight. Like those mothers and grannies and brothers and sisters far away on the Cape Flats.'

'I don't think it's possible he actually sends all his pay. I mean how would one eat?'

'Maybe what's left doesn't buy anything he really wants.'
Not a sound, not a sigh in sleep, behind them. They can go on talking about him as he always has been discussed, there and yet not there.

Her companion is alert to the risk of gullibility. He verifies the facts, smiling, just as he converts, mentally, into pounds and pence any sum spent in foreign coinage. ‘He didn’t sell the radio. When he said he’d sold all his things on the road, he forgot about that.’

‘When did he say he’d last eaten?’

‘Yesterday. He said.’

She repeats what she has just been told: ‘Yesterday.’ She is looking through the glass that takes the shine of heat off the landscape passing as yesterday passed, time measured by the ticking second-hand of moving trees, rows of crops, country-store stoops, filling stations, spiny crook’d fingers of giant euphorbia. Only the figures by the roadside waiting, standing still.

Personal remarks can’t offend someone dead-beat in the back. ‘How d’you think such a young man comes to be without front teeth?’

She giggles whisperingly and keeps her voice low, anyway. ‘Well, you may not believe me if I tell you...’

‘Seems odd ... I suppose he can’t afford to have them replaced.’

‘It’s — how shall I say — a sexual preference. Most usually you see it in their young girls, though. They have their front teeth pulled when they’re about seventeen.’

She feels his uncertainty, his not wanting to let comprehension lead him to a conclusion embarrassing to an older woman. For her part, she is wondering whether he won’t find it distasteful if — at her de-sexed age — she should come out with it: for cock-sucking. ‘No-one thinks the gap spoils a girl’s looks, apparently. It’s simply a sign she knows how to please. Same significance between men, I suppose... A form of beauty. So everyone says. We’ve always been given to understand that’s the reason.’

‘Maybe it’s just another sexual myth. There are so many.’

She’s in agreement. ‘Black girls. Chinese girls. Jewish girls.’

‘And black men?’

‘Oh my goodness, you bet. But we white ladies don’t talk about that, we only dream, you know! Or have nightmares.’

They’re laughing. When they are quiet, she flexes her shoulders against the seat-back and settles again. The streets of a town are flickering their text across her eyes. ‘He might have had a car accident. They might have been knocked out in a fight.’

The confident dextrous hand is moving quickly down in the straw bag bought from a local market somewhere along the route. She brings up a
pale blue note (the Englishman recognizes the two-rand denomination of this currency that he has memorized by colour) and turns to pass it, a surreptitious message, through the open door behind her. *Goodbye master madam.* The note disappears delicately as a titbit finger-fed. He closes the door, he’s keeping up the patter, *goodbye master, goodbye madam,* and she instructs — ‘No, bang it. Harder. That’s it.’ *Goodbye master, goodbye madam* — but they don’t look back at him now, they don’t have to see him thinking he must keep waving, keep smiling, in case they should look back.

She is the guide and mentor; she’s the one who knows the country. She’s the one — she knows that too — who is accountable. She must be the first to speak again. ‘At least if he’s hungry he’ll be able to buy a bun or something. And the bars are closed on Sunday.’
Women have always been upholders of tradition. This is not because of any inherent difference in intellect or temperament from men, but because of their role in society. Change, whether it be technological or social, has always reached them last because they were less educated, less prominent, less important in male-dominated society. This is true of the Western world, and it is an even more clearly marked feature in modern African society made up as it is of a mixture of traditional African and Western values. Both societies were oppressive towards women, but in different culture-specific ways. Many African societies were polygamous and patriarchal, and women had no influence on decision-making and were subject to physical violence (beatings). The Victorian version of Western civilization which reached Africa in the form of the early missionaries objected to these forms of oppression, but in turn brought their own, namely in the concept of the virtuous woman, a concept which severely limited her possibilities for sexual, emotional and intellectual expression.

In both societies women depended on men for status and respectability. This aspect was most clearly marked in the African societies through the institution of bride wealth, but when it came to the economic situation, the African woman was in a better position than her Victorian sister, relatively speaking. Whilst being poorer, she herself made a large contribution to her society, mainly in the form of trade and agriculture, and she had a measure of control over her earnings, whilst the Victorian woman in most cases could neither earn nor possess money. Both groups were, and to some extent still are, beset by feelings of inadequacy which have deep roots in the fabric of society as well as in their minds. In the African societies this is expressed through proverbs, which are supposed to contain the accumulated wisdom of centuries. ‘I am only a woman. What can a woman do?’ Flora Nwapa’s heroines frequently exclaim, and to behave ‘like a woman’ is a frequent term of abuse in Achebe’s novels.
On the Victorian side there are tomes of learned treaties on the subject, but the two following sentiments are central to the Victorian view of women:

Mr Oscar Browning was wont to declare 'that the impression left on his mind, after looking over any set of examination papers, was that, irrespective of the marks he might give, the best woman was intellectually the inferior of the worst man'.

...the *Saturday Review*; there was Mr Greg — the 'essentials of a woman's being', said Mr Greg emphatically, 'are that they are supported by, and they minister to, men'.

The two traditions are not as conflicting as the missionaries fighting battles against polygamy considered them, they have different emphases and complement each other. Both societies also had, and still have, a female idea, expressed by men in writing or story telling. 'Some of the most famous heroines even of nineteenth century fiction represent what men desire in women, not necessarily what women are in themselves,' says Virginia Woolf in a book review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1920. If we take a look at the ideal woman in modern African fiction written by men, we get a clear picture of what this ideal is. The following description of Ihuoma, the main character of Amadi's novel *The Concubine*, I take to be representative of the ideal:

That she was beautiful she had no doubt, but that did not make her arrogant. She was sympathetic, gentle, and reserved. It was her husband's boast that in their six years of marriage she had never had any serious quarrel with another woman. She was not good at invectives and other women talked much faster than she did. The fact that she would be outdone in a verbal exchange perhaps partly restrained her from coming into open verbal conflict with her neighbours. Gradually she acquired the capacity to bear a neighbour's stinging remarks without a repartee. In this way her prestige among the womenfolk grew until even the most garrulous amongst them was reluctant to be unpleasant to her. She found herself settling quarrels and offering advice to older women.

One could add numerous other descriptions, like the women in Achebe's novels or Okot p'Bitek's *Lawino*, but the essence remains the same: the ideal woman is 'The Angel in the House'. This is how Virginia Woolf defines her:

...Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it — in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.
Virginia Woolf unceremoniously sets about killing her. ‘My excuse was that I acted in self defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me.’ According to this ideal, questions about human relationships, morality and sex cannot be dealt with honestly by a woman. She ‘must charm, must conciliate, she must — to put it bluntly — tell lies if she is to succeed’. Killing the Angel in the House is part of the occupation of a woman writer, Woolf asserts.

The African woman writers have inherited this ideal/monster both in its specific African form and in the Western form through education, and their writing can be seen as a battle fought with varying degrees of success against it, both as a literary image and as a personal reality.

The immediate effect on women on the change from oral to written forms of literary expression was that they lost the role they had in traditional literature. In oral literature women were — and still are — tellers of stories. The story telling was an important part of children’s education, hence the women’s role. The women were reluctant to part with this aspect of influence which they had over their children, and there are many examples in the novels and short stories which deal with the time and problems of the early converts in which the woman secretly keeps telling the children the old stories even though she has been forbidden to do so by her husband who has become a zealot follower of the new faith. The following excerpt is from a short story by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The story is called ‘A Meeting in the Dark’. It is a typical motif in African writing.

His father always carried this bag. John knew what it contained: A Bible, a hymnbook and probably a note book and a pen. His father was a preacher. He wondered if it had been he who had stopped his mother from telling him stories when he became a man of God. His mother had stopped telling him stories long ago. She would say to him ‘Now, don’t ask for any more stories. Your father may come.’ So he feared his father.

The necessary background for the existence of a written literature is, of course, literacy, and the earliest opportunity for acquiring this was through the missionaries. It was mainly boys who were sent to school, and for the girls that did go the missionaries stressed the teaching of housewifely duties rather than academic subjects; so women were, with a few exceptions, barred from giving literary expression to their thoughts and feelings.

One African woman, however, steps out of the mist of forgotten lives and insists on being very visible, even before Virginia Woolf speculated on the difficulties of being a woman writer: She is Adelaide Casely
Hayford (1868-1960). True to the history of our time she is mainly known as the wife of the famous West Coast nationalist, politician and writer J.E. Casely Hayford. She was married to him for eleven years, between 1903 and 1914, and after that she lived on her own and supported herself and her daughter. She was of mixed African and English heritage, grew up in England and felt very estranged when she moved to Freetown in 1897. There she saw the need for a vocational school for girls, the aim of which was to give the girls the means to earn a livelihood and instil in them racial and national pride. She started collecting money and support for it and even went on an extended tour of America where she inspected Mrs Booker T. Washington’s School for Brides at the Tuskegee Institute. Back in Freetown she opened her school in 1923, the first African-owned and African-run school in Freetown. She also continued her public career and became the first woman speaker in Aggrey House in London where she gave an address, ‘The Home, its Educational Value’, in which she denied that women were inferior to men. Different, yes, but inferior, no. She was also chosen to represent African women at the Geneva Conference for the Welfare of the African Child, held in 1941, but due to lack of funds she was not able to attend, and her daughter, Gladys Casely Hayford, who was living in Europe at the time, read her mother’s paper at the conference.

I am enumerating all these public appearances to emphasize the fact that this is a visible woman whose ideas reached a large audience and were put into practice. She is both a barometer of the prevailing thoughts of the very cosmopolitan and not very radical Creole élite on the Coast and a critic of them. She was an embattled woman, with enemies in many camps. What, then, were her ideas?

She had two main areas of interest: feminism — or perhaps we should say an interest in the roles of women — and cultural nationalism. On the feminist side she spoke out against polygamy and supported the education of girls because she thought that ‘a woman must be economically independent to retain her self-respect’. The school curriculum, however, had a heavy emphasis on the virtues of home making: cooking, hygiene, child care, etc. On the nationalist front she aimed at giving an education ‘which would instill into us a love of the country, a pride of race, an enthusiasm for the black man’s capabilities and a genuine admiration for Africa’s wonderful art work’ (Marcus Garvey overtones). She changed her name to Aquah Laluah and wore national costume on public occasions.

If one looks at the themes of Adelaide Casely Hayford’s battle, it becomes apparent that they are, in fact, the basic themes of the black
women writers today. They don’t of course have the same solutions, nor are they necessarily phrased in the same way, but the core of ideas and controversies still remains. They are, to put it schematically:

(1) Feminism. I use this word to denote an interest in women’s status/role in society, not to indicate a specific ideology. Within this theme there are two main branches: (A) The biological and marital aspects of women’s lives. The central themes in the African treatment of these areas are the role of motherhood, bridewealth and polygamy (Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta). (B) Women’s economic dependence (Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali).

(2) Black Nationalism. This can take the form either of a celebration of the African heritage, like the writings of Efua Sutherland and, to some extent, Ama Ata Aidoo, or a criticism of aspects of it (Buchi Emecheta), or an outright rejection of it as tribalist, superstitious, evil and backwards (Bessie Head).

Adelaide Casely Hayford shares not only the basic themes with the present-day women writers, she also shares with them a certain ambiguity or confusion in relation to her writing. Her best known piece, a short story called ‘Mista Courifer’, exemplifies this. Mr Courifer, ‘a solid citizen of Sierra Leone’, is an undertaker who slavishly admires everything English. A tyrant in the home, he is our nationalist villain. He wears English clothes, brings his son up to admire everything English, and is rude about women. So far so good. Into this picture of general unpleasantness sneaks a tone of ridicule, not for the ideas, they are too important to ridicule, but for the lack of education and sophistication of the man.

His favourite themes were Jonah and Noah and he was forever pointing out the great similarity between the two, generally finishing his discourse after this manner: ‘You see my beloved Brebren, den two man berry much alike. All two lived in a sinful and adulterous generation. One get inside am ark; de odder one get inside a whale. Day bof seek a refuge fom de swelling waves.

‘And so it is today my beloved Brebren. No matter if we get inside a whale or get inside an ark, as long as we get inside some place of safety — as long as we can find some refuge, some hiding place from de wiles ob de debil.’

She is in fact poking fun at him from the point of view of the culture which she is also criticizing him for imitating. Mr Courifer’s son is the new nationalist who objects to the inferior conditions he is offered in the Civil Service, insists on wearing national costume and lives in a mud hut, but who nevertheless prefers the English type of marriage. ‘I shall never look like an Englishman … but there are some English customs that I like
very much indeed. I like the way white men treat their wives. I like their home life. I like to see mother and father and the little family sitting down eating their meal together.' In this connection it would seem that the feminist aspect takes precedence over the national and this leads Adelaide Casely Hayford into advocating certain aspects of the English life style. To complete the confusion, she did not consider African women from the Protectorate of Sierra Leone as suitable teachers of their own native art and craft at her school but thought of them as illiterate and incapable of systematic labour. Despite her nationalism, she was generally considered 'pro British'.

This ambiguity in Adelaide Casely Hayford and in most of the black women writers reflects not weak minds, but a difficult and confused situation, a period of transition during which old values are uprooted, leaving a hole which can only be filled after much agonizing and uncertainty. The women writers all write from within the situation, without hindsight or the overview which distance in time or place or cool objectivity can give. The books are thus themselves an expression of the struggle, and I think that they will go down in literary history as a literature of transition, trying out various value systems without any knowledge of which is going to be the mainstream development, and all the time trying to adjust to or challenge a social situation which is in itself rapidly changing. The actual social reality of present-day African life for women is out of phase with their role expectations, and the women are thus forced or pushed into a confrontation which they might not have looked for in the first place. They write from a sense of dislocation without a clear sense of direction. They do not agree among themselves and there are often contradictions within the individual authorship. A clear case of cultural dislocation is the Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa.

Flora Nwapa is an Ibo writer, educated at Ibadan and Edinburgh with a career as a teacher, woman education officer, elected government official, writer, publisher, and business woman. Her first two books, Efuru (1966) and Idu (1970), are set in a traditional Ibo village and describe traditional life. They belong to the anthropological genre, but with the difference that they restrict themselves to the village women's universe which is considerably smaller than the totality of life in the village. True to the genre, the focus of the story is not on an individual but on the village as such. The life stories of the two main characters are of course of interest, but they serve mainly as a focal point of comment which explains the values of the village. The narrative technique, which is considered 'oral', consists of a series of conversations, mainly between
women in the course of their every-day life. For example, ‘Have you heard?’ or ‘Are you in? I thought I would greet you before I go to the market’, or ‘Greetings, are you also going to the stream’, etc. The total effect is of a small, repetitive, uneventful and suffocating world. The central themes are motherhood — or rather its opposite, childlessness — dowry (in Efuru), and women’s economic power.

Both heroines start off as personifications of the ideal village woman. Efuru is not only beautiful, she is also ‘remarkable and distinguished’, and she is ‘such a good woman. She does not make any trouble.’ They are both good traders, clearly more intelligent than their husbands, and they both end up rejected, lonely, and miserable. Idu commits suicide on her husband’s death, and Efuru prepares to live alone and become a worshipper of the woman of the lake, a kind of female priesthood. The cause of their tragedy is childlessness. They do, in fact, both have a child, but as it dies, this does not count. Pregnancy is the central point of focus of the novels. Idu gets married on p. 2 and is ‘not yet pregnant’ on p. 3. Both women scrupulously follow the pattern of meekness, patience and forbearance which their society demands of them. Ifuru, however, is said to have a streak of rebellion in her, and she does exacerbate her situation by marrying her first husband without a dowry, but she is taught a lesson and is abandoned. Her second husband ‘pays cash’. I disagree with Lloyd Brown that Efuru actively seeks to be ‘alone and independent’, and that traditional marriage fails because it ‘is incompatible with her sense of self’. The book presents her marriage as a series of defeats which she does everything in her power to prevent but, as one of the village women says, ‘You don’t pluck children from a tree, you know. You don’t fight for them either. Money cannot buy them. Happiness cannot give you children. Children indeed, they have no children.’

The village women, who constitute the moral universe of the novels, clearly regard childlessness as not just a curse, but a failure, and this elicits moral speculations about the possible crime causing the childlessness. They see the childless women as in some way guilty and exhibit a large degree of cruelty in their judgements. This view is not contradicted, except perhaps in one sentence in Efuru, where it is said about childlessness that ‘her people didn’t just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature’. The little word ‘just’ might indicate that the writer thinks so, but it is a slight indication. The two women are scrupulously flawless, and yet a moral condemnation of their barrenness seems implicit in the novels. This also helps to explain the strange lack of compassion for their plight. Efuru ends with the words ‘She [the woman of the lake] was
happy. She was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth, but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?’ (p. 281).

Flora Nwapa has perfected the technique of ending not only her novels, but also her short stories, with an open-ended question. Her short stories in *This is Lagos, Never Again* and *Wives at War* move the same problems of childlessness, marriage and economic power into an intensely urban, fast-moving, money-booming or war-torn setting. Women are still the central characters, but the secure moral universe of the village has disappeared, and instead the women are confronted with the problems of individual survival in a city jungle with no guide lines except those provided by success, modern life and wealth, exemplified by cars, drink, wigs, etc. The stories record a moral and spiritual flux, recording different roles for women — a childless woman snatches a baby, a sophisticated girl gets herself a new boyfriend, a married woman has an affair with another man, who dies, etc. In *One is Enough*, however, Flora Nwapa takes a bold leap and (almost) makes a radical new morality for herself and her urban sisters.

Amaka leaves a childless marriage and goes to Lagos to start a new life at thirty and to try to find ‘even happiness in being single’. She states her purpose very clearly: ‘She had not come to Lagos to be a whore. She had come to look for her identity.’ Her identity seems to lie in business, because she is instantly very successful at what is called ‘contract work’. She lands a contract worth half a million naira, and all she has to do is sign on the dotted line. The contract is bogus, the wall she is supposed to find builders for has already been built. Corruption, in other words. She buys a car, a flat, airline tickets, and finally she can join the Cash Mama Club. It consists of women, mainly single or widows from the Biafran War, and the only criteria for membership is fabulous wealth and ostentatious consumption. She did do more than sign on the dotted line of the contract, though; she slept with a catholic priest who knew the Brigadeer etc. Nwapa is very careful to explain that her heroine prostituted herself for the contract. ‘She was going to exploit the situation. She, Amaka was going to tempt. That was the task that must be done.’ This leads to one of the book’s radical stances: a rejection of marriage, but not of men. ‘She neither wanted to be a wife any more, nor be a mistress, nor be a kept woman. She wanted a man, just a man, and she wanted to be independent of this man, pure and simple.’ The reason for this stance is to be found in the repressive nature of marriage as she experiences it. Armed with Adelaide Casely Hayford’s economic independence, she is ready for success. There is one thing lacking, of
course: children. However, in the course of the book, she becomes pregnant and for good measure gives birth to twin boys. The father is of course the priest, but after some humming and harring he decides to stay with the church and not claim the children as he could have done under Nigerian law. This leaves Amaka free to realize what is obviously the lifestyle which the author has decided upon as the physical and moral goal: the life of a rich, independent single mother. This is a radical new view, but unfortunately it is marred by an excessive admiration of ostentatious wealth and by the last sentence of the novel in which Amaka expresses her gratitude to the priest for ‘proving to the world that I am a mother as well as a woman’. The fact that she should choose to be ‘grateful’ rather than, say, ‘happy’, indicates that her sense of sexual inferiority is deeply ingrained into her; and her independence seems precarious, despite its brashness.

A less precarious and less contradictory rebellion can be found in the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta. She grew up in Lagos, married young, went to England as a wife, had five children, left her husband, and brought up her children on welfare whilst getting a degree in sociology at the same time. She is now a full-time writer. Her own life has so far been her main source of inspiration, and her autobiographical novels about her experiences of growing up in Lagos and living as an immigrant in London’s slums hold the key to most of her ideas. Traditional Ibo culture also forms the moral universe against which Buchi Emecheta pits herself, and it is not surprising that brideprice, motherhood and economic independence figure large, in fact provide the titles for two of her non-autobiographical novels.

Up until now Buchi Emecheta is the closest to a protest writer in the African women writers’ tradition. Her protest is against the different and discriminating treatment of girls and women. Whilst praising the communal spirit of Ibo life, Buchi Emecheta quite obviously finds it suffocating, and her breaking out of it affirms an individualistic approach, not dissimilar to Flora Nwapa’s economic individualism, but with a much clearer knowledge that this emphasis on individual freedom and achievement constitutes a clear break with traditional life in all spheres. Thus, in The Bride Price fifteen-year-old Aku-nna (the name means father’s wealth in anticipation of the bride wealth she is going to fetch for her father) meekly hopes to marry well so that her brideprice can help towards paying her brother’s school fee. She is intelligent, beautiful, and fragile (the last characteristic is partly explained by the fact that she is an ogbanje, one of those people who live with one foot in the spirit world and are expected to die young). She does go to school — educated girls
fetch a higher price — and she elopes with her teacher who is of a traditional slave cast and therefore unmarriable. They marry without bride-wealth and without her family’s consent, and she dies in childbirth. The novel concludes:

So it was that Chike and Aku-nna substantiated the traditional superstition they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-nna’s death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished to live long and see her children’s children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold over every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernisation, until the present day. Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody’s guess.

If we compare this with the conclusion of Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru,* we can see a greater degree of certainty (or a smaller degree of ambiguity). This is a result of a certain distancing from the moral universe of the novel. Buchi Emecheta’s use of psychological or sociological jargon, which on a stylistic level flaws her books, creates this distance, but in this, her first novel with an African setting, there are still traces of an attachment to her cultural background. The heroine upsets all taboos — and dies. The book postulates no causal link between the two events, but neither does it offer any other explanation of why she should die, except, perhaps, that she is an *ogbanje.* Lloyd Brown explains it by saying that ‘fate is the collective will of the community and the roles are prescribed by the community’. So Aku-nna is collectively willed to death by the community! This is of course a nice metaphor, but on a realistic level it strains at least my credulity and, if it is accepted, must act as a warning against rebellion, thus undercutting the protest aspect of the novel. My point here is that Buchi Emecheta’s starting point is not that far removed from Flora Nwapa’s, but in the course of her following books she moves towards an unambiguous, clear, and increasingly more angry voice of protest.

What appears as a different and alien moral universe in Flora Nwapa’s books becomes an anomaly when it is transferred into the setting of a modern city like Lagos. *The Joys of Motherhood* describes a period in the history of Nigeria (from the thirties to just before Independence) during which enormous changes took place, both of a political and economic nature, but the Ibo immigrant society in Lagos which forms the subject of the book refuses to make any allowances for change; in fact, as the men experience defeat and humiliation in the new society, they cling even more tenaciously to the power they have over the women and children.
within their own group. The final sufferers become the women who, like Nnu Ego, are caught between economic necessity on the one hand and cultural taboos and aspirations on the other. Nnu Ego struggles hard against appalling poverty and a cruel and irresponsible husband to reach her objective, which is to give her sons an education and to marry off her daughters, so that their bride price can help towards the boys' school fees. She reaches her goal, but dies a lonely and disillusioned woman. The moral is obvious: by clinging to her traditional role as wife, or first wife, after her husband inherits a second wife from his deceased brother, she is destroyed and in turn tries to destroy her daughter's chances for a happier life.

Her co-wife Adaku's decision to leave the home and set up as a prostitute/trader on her own resembles Nwapa's solution and also has Emecheta's blessing, but for a slightly different reason. It is not just the desire for personal and economic independence which motivates Adaku; she wishes to educate her daughters, who would not be given an education within the traditional family structure.

Education, which is the passport to the middle-class life, a life to which Buchi Emecheta's characters aspire, plays an increasingly larger role in her authorship, and in *Double Yoke* she confronts directly the prejudices surrounding the educated woman in Nigeria. *Double Yoke* is a blast, aimed at Nigerian men. It was occasioned by a year's stay at the University of Calabar as a writer-in-residence, after which Buchi Emecheta came back to London appalled and exasperated. *Double Yoke* is a campus novel. Nko sets out with the aim of being 'an academician and a quiet, nice and obedient wife'. The latter part of her wish is also what her boyfriend wants, but Buchi Emecheta is no believer in 'the Angel in the House'. After having faced her boyfriend's scorn because she has allowed him to make love to her, and after having been forced into a choice of prostituting herself to her professor or not getting her degree, some of the obedience has worn off. At the conclusion of the novel, she is pregnant by the professor, but her boyfriend is considering accepting her 'growing up', as Buchi Emecheta mercilessly suggests. Independence for women in Nigeria, according to its women novelists has to be a leap, with much burning of bridges, and to both of them the relationship between the sexes resembles a war.

The national cultural aspect in Buchi Emecheta's writing takes the form of an increasingly vigorous criticism of aspects of her cultural background, but in this aspect of the authorship there is a certain degree of double think. On the one hand, Emecheta firmly supports Western ideas of individual achievement, and she strongly criticises the ascriptive static
 roles, given mainly to women in her African society; but, on the other hand, she succumbs to a kind of simplistic Négritude in the allegorical novel *The Rape of Shavi* which praises a kind of pre-lapsarian, peaceful African communalism disturbed by aggressive, warlike western civilization, reminiscent of Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*. She lands, so to speak, mid-culture. The theme of black nationalism which started off as an African affirmation of national values *vis-à-vis* Europe (in Casely Hayford) has moved into an inconclusive discussion of the relative values of the two culture systems.

With the South African writer in exile, Bessie Head, it moves into an outright condemnation of African 'tribal' values, as she calls it. This is the very antithesis of cultural nationalism and an outcome of the very special circumstances of Bessie Head.

She is a coloured South African, and the story of her origin is that her white mother conceived her with a black stable boy. She was insane, or rather her society thought that this act was proof of insanity, so she was put into a mental hospital, where she eventually committed suicide. Meanwhile her child, Bessie Head, was brought up in a series of childcare institutions and foster homes, and she eventually left South Africa as a political refugee to end up as a stateless person in Botswana. This life story constitutes the ultimate in alienation. Bessie Head literally does not know who she is, and the only cultural background she has as a point of reference, is the South African apartheid state which in her case is not just a violent and inhumane system, but the very cause of her personal and very painful exile from humanity and retreat into madness or, to put it more mundanely, mental breakdowns.

Bessie Head is a complex writer, even though her message seems simple enough, and to reduce her to a couple of pages or a pattern of themes like the one I have outlined is to do her an injustice. A complicating and also interesting factor in her writing is the way in which her themes are perceived at the same time as being both historical incidents and timeless aspects of the human mind. The national cultural theme is a point in case.

On a historical level it has two points of reference in her writing. One is white South Africa, and the other is tribal Botswana. White South Africa is a politically oppressive system from which the hero of her first novel, *When Rainclouds Gather*, flees, but he climbs the barb wire fence and enters Botswana and 'whatever illusion of freedom which lay ahead'. South Africa gives rise to a series of prison images. Makhya has been to prison in South Africa. He is intensely lonely and incapable of emotional communication with people. He has internalized the repression. 'In
order to make life endurable you had to quiet down everything inside you, and what you had in the end was a prison, and you called it your life." In the next novel, *Maru*, the character of Moleka, who represents a dark, satanic and power-conscious aspect of the human psyche, is said to preside over an inner kingdom, 'shut behind a heavy iron door',¹⁴ and in *A Question of Power* which is the record of a mental break down she sees South Africa as 'just a vehement, vicious struggle between two sets of people', and she calls it 'a power maniac, who saw only his own power', thus linking South Africa to the basic question of the title. As she moves further into the depth of her break down, she says. 'The evil overwhelming her was beginning to sound like the South Africa from which she had fled', and a consistent noise in her head is diagnosed as familiar — 'it was the nightmare of the slums she had grown up in in South Africa', and she identifies it with a mental father figure whose personality was 'icy and rigid self control' and who instilled in her an intense sexual shame, a 'cringing deep shame'. She thus adds to the picture of social oppression and internalised mental oppression the aspect of patriarchal oppression of women, connecting it to the fascist aspects of the political system.

The tribalist aspect of traditional Botswana society is taken through similar permutations. It is a straightforward, corrupt and exploitative system in which chiefs live off what is virtually the slave labour of their tribesmen. It stands in the way of progress, which in all Head's novels is exemplified by an experiment in co-operative farming, it oppresses women and keeps them docile and dull, and like South Africa it is racist and gives rise to the hallucinations of sexual perversion, which mark her mental break down. The national cultural aspect of her writing is thus inextricably tied up with the feminist or sexual aspect.

This aspect also has both a social and a psychological side. Socially, she deplores the role of women in Botswana society. She sees Botswana men as sexually promiscuous and emotionally unfeeling and cruel, and she concludes that the women are forced into the same way of life, because if they became serious about a man they would commit suicide and 'surely', she argues, 'it was far better to have a country of promiscuous women than a country of dead women'. The lightheartedness ends here, though. The first two novels end with cautious marriages, fraught with immense difficulties, but representing an opening up of enclosed or imprisoned personalities and social groups, but in the last novel the nadir of her mental break down is the destruction of her sexual identity. The phantom in her imagination, who represents evil and who is said to be like South Africa, tells her that she has no vagina, and he
taunts her by parading a series of vulgar, obscene and sexually overpowering women in front of her. This point of self-loathing is tied to her mixed-race origin, which in South Africa is seen as an act of shameful lust, and internalizing this accusation of sexual perversion she identifies with the coloured homosexual men whom she remembers from her childhood and whom she finds repulsive. They are 'men in women’s clothes', forced into a traditionally female role of weakness and oppression, like her own. Like the aspect of cultural nationalism, the aspect of race and racial pride, which is related to it, is turned upside down in Bessie Head’s authorship, and both modes are rejected as a basis of identity. The aspect of ‘feminism’ is not discussed in terms of motherhood and bridewealth, but in more — if you like — profound terms of power relationships where the key to a betterment of women’s position, which she desires and advocates, lies in keeping the power-hungry systems, personalities and aspects of one’s character in check. There is no watertight system of how to achieve this, as the mental break down indicates, and sanity is surrounded by uncertainties and dangers in Bessie Head’s fiction.

It is impossible to sum up neatly the ideas and developments of these woman writers. One of the points I have been trying to make is precisely that: that their achievements lie not in the solutions they offer — they often seem confusing — but in the courage and determination they show in dealing with unpopular subjects and having unpopular opinions.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 53.
11. Lloyd W. Brown, op. cit., p. 49.
Abena Busia

COUNTER-COUP

Harshly aware of the brightness of electric light against the chill January sky, in the ominous silence of the Harmattan night we kept vigil for the final shots. From guns to guns again: full circle.

LIBERATION

We are all mothers, and we have that fire within us, of powerful women whose spirits are so angry we can laugh beauty into life and still make you taste the salt tears of our knowledge — For we are not tortured anymore; we have seen beyond your lies and disguises, and we have mastered the language of words, we have mastered speech. And know we have also seen ourselves. We have stripped ourselves raw and naked piece by piece until our flesh lies flayed with blood on our own hands. What terrible thing can you do us which we have not done to ourselves?
What can you tell us
which we didn’t deceive ourselves with
a long time ago?
You cannot know how long we cried
until we laughed
over the broken pieces of our dreams.
Ignorance
shattered us into such fragments
we had to unearth ourselves piece by piece,
to recover with our own hands such unexpected relics
even we wondered
how we could hold such treasure.
Yes, we have conceived
to forge our mutilated hopes
into the substance of visions
beyond your imaginings
to declare the pain of our deliverance:
So do not even ask,
do not ask what it is we are labouring with this time;
Dreamers remember their dreams
when they are disturbed —
And you shall not escape
what we will make
of the broken pieces of our lives.
'Have you read the one about the angry women who laughed?'

Anger, anger, anger, I say,
rescue me:
let me fight:
...
Here is our problem, Sylvia:
how to feel enough anger to survive
and yet not to spoil one's ability to love...

(Diane Wakoski, 'The Water Element Song For Sylvia' in *Greed.*)

'Apple Pies'

To make crust, cut 1 cup shortening into 3 cups flour. Add 1 tsp. salt and ¼ cup cold water, a little at a time. Stir until dough has achieved correct consistency. Chill. Roll out on floured board.

To make filling, peel and core 6 or 7 apples (about 3 cups). Slice into uncooked pie shell. Add ½ cup sugar, ¼ tsp. salt, ½ tsp. cinnamon, ¼ tsp. nutmeg, and ¼ cup lemon juice. Dot with 1 tbsp. butter. Top with piecrust. Set oven at 450 (Regulo 7). Do not light gas.

(From 'The Sylvia Plath Cookbook', in Deanne Stillman and Anne Beatts, eds., *Titters, The First Collection of Humour by Women, 1976*)

How can the woman writer 'write angry', be 'at war with her lot' and not, to borrow from Woolf's consideration of this problem in *A Room of One's Own*, 'die young, cramped and thwarted'? In 'The Water Element Song For Sylvia' Wakoski is demanding more than mere survival, more than the lonely promenade along an empty beach which is the fate of too many 'liberated heroines' of the neo-feminist novel:

Some days I feel dead....

I have opened all the doors in my head.
I have opened all the pores in my body.
But only the tide rolls in.

(Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*)
How can women not only survive but, phoenix-like, arise newly creative and fertile, working through anger to find not 'new varieties of defeat' but patterns of commitment and optimism which celebrate female power?

The search for a different kind of feminist writing, one which is subversive, angry and defiant has been a dominant theme in a little examined area of women's writing-humour. That the angry woman might use laughter and satire as a weapon has escaped many of us. Should we laugh at something like 'The Sylvia Plath Cookbook'? I placed it alongside Wakoski's address to Plath for it seems to me that it is another way of fighting back, and one which might end with a giggle and a defiant survivor rather than a whimper and no bang at all! The very irreverent gesture across to a quite different tradition of feminist writing which 'The Sylvia Plath Cookbook' makes also draws our attention to the way that much humorous writing tends to deliberately play itself against the solipsistic and fairly self-destructive patterns which have dominated neo-feminist realist novels in particular. By refusing to put their head in the oven or in the sand, the militant woman humorist is in the odd position of shocking not only men but also many feminists! 'If it's okay for women to write poems about menstrual blood, why shouldn't it be okay for women to make jokes about women who write poems about menstrual blood? Well? Why shouldn't it?' (Titters, 1976).

Well, why? One reason supposedly is that women lack whatever it is that makes men in general, and men like Don Anderson in particular, 'humorous'! As recently as January 1984 Don Anderson used an article on Australian humorous writers (all male) to reassert the proposition that humorous writing is an all-male preserve: 'In the near Orwellian future we may be prescribed from saying, for example, that a feminist sense of humour is a contradiction in terms. Let's hope a Barry Humphries will always be there to laugh us out of that authoritarian absurdity' (National Times, 6-12 January 1984). Anderson is right in focussing as he does elsewhere in this article on humour as disruptive, subversive and 'the hardest thing in the world to write'. Yet the authoritarian absurdity here is that humour is a male preserve, policed by a male in female Everidge guise. As the editors of Titters assert, 'who among us will say, «I have no sense of humour. I wouldn't recognise a joke if I tripped over it»? Nobody. Nobody, that is, except women.' It is not part of the feminine role-model to be funny.

Ironically, it is not a readily accepted part of the feminist role either. For example, Patrick Cook offers the following about Australia's best known feminist humorist, Robyn Archer:
Humour as a defense is its most important niche. For example, Robyn Archer was being interviewed about ‘Pack of Women’, her new stage show. One of the most boring, usual questions was ‘Do you say feminists have no sense of humour?’ Robyn did the completely wrong thing, backed over it, and stuttered out ‘The main problem is ... ahh ... that so many women come from working-class backgrounds, where things are really rotten and they don’t find life funny’.

She was exactly wrong, because the people who don’t find things funny are the academic bourgeois feminists, and the people who do find life amusing are those who’re having a rotten time. That source of humour is to be found a long way down the social scale — ‘the king is a fink!’ is the oldest standing joke there is!

There are a lot of presumptions here. Most obviously Cook’s reassertion of the ‘humorless feminist’ stereotype and the repugnant labelling of the ‘happy worker’. Yet also interesting is Robyn Archer’s own discomfort with the question of feminism and humour — an issue which seems to give her more difficulty in theory than in practice. What Archer refuses in theory here is the simplistic notion of woman’s life as funny, as the butt of generations of sexist chauvinist jokes women might be excused for failing to recognise many so-called jokes as ‘funny’. Yet, in practice, Archer’s work is a fine local example of the use of humour to explore and subvert conventional notions of women’s experience. In theatre Archer produces effects which a number of literary women — such as June Arnold, Jane Rule, Betty Webb Mace, Fay Weldon, Rita Mae Brown, Margaret Atwood — achieve via the feminist humorous novel.

I want to go on to make my case for the importance of feminist humour here in relation to the novel; however, I see this as only a beginning in producing a more wide-ranging analysis of feminist humour as it is emerging in a number of national and generic contexts.

The fact that we have paid little attention to funny feminists and that, ironically, feminists as much as anyone have been inclined to see ‘feminism’ and ‘humour’ as incongruous, is perhaps a result of our underestimating the deeply subversive potential of the humorous mode. The juxtaposition between the two visions of Plath — the tragic and the conventional and the humorous version with which we began — is useful because it highlights one of the best ways in which we can understand what humour is all about. For humour is the obverse of tragedy, it refuses the tragic ending. In this sense it is perhaps wrong to equate the humorous with simply the laughable, or with ridicule. If we look at feminist humour we see that it is concerned with precisely the same kind of experiences as tragedy — love, sexuality, mothering, etc. — yet turns away from the sense of doom and despair which shapes the tragic vision.
I have chosen to use the word 'humour' rather than comedy because, conventionally, comedy aims primarily to amuse and produce laughter. Although humour can be utilised to produce a comic effect the two are not the same, the comic is more inclined to ridicule and mock. In fact I think that the comic mode has not translated particularly well into the feminist literary tradition. Although Lisa Alther and Erica Jong are the best known 'funny feminists' they write within the comic mode rather than the humorous, and this produces some awkward breaks in their work, spaces where jokes crack and leave a sour legacy.

Certainly novels like *Kinflicks* and *Fear of Flying* represent an alternative to the lonely, self-defeating solipsism of *The Women's Room*. Isadora Wing and Ginny Babcock emerge triumphant, self-assertive and ready to fight another day, 'patched, retreated and approved for the road'. Throughout *Kinflicks* Alther reminds us of the rules of the comic genre: her protagonist is fated to survive and this is used by Alther as a means of 'writing against' a more conventional ending; in this sense she is commenting upon earlier novels such as *The Women's Room*. Alther refuses to embrace suicide as a conclusion, and also satirises another alternative: the humanist individualist discovery of a deeper meaning and Truth. Throughout the novel all pretensions about Truth and Mankind are lampooned: Ginny's very last lesson is that suicide is a false statement of existential freedom, a false impression of the freedom and significance of the individual. Alther's persistent reminders about the rules of the comic genre — 'Like most of her undertakings, her proposed suicide had degenerated into burlesque. Apparently she was condemned to survival' — prevents any immersion of the reader in the text, that process of reading by identification which was celebrated in early feminist literary criticism. Alther is concerned to show that a social realist technique is not the only avenue open to the feminist novelist and that a more stylised satirical and self-conscious structure can be equally powerful. Jong does not self-consciously explore and respond to feminist literary precedents in this way, but her novels have much in common with Alther's in that they too attempt to use the picaresque, comic mode with a feminist heroine.

In some ways both Alther and Jong do make the comic mode work well. The comic traditionally stresses incongruity in language and appearance; this allows them to lampoon pretension and hypocrisy and the norms of patriarchal dominance. The comic pornography, which can be traced back to conventions which traditionally make fun of bodily functions and animal nature, translate into a female world to produce such non-traditional absurdities as the unexpected arrival of a period — a female equivalent of the male fart perhaps in terms of raising a laugh. In
this sense the ability of the comic to mock weakness and excess, the gap between appearance and reality, ideals and experience allows Jong and Alther to break new ground in what female protagonists can think and do. Ginny and Isadora are frequently witty and outrageous, like all picaresque hero(in)es they glide across the surface of life from one adventure to another, unscathed.

Yet in other ways these comic conventions have not translated into the feminist literary tradition well. What price some of the laughs and optimism? In *How To Save Your Own Life* for example the traditional happy ending arrives with the discovery of Self in the Ultimate Fuck, and this is merely the tip of a rather phallic orientation in much of this writing. Too often Alther and Jong take what has always been the easy way of gaining a laugh: at the expense of women. Both, for example, send up lovemaking between women — Isadora resorting to a women’s commune in which the women are stereotypically unworldly and ill-equipped for survival, where the electricity bill is enormous due to the incessant use of vibrators. The hedonism, youth and self-display of both of these heroines does little to challenge the conventions of male mythologies about women, sexuality and the fetishisation of the phallus and physical attractiveness. Both Ginny and Isadora are very conventional women in some senses, simply joining the ranks which have previously been manned by the likes of Roth and Mailer. From this point of view the widespread popularity and acceptance of these novels should not surprise us; they do little to contradict traditional norms and, in fact, refurbish and reassert them under the banner of feminism. It has been suggested that the adventures of Ginny and Isadora take place in a social and political vacuum; perhaps their effect has not been so innocent.

The comic mode as practised by Alther and Jong does not, to my mind, work well from a feminist point of view (one can, of course, already hear Don Anderson finding this judgement ‘absurdly authoritarian’). This is not to say that the comic cannot work here but simply that as yet it has not done so, neither Jong nor Alther have managed to translate comic conventions into a feminist framework without also bringing some of the patriarchal and heterosexist trappings. More successful perhaps is Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Here Brown uses the comic to present a picaresque lesbian heroine, Molly Bolt. I shall return to this novel later, however suffice to say that here too a lack of emotional depth and a romp from bed to bed works against some of the things which Brown wanted to say about woman-centred relationships.

On the other hand, the conventions of humour have translated into a feminist framework well, so much so that it has become a major part of
much lesbian or woman-centred writing. Separating comedy from humour is not easy, yet it is useful to realise that the word ‘humour’ was not originally associated with laughter and even now humorous writing is far more sympathetic, tolerant and emotionally complex than the comic. Humorous characters have a depth beyond that of Isadora or Molly Bolt; for these reasons it seems to suit the concerns of woman-centred writers such as June Arnold. George Saintsbury’s standard trope runs ‘Humour laughs, however deeply it feels, and sometimes chuckles; but it never sniggers’; it is these qualities of seriousness and emotional depth which bring us back to the exploration of deep and sometimes destructive emotions which has been an important part of neo-feminist writing. In the writing of women such as Arnold and Piercy humour is used to tap anger, but in a different key, leading towards compromise and survival. This is not the kind of ‘survival according to the rules of the genre’ which we find at the end of *Kinflicks*; it is a resolution which is reached by working through issues, relationships and emotions.

These differences become clearer if we compare *Rubyfruit Jungle* with Brown’s second novel, *Six Of One*. In the latter the peripatetic picaresque heroine Molly Bolt is replaced as the centre of interest by a community of women who are observed over a long period of time. The women interact in a number of ways; here lesbian relationships are not the subject of prurient interest but have a fruitfulness and naturalness equivalent to the heterosexual relationships favoured by some of the women. Brown’s protagonist returns to find her place in this community, the act of regaining and refurbishing her grandmother’s house becomes a symbol of continuity across the generations of women. She herself grows, and writes, a far more realistic and natural heroine than Molly. One senses in the contrast that Brown herself may have felt that the comic format of her earlier novel worked against her desire to portray lesbian relationships sympathetically and naturally; Molly’s multiple and short-lived relationships are comic, yet invite the label she despises: ‘just a piece of meat’. Molly’s progress from adventure to adventure and her lack of personal growth are true to the comic tradition rather than the lifestyle which Brown was concerned to depict. The humorous mode of *Six Of One* allows her to develop the more sensitive and sympathetic point of view without abandoning that ability to make the reader laugh, which Brown does so well, and also to sustain the intention to disrupt and subvert which is such an important part of feminist writing.

June Arnold in particular seems concerned to make a space for humorous writing in the feminist tradition; she openly writes against both the comic mode as it is used by Jong and the solipsistic ego portraits
of the biographical novel as it is practised by Oates, French and (early) Lessing. In Arnold’s Sister Gin, Su, a successful book reviewer, gradually becomes aware of women’s writing at the urging of an anarchic, disruptive ‘briny bitch’ called Sister Gin who, genie like, mysteriously leaves alternative reviews of women’s writing in her typewriter. Gin’s reviews are quite contrary to the ‘respectful careful summaries’ of praise balanced with a tiny fault or two which are the standard fare of Su’s profession. They clash, for example, over a review of May Sarton’s As We Are Now, for which Su writes the standard commentary:

...one of the few serious books about female death in our disposal-obsessed culture. Caro embodies the extraordinary virtues of women who have lived in the real world for eighty years — the ability to size up strange situations, the intellect to uncover truth, the sophistication to be able to make contact with all kinds of people, and, finally, as we watch her being stripped in a literal humiliation by the ‘rest home’ attendant whose envy compels her to make Caro die by small days, the courage to choose death.

Which the ‘briny bitch’ rewrites as follows:

Caro has all the virtues of women including horror that she might be thought a lesbian and you hate the word as much as they do. She may have the courage to choose death but she can’t stand the word queer. Caro found it disgusting that ‘they’ thought her feeling for the one woman who treated her with tenderness might be sexual. You found her disgusting for finding that disgusting. You are disgusted with old women anyway.

Gin retreats only as Su’s own judgements about literature begin to reflect an understanding of not only sexist but also heterosexist bias in much women’s writing. Significantly the rite of passage for Su is a review of Joyce Carol Oates’s Do With Me What You Will:

The publisher’s attempt to cash in on feminism with a book which is not even remotely feminist (even in opposition) is standard male commercialism. Oates’s attempt to flatten her women so stringently (to get them beneath her men) that they are no thicker than paint on the floorboards is par for the fifties where busy, productive, educated women wrote novels about idle, passive, ghostlike females as if they, the writers, were not women also.

Busy, productive, educated, and parched and starving readers who were also women knew in their wombs that such writers were pulling a fast straddle and were, in fact, writing male fantasies in a female hand. As Sister Gin, that fearless critic of those who cry ‘woman’ too often to be believed, succinctly puts it: In the new wave of women, everyone tumbles over each other like periwinkles racing to get stranded on the sand.
Su is fired shortly after for tearing *Fear of Flying* apart although its publishers had paid for a large promotion. To Sister Gin both Jong and Oates have been elevated by the male literary powers to the position of woman-novelist-to-get-the-praise.

June Arnold is firmly nailing her colours to the mast here, setting her own perspective apart from the woman-novelist-to-get-the-praise canon and suggesting that Jong, Oates et al. have done little to subvert the patriarchal norms for the presentation of women and female relationships in literature. Arnold pursues this difference further by returning to the 'on the beach' metaphor and exploring different connotations; in Sister Gin this becomes an image of survival: 'In the new wave of women, everyone tumbles over each other like periwinkles racing to get stranded on the sand. Us old periwinkles who have been beached before shout with a mouthful of salt. Salt is full of savour here in the breakers...' Arnold's women 'shout in the wave' exultantly, her 'old periwinkles' are not alone on the shore, or transcendent in death but survivors, 'I ran in and disappeared into the stomach of a wave. The next wave picked me up and deposited me as nice as you please back in the shallow...' Here she is playing with traditional uses of imagery in women's writing, translating Mira's lonely walk on the beach, or Chopin's death swim, into patterns of survival. On her shores the women discover the 'salt, and bitter, and good' — 'Staring at the crystal green of the winter sea all things seemed possible and spring, for the first time, inevitable'.

In Sister Gin spring comes after a long process of relearning and rediscovering women which takes place at a time when women are, traditionally, 'beached'. Arnold's women are all middle-aged to say the least; Su is fifty and in menopause, the tradition of the young, attractive heroine is rejected and 'age' and 'menopause' become metaphors for rebirth and positive change. It is hard to imagine how this could be done in any way other than the humorous mode; to be comic would be to risk superficiality or ridicule of what deserves to be taken compassionately and yet to write realistically would be to invite pathos, which Arnold carefully avoids. As I have suggested, there are a number of ways in which Arnold quite consciously addresses and rewrites other feminist conventions, defining a space for humour. Even after twenty years of neo-feminist writing it is still rare to find writers who do seriously challenge both sexist and heterosexist norms and biases in this way, who are both brave, witty and delicate enough to describe lovemaking and desire amongst older women, when the flesh is no longer taut or the teeth intact.
Such literary interpretation as I have pursued here does little justice to the fun of Arnold’s novel, in which the figure lusted after is a 77-year-old woman whose Tuesday afternoon bridge club doubles as a vigilante gang for punishing local rapists, and in which the grasp of the real is loose enough for a genie-like character to coexist with this community of aging women. These are potentially elements of comedy; yet mixed as they are with complex characterisation and a serious attempt to develop alternatives to some conventions of neo-feminist literature, the novel itself is not comic. Like many of Arnold’s characters and situations it rests on a balance between laughter and tears, a complex mix of emotions. It is significant that the end of Su’s process of relearning is the discovery of anger, that emotion which percolates right through feminist literature, she experiences ‘a full torrent of anger — flowing, pouring, cascading ... like a mountain waterfall, sparkling and shimmering and clean as glass, glistening and fresh and pure as spring’. This is part of the process of rebirth which comes as menstruation ceases, a new kind of creative force from the womb which comes with age like oysters ‘slowly growing plump and making pearls’. For Arnold anger is a source of power which can be controlled rather than erupting wildly and self-destructively: ‘Sitting on the spout she could become a steam engine if she could learn to raise up and down in regular squats...’ Here the characters do ‘feel enough anger to survive’ and love.

It seems to me that, for the present at least, some of the most innovative and subversive feminist writing is humorous. Arnold’s novel ends with her characters brought together in laughter, Su and Sister Gin enter ‘the room of female laughter’. This is of course a quite different room to the ‘room of one’s own’, the ‘women’s room’ of Woolf and French. Yet it is no mere annex but a vital and new part of the structure which, at the pens of writers like Arnold, Piercy and Brown, is a space from which some of the most powerful feminist writing will come.
Carlotta’s Vinyl Skin

My friend David, a successful lawyer who helped me with my immigration papers for this country, is unhappy in a niggled, half-tortured sort of way because of the unimpressive salary I earn as an English professor. Once a month regularly he will phone me to beg me to write a lurid romantic novel that might get on the best-seller list and enable me to buy the house and car he thinks I owe it to myself to own. I have told him over and over again that I cannot write such a novel — I would become immobilized with ennui and self-disgust at my very typewriter. I would waste my time trying, and simply be inserting my hands and head into a stocklike writer’s block.

‘Sheila, can’t you just prostitute yourself for once?’ he pleads. ‘Just once. Then you could keep writing the egghead stuff no-one wants to read in comfort, at least.’

Sometimes a little inner voice joins its harangue with his. If I have endurance and energy (which perhaps I don’t have and am therefore lacking the essentials of a full human being) I could indeed write a money-bringing book, the voice insists. Think up a simple plot, set it in a foreign country during a time of turmoil. Be prepared to write six hundred pages. Create a beautiful heroine who falls in love with a rebel/renegade/revolutionary/freedom fighter/innocent fugitive from justice/political activist/disinherited son later to be re-inherited/wildcat unionist/or even a handsome Dracula-like fellow, eyes heavy-lidded, soul possessed. Or she could be torn between her love for more than one of the above and the wishes of her father. Or she could be in search of a lost father. Contrive to have the lovers separated and then bring them together in a grand finale. They are both, or all three, hot-blooded. Here’s your chance, Sheila, to portray the sex act from the woman’s point-of-view. You could do a service to womankind while making money.

Weaving, weaving, I stick a sheet of paper in the typewriter. A foreign country? The only country I know well, whose landscape forms part of my own mental baggage, is South Africa. My setting will have to be
South Africa — it’s foreign enough to most Americans and it’s their money I’m after. I couldn’t presume to write about America: I know too little about American turmoil and even less about the various historic sites. I have no doubt that I could recreate in words the look of the Cape coast, the Karroo, the Bushveld, the Highveld, the Natal highlands, the Drakensberge. In fact, if I invented a country, calling it something like Sylvanvakia or Prinsenmania or Eendt-sur-Mer, I would only end up describing either the Cape coast, the Karroo, the Bushveld, the Highveld, the Natal highlands, or the Drakensberge. Geography is destiny.

Turmoil? If I want this book to sell, I have to keep all racial discrimination or conflict out of it, except for a bit of jungle-enshrouded sex to the beat of tom-toms, but that could come into the subplot. So I could go along with the myth of the ‘white man’s’ war and set my story in South Africa on the eve of Anglo-Boer hostilities. My heroine will be a peaches-and-cream English girl who comes out with her wealthy father to visit the mines and falls in love with ... an Afrikaner? No, no. A descendent of the 1820 Settlers? A South African English Gentleman and a Rebel. How about that?

I visualize delicate Victorian blouses, thick blond hair done up in a chignon, large hats, many petticoats, soft white hands, large blue eyes, a vulnerable but brave mouth. Oh no, I am regurgitating memories of Bo Derek starring in Tarzan the Ape Man. Why does schlock always stick? I must start afresh. I must start afresh. The image of one of my best-looking writing students comes to mind. She has slightly curly, untidy brown hair, a thin face, and slanting catlike eyes. She usually wears long peasant skirts or calf-length tight trousers in Hot Pink or Luminous Blue, and soft suede boots with a foldover at the ankle, such as medieval pages must have worn, three earrings in one ear and none in the other, oversized T-shirts or fifties blouses. I try dressing her in a Victorian outfit. She looks okay although her shoulders are a bit broad and she stands rather sardonically and firmly on the ground surveying the desolation of a burnt-down Free State farm. Allie, get those boots off, and for God’s sake, wilt a little!

Get her off that farm. I’ll send her in a donkey cart with her wealthy but dying father into the interior. They are on their way to Kimberley. But the father dies on the road and she is left a pile of money. I love bumping fathers off in my stories: like other egghead writers, I am haunted by Oedipus, Electra, and Jocasta.

So there she is alone, on her way to Kimberley. She will have to have picked up some passengers, though. Poor girl. Look, I’m sorry, but I have to think about these things: how will she wash properly on the road?
Wonderful complexions don’t stay that way without cleansing. How will she be able to urinate and move her bowels out in the bush with all those skirts on? Just bundle them up? But won’t they still get splashed and stained? How much toilet paper does her party have? Did they have toilet paper in those days? Did they have toothbrushes? When was the first toothbrush marketed, hey you Popular Culturists? What if she gets her period? Of course she’ll get her period, unless she’s anorexic. But an anorexic girl won’t be able to handle the boisterous sex scenes in the book. And what about mosquitoes? I mean, have you ever spent a night out of doors in the summer without netting and that new insecticide you rub on hands, face, and feet, or whatever parts of the body are exposed? The perspiration! The food going bad!

Let me tell you, I know from experience that when my skin breaks out, I lose all sense of the romantic occasion. I don’t feel like going to bed with some guy whose skin is fine and who’ll want to leave the light on while we make love. I don’t like making love when I’m sweaty or dirty. I don’t fancy sweaty or dirty men. Also, I find it excruciating to be ‘confined’ with a man in bed, or even in a car, when I’m suffering from flatulence. Yes, contrary to masculine belief, women do fart. Over the centuries we’ve worked hard to establish the conviction of our continence. But out in the bush the pretence would have to go. I simply cannot muster up enthusiasm for Romance as I regard Carlotta, my beautiful heroine, waddling like a duck as she squats, searching for a place to hold steady where the tough grass won’t prick her bare butt.

In my imagination my student Allie walks into my office. Today she is sporting an old stained braided coat of the kind Majordomos of hotels wear, a limp mini skirt and army boots. I know that she (like many other students these days) buys her clothes from a popular second-hand clothing store that sometimes stocks astonishing antique garments, things people have stolen out of their grandparents’ attics, or defunct theatre companies have hawked. Allie has on bottlegreen tights and a little head-hugging hat from the twenties.

‘Why do you want to write that trash?’ she asks me.

‘To make money.’

‘Then you’ve got to stop thinking about physical discomfort. Your heroine has to have skin of vinyl, teeth of white stainless steel (if that is possible), her polyfibrous hair does not grow damp and scraggly, and her crystalline eyes have the three or four necessary expressions, depending on the light, for your purposes: joy, indignation, love, and sorrow. She doesn’t have periods, or perspiration, or pee, or poo!’
‘I can’t write about a vinyl *dummy,*’ I say, my own eyes flashing indig- 
nantly.

‘What is the least you can write about?’

‘Well, to begin with, I need to see real people in my mind’s eye, a 
woman like you, for instance. Say, what does your boyfriend do?’ Deep 
down in me a little hope is born that she will say he is completing training 
as an officer in the Air Force Academy. A shadowy Richard Gere starts 
forming. *Would* such a gorgeous thing date Allie the Punk in her tights 
and boots?

‘My boyfriend has a degree in Agriculture, but because of the 
recession he can’t find a job in his field, no pun, so he’s working as a 
male nurse at Hannah Hospital. Oh boy, you wouldn’t believe the kinds 
of things he’s learned to do! Give people enemas, stick catheters into 
them, give them shots in the bee-hind, and hold pans for them when they 
want to throw up. But it’s done him good, especially seeing old people 
naked and having to wash the shit off them and all that. He’s much more 
sympathetic toward people these days. He never criticizes women for 
their bodies the way most guys do.’

‘What does he look like?’ I ask, a bit disconsolately, pulling the paper 
out of the machine.

‘He’s no Mister Universe. He’s okay. He’s going to have to go on a bit 
of a diet because of the tummy he’s getting. Twenty-five’s too young to 
get a tummy. Not that I mind. He’s got a sweet face, but his skin is very 
pale. He can’t suntan at all: he just goes red, mostly his nose, and he was 
ever good at sports at school because of his flat feet. Would you listen to 
this: no-one realized that he was flat-footed until he was about fourteen? 
He got out of the swimming pool at school and by chance the coach 
noticed his wet foot-print. As flat as a fish.’

‘What will he do? Keep looking for a job in his «field» or settle for 
nursing?’

‘Naa ... he’s decided to go on to grad school next year. He may as 
well. He’s saved enough to put himself through, and he still wants to get 
into some branch of agricultural science, maybe at a higher level.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll keep on with my studio art. Though I wouldn’t mind farming. 
I’ve always wanted to farm. That’s why Percy and I get on so well.’ She 
settles herself on the corner of my desk, running one hand over a pile of 
books. I see that each finger-nail is painted a different colour. She looks 
at me confidentially. ‘You know, Percy my boyfriend, had a terrible time 
as a kid. His mom used to dominate him totally. Even when he was in
highschool she’d clean his room and go through all his things. She’d even examine the underclothes he’d thrown in the wash. He had no privacy whatsoever. And the one time he came home a little drunk, both his parents created such a scene, even though he was already twenty-one, that now he simply can’t, he can’t drink in front of them. Now his dad offers him beers and beers and beers, but he can’t accept them. I’ve had a lot of trouble getting him to loosen up with me, you know. Do you know he stayed a virgin until he was twenty-four?

‘Allie, you don’t have to tell me all this stuff.’

‘I know you’ll keep it to yourself.’

‘Of course.’

‘I had to teach him a lot,’ she says coolly, getting off the desk and clumping to the door, her boots heavy against the floorboards. ‘I hope you can write your Romance and make some big bucks,’ she adds, but without much interest. She wiggles her painted nails at me and leaves. I put the paper back into the typewriter.

My story begins to take form. Percy, my male protagonist (I dare not call him a hero, which is not to say he isn’t heroic) will be a civilian helper in the military hospital at Bloemfontein where more British soldiers are dying of diarrhea than are being killed by the Boers. But I won’t go into details that will nauseate the reader. I might draw a Daumieresque picture of grey skeletal bodies with sombre young faces in overcrowded wards. But Percy is a short, shy, pink-faced fellow with not too noticeably flat feet and a deep desire to be a farmer. He has never known a woman (in the biblical sense) until he meets Petronella, a farm girl who has had to take on many of the chores at ‘Bloustroom’ because the men are away fighting in the Transvaal. She wears army boots and hitches up her skirts for ease of movement by means of an old cartridge belt. She ties her hair up in pony tails with string, which causes her cotton sunbonnet to sit oddly on her head. The neighbours think she is eccentric if not mad (The Mad Woman of Africa — cliché alert!) and no young man comes riding up to ‘Bloustroom’ to court her when the farmer-fighters are on leave. But Percy doesn’t notice anything out of the ordinary about Petronella. Besides, he is lonely. His widowed mother, who wielded inflexible control over his life, has herself passed on to the Fathers as a result of a stray shell crashing through Percy’s suburban bedroom just as she was about to riffla through the things her son stores in his tin trunk. (Am I killing Mothers off too now?)

Petronella has great trouble with stomach wind, mostly because of the high-starch diet forced on all the population, but Percy is unaware of her sneaky farts — because of his job, his hair and clothes are infused with
excremental and medicinal smells. One afternoon in the barn, she shows him how to make love (this will be my main sexual scene, putting male readers straight about female arousal once and for all), whereafter he becomes insatiably attracted toward her. He nearly gets shot by the British at one point because they suspect that he is consorting with the enemy, but Petronella is not the enemy nor do any of the enemy come near her. But Percy goes to jail (SAD scene), and the British burn Petronella’s farm (TRAGIC scene, Petronella’s unusual silhouette seen against the brilliant orange and blues of the fire). But after the war Percy marries Petronella and takes up farming with her — her father and brother died in prison camps set up by the British for Boer prisoners in the West Indies. This information is conveyed to Petronella in a letter written by General de Wet, a letter which she frames.

My telephone rings. ‘Sheila, honey...’ (it is David, my lawyer-friend), ‘I’ve just been reading in the Free Press about a housewife in Troy, Michigan, I mean Troy, Michigan! And she’s making plenty of money writing these novels to a formula. Apparently her publishers supply her with an outline which she merely fleshes out. Now you could do that!’

The strong picture I have of Petronella and Percy clearing away the debris of the burnt-down farm house begins to dissipate. Behind them I see beautiful Carlotta, her blond hair wisping the sides of her lovely vinyl skin, her lacy petticoats caught up against the breeze in one small hand, her lips pursed redly in anticipation. She waves. At a handsome horseman? No, at me. I am surprised. I see that she wants me to bring her to life, rescue her from that vinyl skin, allow her to experience hot tearful afternoons of toothache, days when she can’t get a comb through her sweating hair, the bloated feeling of food moving through her digestive system, messy periods at the wrong time, just when she wanted to wear a white gown to the officers’ dinner, and she wants me to give her the good sense to guide her lover’s hand and penis so that they move in ways she wants, instead of having to submit to one of those writhing, grunting, quick, harsh sex acts always inflicted on Romantic heroines. I hesitate. I do pity her. Mmm ... Carlotta could be Petronella’s cousin from overseas. Percy introduces her to Captain Coningham, the Chief Surgeon. Carlotta uses part of her fortune to rebuild Petronella’s farm.

‘Look, David, I don’t think I want some publisher’s outline. I can think up my own outline,’ I say.

‘Don’t tell me I’ve persuaded you to do it?’

‘I am thinking about ... the project ... very seriously.’

‘I mean, if someone in Troy, Michigan, can do it, so can you.’

‘Ja, ja, I’m thinking about it,’ I say, beckoning to Carlotta.
Once upon a time the gods decided to be lavish in their blessings. ‘We will make you a queen,’ they told the little girl. ‘Thank you,’ she said, a bit startled, but not really knowing what else to say. She supposed that being a queen was probably a good thing. ‘And we will give you a king who is a genuinely good person, and who will help you with everything.’ She said ‘thank you’ again. A helpful partner was almost certainly a good thing; being a queen might be difficult and she could do with some help. ‘And we will give you 5 children who will prosper reasonably and 17 grandchildren to go with them.’ The little girl looked doubtful. Seventeen grandchildren was rather a lot; but she decided that on the whole they’d turn out to be nice.

‘Have we left out anything?’ The gods murmured among themselves. ‘Oh yes, you will have excellent health and a long life.’ ‘And you will also be intelligent and beautiful.’ This last was an afterthought. The little girl shuffled her feet, thinking she was being dismissed at last; but the gods weren’t done with her. ‘There’s one more thing,’ they informed the child. ‘For all these gifts we hold you responsible. Do you agree?’ For the first time the little girl felt apprehensive: what did it mean to be held responsible? But since there wasn’t very much she could say to the gods, she said, ‘Yes.’

Well, everything turned out as they had said it would. And when her long life came to an end, she knew she would have to face the gods. So she prepared an apologetic speech in advance. The gods summoned her. She dared not look at them. She launched into her speech. ‘I tried to be a responsible queen, but in time somehow the kingdom dissolved. And even the money trickled away. As for the children, they are all right, but not as prosperous as I once was. Both beauty and good health, and even my power over words, faded at the last. And now of my long life nothing is left. I could not preserve any of your gifts. I ask your pardon.’ She was certain that the gods were displeased with her.

But the gods merely said, ‘So you think you were a failure?’
'Yes,' she answered humbly. 'You gave me wealth and power, and I lost it all.'

'And you thought we expected you to keep it forever? Had you power over time?'

'No,' she faltered.

'You were only expected to try to grow to your full stature. And from that responsibility as a queen or a mother or an ordinary woman you didn't abdicate. Come, do you still think you failed utterly?'

'No,' she ventured, 'but I failed often...'  
At that the gods laughed. 'But you weren't a god,' they remarked, 'only a queen.'

So she looked up at last and smiled at them.
untying the tongue

what prompted me to write open is broken was the realization that the English language tongue-ties me. this ‘restricted mobility’ was most apparent in my attempts to speak of my erotic life. such speechlessness is not peculiar to me. few erotic texts exist in north american women’s writing. is it taboo? TABOO: ‘ta, mark + bu, exceedingly.’ are women afraid to ‘mark’ the paper? or as Hélène Cixous writes, ‘inscribe’ ourselves? it is difficult. women already feel (are) far too vulnerable in this society. ‘To write: I am a woman is heavy with consequences.’ (Nicole Brossard, These Our Mothers)

‘Patriarchal development of consciousness has an indisputable inner need to «murder the mother», that is, as far as possible to negate, exclude, devalue, and repress the «maternal-feminine» world which represents the unconscious.’ (Erich Neumann, ‘Narcissism, Normal Self-Formation and the Primary Relation to the Mother’)

immediately surfaces the second intimidation: fear of narcissism. though few mirrors stand in which we can see our eroticism reflected, we are terrorized by the thought of this accusation. safer to have no ‘marks’. no marks? pornography is ignorance. and romance? we have been persuaded to believe eroticism is romance. ROMANCE: ‘made in Rome.’ so much for romance! the world itself connotes fabricating an image outside ourselves compared to discovery of the erotic wellspring within.

TABOO

ROMANCE

140
'Where the god is male and father only, and ... is associated with law, order, civilization, *logos* and super-ego, religion — and the pattern of life which it encourages — tends to become a matter of these only, to the neglect of nature, instinct ... feeling, *eros*, and what Freud called the «id». Such a religion, so far from «binding together» and integrating, may all too easily become an instrument of repression, and so of individual and social disintegration.' (Victor White, *Soul and Psyche: An Enquiry Into the Relationship of Psychotherapy and Religion*)

the language itself does not reflect women’s sensual experience. for most of us, however, it is our native tongue, the only language we have, *open is broken* is about the words i abandoned. **ABANDON**: ‘(to put) in one’s power; a, to, at, from Latin ad, to + bandon, power.’ so, when we abandon words, it isn’t a simple matter of leaving them behind but rather a turning over of our power to those who keep them: speechlessness the consequence.

the word is the act. when i abandon a word i relinquish the experience it calls up. yet, how can i use the word ‘intercourse’ as a lesbian? and what do i say as a feminist, when in my deepest erotic moments words like ‘surrender’ pulse in my head? a dictionary defines surrender as: ‘to relinquish possession or control of to another because of demand or compulsion.’ still, my body insisted, my instincts persisted/pulled me toward this word. it seemed full of life, and indeed, in IX, i find it is. the truth is in the roots.

contemporary *usage* of our words is what tongue-tied me. the repressed is the absent. women have been **DISMEMBERED**: ‘dis-, (removal) + membrum, member’ from the word. in tracing words back, i have found that etymology nearly always re-members the feminine sensibility of our inner landscapes.
usage is selective. Cixous writes: 'I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural — hence political, typically masculine — economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated ... that this locus has grossly exaggerated all signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak.' ('Laugh of the Medusa')

Mary Daly describes the dominance of male culture as the 'presence of absence'. This presence of absence in our language has resulted in the abandonment of our most significant words. tongue-tied. no marks. no rituals. RITUAL: 'rite.' RITE: 'retornâre, to return.' RETURN: 'turn, threshold, thread.' the thread knotted around our tongues — untied, spirals us to the edge. MARK: 'merg-, boundary, border, marking out the boundary by walking around it (ceremonially «beating the bounds»').'

mark of the spirit. painted bodies. marked objects. sacred openings. threshold to altered states. TABOO: 'exceedingly marked, marked as sacred.' invisible made visible.

abandoned words spring up from deep places. claiming our eroticism reclaims the dismembered.

'homesickness without memory
yet tongues are not fooled
tissue «clairvoyant»
memorizes, re-members «chiaroscuro» history'

(XI)

RITUAL RITE RETURN MARK TABOO

142
Audrey Lourde, in her essay ‘Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power’, names the erotic ‘the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge’. tracing the etymology of abandoned words has that same reconstructive power. reclaims what we subconsciously know, passionately BELIEVE: ‘leubh-, livelong, love, libido.’

intact. the texts woven in/are the very fibers of our tissue. TISSUE: ‘teks-, text.’ the body of language whole again.

Daphne Marlatt, in her poetic statement ‘musing with mothertongue’, characterizes this phenomenon: ‘inhabitant of language, not master, not even mistress, this new woman writer ... in having is had, is held by it, what she is given to say. in giving it away is given herself, on that double edge where she has always lived, between the already spoken and the unspeakable, sense and non-sense. only now she writes it, risking nonsense, chaotic language leafings, unspeakable breaches of usage, intuitive leaps. inside language she leaps for joy, shoving out the walls of taboo and propriety, kicking syntax, discovering life in old roots.’

writing comes out of chaos much as Eros was born out of Chaos. in trusting the relationship between eroticism/etymology and tissue/text, the language — my language — broke open. my tongue freed. to mark exceedingly.
THE SHAPE OF THINGS

we heard it blocks away
the noise fell a net
pulled us to itself

thousands of birds in a park not entered
a piece of green
one-way screen from which we are
seen not heard

stood in the midst of this and these black singing leaves
watched by a last quarter moon of men
hunched around obelisk monument:
‘mania, monster, admonish, amnesia’
inscribed:
‘is it nothing to you’

the birds
why were they there? migration months away
overhead
three layers of winged choreography
like watching your words fly the page
or Penelope’s tapestry she weaves and unweaves so no one can claim her

this park is not a square is
triangle of Aphrodite, mound of Venus
claiming herself symbol of our fecundity

on the eve of your fortieth year
we witness this
a man on a bicycle careens by shouts
‘this park is dangerous you know!’
we know
he doesn’t realize
the why has changed

‘THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY.’
(Alfred Korzybski)
for K. & A.

when did it happen
was there a moment of mutation?

where did we originate
are we a displaced civilization?

foreigners, we are foreigners
we have not named this planet
this is a second language we speak

forever fugitive
we carry small packs on our backs
alert, keeping
hands free
(a daily manoeuver rehearsed instinctively)

our country
our bodies
edge
boundaries of viciousness:
each country’s conviction
to colonize us
It Takes a Lesbian

THE WEATHER’S CHANGED

The weather’s changed.
   All the days
have become
   simple and sunny.
In my forty fourth year
   my lover came.
Hereafter, what can alarm us?
   Even
to time and to ordinary
   death
we shall merely say,
   ‘We lived.’
Once it so happened that an intrepid naturalist stumbled upon a tribe of exotic creatures. They looked a bit like rabbits and a bit like piglets, but they might have been apes or possibly hyenas. 'Aha!' said the naturalist, 'A find, a veritable find! I shall be famous.' He took a number of photographs — for which they posed perfectly obligingly albeit a little bashfully — and then dashed back again to civilization. He wanted the millionaires to equip an expedition. But the millionaires looked dubious. 'What are they good for?' they inquired cautiously. The naturalist felt silly; he had forgotten to ask. He returned to the monkeys, or perhaps they were piglets, and said to them, 'What are you good for?' But they just looked bashful and said nothing at all. The naturalist got impatient. 'What I mean is, is your flesh good to eat? Is your fur warm?' 'No,' they murmured, smiling deprecatingly, 'no, no good at all.' 'Well then, your jungle? Surely something in this mass of luxuriant green must prove useful?' By this time he was very indignant, but the piglets could only look perplexed. They smiled anxiously, they would have liked to have been helpful. 'Well, who are you then?' the naturalist screamed. 'What do you do?' 'Oh, we're poets,' they said happily and eagerly, glad at last to supply an answer. 'We do nothing useful.' So the naturalist left never to return, and to the best of my knowledge the purposeless pandas, or perhaps they were pangolins, still prosper.
YOU SAY THAT THE WORLD

You say that the world struts and parades and that the human animal raised to consciousness by an unlikely chance is less than malicious and more than a fool.

You say that your son will be different, raised without a father, the first, perhaps, of a new species. But I say that they like killing, that they kill with a simple and unconscious arrogance. And they wish to die. Therefore they take appalling risks.

'The world will change,' you smile. I smile back. Behind your head I check the windows, the bolts on the door. I try to calibrate which way exactly the world is rolling, the percentage of risk. At night you are nervous, but you explain nonetheless, 'It's the penniless young. They are unemployed. Therefore they steal.' I nod, I agree, but still feel angered — let them eat cake. Aloud I say, 'Well, I'll go look. Should anything happen, call the police.' I bare my fangs, reveal, as it were, my lack of teeth. But the potential is there. It was always there. Slowly — under your eyes — I change. Try not to see.
Under my eyes
— though I cover them with my fingers —
she turns into a tiger.
   Do I stare? or dare?
I hear her complain;
   I dream the jagged flare
of black on sand.
   The memory of her jaws lingers.
If the crowd could see,
   they'd jeer, they'd attack, though they're warmongers
every one;
   and cowards anciently declared.
It's true I bolt my door;
   they're known. And feared.
The tiger comes.
   Her head's in the spread of my fingers.
She turns back into my lover.
   'Were you afraid?'
'I thought of the crowd.
   How they would call you maneater.'
It is timely. We circle the bed.
   In lesbian lands
I am supple and brave.
   Like this, every midnight, I've stayed
to catch the blaze
   of black on sand; of the creature
whose creature I am,
   under her lips, her hands.
All right, call them another species, throw off nouns with a categorical clink.

A tiger, a woman and a man are different. A lesbian is the fourth. A man says, ‘Only I am human.’ His woman says, ‘Yes, but I am human too. Perhaps not quite as human as him or you, but very human too.’ There is no difficulty. But the lesbian and the tiger do not speak — not to the man. In his kingdom they’re a threatened species. They speak to the woman. She listens for a while, is charmed and enthralled, but then they’re overheard. She runs to her man. ‘Serpents,’ she hisses. She spits and she cries. ‘You’ve got it all wrong,’ the lesbian mutters, the tiger is pleading. But in the patriarchal skies there’s death and destruction. They retreat to the forest and discuss logic.
If you agree not to play pedant, I’ll agree not to play poet. So we can begin in the middle.

Tigers, women, men and lesbians are all different, you say.

Sure. But a masquerade is sometimes in order — we need the relief — and a reconnaissance mission is never out of order if one’s bent on survival.

Look at it this way. Tigers prey anyhow, given no other option. Whether it’s their nature or not, who can say? But it’s clear their digestive tract dictates it. As for women — well — better to be eaten than to eat: it’s a question of morality after all. And men, being more interested in muscle than morality (there’s a principle at stake) take what they can get: tigers, women... each has its purpose.

But lesbians. Now. There’s phenomenon. The digestive tract has no special distinction. Some parts of the musculature are more developed than we might have expected; but taken overall both muscle and morality leave them disinterested. Tigers they admire; men they find puzzling, but hardly relevant; and women they merely desire.

So which of the four is most human?

Tigers, no doubt you’ll say, finding no fault with the dictates of the flesh.

Still, I must argue, it takes a lesbian to see it how it is.

‘It Takes a Lesbian’ is Section 3 of *Flesh and Paper* which will be published by GMP Publishers in November 1986.
INTERVIEW

Elsebeth Gabel Austin interviewed Barbara Hanrahan in London in April 1985. Part of the interview took place on 21 April, and the second part on 30 April.

How important was art and printmaking to you?

Art was a sort of refuge to me when I first began to make prints. If I was making a print or a drawing, all worries or cares were shut out. It was like a perfect world you could get into. And I always felt that if I could stay faithful to that, I’d be led along and something would happen... I’ve been thinking about this lately because of being a long way from Adelaide. It seems that growing up in a small Australian city means that very early on you’re put in your place, labelled. If I hadn’t been in London, I doubt that I could have jumped free and got away from the label I felt I’d been given.

Do you feel that it might have limited you if you had stayed in Adelaide?

It’s a strange paradox. I had to get away from Adelaide to start writing and I stayed away, to begin with, for about eight years. But Adelaide is the place that gives me all the ideas for the work, even if I’m writing something set in London. You go through a period where you just want to get away, but now I realize how important the place is to me and how much I care about the Adelaide that’s my Adelaide. But sometimes it’s harder to see that Adelaide when you’re there.

What do you think about our ‘spiritual welfare’ today? Do you think that there is such a thing?
There are certain books that are supposed to reflect a real world, but if I read a book about a woman with lots of children and she’s doing the washing-up or thinking about the children’s nappies and she’s utterly absorbed in these tiny day-to-day problems — they’re her world... I suppose, now I say it, that it could be written in such a way that it becomes a beautiful abstract pattern... but most of the books written about the everyday life of women don’t, for me, have much point because they don’t acknowledge the spiritual thing that exists with it — that huge other world that lies behind and all about the small everyday existence. Those so-called realistic novels — the small human world without a sense of the great other world — are a fantasy to me, a very frightening fantasy. I’d hate to end up in a world like that, or in any kind of world that stays quite rational and known. An intellectual ‘mind’ world is foreign to me — I can’t read books like that. There’s a dimension left out. To me, the world only comes alive when it’s got a religious aspect.

*Your father died when you were a year old. What did that mean to you?*

It meant that I grew up in a household of women — three women, no men at all. As a child, I always wanted to be told stories about my father. He seemed like a hero and I’d ask my mother to tell me about him, and what she remembered was always different to the proper Rose Street world we lived in — how he wrecked the billiard saloon, how he carried me into the bar of the hotel with her best handbag round his neck, pretending to be a bookmaker. He stayed a hero, someone apart. In his photos, he was good-looking — that was important. I like to know what people look like; I like being in London, watching people... So my father was good-looking — they said he looked like Tyrone Power, and they gave me a cutlery box lined with blue satin, with photos of him as a Christian Brothers’ College schoolboy, and his scout tabs and little Catholic books inside it. The box was mysterious, like part of a secret religion. He was my father, but in the box he stayed a child; and he was like a character in a book because you heard stories about him. He wasn’t there in reality, yet there was the fact of me — and he was my father... he was always there, mixed up with me to think about. I grew up with the three women in the house. When I was fourteen, my mother married again and I had a stepfather. But my father was dead. The death thing is there from a very early age. I had a grandfather that I loved and he died. I had a grandmother and she’d died; a great-grandmother and great-grandfather were there for a while and they’d died, too.
Did you ever blame God for those deaths?

No, it just seemed natural to have those people go like that. As a child I had a fantasy about how I was here on the earth and there was something up above watching me, or perhaps I was even up in the sky watching another myself. It was always that feeling of being a voyeur, of watching myself, of watching someone else.

This is also reflected in your books.

Yes, and looking down at the grass, feeling you can hide; if you can just get small enough, you can escape and hide.

How important is Adelaide and a sense of place to you?

It’s important. At the moment, the people I most want to write about are the working-class people of Thebarton, the old suburb where I grew up. The ones that are old now, and soon they won’t be here and their stories will never be told. It seems important to try and get their stories down. I want to write about Adelaide like the Southern writers of the States write about their home towns. Thebarton’s important to me. You can get in touch with people there who have a directness, an innocence. But if you try to write about people like that and use their directness, and write in a language that reflects it, it’s difficult — it’s terribly hard to pare everything down and still stay meaningful and poetic. I want to write books that have a sort of double language — a simplicity, a clarity on the surface that masks a complexity and mystery. Nothing pretentious or over-stated.

The theme of ‘innocence’ runs through your books and is also depicted in your child characters, some of whom are not innocent at all.

There are lots of children who don’t have innocence.

What exactly do you mean by ‘innocence’?

Which innocence? The real innocence or the other innocence?

Well, which one is real? The one that a character like Annie Magdalene has?
A person like Annie is just herself, with a wonderful confidence, and everything she does is important to her. I can’t talk in an abstract way when I think about innocence, I think of this particular woman at Thebarton. Her garden is her world. She lives a life where she seldom sees anyone. She doesn’t talk to neighbours, she goes about the same rituals in her garden each day. The bees, the daisy bushes are all part of her world and she’s a big thing in it. She isn’t dwarfed by a second-hand newspaper existence. Her world-wide event is herself.

*Living in accordance with your Self, your own nature and Nature around you is the innocence you are talking about. Do you think that one can gain that innocence?*

Yes, through somehow reaching back into yourself, re-finding yourself. When I was younger, I was always in touch with a sort of innocence. I kept diaries and was just starting to make prints and everything seemed part of my inner world. I wrote about this in *Kewpie Doll.*

*You said that one can gain that innocence — but how does one lose it?*

There are so many things that can make you lose it. Being surrounded by people, not being quiet, not being yourself. Often you’re told it’s unhealthy to be alone, to concentrate upon yourself. I grew up in the ‘50s, when a normal world meant white cotton gloves and a lipstick smile — that proper world that one part of Sylvia Plath tried to conform to... You’re made to conform so very early, most people lose themselves early.

*The artist is another major theme in your books. Do you think art is something the artist feels compelled to do?*

Well, you might see a painting someone felt they had to do and it might be terrible. I’d like to think that emotionally the person felt it had to be done, but that doesn’t guarantee it’s going to be any good. I don’t see the artist as anyone or everyone, though I know that to a lot of people that’s an unfashionable and elitist thing to say. Perhaps you can be one sort of artist if you’ve got that innocence and simplicity that Annie Magdalene has. She can be an artist in her garden, an artist in her life. But if you’re going to step out into the world and call yourself an artist, you take a risk.

*The real artists, according to your criteria, would you say that they are in touch with something? Something ordinary people in turn can get in touch with through them?*
In one sense I do, though no one is ordinary. The big things the real artist creates become powerful, they should take on a life of their own that’s more powerful than that of their creator. But you don’t find that very often. If a book is any good it somehow looks after itself, it gets free of the writer. If you keep caring about your reputation, about people reading your book — reading you, it doesn’t work.

You write mostly about women and mostly strong women. What do you think about marriage? In your books, marriage is not described as a particularly desirable way of living together.

In most marriages I’ve observed, one character is dwarfed by another. For most people, whether they’re married or not, it’s difficult to grasp on to a way of living your life freshly. Often when people live in pairs, one seems to be submerged into the other, taken over; both people lose something. I’m fascinated by women who are able to stand alone. Perhaps other people judge some of them as strange or eccentric, but it’s through this strangeness and eccentricity that they’re able to hang on to themselves. But marriage fascinates me, too — some people’s real lives seem to be more like fantasies. What I like to do in my writing is to take what seems an ordinary situation and stare at it hard and discover the fantasy that’s hidden inside it. I’d never be able to write science fiction because it doesn’t interest me, I can’t get a toe-hold in a world like that. I want to be able to enter what seems an ordinary Adelaide and find another Adelaide inside it to explore. Like Annie Magdalene — a woman in her seventies, who might be dismissed as not being very interesting. But I wanted to explore her life from childhood to old age and show how rich it is, how full of adventure — the adventure of someone who’s never married or strayed out of her own neighbourhood, who’s lived her real life alone. That I find very interesting. I’d write a boring book if I tried to write about somebody else’s idea of a happy marriage. Everything you do is unconscious in one sense, in another you quite consciously choose the subjects that interest you.

Do you think that women are stronger than men?

Not really... but it goes back to my childhood and being brought up by three women. I keep thinking about women images. It’s easier for me to see men as strange or weaker or as having altered women’s lives because that’s been what I’ve observed through my own life: an absence of men, or men coming into situations and changing them, or representing a
proper world that everyone jumped to conform to. Growing up in the '50s meant a pattern of pretending, where women dressed in a certain way because of men and pretended to be other people. The experience of being twenty in the '50s stays in my mind.

There are all brands, all sorts of feminists and feminism. I take the small details that make up my view of the world, and if I write caringly enough about my women or trustingly enough, if I write about what I see or write out what I feel strongly enough, it should reflect a feminist world. I could never take a feminist ideal and stamp it down and then take my characters and use them to fill a pattern that’s already there.

In most of your books, sex is for the most part depicted as exploitation of either a child or an adult; it is sex for its own sake without having anything to do with love or the caring for another person. Do you see sex like that as a source of evil, a way of losing this innocence we talked about?

In *Annie Magdalene*, the sex is more humorous and not a source of evil in any way, so that’s a different book. With the other group — *Where the Queens All Strayed, The Peach Groves, The Frangipani Gardens* and *Dove* — in some ways, yes. In some of those books it’s a symbol of evil or just a symbol of the way people don’t see the other person. They see themselves, they think of themselves and don’t feel any responsibility to the other. It’s curious, how we have this body and then dress it up in different disguises. By taking the disguises off layer by layer, a respectable old man might end up as a wicked old man, like Mr Maufe in *The Peach Groves* — it’s the queer duality all the time.

The children that are innocent in the way we talked about, end up being ‘knowing’ children in a sort of dangerous way, don’t they?

In a character like Maude in *The Peach Groves*, the danger was there in the beginning. She was the perfect little white girl but to someone else, looking on, that innocence can have a dangerous aspect — they want to harm it.

Then beauty becomes a source of evil, too?

But who’s to say what beauty is? Perhaps it’s only to be found in the person who’s blighted in some way; perhaps the perfect thing can come to seem sterile.
In The Frangipani Gardens you write: 'Mysticism was chic ... it gave you an uplift as enjoyable as a Martini cocktail.' Are you getting at the people who adopt a fashionable interest in these matters without realizing what forces they're dealing with?

Yes, they take something enormous, unknowable and always reduce it to something small. Though perhaps I'm interested in writing about a second-rate experience rather than a truly mystical one. I like absurdity. My sympathies are more with the people who wander down the twisted paths and end up with tea-leaf patterns instead of the great mystical experience.

Girlie in The Frangipani Gardens and the circle she's surrounded by are playing with enormous things. They're small but they're evil, though I see that book as one where evil is defeated in the end by Boy giving up his life. I see it as a happy ending, because Boy does something that makes him for once larger than life, by getting himself out of it. I don't see this small material life on earth as the only life there is; real life can seem more symbolic than someone's other-world life. The craziness of what is real fascinates me. I don't think in black and white, all the little details merge, which is why I need a strong pattern to contain these weird explorations and images. When I work at a book like Annie Magdalene I feel I'm burrowing along in the dark amongst a host of little details, almost waiting for the character to guide me in my selection.

Do you see the religious forces or energies as emanating from the same source as the creative energies?

It's more spiritual than religious, I think. When I read something of Blake's or look at his engravings, I find a world I feel at ease in: his spiritual world was with him all the time, there wasn't any difference between that world and this. That to me is an ideal state. I do find it sometimes — mostly through making a print. If I put my head down and work long enough it's like meditating. You become so engrossed that you escape your mind and become unaware of time. In writing the mind's always there — directing, criticizing.

Do you feel in touch with your God then, when you are engrossed in either printing or writing?

If I don't do it very well, I don't feel in touch with anything... if you thought about it, it would put you off starting as you'd feel you could
never be in touch with anything, let alone any sort of God. But writing and making a print is the same as religion to me.

At the beginning of one of your novels, Dove, you quote Faulkner: 'The past is never dead. It’s not even past.' What is your concept of past, present and future?

I see the past as threading through the present, and both present and past are there reaching out to the future. I mean, my father is dead but he’s utterly alive to me; he’s alive to me because he’s dead, because I never knew him — it makes him so much more potent than if I had. He stalks through my mind, I feel I’m speaking to him, writing for him. It was my grandmother’s death that started me off on The Scent of Eucalyptus. Dead, she was so real that I had to create her again.

There is no borderline between life and death, then?

Well, some people that are walking round alive seem much more dead than the officially dead ones. It’s curious, some people have said The Albatross Muff is a frightening book, they felt depressed by all the deaths in it. But to me, they’re just more life. When Stella dies, I see it as another happy ending. By dying, she’s found her Papa and that other world she searched for.

Part Two

In your books, the external world in our so-called civilized society seems to be a threat to the creative energies. Is it reconcilable at all with ordinary life to be an artist?

Well, you have to work out what you mean by ‘ordinary life’ and ‘artist’. Some people who call themselves artists are really art teachers, with their art put aside for special days and not entering very deeply into the rest of their life — that’s not what I mean by artist. An artist, to me, is someone whose art permeates every tiny detail of the life they live, so you can’t distinguish the art from the life. The art is with them all the time, like a religious quest. The true artists for me are the ones like William Blake — they can’t switch from some other role to suddenly becoming an artist. But often I write about false artists, the ones like polite ladies at tea parties. I’m attracted to people who pretend.
Real art, then, is not reconcilable with what we would call a normal life?

But you can't say there's a normal life, as if it's something apart. I know that for me it's reconcilable with what someone might call a normal life... if it's real art, it's just part of life. There's no such thing as a normal life. My abnormal life is one where someone's chopped into little pieces, and the newspaper world's real... The people that are sitting in the tram, all neat and twitchy — they're my odd people. In most of my books the odd people are the ones who think they're living normal lives.

Do you see your characters as archetypes?

I see them as symbolic, but at the same time I see them as very small. If you can get something down on paper in all its detail, if you can write about a place so carefully that you can pin-point every street and all the houses in that street, and you can describe the gardens — if you can do that caringly enough, it becomes an archetype. If I can write about Thebarton well enough, it should stop being Thebarton and become a symbol of some other place. Thebarton can stop being part of today and link up with some mythological place, so it can be like writing about a place in the Greek legends. But you have to be able to step aside from your preconceived ideas of what Thebarton is and be able to see it freshly, originally. It never works if you just skim and write about the surface of a place. I'm drawn to the work of Southern writers like Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner who get close to their small towns and write with such potency that the place jumps away from them and becomes part of a legend.

Is there a connection between what you are doing and the fairy-tale?

Some of the characters in the more fantastic books are almost like characters sliced out of paper, striding along. Girlie and Boy aren't merely everyday people, they're larger or smaller than life. I wanted to set these people against the fairly naturalistic background of the Adelaide Hills, so that the landscape was there to vibrate against the characters. But I don't think you can simplify it and say they're fairy-tale characters. I do try to get into their minds and analyse what's there. They're not only cut-outs, the novels can't be labelled as just some sort of Gothic. There is melodrama, but there's naturalism at play against it — you have these different viewpoints playing against each other all the time.
I would like to ask you about something completely different. In your books, you make the occasional reference to Beardsley and Oscar Wilde. I have sometimes been reminded of Beardsley's drawings through the style of your writing.

I do admire Beardsley and the style of the '90s; sometimes I try to do with words what he did in his drawings. Some passages in Absalom, Absalom! are like a Beardsley, I'm drawn to these inner artificial worlds. But I also care about an outside world with all its sordidness and dirt in the garden. I like Beardsley's exotic flowers but, as well, I like the flowers in a backyard with a rotting paling fence and its earth threaded with worms and ants.

You have said to me that people's looks are important to you, you like to picture what people look like. What do looks communicate to you?

Words set my imagination off, even before looks. An unknown person's name leads on to a person I imagine... so that if I ever meet the person I'm usually disappointed, because I'd seen my own imagined person so clearly. It's the same with the characters in my novels. I spend time trying to get their names right. One reason I like old cemeteries is because of the names on the headstones. I use words in my prints, too; I name the characters I draw.

Birds are a frequent symbol in your books. What attracts you to birds particularly?

Sometimes I see the birds as swooping evil things. In The Peach Groves there are sinister birds. Birds come into my prints, too — in some, girls are being attacked by long-beaked pecking birds. It's strange that there are these small delicate creatures, flying about, while people walk round in what they think is just their world — and all the time the bird world can swoop down on them. And of course birds link up with folktales where they're messengers from some spirit world, and it's unlucky to kill one, and there are certain feathers you shouldn't have in your pillow. And I think of the birds in the closed world of an old tapestry, an embroi-dered Garden of Eden. The part of The Peach Groves where there are dead birds all over the forest makes me think of Adelaide last summer. There were dead birds in the streets because of the heat. In summer Adelaide changes, even though Government House and all the other English bits are still there. You get this furnace heat. The landscape, the climate makes Australia a very physical, sensuous place. Summer comes, heat
comes, and it isn’t just weather, it’s like a person because it invades your life. Even when you’re a long way away, the richness of that natural world is there growing in your mind, becoming even more potent.

*The idea of the journey is another interesting symbol in your books. I would like to ask you about the journey that the Duke and Duchess of York make in The Frangipani Gardens. What do they represent?*

I’m more interested in making suggestions than definitions in my writing; I want readers to have their own idea of what the Duke and Duchess represent. I like the absurdity of Duke and Duchess teacups and society ladies buying new clothes, and the way these English symbols affect people’s lives so far away. The Duke and Duchess are another symbol of the English world coming out and impinging on an Australian landscape. Adelaide to me is always a place where you see palm trees poking up round the Cathedral, and then there’s the Union Jack and a Government House, so white, behind the Boer War soldier; and mixed up with that are the Hills and the gum-trees and the weather. That sort of scrambled world attracts me most.
Lunch

Robert Pegrum lurks — his word, he always puts into words what he is doing — he lurks by the table piled high with copies of his latest book, and several of the earlier ones. Robert Pegrum well-known novelist en route from the Adelaide Festival in this store today from 11.30-1pm. Get your signed copy today.

He thinks it’s a stupid thing to be doing. But publishers like it, and since he knows which side his bread is buttered (is grateful that it is buttered at all) he goes along with it. So far, in an hour, he has signed eleven books, and one of those wasn’t new. He smiles, an elegant ironic smile curling his lips, sees himself doing it (in his wordmonger’s eye) and smiles more broadly. He is nearly 50, his novels achieve quite a pleasant succès d’estime, he is glad that he has never sold out to commercialism (at the same time is wondering whether he could have, had he wanted to) and only regrets that his writing is good but not great. But he has the comfort as well as the despair of constantly trying; he might surprise himself one day.

So he stands by his table of books and charms those who come to buy them. He smiles at them, head on one side, and immediately they feel immensely significant. Fascinating people, of real interest to this famous novelist. His wife is very scathing about this, compares him to a bitch on heat; it’s like a smell you exude, she says, and people come lapping it up, take it as a personal compliment. But just that same charm has blunted Barbara’s sharp tongue over the years; neither is any longer much upset by the other’s defects. They rub along well enough; Rob sometimes thinks it’s odd that so much passion — of jealousy, despair, betrayal, as well as love — should come to this. The critics rave about his perception: ‘the chilling clarity of his truth-dealing’ is mentioned on the latest blurb. Perhaps that’s all it means, the recognition that rubbing along well enough is very much the best that life will offer, a good gift, a nice piece of luck.

He stares out of the window at Garema Place, at the great plane trees already yellowing, already unleaving, at the lunch-eating people sitting
on benches in and out of the hot autumn sun. There’s a woman standing on the pavement staring at the bookshop window with a small intense frown; doesn’t he know her? He would claim that he doesn’t know anybody in Canberra, but he did live in Australia for more than thirty-five years, and perhaps old friends, acquaintances, could have moved here by now. The woman has shoulder length dark hair and at that moment a flutter of autumn breeze catches it and streams it away from her face, and Rob is back on a windy gazannia-ed paddock by the sea and Frances, his 19 year old love, is frowning just like that as she tries to get one of his kites to ride the sea airs, and the old pangs of passionate longing catch his chest. The sickening desire, which he had to pretend in front of Barbara and their friends was simply friendly interest in a protegée, a clever story-writing girl who would benefit from his interest, raises his gorge again.

The pangs are momentary. The desire is a flash of déjà vu. But he is very pleased indeed to see her, as she walks through the shop to his table of books.

— You’ve cut your hair, he says.
— Mm. Well, I decided I was a bit past the long and flowings.
— You haven’t changed a bit, he says. You’re still as beautiful as ever. Head on one side, smile specially, privately, just for her.
She smiles uneasily. You always did flatter, she says.
— Ah, but never you, never you. I just tried to find the words for you.
— I wasn’t sure whether to come, whether it was a good idea. I was going to have lunch with my husband but then he rang and said a whole lot of work had come up and he couldn’t make it, so I thought I would, well, at least look through the window. And then, well, it seems silly not to say hello.
— So, you’re having lunch with me.
She has forgotten the ease of his masterfulness. The comfort of it.

Now it’s lunchtime there are a few people coming into the bookshop and Rob is kept busy with signing. At 5 past 1 he seizes a gap and hustles her out of the shop.
— Where to? Any outdoor restaurants? It’s a glorious day, much too nice to be cooped up inside.
— Well, there’s University House. Food’s not amazing, but the garden’s lovely. Stephen and I were going there.
— University House it is.
— Do you still fly kites? she asks in the car.
— Oh yes. When I can. I wrote a book about them, you know.
— Yes. You gave me a copy, remember? A valedictory one.
Of course. How could he have forgotten. My heart is breaking, he wrote. I cannot leave Barbara now. But I will always love you. Always, always. My dearest love in all the world. Well, it was 15 years ago.

They get trays and take cold meat and salads and a litre of red wine. (When I drink the wine, says Rob, I wonder why I ever left old Oz.) They walk up the steps into the Fellows’ Garden, an Oxbridgean enclosed space of lawn and flowers and immense calm trees. Frances stops suddenly and Rob almost bumps into her, then she walks across to a table where a couple sit, heads together in earnest important conversation.

— This is amazing. What a small world we live in. (All in sharp bright brittle social comedy tones.) Rob, I don’t think you’ve met my husband, Stephen, and this is his mistress Sharon. Rob Pegrum, an old friend of mine.

— Bitch, says Sharon.

— Slightly vulgar, as you see, Frances apologises to Rob. Well, we won’t join you. I’m sure you’d rather be ... tête à tête. A bientôt.

She and Rob holding precarious trays walk through the meandering garden; she takes them to a part out of sight of Stephen and Sharon.

— Does that happen often, says Rob.

She laughs, though her eyes are thick-lensed with tears and her hands quiver. No, it never has before. You must have given me courage. Or gall. Oh, I know she exists, he keeps swearing he’s given her up, that she means nothing to him, and then I come across her ... spoor, and realise that all his swearings mean nothing. But this is the first time publicly.

— Do you think of leaving him?

— Oh yes, all the time. But I don’t want to. And he doesn’t want me to. Funny, isn’t it?

They look at one another, each the object of the other’s dreaming when spouses failed. He the brilliant verbal lover, love in words, passion rarely realized, she the fresh slender girl, virginal in idea as well as in flesh. Both realise that he is the one who has kept the old role; he’s aged, a bit, is slightly sourer, slightly sharper, but she is no longer the girl whose hair fell like silk in the wind, is a married woman, matron, mother, and life has worked his wicked will upon her. She’s no different from his wife, the 10 years more youthful are a drop in the bucket of the scheme of things.

— Well, beautiful-as-ever Frances, tell me about yourself.

So she does, picking at her food with its tasty industrial dressings, but drinking the wine in hundreds of tiny sips, so that he offers to get some more. Tells him, one sentence per item, of finishing her degree, and teaching, and getting married, and having children (three, now 11, 9 and
8) and declaring that she will never teach again, of her small pleasant business, cooking: pâtés, terrines, tarts, puddings, casseroles, transportable food for people without time or inclination to make their own, and delivering her goodies all over Canberra for people to serve up (just a quick turn in the microwave) as their own.

— And your writing?

Her eyes slide sideways, stare down at the grass, the dug-over autumn flowerbed. Well, I still write a bit, short stories still, but just for me. I mean I don’t do anything with them. All tooled oop in me little bottom drawer — forgetting he won’t know this comic spinster’s song of her youth.

— Cowardice, he says.
— Yes, of course. But comfortable.
— You write well. You used to, and you’re probably better now. You should be making something of it, you know. It’ll be foul for a while, with rejections and so on, but it’ll come good — it has to when you’re good.
— I suppose so, she says. I keep thinking I will, but not yet.
— Promise me, he says. Now. Today.
— Well, soon, she says, smiling and deprecating like the girl she used to be. But you, how are you? I read your novels, I buy them even, when they come.
— Aye, there’s the rub. I stopped being a full-time novelist when I started having a family. He doesn’t tell her he believes he has her to thank for this; remembers sitting secretly in the ugly harsh-lit cafe drinking feeble coffee and saying I want to have children with you, I want to have six children, I want you for my wife and the mother of my children. He doesn’t tell her that he thinks it was Barbara’s awareness of Frances — perhaps not the person but certainly the fact — that made her stop taking the pill (without telling him) and present him with the fait accompli of her pregnancy, after 10 years of marriage and 10 years of refusing to bugger up her life with children. But perhaps Frances knows. Curious, he thinks, this girl whom I loved, who has children of her own, and my children, who are not hers, but I couldn’t have loved them more if they were, though I might have loved their mother more but that’s not really important, not now, my life has its patterns and I do not really want to change them.
— So you have children, she says, nodding gravely.
— Yes. Two daughters.
— Called...?
— Miranda, and Imogen.
— Shakespearean, I think.
— Indeed. They’re rather highly wrought little English girls, I’m afraid, even if we do fly kites on the downs.
— How old are they?
— Miranda’s 15, Imogen 12. Quite aged, you see.
— And Barbara? Is she as beautiful as ever? (This is a disingenuous question; Frances never thought Barbara beautiful, but she knows Rob did.)
— Yes, I suppose so. She keeps busy with her music. And village affairs. We live in Brighton now, you know, or at least, a village nearby. A 17th century farmhouse, but not too inconvenient, and easy enough to get to the university. You can’t keep a family on the odd novel. Though the thing is it is the odd novel when you work for a living, even though Sussex gave me the job with the idea of my going on writing, still without it there might have been more than the odd novel. Still, it’s footling to quarrel with the past. What’s done is done, etcetera.
— No, but you can use it to change the future. You can learn, and change yourself, even.

She leans forward and speaks passionately. Rob draws back. He is positively non-committal.
— Yes, he says. Maybe.
— And you are happy, she says.
— Oh yes, I think so. As the pessimist and the optimist said, all for the best in the best of all possible worlds.
— Oh, I hope not, she says, deliberately dimpling. Then softens. I used to think I was happy, she goes on, eyes down and sideways, fixed on the clods of earth. I used to think what a gift it was not just to be happy but to know you were, so many people only find out when it’s passed that they were. And it’s ironic, isn’t it, because that happiness was wrong, it was based on a false premise, what I thought I had I didn’t.
— No, no. Rob shakes his head vigorously. Happiness is never wrong. That happiness was real, because you perceived it; nothing can change that.
— I’m afraid that’s not true. I’m afraid of the tainting of the past. Oh, not our past, that’s safe, but Stephen’s and mine.
— You mustn’t let it happen. You can control it, you know. The mind is its own place, and all that.
— And makes a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven... Mm. I don’t know that it’s supposed to be voluntary, though. She raises her eyes to him. They are still as glittering brown and green as ever — he once wrote a poem about them being magic stones that changed and had power, were laved in the streams of her tears and sparkled in the sunlight; a cryptic
and conceitful poem like all the ones he made for her — and her face is still pretty and hardly lined, what it has lost is that mysterious bloom that youth does not know it has until it is lost. Youth and bloom, and both gone; beauty (for the lucky possessor of it) remains, but harder, colder, more disdainful, without the vulnerable glow that catches the heart.

She hesitates, holding her words, but then speaks. She has drunk a lot of wine.

— In this last year, with this horrible business with Sharon (she’s young too, you know, she’s 20) I’ve thought about you a lot. You’ve been a kind of dream, a fantasy I had, I could run through it when I felt unhappy. You came back, like this, and we were still in love, just as we used to be, only even more passionately because of the long parting, and Barbara had left you, or died or something (I mean, not horribly) and you were alone and we could live together as we’d always planned. Happily ever after. A fairy story, you see. Escapism.

She stares at him, speculative, defiant, but not hopeful. He smiles his old charming smile, misty, loving, sad. It accepts her conclusions. He has no magic wand to wave, he cannot make her story come true. Or he could, but he won’t. His life has its patterns. He does not wish to change them.

He takes her hand, lying clenched on the table.

— Oh Frances. It’s a beautiful dream. I wish it could happen. I’ve never stopped wanting it. But my life, Barbara and the girls, I couldn’t hurt them like that, you do see, don’t you?

She sees, as she did those years ago, when he said, I can’t leave her but any day now she will leave me and then we can be together always.

— I’ve got to go to a reception tonight at 6 o’clock (some hooha at the High Commission) and I leave on the plane at 8.30 tomorrow … but this afternoon … are you busy? We could go back to my hotel, we could have a few hours…

All his sweetness is in his eyes, his smile, his pleading voice, in the delicate nursing of her hand.

— No, she says, let’s leave the past where it is … and safe … that bit of it. Besides, I’ve got to get home. I’ve got to make three quince tarts by 6 o’clock. Can I drop you somewhere?

He follows her out through the garden. Stephen and Sharon are gone. And he knows he has killed the sad little dream that helped her to bear them.
Women Experiment Down Under: Reading the Difference

Questions of difference in women's writing, of what might constitute a female specificity and a female difference in comparison with writing by men, particularly in relation to language and literary form, are items on the agenda of feminist discussion of women's writing in Australia and New Zealand as they are in some European and North American circles. These questions are also seen as important by some women writers and some publishers, although it is arguable that the debate has its own resonances in the Antipodes where, if women's presses and other small presses are marginalised in relation to dominant publishing, it should also be remembered that the larger Australasian presses are themselves marginalised in relation to British and American firms.¹

Here, as elsewhere, the editors of the early 1970s women's collections often saw getting women's writing, and women's experience, into print as a political action, the strategy of continuing with gender segregation a necessary counter-attack on usual publishing practices. Editors of later collections began to ponder the difficulties and possibilities of defining women's writing as an identifiable entity and in relation to feminist politics.² The more recent introduction of questions of 'difference' into feminist political and critical debate, a result of the growing interest in the various new French feminisms, is now having its practical effect. An example is the 1985 Women Writers Week, held in Victoria as a part of the state's 150th anniversary celebrations and organised around the theme, 'The Language of Difference'. Such a thematic distancing from official, presumably white male ruling-class, culture is in keeping with the policy of all the Women 150 activities as seeking to counter sexism and racism.³ In this way, the organisers thumbed their noses at the establishment which tends, in such celebrations, to perpetuate hegemonic cultural values, sometimes by suppressing marginal cultures or sometimes, if these prove too resistant, by incorporating them.

I intend below to discuss some recent writing by Australian and New
Zealand women, mostly fiction and mostly able to be described as belonging to the 'new writing', perhaps as representing a flowering of a women's avant-garde. In doing so, I shall also explore some implications for experimental fiction of theories of women's writing that derive from notions of female difference. These critical approaches often politically privilege women's experimental over women's realist writing. While it has long been argued by feminist critics that, in the dominant view, women's cultural production has been trivialised in its high art forms and barely noticed in its popular or craft forms, the new emphasis on questions of female difference and female specificity in language has begun to alter the terms in which the debate is conducted. In discussions of literature, it has been suggested that women's experimental writing is intrinsically politically progressive because the values of masculine language and meaning are here challenged at the level of words, grammatical constructions and literary form. An emphasis like this in language leads to a politics not just about words but of words: language itself becomes a major site of contest, of revolutionary struggle.

Current theories of female difference are based on the various French feminisms, themselves often usually deriving from the more general post-structuralist debate in France. For Anglophone feminists, their use involves a rethinking, and a rewriting, of the traditional cultural dichotomy, male versus female equals active versus passive, with the female functioning negatively as 'other' in relation to the male. Difference theories attempt to overcome the negative associations of 'otherness'. They suggest, in some accounts, that women operate in a libidinal economy which is not simply a reversal of the male but rather one or, more accurately, many, which is marked by the specifically female characteristics of multiple versions, and subversions. This female specificity derives from the relationship of women to the female body, notably in female sexuality, and also operates in language, theorised as being acquired during the dual process of subject formation and attaining gender identity. For women, this means suppressing their female identity in order to speak, but in obedience to the encoded male definitions of masculine oriented language. For women writers, the revolutionary task is then to write, or speak, as women, to give voice to the previously suppressed female difference, an act which necessarily involves new forms of language. For example, Hélène Cixous argues that women's language, together with that of some marginalised men, 'does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible'.

While these theories do allow all kinds of new analyses of words and women, in my view their uncritical use also results in important political
and strategic problems. A feminist criticism that bases its analysis on an understanding of women’s oppression as deriving, through language, from a female-male opposition that is ultimately dependent on anatomical difference glosses over or, worse still, leaves out what are the more likely determinants of women’s oppression: the social system with its structures and institutions, class and racial oppression which interacts with gender oppression, the economy. Saying that all these, and more, derive from a primary male-female dichotomy and from its expression in language, whatever values are associated with each side of the gender equation, seems an unlikely explanation of the varying circumstances of different groups of women.

The main kinds of feminist political practices in Australia and New Zealand have now moved some way from the radical feminism of the early 1970s. There are an ‘affirmative action’ or ‘equal opportunity’ approach, which represents a pragmatic watering-down of the early radical demands to accommodate the tactics of a broadly liberal or progressive tradition, and a revived women’s movement feminism, often based on difference theories and representing attempts to overcome what is now usually perceived as the essentialism of early feminist politics. As well, and sometimes in opposition to both approaches, some feminists organise within, or operate in association with, socialist groups, a perspective which informs this essay. Interestingly, the affirmative action and the difference approaches are demonstrated in two collections of fiction by women published last year: Room to Move: The Redress Press Anthology of Australian Women’s Short Stories, edited by Suzanne Falkiner and Difference: Writings by Women, edited by Susan Hawthorne and published to coincide with the Women 150 Writers Week in Victoria. Some authors are represented in both collections and, together or separately, the collections show the range and versatility of current women’s writing. Yet what marks both collections more compellingly is their substantially differing editorial policies, each based on feminist principles but, in terms of their feminist politics, with very little in common.

The Room to Move anthology, in its stated editorial policy, is characterised by affirmative action tinged with nervousness. Falkiner, in her ‘Preface’, is careful to assure the reader that the stories herein ‘have been chosen as representing a balanced selection of modern writing by Australian women’. She reassures us that a ‘balanced second opinion’ was also sought. Quite what a ‘balanced selection’ might consist in is not elaborated although clues are given: ‘No effort was made to select stories that represented names, categories or political beliefs: these are simply the best of the stories submitted, as perceived by the editor and readers’
Maybe, but choosing 'the best' is not, as Falkiner suggests, a politically innocent activity. It is odd indeed to read in a purportedly feminist collection what conservative critics often argue: that politics, and feminist politics, will get in the way of good writing.

Elizabeth Riddell continues this theme in her 'Foreword'. Unfortunately at present, she argues, special arrangements are still needed to get women into print (and who could disagree with such sweet reason). It follows then that the Room to Move writers will be 'busily questioning masculine assumptions' and writing accordingly. But never fear, dear reader, as a measure of their success these women writers have 'avoided the trap of facile feminist assumptions' (pp. vii-x). What Falkiner and Riddell have not accounted for, though, is that balance can be dangerously close to stasis, nor that their kind of faint-hearted nervousness about feminist politics may well lead to a failure to take risks, to what has been called in feminist parlance a fear of flying. In Room to Move, what's presented, in terms of its literary standards, as an apolitical selection results in the confirmation of traditional ideas about women, and their writing, as being involved overwhelmingly with personal feelings. Riddell herself comments on the 'interior' preoccupation of much of the writing. While Room to Move contains engaging stories, overall the anthology is of a kind which does not often challenge our ideas about the short story, nor extend our understanding of women's writing. Balanced politics of life or literature are unlikely to rock the short story boat, or the reader either.

Rumours that have been circulating about disagreements and changes at Redress Press suggest controversy there about the effectiveness of middle-of-the-road affirmative action feminist publishing policies. What is not always recognised by those who adopt liberal strategies is that even these will be perceived, like their more radical counterparts, as unbalanced in some quarters. This has occurred already in one review. The anthology, Difference, provides a comparison with Room to Move in this respect. Rather than dismissing feminist assumptions, Hawthorne has organised Difference to play a part in the current debates that seek to make female difference 'empowering and enriching'. In her 'Introduction', Hawthorne also states the aim of giving voice to the differences among women, class, race, sexual identity, all topics often discussed but, still, not always seriously confronted, in feminist politics. Hawthorne hopes the anthology will 'help create a community of women to speak across the differences that separate us'. Through this, difference can at last begin to be viewed not as otherness, as weakness, but 'as a source of strength' (p. 1).
"Difference" is not composed entirely of short stories, nor are the pieces always about relationships and feelings. There are as well poems, prose-poems, polemical pieces, and photographs and statements from each writer. Much of the collection is interesting and some of it, in terms of what usually appears as the printed word, unusual, particularly in the contributions from Aboriginal and migrant writers. Many of the pieces do indeed take up, in all kinds of ways, questions about writing and language as seen from the difference in political and cultural perspective of each writer. Balance is not a feature of Difference, but neither is it perceived here as desirable. The anthology argues against 'balance' by asking the reader to think politically about women and writing. It goes some considerable way towards achieving this goal, and does so in a fashion which lends support to theories of a connection between new ideas in women's writing and new literary forms.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that only the avant-garde has identified form and language as issues. For socialist realist, and feminist realist writers, the question of how to write particular topics and for particular audiences has always been important. A realist preoccupation with form and its possibilities is found in much Australian and New Zealand women's writing earlier this century, one recently revived example being the 1930s play, *Paradise Flow* by Jean Devanny, the material of which she also wrote in longer form in a novel of the same name. It is worth mentioning here that Virago Press has recently made available some long out-of-print novels by Australian women that are centrally concerned with questions of form, *The Little Company* by Eleanor Dark and *Bobbin Up* by Dorothy Hewett. While we are grateful for these novels' new availability, their republication in London, even if by a feminist press, is a sad reminder of the condition of Australian publishing earlier this century and currently. Their republication is not because no Australian publisher would take them on. In the case of Hewett, as well as some other works by Devanny, funds were not available in the shrinking coffers of the Literature Board for one Australian feminist press (Hecate) to republish. I expect there would be other examples. It seems a pity that such important works by Australian women are being released at some remove from their Australian context, by what is now part of a large British press.

World publishing and realism versus the avant-garde aside, however, it does seem that an important contemporary current of politically questioning writing by Australian and New Zealand women (and some men) is marked by a formal experimentation that seeks deliberately to redefine, undermine or break up the conventional literary boundaries. Often
writing from this current can be described as deriving from, or influenced by the debate about difference and women's writing. Certainly, as with much of the *Difference* anthology, experimental writings of this kind are amenable to critical readings from difference perspectives.

Three recent shortish works can be so read: *Quilt: A Collection of Prose*, by Finola Moorhead, *A Gap in the Records*, by Jan McKemmish, and *Tunnel Vision*, by Dorothy Johnston. *Quilt*, by Moorhead, is a collection of some of her poems, prose and fiction pieces, grouped in sections with commentaries providing interludes. As the title suggests, the structure is like a quilt, that traditionally time-consuming women's craft which itself has functioned in much feminist discussion as a metaphor for women's art and creativity. Quilts are often produced communally and by reworking old materials into something useful, beautiful and new. Because of the method and purpose of their production, and their status as 'women's craft', these intricate objects have been dismissed as culturally insignificant in the establishment view. While some of the feminist discussion of quilting is really rather idealistic, Moorhead is convincing in relation to her own writing when she argues for celebrating the strength of women's traditional creative achievements in new works by women. For Moorhead, women's writings are like quilts in that they must work over that 'very old and worn stuff, the language of our culture'. So, in *Quilt*, we are offered not just a collection of Moorhead's writings, but a new arrangement. The pieces are organised so that we ponder the impact of a collection of her writing as well as individual pieces and, through her writing, what the activity of writing means for women.

Jan McKemmish, in *A Gap in the Records*, also explores literary form, but her interest is the popular forms of spy and crime adventure fiction, often read by men and in which women are notably absent as actors. McKemmish invents a group of women running a very efficient counter-operation against the activities of patriarchal capitalism. The women's success in several ventures over many years is precisely because of their status as a silence, or gap, in the official records. Inventing their own subversions, they make of their weakness a strength when they find, to their advantage, that their activities are noticed but they are not. This is feminist guerrilla warfare, in which the dominant methods of control and power are challenged. To write the story, McKemmish had herself to invent a form that would give voice to the silent places in official accounts of subversion and in mainstream spy fiction. Because the conventional narrative spy form is heavily encoded with the values her characters fight against, McKemmish offers the reader instead a de-centred and split
series of narratives: the clues are as likely to appear in the piecing together of the form as in the bits and pieces of information so tantalizingly held out to us.

Dorothy Johnston, in *Tunnel Vision*, also seeks to rewrite the depiction of a particular group of women in the official records. The women here are prostitutes and, avoiding both moralism and statistics, Johnston writes of prostitution as work that assumes a dominating role in her characters' lives. Usually in print, in fiction as in journalism, prostitution is approached in a sociologically-influenced style laced with sensationalism and disapproval. At best, such writing seeks to raise the consciousness of readers by appealing to their human charity, an approach which perpetuates ideas of prostitutes as somehow apart from other women. Using different methods, Johnston constructs her text's political position by assuming a political awareness on the part of her readers. In this way, she can approach the topic in a manner that is morally matter-of-fact as well as stylistically audacious. She demystifies a topic so often discussed in simplistic terms.

*Tunnel Vision* is a novella made up of short sections. Often close to farce, it features a brothel characterised by craziness, in its workers, its clients, and its running. The work, a supreme example of alienation under capitalism, is responsible for the prevailing lunacy. The women face a never-ending series of virtually identical encounters with a very narrow aspect not just of their clients' lives, but of their clients' sexual lives. Johnston constantly questions the conventional definitions of prostitutes and clients by refusing to countenance moral judgements, and by showing the fantasy that masks the economic transaction that takes place. In the brothel, sex with women in exchange for money from men is organised like a play or a show, with trappings to transform, or conceal, what is really going on. By writing this fantasy, Johnston succeeds in making a political point that other writers, including some feminists, often obscure with moralism. For her, prostitution or massage, understood in conjunction with the industry and the social relations it draws on and perpetuates, is both 'the boldest euphemism of our times' and 'the name of a disease' (pp. 85, 97). The likely work-related health problems are listed. The prostitute Maria, who develops tunnel vision and goes blind, and not due to any sexual pleasure, symbolises the problem. Because in her work she is concerned with such a narrow band on the spectrum of human relations, she must and, in the end can only look straight ahead. Her illness is suggestive of the results of the alienation of all labour and, especially here, of female labour, under capitalism, and of the effects of alienation for social relations, including sexual ones.
Moorhead, McKemmish and Johnston can all be read as writing new topics, women’s topics, in fiction in new ways: they can be described as writing the language of difference. But there are, nevertheless, still problems for feminist theories, and for feminist critical theories, that see binary gender difference as a model for all forms of difference and which privilege the subject’s relation to language as a primary site of oppression. Hints of these can be observed in Hawthorne’s Difference ‘Introduction’ where she hopes that, by addressing the differences that pertain among women, a ‘community of women’ will ultimately be created. Although a more sophisticated analysis, this is not all that far removed politically from early radical feminism. It is still thought that women can be united as a group, that a more effective, albeit more complicated women’s autonomy can, and should be achieved, if only the differences of class or race might be overcome.

My argument with accounts like these is that race, class and sexual oppression are not just ‘differences’ capable of being overcome by well-meaning dialogue. Oppression of all kinds is produced and functions in economic and social structures. The varying circumstances of women from different backgrounds thus may make the forming of alliances, of a ‘community of women’ unlikely or even impossible in many circumstances (even if French theorists like Cixous or Julia Kristeva have suggested, each in her own way, that the women’s struggle can be a model for other struggles also). Political problems thus emerge for feminist critics aiming to further women’s writing by arguing for a female difference vis-à-vis the masculine; likewise for critics who wish to discuss differences of class or race by using a concept of female difference as a model. While the use of the term ‘difference’ does remove the problem of a negative ‘otherness’, it can also obscure an accurate understanding of the causes and functioning of oppression for various groups, like the working class, blacks, and the women in them.

There are also problems in privileging certain kinds of writing as ‘new writing’ too easily; and in therefore defining other kinds of writing as inevitably old hat. Variable publishing and reading contexts also assist in constructing such definitions, and need to be taken into account. How might difference approaches deal with writers like Olga Masters who, in Loving Daughters, looks at women’s family circumstances with some insight, but not in a particularly avant-garde way? Or with Elizabeth Jolley, whose work raises all kinds of questions about language and writing but not in a way that is consistently amenable to feminist difference criticism? Her latest novel, Foxybaby, provides an interesting example. Purporting to be about a woman writer conducting adult
education classes, it is a deliberately madcap account which deconstructs itself, like so much of Jolley’s work in the reading. In relation to her previous novel, Of Milk and Honey, Martin Harrison has suggested that certain resonances about masculine sexuality were missed by reviewers who read the novel as ‘women’s writing’ and not, more properly as ‘new writing’ (whether by women or men). In what circumstances is the concept ‘female difference’ useful when talking about novels like these?

Other recent works come to mind, as well. Running Backwards over Sand, by Stephanie Dowrick is, in some ways, a latter day revival of the early 1970s United States feminist novel, such as those by Marge Piercy, which told of women changing their lifestyles in attempts to overcome their oppression. Dowrick’s contribution to women’s writing is not in a formal sense particularly new but, because this kind of feminist novel has been largely absent in Australia and New Zealand, her central concern with New Zealand cultural difference in Europe, together with women’s politics, gives the updated early feminist plot a new vigour. Another work is The Morality of Gentlemen, by Amanda Lohrey, a radically experimental novel organised along Brechtian lines and, unusually for a novel by a woman these days, barely concerned with women at all at a surface level. Lohrey’s male narrator has a dim notion of women, or of politics, for that matter; yet he seeks painstakingly to understand the moral implications of what is, in the novel, a famous union struggle in Cold War Australia. In asking us to question the narrator and all he tells us, Lohrey cannot directly provide us with what he misses. This is one of her points, of course, but here, in contrast to A Gap in the Records, we read not the gaps but rather an historical account, itself a revision, itself full of gaps, in the making. This is hardly the language of female difference, though the novel does ask us to contemplate seriously many questions raised in the several versions of socialist and feminist criticism.

Kerryn Goldsworthy has raised, although not always solved, some of the problems of defining feminist readings in relation to some recent Australian women’s fiction. In trying to distinguish between women’s and feminist fiction, Goldsworthy proposes that, for post-feminist fiction only, ‘the images of women presented in that fiction (may) be interpreted as signalling the writer’s (as distinct from the reader’s) position’.

Hence, works like The Children’s Bach by Helen Garner, itself a novel very seriously concerned with literary form, or Home Time by Beverley Farmer, are seen by Goldsworthy as not feminist because the authors continue to depict women as victims. Instead of only showing women’s oppression, Goldsworthy suggests the new feminist authors will go further to revise the existing male-dominated literary forms.
It is probably true that Farmer and Garner do not engage themselves with current feminism as directly as do some other writers, and there may well be a connection here with their depiction of women. But I am not convinced that it is useful to separate their work from recent feminism for these reasons. In a manner oddly reminiscent of early 1970s feminist prescriptive criticism, Goldsworthy seems to have confused political categorisation with aesthetic judgement. For critics, as well as for writers, the relationship between politics and literature could be more complicated. Why should it be, these days, less feminist, indeed somewhat out of date, to write about women as victims? Have we won the battle unawares? Should we be concerned to identify writing as ‘feminist’, or to invent a feminist scale of judgement, anyway? Whose writing? Which feminism?

Feminist or not, the Australian women writers Goldsworthy discusses, and others, speak not only from a position of gender difference but from positions of cultural difference in relation to the dominant English language literary tradition, still very much that of the United Kingdom and the United States. But even to group Australian writers, or Australian and New Zealand writers together causes difficulties. The New Zealand literary tradition, like many aspects of New Zealand, is not as well known as it might be in Australia, partly due to the poor distribution of New Zealand books here but, also, to an Australian cultural chauvinism. Even so, just what might constitute a New Zealand or an Australian tradition is under debate in both countries. In this context, the position of New Zealand culture, as well as what might have been thought of as ‘culture’ in New Zealand in the 1950s, can be read as central in and for High Country Weather, by Lauris Edmond. It is also a novel which charts a woman’s life in a small country town and the moral lessons of an illicit love affair. Edmond is an accomplished stylist and here, as befits the prevailing mood of nostalgia and recall, the possibilities of poetic prose are explored without being technically disrupted. Also in poetic prose, Antigone Kefala in The Island takes questions of cultural location and dislocation in New Zealand even further. The Island is a novella about a student who lives a migrant culture with her family, and the dominant New Zealand culture outside it. As in Tunnel Vision, Kefala avoids the sociological data her topic often implies, yet demonstrates its social and personal implications. The heroine, Melina has a brief association with an unsuitable young man whose appeal is his shared cultural distance from mainstream society.

The difficulties of reading women’s fiction from a binary gender-based difference theory are demonstrated most convincingly in Rosa
Cappiello's *On Lucky Country*, originally published in Italian and an absurdist farce on the life of an Italian migrant woman in Sydney, and *The Bone People*, by Keri Hulme, made famous in 1985 when, as an outsider, it won the prestigious and controversy-ridden Booker Prize. Both novels are, in terms of literary style and subject matter, 'new writing': *The Bone People* being organised around interlocking stories in symbolic spiral form, and often concerned with Maori experience; and *Oh Lucky Country* drawing on Italian and European traditions and word-plays, some of which have been obscured in translation, to discuss immigration. But it is not just its translated status which places *Oh Lucky Country* at a distance from many English-speaking readers. There is also the problem of how to approach a novel which discusses migrant and women’s experience with a startlingly and delightedly wicked humour not often found in Anglophone literature.

For feminist critics, *Oh Lucky Country* provides a storehouse of material about strategies adopted by women migrants, including language strategies. Yet reading *Oh Lucky Country* from an Anglo-Celtic perspective and as a women’s novel, as a novel giving voice to the language of female difference, presents certain critical difficulties. Sneja Gunew has argued for seeing multicultural difference, not just multicultural otherness, at work in *Oh Lucky Country*. She also refers to Cappiello’s status as a woman writer, and argues for Juliet Mitchell’s notion, of the woman novelist as ‘hysteric’, as a way of beginning to understand her particular immigrant and female contribution. These are both important to Cappiello’s purpose of disrupting the dominant white and male Australian literary forms, and the politics associated with them. The problems of speaking about Cappiello purely as a woman writer, especially in relation to her literary politics, leads to the conclusion that it may be impossible, not just inadvisable, to separate the migrant from the woman in this migrant woman’s writing.

Due to the Booker Prize, *The Bone People* is now the best known of what is in New Zealand becoming almost a counter-tradition of experimental writing by authors outside the dominant white culture. Maoris, and others, seem often to write against the social realism that prevails in New Zealand fiction. For Maori writers, the new forms help communicate the consequences of oppression while making possible also an exploration of the strengths and potential of traditional Maori culture. In Australia, a similar process occurs when Aboriginal writers draw on their knowledge of the Dreamtime to help extend present-day Aboriginal experience. Putting forward Aboriginal and Maori cultures, which were suppressed
as part of the British invasions of Australia and New Zealand, are political actions in the face of white Anglo-Celtic culture and should be read as attempts to refuse white control.

Those readers, inside or outside New Zealand, who are unfamiliar with Maori traditions and with more recent trends in Maori culture may thus be ill-equipped to deal with some aspects of the new Maori writing. This has led to difficulties for Maori writers, even in terms of finding publishers willing to take what may be perceived as literary and financial risks. The publishing history of *The Bone People* is an apt example: some years without a publisher, it was eventually produced under difficult circumstances by Spiral, a tiny New Zealand feminist press, and has now, following the Booker, been jointly re-released by Spiral together with the British firm, Hodder and Stoughton. It seems that few people knew how to read or where to place a long and challenging novel which, among other things, develops its own formal structure and its own interpretation of very difficult material, including an account of domestic violence which, in the active collusion of a woman, differs from most feminist accounts. In the schema of this novel, the violence is necessary for an inter-racial reunion of the woman, man and child to take place in its wake at the novel’s optimistic ending.

Yet despite its early championship by a feminist publishing collective, *The Bone People* has not always been read sympathetically in feminist locations. Feminists reading from some political perspectives have had difficulties in assigning a literary seal of approval to this particular example of women’s writing. The New Zealand Women’s Advisory Board refused funds for the novel’s publication on the grounds of its insufficiently positive depiction of women. For them, the novel was insufficiently feminist. More recently, an English reviewer, Sue Wiseman, has been disturbed that spiritual matters are referred to in a way that is at odds with the expectations for progressive novels held in some sections of contemporary feminism. Mary Daly and her spiritualistic ilk certainly pose problems for socialist feminism; but special circumstances apply here where a politically-realised racial and cultural difference may be obscured by concentrating on questions of gender. It should not be assumed that in all contexts, particularly cross-cultural ones, spiritual and religious imagery and symbolism will be inherently reactionary. It appears that, like the earlier theories of women’s literary traditions, theories of female difference in writing may be unable to tell us all that much about some kinds of women’s novels or, for that matter, about some of the politics of women’s writing.

It may be that, in the long run, those theories of female difference that
do not adequately account for other social and cultural determinants can operate only in limited locations, within cultures and not across them, within class and racial contexts and not outside them. A comparison of *The Bone People* and *Oh Lucky Country* with *Lilian's Story*, by Kate Grenville and *Lines of Flight*, by Marion Campbell suggests this may be the case. Like Cappiello and Hulme, Grenville and Campbell share an interest in exploring ideas about women and art and a commitment to literary experiment. These concerns are mediated somewhat differently, though, for *Lilian's Story* and *Lines of Flight* can be read more securely than the other two as highly-elaborated versions of the female *Künstlerroman*, as being more centrally concerned with the woman artist than with other questions about women or other issues altogether. They are also reminiscent of Doris Lessing's landmark *Künstlerroman*, *The Golden Notebook* which, like them, confronted formally and thematically the artistic and political difficulties facing women writers. The novels by Lessing, Grenville and Campbell all have split artists as central characters; all three end without functioning artists: Anna, in *The Golden Notebook*, gives up writing; Lilian, in *Lilian's Story*, is soon to die; and Rita, in *Lines of Flight*, seems to have disappeared. All three artists leave some work behind them: Anna, a collection of notebooks, fragments of her proposed novel; Lilian, a life lived out as a grand artistic production; and Rita, an exhibition of little-understood paintings. Their artistic production suggests simultaneously their potential achievement and the difficulty of that achievement for women.

Despite these similarities, the impetus for discussion of women's marginalisation in art in the three *Künstlerromane* varies considerably. *The Golden Notebook* has often been read as prefiguring feminism, yet Lessing's analysis of a woman artist also draws very strongly on the socialist politics current before the second wave of feminism. Grenville and Campbell, writing twenty-five years after Lessing, derive their analyses of women artists primarily from recent feminism and echo its concern with the implications of female difference for language and cultural expression. A central aim for both Grenville and Campbell is to explore women's marginalisation in language, yet in important ways both Grenville and Campbell write much closer to the dominant tradition they are engaged in questioning than do Cappiello and Hulme and, in some ways, Lessing, in whose books cultural, racial or class differences are emphasised to a greater degree.

In developing the character of Lil Singer, Grenville used stories about the Sydney eccentric, Bea Miles, as a starting-point. Like Bea, Lil is popularly seen as a brilliant woman gone wrong, a living proof of the
contradiction between female gender and brains. In her revision of the
legend, Grenville shows Lil deliberately inventing a character of herself
as the woman spouting forth Shakespeare, as the scourge of taxi drivers,
partly as a means of survival and partly as an extravagant work of art.
Denied access by her father to conventional forms of creative expression
and to any control over her own life, Lil makes use of unconventional
methods to express her creativity. At least in this way, her considerable
energy is recognised, if not always understood, by other people. In a
novel which is subversive of many aspects of the Australian literary tradi-
tion, Grenville argues in some detail for the existence of a relationship
between power, literary expression and gender in Australia. In writing
the character of Lil who, in speaking and creating her life can be seen as
giving voice to the repressed language of her female difference, Grenville
herself can be read as, through the novel, providing a means at last for
Lil’s life and language to be understood.

In her discussion of women, language and artistic expression in *Lines of
Flight*, Campbell draws even more extensively than does Grenville on
recent French post-structuralist debates about language and politics,
including in particular French feminist theories. The novel is cleverly
structured around the metaphoric possibilities of a series of word-plays
and in-jokes. Some of these refer directly to certain French post-struc-
turalist writings, like the title and, early on when Rita, dressed in an
aviator jacket, steals some sausages, we are even given in English the
double meaning of *voler*, to steal and to fly, also the term used by Cixous
to propose strategies for women’s writing, as I mentioned at the outset.

Throughout the novel, Rita tries on, contemplates and discards a
number of painting styles in her search for an adequate means of ex-
pression. This search is associated with her search for identity, compli-
cated for Rita because, in Paris, she is isolated from the dominant French
traditions due to her national background and her gender. Her male
friends, all difficult personally, are unfamiliar with the Australian tradi-
tions she draws on and are threatened by the difference in her work,
choosing to see ‘female violence’ (p. 157) in it. In conventional novels,
Rita’s disappearance at the end would be a sign of her failure but here,
where we are asked to read between the lines of her flight, there are other
possibilities. Was Rita defeated; or has she made a happy escape,
refusing the conventional definitions of art, artist and woman, the only
way she can continue with her painting? The novel does not directly tell
us.

Like *Lilian’s Story*, *Lines of Flight* offers a significant critique of the place
of women artists in society. Yet, while both writers place themselves
deliberately at a critical distance from the male-dominated literary tradition and argue their cases for women in inventive ways, neither novel seems as far removed from that tradition as their characters, Lilian or Rita, are shown to be. *Lines of Flight* does not share Rita's cultural isolation, for example, for it is published in Australia where cultural isolation from Europe has long been a literary preoccupation. Both novels too assume a shared literary and cultural knowledge with their audiences and depend on at least a working familiarity with Australian and European literature to make their point. In *Lines of Flight*, this extends to a knowledge of difficult theoretical debates and of the French language, used quite liberally in the novel but translated only occasionally. These novels' association with established sections of Australian writing, including some avant-garde writing, allows them to depend on certain of its features in order to mount their feminist critiques.

In comparison, it is not unimportant that *Oh Lucky Country* had first to be translated before most Australians were able to read it. Cappiello had originally conceived of quite another audience which was, except for Italian, immigrants, outside an Australian context. Adopting another strategy, *The Bone People* caters explicitly for language problems. The text incorporates many Maori words and phrases and a Maori glossary is appended. The ignorance of a large part of the potential audience was a foregone conclusion and had to be catered for, if a large number of readers were to be reached. Formally, the novels by Cappiello, Hulme, Grenville and Campbell are all avant-garde works that delight in their literary experimentation; yet it would be a mistake to think that all have similar political relations to dominant traditions because of their literary experimentation.

None of this is to denigrate Grenville's and Hulme's considerable achievement but, rather, to point out some problems that can occur when theories of female difference in writing are applied uncritically. The use of the term 'difference' can be no substitute for a serious analysis of the structural causes and effects of women's oppression, and of the relationships of women from different groups to language and literature in varying circumstances. That political struggle occurs in and around language is an important insight, as is the idea of established forms being encoded with traditional values, but we should be careful that these do not lead to an uncritical privileging of experimental forms of writing, regardless of their reading and publishing contexts, nor to assumptions that experimental writing by women proves a case for the elusive female difference. To do so is to ignore the other 'differences', class, race, and so on, that affect women in important ways. It is also to underestimate the
contribution of experimental writing, by simplifying its impact in varying circumstances. Words, language, literary form, exist in contexts of reading, writing and publishing, all ultimately social, and flexible institutions. By all means let women speak to each other but we should understand that, in our writing as in our politics, this does not mean we all speak with each other. And if we adopt the metaphor that women writers steal words in order to fly, we should also understand that some of us will have quite different ideas of the words we want, and of where we want to fly.

NOTES

3. See Women 150 Statement printed in various brochures. Activities around jubilees in Victoria in 1985, and South Australia in 1986, and the public debate about the 1988 Bicentennial in Australia, especially after the replacement of the head of the Australian Bicentennial Authority last year, offer further examples of 'culture' being very much a contested site in contemporary Australia. Is it the founding, or the invasion of a nation that we celebrate?
7. Virago has now published novels by several Australian women writers, including Miles Franklin, Christina Stead, Henry Handel Richardson, and Katharine Susannah Prichard. Jean Devanny's Cindie is due out in 1986.
8. Finola Moorhead, 'The Landscape of the Egg', in Difference, ed. Susan Hawthorne, Section 6, pp. 6-7. Also see Margaret Haselgrove's film, Patterns (South Australia, 1985), which explores issues of women's art, traditional crafts, work and politics.


**PUBLICATION DETAILS**

Campbell, Marion. *Lines of Flight.*
(Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1985)

Cappiello, Rosa R. *Oh Lucky Country.*
Tr. Gaetano Rando (St Lucia: Univ. Queensland Press, 1984)

Dark, Eleanor. *The Little Company.*
(London: Virago, 1985)

Devanny, Jean. *Paradise Flow.*
Ed. Carole Ferrier (St Lucia: Hecate Press, 1985)

(Harmondsworth: Viking, 1985)

*Difference: Writings by Women.*

(Wellington: Allen and Unwin/Port Nicholson, 1984)

Farmer, Beverley. *Home Time.*
(Ringwood: Penguin, 1985)

(Fitzroy: McPhee Gribble, 1984)

Grenville, Kate. *Lilian’s Story.*
(North Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1985)

Hewett, Dorothy. *Bobbin Up.*
(London: Virago, 1985)
Hulme, Keri. *The Bone People.*
(Auckland: Spiral/Hodder and Stoughton, 1985)

(Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1984)

Jolley, Elizabeth. *Foxybaby.*
(St Lucia: Univ. Queensland Press, 1985)

Jolley, Elizabeth. *Of Milk and Honey.*
(Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984)

Kefala, Antigone. *The Island.*
(Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1984)


(Chippendale: Alternative Publishing Co-operative Ltd, 1984)

Masters, Olga. *Loving Daughters.*
(St Lucia: Univ. Queensland Press, 1984)

(Fitzroy: Sybylla, 1985)

Moorhead, Finola. *Quilt: A Collection of Prose.*
(Fitzroy: Sybylla, 1985)

*Room to Move: The Redress Press Anthology of Australian Women's Short Stories.*
Ed. Suzanne Falkiner (Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985)
Book Reviews


Asked to review each of these publications, I found the temptation to consider them together irresistible. They should, I felt, have much to tell us about the state of literary criticism and of feminist theory in Australia; while also inviting speculation about their publishing economy, and the cultural situation which produced them and to which they are addressed. But the questions raised in relation to both collections of feminist literary criticism of Australian fiction (specifically women’s novels in the Ferrier collection) became too numerous and complex for a review to address and they increased in complexity when the volumes were placed against one another. I must, therefore, be content with very introductory comments here.

That these collections have been published in Australia — Who Is She? in 1983 and Gender, Politics and Fiction in 1985 — at this particular time is significant. They are the first of their kind; written out of and in response to a burgeoning interest and awareness in Australia of questions of gender. As this concern is institutionalised such publications will proliferate. A number of small feminist publishers in Australia have begun the task of reclaiming disregarded or forgotten Australian women writers and publishing collections of women’s writing. By now, too, the field of feminist theory seems well established in Australian academic life. Courses in women’s and gender studies, research centres, a new feminist journal (Australian Feminist Studies), and one, Hecate (established and edited by Carole Ferrier) that is ten years old, a women writers’ conference in Melbourne in 1985, and the august Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University naming feminism as the research focus for visiting fellows for 1986, all testify to changing beliefs and attitudes. However, despite the individual and collective strength of this movement, despite the recent, belated introduction of equal opportunity legislation at Federal and State level in Australia, there is a fragility, a tenuousness about this activity that doubtless comes from a history of embattlement and marginalisation of women and an actively hostile or subtly patronising masculine cultural milieu.

These, then, are landmark publications in their field. Sharing a publisher and a concern with feminism and fiction, they nevertheless differ significantly from one another. Their titles are revealing. Who Is She? indicates woman as a problematic area. Unknown, absent, 'she' is a site to be investigated. Gender, Politics and Fiction, on the other hand, is assertive. It acknowledges an ideological and theoretical perspective: gender, politics and fiction are inextricably related. Shirley Walker’s brief Preface and Carole Ferrier’s longer Introductory Commentary consolidate these differences. At the same time, Ferrier estab-
lishes a relationship between the collections. She describes, albeit questionably, a linked, three-stage development of feminist literary criticism. From its emergence in the late sixties in the form of images of women criticism from the standpoint of the female reader, it moves to the recuperative activity of rediscovering lost works by women authors and establishing a woman-centred criticism, then to the stage that attempts to go beyond 'the methodological problems' (p. 4) of the first two into a range of theoretical possibilities, including post structuralism and French feminist theories. This is where Ferrier places the writings in her collection, while she assigns Walker's volume to an historically earlier more conservative area: 'In most contributions to Shirley Walker's recent anthology *Who Is She?*, the influence of the work associated with these two developments [Ferrier's first two stages of feminist literary criticism] is clearly visible' (p. 3).

Consciously connected in this way, the collections diverge in others. The essays in *Who Is She?* ponder and explicate, sometimes whimsically, the feminine principle, placed as always in Australian society and culture outside the masculine hegemony and its concerns and comprehension. Ferrier, however, looks for alternatives to traditional critical methodologies and argues for those that politicise literary criticism. The 'real issue' (p. 21) for her in the vexed question of the proper role and methodology for feminist literary criticism lies not in asserting a challenge to the authority of the patriarchy, but in challenging the ultimate authority of the State. Feminist literary criticism is thus a political weapon, not only part of the struggle for women's liberation, but also part of a wider struggle: 'If our reading of literature is not informed by a much more adequate theory of reading, of «literature» and, always, by a consideration of class and economic questions, then the practice of literary theory will be able to play little part in our overall struggle for liberation' (p. 21). With this call to specific action, Ferrier concludes her Introductory Commentary.

In her very brief Preface, utterly unlike Ferrier's prescriptive polemic, Shirley Walker argues for the primacy of an aesthetic: 'the essays are concerned with literature as an art form and attempt to come to terms with the writer's use of women figures and of the feminine as an integral part of the art form which the texts represent' (x). The volume is not intentionally feminist, and any 'judgement' of the essays and their approach is innocently 'left to the reader'. The two years that separate the publication of these collections widens in critical terms, and Walker's retrospectively naïve expectation that critical pluralism needs no apology and will encompass the 'individual literary manifestations (of the feminine) in the works under consideration' (x) is matched by Ferrier's oppositionally narrow demand for a specifically political critical framework.

The contributors and contents of each volume reinforce its editor's critical impulse. *Who Is She?* presents a chronology of writers' work, most of which belongs to that cannon accepted as an Australian literary tradition. An equally predominantly mainstream group of academics explore the way woman is presented in these works. Their essays are scholarly, elegant, witty and sometimes critically challenging, presenting a great deal of useful information about the writers and the texts they engage with and sometimes provocatively opening up questions of the identity of woman in Australian fiction. These questions are answered in most of the essays in one of two ways; through textual explication, and by way of an exploration of the author's subjectivity. In the only two avowedly feminist essays, Francis McInerny re-places Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, shifting it out of its familiar literary and social context in the bush ethos of the nineties and arguing for its place in a female literary tradition, using Elaine Showalter's structure, while Carole Ferrier investigates possible feminist methodologies to read Elizabeth Harrower's *The Watch Tower*. 

188
Alternatively, Ferrier’s volume offers a more radical range of writers’ work and topics, and the contributors are less firmly established in the mainstream of Australian academic life. (Jaded readers can enliven their response to this volume by playing ‘spot the male critic’ among the contributors.) ‘Nettie Palmer as Critic’, ‘Migrant Writers’ and ‘The Reviewing Reception of Hazzard’s The Transit of Venus’ indicate that range of concerns, while the work of writers such as Eve Langley and Jean Devanny is considered as well as those like Franklin and Stead whom the two collections have in common. *Gender, Politics and Fiction* moves away from literary criticism towards a transdisciplinary, women’s studies approach. It also includes an invaluable bibliography in two parts; one a selective list of Australian women’s novels from 1900 to 1983 and the other a list of Australian literary and cultural criticism and history as well as Ferrier’s selection of books on Marxist, feminist and sociological approaches to literary theory.

*Who Is She?* celebrates unquestioningly the achievement of mainstream literary studies while *Gender, Politics and Fiction* offers an explicit challenge to that activity and its assumptions. Each of these collections forms a valuable resource text for students, teachers and readers of Australian fiction with an interest in or commitment to gender and writing.

DELYS BIRD


Ellen Kuzwayo’s autobiography reads like a miniature history of South Africa. Four propositions give the work this unique quality. She was born during the first quarter of this century, a period when the whole world had hopes of a bright future, based on newly discovered technologies. She has been around long enough (seventy one to date) to witness the birth of many dreams and the stifling of many more. Her experiences are varied; from mother to actress, to civil rights leader. The unassuming style of her prose is the fourth quality which elevates Ms Kuzwayo’s story from being merely a personal record to being the story of a nation.

The author’s recollection of life in South Africa of the 1920s is that of beautiful landscapes, and a culturally integrated society. In that society black people played a dignified role in the scheme of things. Some were successful farmers like her family who owned acres of farmland, and produced food for their own consumption, and who also sold crops for cash. In addition to the family’s economic success, her grandfather was active in the political life of his community and became the Secretary to the Native National Congress (now the African National Congress (ANC)). Her grandmother was an outspoken and industrious woman who was a match for any avant garde of the age.

With the coming of the ‘Group Areas’ legislation, South Africa underwent a rapid change from a society which provided equal opportunity for its citizens to one in which increasingly discriminatory legislation was levelled against its black population. In 1913, the ‘Native Land Act’ left ownership of the land in the hands of the whites. When this Act failed in its desired effect to drive the black country folk to the city, the ‘Poll Tax’ was
introduced. Faced with the prospects of going to jail for failure to pay tax, and unable to raise money in the country, black men were forced into the mines. In the 1930s community land in the countryside was declared ‘Trust Land’ and removed from the control of black people. Farm lands were declared ‘black spot’ areas, and blacks prohibited from even living there. ‘The Group Areas Act’ denied black people the right to trade within the city of Johannesburg. And to monitor their movement and ensure that they are employed only in areas of the economy which best suits the ruling class, black people have by law to carry a pass. With one callous legislation after another, attempts are made to render black people homeless, landless, stateless wanderers in the land of their birth. When one considers that these beleaguered people who form 75% of the population cannot even vote at elections, it becomes quite clear that white South Africa has decided to make itself the graveyard of the democratic process.

Ms Kuzwayo informs us that although cornered by law, constricted by regulation and trapped by legislation, black people in South Africa have refused to turn the other cheek. Their methods of protest have included direct confrontation with state police, sit ins and strikes. The women especially have been adept at combating South Africa’s climate of fear. They have habitually made burn-fire of their passes. And the Skokian queens with their secret market strategies have in their unique way undermined the racist government’s economic system.

With the departure of the men to the mines, the burden of looking after the family became that of the women. As Ms Kuzwayo puts it, the woman ‘became overnight, mother, father, family administrator, counsellor, child-minder, old age caretaker and overall overseer of both family and neighbourhood affairs in a community which had been totally deprived of its active male population’ (p. 13). Ellen Kuzwayo’s story is the proof that some of the women met this awesome challenge admirably. She has been a teacher, secretary of the Youth League of the African National Congress (ANC), social worker, youth worker, General Secretary of the Young Women Christian Association, member of self-help groups, member of community economic projects, and head of a single parent family following the death of her husband.

The protests of the past, such as the 16 June 1976 unrest in Soweto, the author reminds us have taken a new and sharper focus. The African National Congress (ANC) has stepped up its attack against South Africa’s economic life-lines. Children are once more taking to the streets and embarrassing government. Black stooges of South Africa’s apartheid have become ostracized by their own people. All indication implies Kuzwayo is that the tinder box is about to explode.

Ellen Kuzwayo tells her story through the narration of communal experience, and is eager to share the limelight with others; Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, Steve Biko and her own colleagues who are not such famous public figures are equally commended. The title of the book, Call Me Woman suggests an assertion of womanhood and all that it entails; mother, custodian of tradition, defender of human rights, victim in a male-dominated world, one most able to turn a deficit into an asset. The book ends with the type of selfless concern which characterizes this sensitive work: a prayer for mother Africa: ‘Nkosi Sikelel’i Afrika. God Bless Africa.’ All we can add is our gratitude to the writer for giving us this autobiography of hope. ‘Re leboga Ramasedi go bo o re fi’le Basadi ba ba tshwanang le Ellen Kuzwayo. Thank God for women like Ellen Kuzwayo.’

ADETOKUNBO PEARSE
The texts of the first American edition of *The Letters of Jean Rhys* and the first British edition of *Jean Rhys Letters* are identical although the covers are slightly different. The front cover of the Deutsch edition features a photograph of the young Jean Rhys that juxtaposes with the rear jacket photograph of Rhys in old age. The American edition, however, relegates these important photographs to small back cover insets. In addition, the Deutsch edition includes a slightly blurry but compositionally superb photograph of Rhys in what might have been her thirties. The three photographs represent a triumph in recording the physical maturity of a beautiful, talented woman.

The series of photographs reflects the structure of the collection, representing as they do Rhys's life phases. But before discussing the book's structure, it would be well to consider the intention of its editors. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly are editors of both editions, but it is evident from more than the arrangement of names that Wyndham is the principal editor and that it is his intention that governs the selection of letters. As Rhys's literary executor, Wyndham has scrupulously honoured Rhys's wish that 'no biography of her ... be written unless authorised in her lifetime'. (No such biography was ever authorised.)

Approached after Rhys's death by authors wishing to write a biography, Wyndham realized that eventually someone would undertake such a biography despite her wish to the contrary, and he was concerned that her worst fear might be realized: the record would be mangled. Consequently, he and Melly, a friend of Rhys's from the last years of her life, attempted to resolve the dilemma by letting Rhys speak for herself through her own letters.

Expecting a difficult search, the editors were surprised and pleased to discover that there were so many letters extant that the present volume had to be limited. As they continued their collecting, they noted that the letters formed 'first ... a sequence and then a shape'. Here, of course, is where the editorial function enters: detecting and encouraging the shape of the volume. Using considerable discretion, the editors used the dramatis personae of Rhys's life to organize the shape and the sequence. The organization forms around Rhys's second husband, Leslie; her third husband, Max; her daughter, Maryvonne; a friend, Selma; the village where she lived until her death, Cheriton Fitzpaine; and, finally, her best-known novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

But above and beyond sequence and shape emerges Rhys's voice. It has often been described as youthful and undated, and, indeed, the letters from these thirty-five years exhibit just those qualities. The letters also display the irony, the pessimism, the self-pity, and the passivity that colour her fiction, but at the same time they display the wit, the sarcastic bite, the affection, the anger, and the endurance. After reading the letters, a thoughtful critic must reject as simplistic the popular critical notion of Rhys as the creator of helpless heroines who are mere extensions of her own passivity.

Indeed, the dry wit and tart commentary expressed over and over in the letters invalidate such critical response as Anne Taylor's in *The New Republic*: 'Whining, raging, rationalizing, self-deprecating, she emerges from these pages as a charter member of the «of course it rained» school.' Such fashionably negative criticism chooses to ignore Rhys's wonderfully wry commentary on the literal-mindedness of her neighbours in Cornwall, or
her splendidly underplayed view of human behaviour. ‘I wish people had not got rid of God — they seem to be getting along badly by themselves.’

The complexity of Rhys’s ambivalence about her own life and about the human condition is reflected in her comment to her daughter:

As to the human race, yes they are devils — but poor devils most of them.... Still one is left with all sorts of problems. How to explain away music, painting, poetry, courage, self sacrifice of any sort, flowers, gardens, good acting or writing. Grace or any beauty at all??

(22 September [1959] letter to Maryvonne Moerman)

For teachers of literature and for writers of literary criticism, a record of the artist’s thoughts on the creation of a work of art is more important than autobiographical information or even insights into an artist’s temperament. It is Rhys’s passing reflections — always passing, never ponderously delivered — on the creation of a literary text that deliver the greatest value of the collected letters. For example, in November 1949 Rhys wrote to Selma Vaz Dias, ‘I know it seems stupid to fuss over a few lines or words, but I’ve never got over my longing for clarity, and a smooth firm foundation underneath the sound and the fury. I’ve learnt one generally gets this by cutting, or by very slight shifts and changes.’

About the act of inspiration, she wrote to novelist Morchard Bishop in January 1953:

The worst of the lot though is the mood when the unfortunate — Me in this case — starts off full of self confidence, bursting with ideas — too many, rather incoherent and words come so fast that they can’t be caught and an interruption drives one into a frenzy of rage, and it all ends in a horrible cafard ... so I tell myself Softly softly catchee monkey.

Most revelatory are Rhys’s letters to Wyndham while she was working on Wide Sargasso Sea. These letters provide glimpses into her philosophy of writing combined with her awareness of the mechanics of the craft, the elusive elements of the art, and her own passionate involvement with her work of the moment. Among many similar letters is one dated 22 August [1962] when she sends Wyndham parts one and two of what she calls ‘that heart breaking novel’. ‘I’ve tried and tried and this is all I can do at present.’ In May 1963 she is cutting up part two, and in August 1963 she expresses her concern for such structural problems as how to insert an episode.

In letter after letter to Wyndham, Rhys worries her way through the composition of Wide Sargasso Sea. Surely, these glimpses into the soul of the artist at work are worth far more than any book reviewer’s impatience with Rhys’s problematic personality.

ELAINE CAMPBELL

*An Angel at My Table*, the middle volume of Janet Frame’s autobiography, covers the years from her entry into Teachers’ Training College in Dunedin to her departure for Europe on a grant to broaden her experience — that is, from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s. These were years Frame spent mostly in a series of mental homes, but years too that determined her career as a writer. As she now sees this period, it was a time when an Angel appeared at her table. The allusion is to a passage in Rilke’s ‘Vergers’, which is quoted as an epigraph to explain the title of the book:

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Reste tranquille, si soudain
L’Ange à ta table se décide;
Efface doucement les quelques rides
Que fait la nappe sous ton pain.
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The Angel evidently represents both the gift of creativity and the affliction of great mental insecurity; under either aspect his appearance signals the removal from common existence of the mortal who is visited. Fundamentally the Angel evokes the Angel of the Annunciation, bringing a gift that also entails suffering, an association that suggests that Frame’s attitude has ended as the Virgin’s began, in calm acceptance. Thirty years later, after a long series of writing successes and the acquisition of an international reputation, Frame is calming the fears of a younger Janet Frame facing a situation that was to overwhelm her.

*An Angel at My Table* is more assured than *To the Island* (1982), the first volume of the autobiography, and becomes increasingly assured as it progresses. Her account of her friendship with Frank Sargeson in Part Two is the most interesting part of the book (she wrote *Owls Do Cry* while living in a hut at the back of Sargeson’s house). Sargeson was the first professional writer in New Zealand able to live from his writings, but that was only because his lifestyle was so modest. Dedicated to the cause of New Zealand literature, he was as generous in helping others as his limited means allowed and was quite free from jealousy. Frame’s portrait of Sargeson is the most vivid in the book — more vivid than her self-portrait, for she presents herself with more detachment than that with which she portrays the fictional Istina Mavet (in *Faces in the Water*), who also spends years in mental homes and will probably return to one permanently after the novel ends. Frame’s mother and father, too, are paler and tireder figures in this volume, further along their path to a quiet, unobtrusive death.

Part Two of *An Angel at My Table* is interesting also because it expresses Frame’s growing awareness, shared by other educated New Zealanders of that time, of the emergence and quick growth of a national literature. During her own maturing years, New Zealanders’ attitude to their literature changed from a derisive ignoring of it to a lively interest tempered by a diffidence about its merits. New Zealand literature was the illegitimate child who was quickly making good, an Edmond who was becoming an Edgar.

This personal account of Frame’s life in a series of mental hospitals does not involve one as intensely as does her fictionalized account in *Faces in the Water*: it somewhat repeats the earlier book without rising to the same heights, especially of style. The chapter ‘The Pine Trees in the Cool of the Evening’, however, telling of Frame’s final visit to her parents’
home in Oamaru, is one of her most lyrical altogether, a delicate compound of delight in present beauty and nostalgia for what she knows cannot come again. But An Angel at My Table must have been the most difficult of Frame’s three volumes to write, simply because it deals with her stays in various mental homes, a subject that is painful to her while arousing curiosity in her readers. Presumably, like anyone writing an autobiography, she has selected and represented facts and events to portray herself sympathetically. If she has not told everything about those painful years, she has no obligation to do so; the important thing is that she has made the necessary adjustments to living an independent existence while pursuing the career of a writer. And what a comeback she has made! — after breaking the silence that followed her first two works, The Lagoon and Owls Do Cry, she has written another nine novels, two books of short stories, a children’s story, a book of poetry, and a long autobiography. (Volume Three has been completed, and should appear in 1985.) Janet Frame has lived two lives, both of them extraordinary, and at the age of 60 can look back upon them with some equanimity. When the Angel appears at her table now, he no longer disturbs her: she merely inclines her head and smooths the wrinkles in the cloth beneath her piece of bread.

JOHN BESTON
GRACE AKELLO was born and educated in Uganda and worked in Kenya and Tanzania before coming to England in 1981. Her published works include *My Barren Song*, *Iteso Thought Patterns in Tales* and *Self Twice Removed*.

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AGNES SAM was born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and studied in Lesotho and Zimbabwe before teaching in Zambia. She wrote for children for the *Sunday Times of Zambia* under the pen-name ‘Dominique’ and since taking a degree in English at the University of York has written an experimental novel, *What Passing Bells* (unpublished), several essays, short stories and poetry. She is presently working on a feminist work in which she proposes a theory about the subjection of women.

SUE SHERIDAN teaches at Deakin University, Australia. She is convener of 1986 ‘Feminism and the Humanities’ Year at Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University.

ARITHA VAN HERK is a Canadian novelist and critic. Her books include *The Tent Peg* and *Judith* which won the $50,000 Seal Award. Dangaroo Press will publish a collection of her essays, *The Frozen Tongue*, in 1986.

BETSY WARLAND is a Canadian poet. The piece by her in this issue is taken from her book *Open is Broken*.

GILLIAN WHITLOCK teaches at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia.
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