Women experiment down under: Reading the difference

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Abstract
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.'
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.

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. 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. 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 anatomic-al 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 charac-terised 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 Aus-tralian 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 tradition, 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-structuralist 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 expression. This search is associated with her search for identity, complicated 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 traditions 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

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Hulme, Keri. *The Bone People.*
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Jolley, Elizabeth. *Of Milk and Honey.*
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(St Lucia: Univ. Queensland Press, 1984)

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