

**POSTMODERN FEMINIST READINGS OF IDENTITY
IN SELECTED WORKS OF
JUDITH THOMPSON, MARGARET HOLLINGSWORTH AND PATRICIA GRUBEN**

by

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ABSTRACT

POSTMODERN FEMINIST READINGS OF IDENTITY IN SELECTED WORKS OF JUDITH THOMPSON, MARGARET HOLLINGSWORTH AND PATRICIA GRUBEN

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This dissertation uses a strain of postmodernist thought, informed by discourse theory and inflected by feminism, to explore the articulation of identity in selected plays of Judith Thompson and Margaret Hollingsworth and selected films of Patricia Gruben. In these works, identity is configured as a process, an accumulation of temporary points of coherence. This dissertation demonstrates how identity is contingent on fluctuating relations of power. The notion of mastery in the relations of power is critiqued through the serialization of identity, through images of the body, and through the interruption and destabilization of narrative structure. As a result of the conflictual representation of identity, the spectator experiences a destabilized subject position; identification is both engaged and thwarted as several different possibilities for seeing the action are activated.

Chapter One discusses the theoretical parameters of this dissertation. The work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Stuart Hall is important in the development of a model of **subject/identity** which is applied in later chapters. In **Chapter Two**, selected plays by Judith Thompson are considered with particular attention to the dynamic of subject/identity and its inscription on the body. Here Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject is applied, for example, to illuminate the instability of identity. Margaret Hollingsworth's plays are remarkable for the foregrounding and destabilizing of narrative structure. In **Chapter Three**, Catherine Belsey's definition of classic realism is used to focus the discussion of Hollingsworth's plays. In **Chapter**

Four, Gruben's work is considered with attention to both body and narrative. Audre Lorde's term "bio-mythography" is applicable, particularly when Gruben takes herself as her own object of inquiry. The results of these analyses are considered in **Chapter Five**. In conclusion, identity as a site of ambiguity involves a relinquishment of a subject/object positioning and of binaries such as right/wrong, *self/other*. Given the destabilized subject position which is afforded the spectator, a different kind of viewing pleasure must be imagined. Temporary moments of intelligibility and mastery are activated, accompanied by an interrogation of the singularity and imperialism of these positions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Setting the Sites	1
Chapter Two: “Identity Panic:” The Plays of Judith Thompson	31
Chapter Three: Stories that Matter: The Plays of Margaret Hollingsworth	96
Chapter Four: “Routes” not “Roots:” The Films of Patricia Gruben	157
Chapter Five: Conclusions for Possible Emergent Identities	209
Works Cited	227

CHAPTER ONE

Setting the Sites

Using a strain of postmodernist thought, inflected by feminism, I explore the articulation of identity in selected plays of Judith Thompson and Margaret Hollingsworth and selected films of Patricia Gruben. Identity is shown to be a site of ambiguity, in a tension of mastery and non-mastery. Identity is not fixed, but contingent on fluctuating relations of power. The notion of mastery or dominance in the relations of power will be critiqued in three ways: through the serialization of identity, through images of the body and through the interruption and destabilization of narrative structure. As a result of this conflictual representation of identity, the spectator experiences a destabilized sense of subject position; identification is both engaged and thwarted as several different possibilities for seeing the action are activated.

In this chapter, I will define the terms of **self**, **subject**, **discourse** and **identity** as they will be used in the following chapters. These definitions will be followed by a more detailed discussion of the theoretical parameters of postmodernism and feminism which situate this project.

Part One

Defining Terms: Self, Subject, Discourse, Identity

Self

In its interrogation and questioning of the master narratives of truth and emancipation, postmodernism brings about a crisis in the concept of the self as an essential, contained being. The **self**, in the legacy of the Enlightenment, refers to a “stable, reliable, integrative entity that has access to our inner states and outer reality, at least to a limited (but knowable degree)” (Flax,

Thinking Fragments 8). This idea of the self is one which is contingent on rationalism and mastery, an ability on the part of the artist/author/subject to control the codes of representation:

Rationalism rests on the notion that there is an Archimedean point from which knowledge is acquired. The existence of such an Archimedean point that abstracts the knower from the known is, for rationalism, definitive of truth. (Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge* 12)

This abstraction can be reassuring for the individual. There is much to be gained from the assurance of a position of “knowing” and frighteningly little solace to be taken if such a vantage point is unfixed. But at what price this abstraction? This kind of constitution of a self is dependent on an *other*, a position of marginalization and subordination to the primary term of a binary equation. This dynamic is not only played out in gender, but is recurrent in other hierarchical positionings of race, class, and sexuality. As Jane Flax points out, assuming a position which is removed and objective also implies a certain domination:

The belief that humans can recognize or construct an objective set of rules, principles, or neutral laws that will protect them from each other is a seductive but dangerous illusion. It reflects a fantasy of a powerful, Godlike, socially isolated, pure mind detached from embodied, interrelated persons To sustain such a fantasy, lesser others must be created whose domination becomes essential to the self. The failures of the products of this pure mind can be attributed to the influences of the inferior “others” (women, other races, the body) over whom perfect control has yet to be fully established. Hence far from making us free, such approaches to justice generate and require relations of domination. (*Disputed Subjects* 115)

Flax’s argument demonstrates the cycle of oppression inherent in a notion of the self which is reliant on rationalism. A rational being implies a separation between subject and object and knower and known. Objectivity is accepted without question and a dynamic of mastery and a hierarchical positioning is implied.

An investment in the self and the power in mastery is hard to relinquish. If the knower and the known cannot be separated in such a way, for example, how is access to understanding possible? How is truth attainable? The cultural value of attaining a stable self is great. It does seem all too convenient that the notion of the self is being undermined, just as those marginalized are finally making their voices heard. And yet the notion of the self as configured within these terms is dependent on restriction, exclusion, and a hierarchizing of difference. Retaining a hold on the liberal-humanist idea of the self implies an acquiescence to a patriarchal society and system of knowledge:

For what is this subject that, threatened by loss, is so bemoaned? Bourgeois perhaps, patriarchal certainly,-for many, this is indeed a great loss- and may lead to narcissistic laments about the end of art, of culture, of the west. But for others, precisely for Others, this is not a great loss at all. (Owens 78)

Rather it is the radical reconception of the self which can be most useful for feminism, particularly for a feminism which is concerned with a theory of subjectivity which takes into account Others who have been consistently marginalized.

Subject

Where the term **self** suggests a stable, unified, rational being, the term **subject** puts this kind of transcendence into question:

The term “subject” helps us to conceive of human reality as a construction, as a product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious. The category of the subject calls into question the notion of the self synonymous with consciousness; it “decentres” consciousness. (Sarup 2)

Althusserian interpellation is a useful way of conceiving the subject as already constituted by language. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser demonstrates how the

subject and ideology are inseparable. In order for workers to perform their tasks “conscientiously” they must be “steeped” in this ideology (133). Ideology, according to Althusser, “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (162). Althusser’s central thesis is that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects: “the category of the subject is a primary ‘obviousness’” and this “is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect” (172).

This concept of the subject is employed by Foucault. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault eloquently describes the way in which the subject is embedded in language:

How can he be the subject of a language that for thousands of years has been formed without him, a language whose organization escapes him, whose meaning sleeps an almost invincible sleep in the words he momentarily activates by means of discourse, and within which he is obliged, from the very outset, to lodge his speech and thought, as though they were doing no more than animate, for a brief period, one segment of that web of innumerable possibilities? (323)

In *The History of Sexuality*, for example, Foucault analyzes the ways in which sexuality is constituted through discursive formations which produce subjects and govern them by controlling their bodies. Foucault draws attention to how the discourses of sexuality create particular subjects. He poses questions in terms of how the body is constituted and formed through discourses:

Why has sexuality been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it? What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested by them? . . . The central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. (11)

Foucault focuses on the way in which the subject is constituted and policed through particular discourses. The term subject is useful because, as Foucault points out, the word has significant resonances:

There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (“Afterword” 212)

As Chris Weedon says, “To speak is to assume a subject position within discourse and to become *subjected* to the power and regulation of the discourse” (119). The term subject in this sense is also useful because of the object which is implied in such an articulation. The subject is inherently unstable, given that it attempts to assume a speaking position, and yet is already spoken. Subject will be used in this dissertation to refer to instances in which a coherent speaking position is assumed, which then proves to be unstable. The standpoint positioning which is assumed is predicated on a dynamic of mastery.

Discourse

A consideration of identity which employs the term subject is dependent on an analysis of **discourse**. Discourse is commonly used on many valences. One of the general principles of discourse analysis is that “a ‘discourse’ is not merely a linguistic unit, but a unit of human action, interaction, communication and cognition” (de Beaugrande 208). Foucault emphasizes how discourse constructs and categorizes the ways in which people come to think about themselves. It is important to emphasize that in Foucault, discourse theory is oriented toward social action:

. . . discourse theory . . . distinguishes itself sharply from philosophical concerns with the truth of statements and the validity of arguments, substituting a concern

for conditions under which one can be judged to have made a serious, sound, true, important, authoritative statement. (Dillon 211)

This concern for context involves a consideration of social conditions and investigates the reasons for legitimation:

Foucault speaks of “rules” of discourse, but it is widely agreed that the conditions under which one can make serious, authoritative statements include material and social institutions and practices. A theory of discourse therefore implies a theory of society, most particularly a theory of power, legitimacy, and authority. (Dillon 211)

In the broadest sense, discourse refers to any communication using signs. Discourse theory, more specifically, emphasizes the importance of context in determining the legitimacy of any given enunciation.

Lyotard also describes how, in postmodernism, the individual is a subject which is always already situated. For Lyotard, the subject is engaged in language games which constitute his/her context and circumscribe a truth-telling ability:

. . . language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist: even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course. (*The Postmodern Condition* 15)

Not only is the subject constituted through language, but it is also determined largely by the social bond, the ways in which language is used and agreed upon by society. In this scenario, the postmodern subject is very much a part of a larger discursive system:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules. (*The Postmodern Condition* 40)

Indeed, sexuality, race, class are discourses which determine the way in which one is named and differentiated within society. As Foucault and Lyotard suggest, **discourse** is an important determining feature of the subject; the legitimacy and authority of any subject is dependent on context and the shifting relations of power within that context. In my discussion of the plays and films, I isolate instances in which subjects assume specific standpoint positions, discursively constituted and dependent on a dynamic of mastery, and show alternatives to this situating of subjectivity.

Identity

In my analysis, the series of positions which the characters assume as subjects constitute a sense of **identity**. Identity, then, is the accumulation of this series of discursively constituted positions. Stuart Hall's articulation of identity in *Questions of Cultural Identity* indicates its ephemeral nature:

I use "identity" to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to "interpellate," speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be "spoken." Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. (5)

Elsewhere Hall discusses identity as a process which connects the several subject positions that an individual assumes. The narrative formation which results is similar to what Brian McHale calls the "as-if" model of story-telling:

[Identity] is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self." Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a

unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or “narrative of the self” about ourselves. (“The Question” 598)

Identity, as it is used by Stuart Hall, evokes the plurality of being while at the same time acknowledges its contingency and ephemerality. Coherence is only to be found in a constellation of these subject positions. Although this identity may have an effect of wholeness, it is also profoundly questioned. In my analysis of the plays and films, as I enumerate the positions which the characters assume as subjects, a serialization of subjects will be demonstrated. This serialization contributes to a destabilization of identity. This destabilization is also evident in images of the body and in the interruption and reworking of narrative.

This discussion of terms has already indicated certain theoretical parameters of this dissertation. In the next section, I will discuss particular strains of postmodernism as they engage with political projects and describe in more detail how a project of postmodernism influenced by Foucaultian discourse theory and inflected by feminism will be applied to the plays of Thompson and Hollingsworth and the films of Gruben.

Part Two

Postmodernism and Feminism

Postmodernism

God is dead, Marx is dead, and I’m not feeling too well myself.¹

With its current ubiquitous use, “postmodernism suffers from a certain *semantic instability*” (Hassan 87). I am considering postmodernism both as an aesthetic practice, and as an

¹ Graffito on Paris walls. (Qtd. by Braidotti 2)

umbrella term for theory which often includes what is called poststructuralism. What can be agreed upon among the various postmodernist pundits and practitioners is the profound questioning of identity. In *Modernity and its Future*, Stuart Hall elaborates five major influences in the second half of the twentieth century which have contributed to the decentring of the Cartesian subject. Hall traces the transition from individualism to a decentred subject situating the dislocation of the subject through five major advances in social theory and the human sciences: marxism, psychoanalysis, structural linguistics, Foucaultian discourse theory and feminism (606-611). Under the influence of these movements, the postmodern subject is “conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity” (598). Given Hall’s elaboration of the conditions which have contributed to the destabilization of the subject, I will discuss two theories of postmodernism and the concepts of identity and the political projects which they involve: Fredric Jameson and Marxism, and Linda Hutcheon and feminism. On the one hand, Jameson laments the loss of the self in the postmodern era, for he sees it as the loss of individuality, of feeling, and of agency. On the other hand, Hutcheon does see why artists and writers are attracted to postmodernism. She acknowledges ways in which postmodernism and feminism have similar concerns. Hutcheon, however, ultimately insists on the complicit nature of postmodernism. For this reason, postmodernism is incompatible with feminism because postmodernism does not offer a framework through which one can offer a coherent critique. After a consideration of Jameson’s and Hutcheon’s visions of postmodernism, I consider the contributions of Foucault to a postmodern concept of identity, and feminist projects which work within this terrain.

Jameson: “as unique and unmistakable as your fingerprints”

Jameson’s influence on postmodernist theory is substantial. Modernism and postmodernism share many similar traits and modes of expression; Jameson makes these fine distinctions, but not without an indication of his own biases. The anxiety and alienation of the modernist self are displaced by the fragmentation of postmodernism (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 14). Modernism as a style is “what is as unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body” (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 17). Postmodernism, on the other hand, must resort to “the imitation of dead styles” (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 18). What is evident in Jameson’s definitions of modernism and postmodernism is a preferred treatment of modernism and, in particular, a nostalgia for the biologically determined individual. Jameson associates modernism with a unique, living individual in his references to “fingerprints” and “body” whereas postmodernism is characterized as imitative, derivative, and “dead.”

Jameson continues his discussion with an oppositional pairing of “feeling” and “expression” in modernism with “the waning affect of postmodernism” (15). Jameson advocates the closed, monadic nature of the modernist self because it affords the ability to express its own alienation in the world. In reference to Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, Jameson discusses the expression of this state of being:

. . . it shows us that expression requires the category of the individual monad, but it also shows us the heavy price to be paid for that precondition, dramatizing the unhappy paradox that when you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm, you thereby shut yourself off from everything else and condemn yourself to the mindless solitude of the monad, buried alive and condemned to a prison-cell without egress. (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 15)

By contrast, a fragmented “self” cannot “express” itself. The repercussions of this state are many; it means the end of several things:

. . . the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and personal, the end of the distinctive brushstroke As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 15)

According to Jameson, “feeling” in modernism, is replaced by “intensities” which are “free-floating and impersonal” in postmodernism (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 16). Jameson uses the schizophrenic as a model in the postmodern scene, as it gives all things equal weight and does not distinguish past from present:

. . . schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the “I” and the “me” over time. (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 119)

And this lack of awareness of self, of a core, leads Jameson to question the efficacy of a postmodern conception of self:

The schizophrenic . . . is not only “no one” in the sense of having no personal identity; he or she also does nothing, since to have a project means to be able to commit oneself to a certain continuity over time. (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 120)

As configured in this scenario, the schizophrenic, like the “self” in the postmodern condition, is without agency.

As Hutcheon points out on Jameson’s remarks on pastiche, many postmodern artists, unlike Jameson, see this aesthetic as offering a different kind of agency and expression:

While Jameson sees this loss of the modernist, unique, individual style as negative, as an imprisoning of the text in the past through pastiche, it has been seen by postmodernist *artists* as a liberating challenge to a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has ignored the role of history in art and thought. (“Beginning to Theorize” 17)

Throughout his work, Jameson’s tone suggests a nostalgia for the coherent self of modernism and a particular manner of artistic expression. Rather than an intrinsic lament over this loss within postmodernism, it is in Jameson’s own work that just such a lament is to be found. He criticizes pastiche as being “the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language . . . amputated of the satiric impulse . . . a statue with blind eyeballs . . .” (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 17). Again, he emphasizes the absence of the self with imagery of the disappearing or fragmented body. In his work, as in the work of Jürgen Habermas², the project of modernity still has potential because of the agency which it can afford him as a Marxist and as a self-constituted individual.

Jameson’s article links social conditions to the postmodern condition. For Jameson, postmodernism is seen as the “logic of late capitalism.” Capitalism is responsible for the waning of the individual:

New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and by universal standardization; the growth of the great networks of superhighways and the arrival of automobile culture . . . I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system. (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 124-25)

² See Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity--An Incomplete Project” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

By linking postmodernism to capitalism, Jameson connects commodification to the loss of self. Subversive power is lost when the idea of the individual is put into question. But the kind of self that Jameson laments is of limited use to feminists who want to avoid a dynamic of domination and subordination. As critics such as Jacqueline Rose have pointed out, Jameson is attached to a concept of the self, or the loss of a self, which is fundamentally masculine. Jameson, in a brief reference to Marilyn Monroe as one of the 1960s Warhol figures, exerts his privilege to “know” a woman, says Rose (240). Rose points out his reference to Marilyn Monroe: Jameson refers to her as “Marilyn herself”, “offered here with all that familiarity that makes the woman so available for intimacy, so utterly *knowable*, one might say” (240). Rose brings a much-needed gender critique to postmodernism. In fact, she suggests that faced with Jameson’s psychic overlay of postmodernism,

. . . feminism might be forgiven for seeing the nostalgia for something felt as an earlier, and potentially reintegrated, form of self-alienation as a regret at the passing of a fantasy of the male self. (243)

Rose suggests that naming, as Lyotard conceives as a basic narrative of the subject, is “always a sexually differentiated naming” (244). Although Jameson laments the evacuation of a personal style and a unique subjectivity, he is still speaking for a concept of the individual which implies a universal, mastering self which requires an *other* to maintain its status.

Jameson’s work is still reliant on a particular paradigm, where difference is configured in binarist terms, where one term is privileged over the other. Early in the article “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Jameson states his method of determining difference:

. . . it was only in the light of some conception of a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm that genuine difference could be measured and assessed If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back

into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable. (13)

Difference in Jameson's terms always needs to be established with respect to a hegemonic norm. This opposition is problematic because it still establishes a hierarchical understanding. It contains difference and usurps it of its radical potential. These are the terms whereby the *other* must be articulated. In this way of operating, substantial, disruptive difference is not possible. Jameson articulates one of the great fears of the effect of postmodernism. "Sheer heterogeneity" and "random difference" suggest relativism, that "anything goes." To consider the polyvocality of postmodernism in this way is to minimize the fundamental epistemological changes that postmodernism undertakes. Jameson's need to establish and categorize postmodernism is an impulse to control and contain it, to avoid the disruption of a centre of privilege.

Linda Hutcheon: compromised critique?

Working from a concept of postmodernism which originates in architecture, Linda Hutcheon emphasizes its compromised politics:

Postmodernism aims to be accessible through its overt and self-conscious parodic, historical, and reflexive forms and thus to be an effective force in our culture. Its complicitous critique, then, situates the postmodern squarely within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism--two of the major dominants of much of the western world. (*The Politics* 13)

Hutcheon points out the patriarchal underpinnings of both these movements and postmodernism's implied collusion with them. Throughout her work, she emphasizes that "the postmodern involves a paradoxical installing as well as subverting of conventions--including conventions of the subject" (*The Politics* 14). Because of the concomitant "installing" in Cindy Sherman's self-portraits based

on Hollywood film stills, for example, Hutcheon argues that these portraits, as examples of postmodern art, are “hardly innocent or uncompromised” (*The Politics* 14). Hutcheon laments the lack of a pure postmodern critical capacity. She views politics as necessarily compromised or limited by postmodernism’s investment in the culture, or style, or ideology it is undermining.

This difference does not preclude the engagement of feminism with postmodernism.

Hutcheon acknowledges that the decentred subject can be of use to feminists, but only to a limited extent:

The centre no longer completely holds; from the decentred perspective, the “marginal” and the ex-centric (be it race, gender or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (i.e. male, white, Western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way, as I have argued, to that of differences: to the assertion not of centralized sameness but of decentralized communities--another postmodernist paradox. (“Beginning to Theorize” 17-18)

Hutcheon notes that there is a productive two-way involvement of feminism and postmodernism: feminism urges a reconsideration of gender in postmodernism; postmodernism affords strategies of representation such as parody which can disrupt patriarchal discourses (*The Politics* 167). However, she insists, “. . . there is still no way in which the feminist and the postmodern--as cultural enterprises--can be conflated” (*The Politics* 167). For Hutcheon, postmodernism is “politically ambivalent” and is not compatible with feminism (*The Politics* 168).

I do not propose conflating postmodernism and feminism, but I do propose reworking them. Referring to Chris Weedon, Linda Hutcheon suggests that feminism is a politics and postmodernism is not (*The Politics* 168). Feminism, as a politics, however, can still benefit from

the different philosophical imaginings of postmodernism, such as postmodernism's relationship to difference. Some postmodern feminists see this as a positive state:

For postmodernists, difference--the condition of being excluded, shunned, disadvantaged, neglected, rejected, dislocated, marginalized, unwanted--is a *positive* state of affairs that permits "outsiders" (in this case, women) to criticize the norms, values, and practices that the dominant culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone. Thus difference, or Otherness, is much more than merely an oppressed, inferior condition; rather it is a way of being, thinking, and speaking that allows for openness, plurality, and diversity. (Tong and Tuana 431)

This *otherness* as a state of being will be addressed as one of the productive ways in which a postmodern feminist alliance can work. This quote suggests that as a "positive" state, difference can easily be reworked into a new utopia. But this is to minimize the epistemological changes in postmodernism, which Hutcheon herself suggests. Rather than an either/or scenario, postmodernism suggests that several truths are possible although they are always problematized in their "truth-telling" power.

The paradoxes and "complicity" which Hutcheon points out in postmodernism can be configured differently, as places in which containment, mastery and easy categorization are not possible. These kinds of contradictions permeate postmodernism. Hutcheon notes, for example, Lyotard's and Foucault's "masterful denials of mastery" and "cohesive attacks on cohesion" ("Beginning" 25). Is there a new centre being established, for a decentred postmodernism? For Hutcheon and for her own poetics of postmodernism, the postmodern condition always reinscribes at the same time as it undermines, never completely disentangling itself from the limits of the discourse which it is critiquing. For these reasons, its politics are limited. However, it is this fundamental paradox in postmodernism that needs to be rethought. The political position which Hutcheon envisions is an unimplicated, objective stance. The transcendence that is implied in such

a vision of politics and the subject is antithetical to postmodernism. This kind of mastery and separation of subject and object is profoundly questioned by postmodernism. Eschewing mastery can itself be a very powerful political project.

The “As If” Mode of Story Telling

Brian McHale recognizes the dilemma of writing about postmodernism. In his review of Hutcheon’s and Jameson’s books, he articulates what he calls postmodernism’s Prime Directive: “Do not totalize; do not commit a master narrative” (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 17); he ends his article advocating the “spirit of pluralism” which Jameson cautions against:

I would like to believe that, if we can learn to entertain master narratives not as they are intended to be entertained but in the key of as-if, and if we begin telling our own stories in the same as-if key, then the very nature of the discursive struggle will be altered before too long, and for the better. (32)

This mode of story-telling simultaneously asserts and questions its own truth-telling ability. What McHale seems to hit upon is something similar to Lyotard’s notion of the “petit récit” (60) in *The Postmodern Condition*. There are temporary, contingent “truths.” If the meaning-making of postmodernism is not based on a binarist model of yes/no, in which there is only one answer, then there are many truths, and for feminism, “. . . none of which is privileged along gendered lines” (Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge* 9). Within this “many truths” scenario, discourse and the interplay of power and ideology within discourse become important factors in determining the measure and effect of a given truth and identity.

The Influence of Foucault

Foucault's discourse analysis emphasizes how discourse and power are intricately linked. For Foucault, the subject, although constituted, is not powerless. Resistance, like power, exists within relations, within nodes. It is diffuse; it is everywhere:

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can run different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy. (*The History of Sexuality* 101-102).

What is frustrating about this description of power and resistance is its lack of specificity. Taking up Foucault's suggestion that power and resistance are everywhere, Nancy Hartsock says, "The whole thing comes to look very homogeneous. Power is everywhere, and so ultimately nowhere" (170). Hartsock suggests that more specific ways of situating ourselves as subjects are necessary (168).

In addition, as feminists have pointed out, Foucault fails to draw attention to the ways the subject is gendered, as he draws no correlation between power and the patriarchy (Diamond and Quinby xvi). Furthermore, Hartsock suggests that Foucault does not recognize his own power as colonizer, nor the specific ways in which power is used:

Foucault's world is a world in which things move, rather than people, a world in which subjects become obliterated or, rather, recreated as passive objects, a world in which passivity or refusal represent the only possible choices. (167)

Although these gaps in Foucault's theories are significant, his ideas are still useful for feminists.

With respect to the question of the project of Enlightenment, for example, Foucault insists on

rethinking the terms of the question. He cautions against succumbing to the “blackmail” of the

Enlightenment:

. . . that does not mean that one has to be “for” or “against” the Enlightenment. It means precisely that one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (this is considered a positive term by some and used by others, on the contrary, as a reproach); or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality (which may be seen once again as good or bad). . . . We must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment. (“What is Enlightenment?” 43)

Foucault argues that “we have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers” (“What is Enlightenment?” 45). Foucault advocates a criticism which is a “historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying” (“What is Enlightenment?” 46). He ends his critique rather ambiguously:

I do not know whether it must be said today that the critical task still entails faith in Enlightenment; I continue to think that this task requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty. (“What is Enlightenment?” 50)

Foucault’s line is a tenuous one, but it is one which others share. Susan Hekman, for example, in her theorizing of a postmodern feminism, cautions also against rejecting completely the concept of agency (*Gender and Knowledge* 189). By so doing the binary is back in place; rejection affirms that which is being rejected. In order to think differently, one cannot simply think oppositionally.

In “*Theatrum Philosophicum*,” Foucault argues that difference, representation, and the subject are all intimately linked. Foucault zeroes in on the constrictions which characterize the consideration of difference, mired as it is in a Hegelian dialectical concept:

The dialectical sovereignty of similarity consists in permitting differences to exist, but always under the rule of the negative, as an instance of non-being. They may appear as the successful subversion of the Other, but contradiction secretly assists in the salvation of identities. (185)

His solution, finally, is utopic:

The freeing of difference requires thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; thought that accepts divergence; affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction; thought of the multiple-of the nomadic and dispersed multiplicity that is not limited or confined by the constraints of similarity; thought that does not conform to a pedagogical model (the fakery of prepared answers), but that attacks insoluble problems-that is, a thought that addresses a multiplicity of exceptional points, which are displaced as we distinguish their conditions and which insist and subsist in the play of repetitions. (185)

The solution is to avoid categorization which relies on similarity and which suppresses difference:

“Difference can only be liberated through the invention of an acategorical thought” (“Theatrum Philosophicum”186). A kind of massive upheaval, such as Foucault is suggesting here with difference, is what is necessary for postmodernism to incorporate gender(s), for considerations of the self to accommodate the *other*, for feminism to effect change.

In Foucault’s discursive formations, the subject of postmodernism, then, is not utterly fragmented, dispersed, and without agency. Rather these terms are themselves within a frame of mind of either/or. What Foucault suggests is that power is implicit within discourse, a kind of agonistics of agency. This can be useful to a feminist project when this agonistics is made more specific. The project of postmodernism, as negotiated by Foucault, can be of use to feminism because the dynamic of mastery is configured differently. In this next section, I consider feminists who use Foucaultian theory in theorizing identity.

“A View from Elsewhere:” Eccentric Subjects

Teresa de Lauretis takes her cue from Foucault’s theory of sexuality as a “technology of sex” in order to theorize gender as the product of technologies, discourses, and critical practices (*Technologies of Gender* ix). She theorizes a space which is both ideologically embedded, representationally contingent and at the same time radically speaks its *otherness*. In “The Technology of Gender,” she offers the suggestion of “a view from elsewhere” (25) and describes the double bind of feminism: “the tension of a twofold pull in contrary directions - the critical negativity of its theory, and the affirmative positivity of its politics” (26). In “Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness,” Teresa de Lauretis addresses Wittig’s “lesbian” and situates it within a model that she calls an “eccentric subject” (143). Although she does not address Wittig’s problematic investment in the project of Enlightenment,³ she does provide many invaluable insights into the struggles of speaking both inside and outside a discourse. De Lauretis details the historical male privilege and heterosexual imperative which always already positions woman as *other*, as less than, as submissive to man. Her alternative is provocative:

I propose that a point of view, or an eccentric discursive position outside the male (hetero)sexual monopoly of power/knowledge--which is to say, a point of view excessive to, or not contained by, the sociocultural institution of heterosexuality--is necessary to feminism at this point in history, that such a position exists in feminist consciousness as personal-political practice and can be found in certain feminist critical texts. (127)

De Lauretis’s argument is powerful. She acknowledges the heterosexual imperative of mainstream society, and sees within it an engrained dynamic of domination and subordination. De Lauretis’

³ See “Homo Sum” by Monique Wittig.

argument is that the term “lesbian” exceeds the patriarchal definition of women; it is not contained by heterosexuality:

The struggle against ideological apparatuses and socioeconomic institutions of women’s oppression consists in refusing the terms of the heterosexual contract, not only in one’s practice of living but also in one’s practice of knowing. It consists, as well, in concurrently conceiving of the social subject in terms that exceed, are other than, autonomous from, the categories of gender. The concept “lesbian” is one such term. (143)

De Lauretis goes on to give other terms which meet her definition of an “excessive critical position” (145): “mestiza, inappropriate/d other” (145).⁴ There are many valuable suggestions in de Lauretis’ article. She is advocating a conceptualizing of identity which contradictorily maintains like and unlike qualities with others (144-45). Here there is the possibility for solidarity at the same time as there is difference. It is important that several differences be accommodated. It is also important, however, to avoid suggesting a theoretical position as a “lesbian” in the manner in which deconstructionists such as Derrida propose speaking as a woman.⁵

⁴ “Mestiza” is taken from Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlines/“La Frontera”* (de Lauretis 138). “Inappropriate/d other” is a term developed by Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Introduction,” *Discourse* 6 (1986-87) (de Lauretis 144-45).

⁵ See Derrida “Becoming Woman” for this use of woman as a metaphor for writing. Somer Brodrigg in *Nothing Mat(t)ers* argues against postmodernism and poststructuralism for their patriarchal legacy and continued practice:

Lévi-Strauss tried to convince women we are spoken, exchanged like words; Lacan tried to teach women we can’t speak, because the phallus is the original signifier; and then Derrida says that it just doesn’t matter, it’s just talk. Women are still used as the raw material for poststructuralist analyses, exchanged in their words like tokens or fetishes. (81)

Brodrigg’s attack, however, also posits her speaking position as beyond implication and does not allow for a hybridized position.

In the introduction to *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, De Lauretis proposes a concept of a feminist subject which is nuanced and multiple, neither singular and contained as in humanism, nor dispersed and irretrievable as in posthumanism:

What is emerging in feminist writings is, instead, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heterononmous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy (8)

This epistemological shift, which de Lauretis attributes to feminism, is characterized by the consciousness of oppression that defines this particular subject, and “engenders the subject as political” (10). Judith Butler also insists upon the politics of such a subject, but she is careful to place any self-consciousness about a subject within a discursive paradigm.

“Constitutive Outside:” Judith Butler

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler carefully considers the determinations of the place and play of discourse in the construction of the subject. Butler proposes that changes in the subject can come about only through the reiterative practices of discourse that form that subject in the first place.

Indeed, I can only say “I” to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilized my place in speech; paradoxically, the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject. Further, the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation. The “I” is thus a citation of the place of the “I” in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to

the life that animates it: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak. (*Bodies that Matter* 225-26)

Here Butler indicates both the ways in which the subject is constituted through discourse and the fundamentally unstable components of this formation. Butler here offers the possibility of change in the subject, without endowing the subject with a transcendental, mastering quality.

Butler's discussion of the discursive limits of "sex" necessarily involves a rethinking of the formation of the subject. Butler addresses the "materialization" of the body which "takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices" (1). Her idea of gender is one which comes to be through performativity, "as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2). Butler painstakingly delineates her ideas on discursive construction. It is important not to endow discourse with a "godlike agency which not only causes but composes everything which is its object" (6). It is necessary to think about the determination of gender as an ambiguous process, neither speaking a subject which is already constituted, nor bringing it completely into being through discourse:

Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves. (7)

This way of thinking about discourse and agency is useful for feminists and also compatible with the project I am proposing. Here Butler does not think in terms of an either/or: "language and materiality are not opposed, for language both is and refers to that which is material, and what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified" (68).

For Butler the activation of the subject within discourse becomes the means through which agency is possible:

The “activity” of this gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a willful appropriation, and it is certainly *not* a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition. (7)

Butler addresses the ways in which discourse “interpellates” the individual. The repetition of this interpellation constitutes the individual; it also provides the means for its resistance. The construction of gender happens through “*exclusionary means*” (8):

. . . the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation. Hence, it is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less “human,” the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the “human” as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation. (8)

This concept of the “constitutive outside” will be of particular use in my consideration of identity in terms of postmodernism and feminism, for the same kind of process occurs in the “I” who comes to speak. For Butler, it is the process of reiteration which is constituting. This reiterative process also opens up avenues of resistance:

As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. (10)

My project is in sympathy with Butler’s, as it applies to a model of identity formation. Butler’s emphasis, however, is on performativity, reiteration and citationality. It is through these means that the subject comes to agency:

“Agency” would then be the double-movement of being constituted in and by a signifier, where “to be constituted” means “to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime” the signifier itself. Enabled by the very signifier that depends for its

continuation on the future of that citational chain, agency is the hiatus in iterability, the compulsion to install an identity through repetition, which requires the very contingency, the undetermined interval, that identity insistently seeks to foreclose. (220)

This idea of repeating differently is the political agency within Butler's discussion. The constitutive outside is an ongoing part of this iterability because it too is in a constant process of being differently configured. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler emphasizes the political potential of such a theory:

If there is a "normative" dimension to this work, it consists precisely in assisting a radical resignification of the symbolic domain, deviating the citational chain toward a more possible future to expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world. (20)

My project dovetails with Butler's in its consideration of the discursively constructed subject and in its project of advocating change. Most specifically, this dissertation addresses how this application of a strain of postmodernism, inflected by feminism, illustrates the tension of mastery and non-mastery in identity formation.

Mastery and Non-Mastery in Identity Formation

Butler is careful to avoid a theorizing of a "godlike" discourse; instead she discusses the ways in which a reiterative and citational discursive process produces gender. Although this process has a constituting effect, Butler suggests that "gaps and fissures are opened up . . . as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" (10). Butler describes a fluid dynamic of identity formation which still accounts for excessivity and change. Homi Bhabha uses similar terms to discuss identity as a process, located as a "*dialectical* hinge between the birth and death of the subject:"(4)

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, “opening out,” remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference--be it class, gender or race. Such assignments of social differences--where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between*--find their agency in a form of the “future” where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present. (219)

This consistent undoing of binary terms of the subject is what is necessary in “how newness enters the world,” as Bhabha puts it (9). Here a different kind of agency is to be found: in the remaking of identity in which mastery is critiqued. Through this process, different ways of interacting become possible, which are not hierarchically bound.

In my analysis of the work of Thompson, Hollingsworth and Gruben, identity is contingent on relations of power; mastery is achieved by characters in these plays and films through a domination of an *other*. This mastery, however, is ephemeral, because identity is predicated on fluctuating relations of power. I emphasize the ways in which particular valences of power, dependent on cultural and societal support, determine the validity of truths. Singular truth and a coherent, masterful identity are refused. The instability of identity and the critique of mastery are achieved through the serialization of identity. In addition, mastery is critiqued by images of the body which rebel against the norm. Here Butler’s “constitutive outside” is applicable, as the limits of the representable body are challenged. Rather than being an exotic, unknown territory, the “constitutive outside” is always discursively contingent. The discursive construction and contingency of identity is also foregrounded by interrupted and destabilized narrative techniques: a literal demonstration of the “gaps and fissures” in the story-telling of identity. Again here mastery or dominance, be it in identity or in an assertion of a singular truth, is critiqued.

Mastery and Non-Mastery in Spectatorship

Because these plays and films demonstrate characters who experience identity as unstable, in narratives which are also interrupted and interrogated, the effect for the spectator is a destabilized subject position. This kind of spectatorship is important to a postmodern feminist agenda. There is no one point of view or story line which is prioritized. Instead, the spectator becomes more actively engaged in choosing and developing meaning. Similar to the process of identity formation, in which subjects are constituted and attain agency according to shifting valences of power, identification is offered to the spectator, momentarily engaged, and then undermined. The dynamic of mastery in the identificatory process of the spectator is also tied to relations of power. By engaging and thwarting this dynamic through disrupted identification and in interrupted narrative structures, these plays and films critique this model of power and point to the discourses and social structures which constitute identity. In this way, the social production of identity is emphasized and a consideration of self is shifted to a consideration of community. As my analysis develops, the engagement with the spectator will be elaborated in the context of the postmodern feminism which I am proposing.

The Choice and Arrangement of Texts

When Jill Dolan discusses postmodern performances, she cites ones which readily cross boundaries of theory and practice, of high and low culture, and display fragmented, multivalent characters.⁶ The plays and films which I consider in this dissertation are not universally agreed

⁶ Dolan discusses, for example, transsexual Kate Bornstein as she performs her experiences of gender identity ("In Defense of the Discourse 67).

upon as properly postmodern. The plays of Judith Thompson and Margaret Hollingsworth, in particular, do not refuse the “referent” but almost always employ some kind of realist aesthetic or narrative engagement while critiquing it. These texts use strategies of realism to present provisional visions of identity. Patricia Gruben uses more radical anti-realist techniques to foreground the construction of perspective and story. Her films problematize identity in archetypes, in fictional representations, and in personal stories, especially when she interrogates her own identity as a filmmaker. The works which I have chosen are arranged on a continuum of deployment of the strategies of realism, from the most realist to the least, from the least obviously feminist to the most, with the plays preceding the films.

In addition, I consider the reception of the work of Thompson, Hollingsworth and Gruben. This is important to my project because the postmodern feminism theorizing which I am suggesting is necessarily committed to a community and to a change within society. I offer these comments on reviews and critical reception as a means of understanding, to a certain extent, the effect that these artists have had on audiences and critics. My address of critical reception is not to totalize and account for all responses; it does suggest, however, a simultaneous reading of community at the same time as it offers a theoretical reading of texts.

As the examination of the **subject/identity** strategies in the works of all three artists will demonstrate, there are different emphases and concerns in their work. Judith Thompson’s work uses visceral and provocative images of bodies which are threatened. In **Chapter Two**, I emphasize the dynamic of subject/identity with a particular focus on its inscription on the body in the work of Judith Thompson. Although there is also attention to the body in Margaret Hollingsworth’s plays, her work is remarkable for its foregrounding and destabilizing of narrative

structure. In **Chapter Three**, I emphasize the subject/identity dynamic in narrative. Narrativity becomes important because it is also one of the ways in which identity comes into being: the dots are connected as the subjects are linked into a story of becoming. I have chosen to consider the work of two playwrights who have been categorized very differently, almost oppositionally, and yet I show how this pattern of subject/identity is relevant for both their works. Patricia Gruben's work is itself wide-ranging and technically experimental; it is concerned with a reworking of both body and narrative. In **Chapter Four**, I discuss Gruben's problematization of the articulation of identity; Gruben eventually takes herself as an object of inquiry. I will discuss the results of these analyses in **Chapter Five**, and return to other theoretical issues which are raised through the consideration of these plays and films in light of my reading of them as postmodern feminist configurations of identity.

CHAPTER TWO

“Identity Panic:” The Plays of Judith Thompson

I’m in the holding your breath part right now, so I’m not sure what’s on the other end, but I feel like I’m so big I’d barely fit into Kirk Community Centre (Pony in *White Biting Dog* 106)

In my discussion of the plays of Judith Thompson, I will demonstrate how identity is destabilized through the serialization of the subject, through disruptive images of the body, and through destabilized and interrupted narrative. The emphasis in this chapter will be on the representation of the body. First, a consideration of the reception of Thompson’s plays will contextualize my reading. The varied reactions to Thompson’s plays suggest a viewing process which is fundamentally unnerving.

Reception

The plays of Judith Thompson are hard to watch, as characters are plunged into horrifying circumstances and grapple with paradoxical renewals. The “identity panic” which ensues on watching Thompson’s plays is hailed by some and reviled by others. The status of Judith Thompson as a playwright within the Canadian context is open to debate. Some critics, like Robert Nunn, declare her “the greatest playwright this country has seen, now or ever” (“Spatial Metaphor” 3). Nunn admits this opinion “by no means represents critical consensus” (3). Newspaper articles referring to early productions of *The Crackwalker* gleefully report the number of walkouts.⁷ One article reports that a disgruntled theatre patron leaving *The Crackwalker*

⁷ See “*Crackwalker* star thrilled by walkouts” for actor Hardee T. Lineham’s perspective on the Toronto Workshop production of *The Crackwalker* in 1982 in which many patrons walked out. Ray Conlogue, in an article anticipating the production of *White Biting Dog*, described how as many as 40 people a night walked out at the mainstage production of *The Crackwalker* at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal. (“Stage Set for Dose” n.p.)

verbally attacked an usher: “I hope all the characters die. I hope the author dies. And I hope *you* die!” (Kaplan, “*The Crackwalker*” n.p.). Clearly Thompson’s plays provoke extreme reactions.

Judith Thompson herself attracts a certain amount of notoriety as a playwright.

Newspaper reviews, particularly early in her career, were obsessed with who Judith Thompson was. The headline in *The Globe and Mail* on the occasion of *The Crackwalker*’s nomination for a Dora Mavor Moore award proclaimed: “Thompson different from her characters” (Steed n.p.). In interviews, Thompson reports similar responses from people:

I’ll be at weddings or functions and the person sitting next to me will think I must be racy or radical and talk to me in a vulgar way because of my plays

A lot of people expect green hair. (“Judith Thompson Interview” 91)

If some audience members expect her to act like one her characters, some critics endow her with a similar essentialism. In his introduction to *The Other Side of the Dark*, Urjo Kareda attributes an uncanny artistic ability to Judith Thompson:

Judith Thompson hears the poetry of the inarticulate and the semi-literate, embodying the colloquialisms, the brand names, the fractured but expressive syntax, with the urgency of their speakers. She frees her words to carry their wild, unruly, seeking spirits. (9)

Not only does the playwright “hear” the words of the inarticulate, she also translates their spirits into words. Her plays, Kareda implies, remind us of our physicality, our ineluctable humanity:

Piss, shit, sweat, blood, saliva, vomit, tears, mucous, semen, amniotic fluid--these are as central and as inescapable a part of our beings as our heart, our mind, our soul. (10)

Judith Thompson may not have green hair, but she seems to have a special ability to hear, translate, and evoke an essential being. This line of critical inquiry assumes an unchanging reality, inscribing a coherent, unified, essentialist self. It assumes an inarticulacy and primitiveness in the

other: Thompson's plays are a dangerous walk on the wild side, leading irrevocably back to the dark side of ourselves.

Indeed, Judith Thompson herself might agree with such articulations of the self, in which truths are universal and unchanging. In interviews she expresses her belief in a collective unconscious: "I do believe in a collective unconscious. I believe that we can all relate to everything. Somewhere. Somehow" ("Judith Thompson Interview" 89). In an interview with Cynthia Zimmerman, Thompson describes her belief in synchronicity and her disagreement with Marxist views that "everything is contextual" ("A Conversation" 86). In the same interview, Thompson speaks of her own playwriting process in similar terms:

. . . I know that the way my work works is from a kind of chaos, a helpless chaos. And that I have to feel passive, like a conduit. I don't want to do too much directing because of that. As soon as I start to feel queenly, I know something will go away. (193)

She wants her audience to experience a painful recognition:

My real hope is to hold a mirror up to all of us, because I think that awakening, slipping out of our comas, is what it's all about. Otherwise, we do not live--it's the unexamined life. The coma lifting, then, becomes political. Art is political, should be political, but only in this really essential way. (193)

"Truth" is a word which recurs in interviews with Judith Thompson: "You've just got to tell the truth and leave it at that. The horrible Truth," ("Judith Thompson Interview" 102) and later, "Truth is simply what *is*. It happens to you through not doing anything" (103). Her perception of identity is similarly anchored in essentialist terms: "I'm fascinated by identity, and I guess my work discusses the stripping way [sic] of the superficial masks to reveal the genuine self" (Thompson in Cadoret n.p.).

Reports of audience reaction and critical commentary account for the disruption brought about by Judith Thompson's work. They do this by seeking to find the real self within or behind the plays. Kareda and other reviewers see Thompson's work within a context of a social reality in which people are universally the same: she speaks for the disenfranchised or explores the maternal urge in real people, real selves. Critical commentary on Thompson's work often stresses her Freudian predilections. Robert Nunn develops psychological readings of Thompson's plays, emphasizing the conscious/unconscious divide, the Oedipal patterns and the "uncanny."⁸ Nunn ends his article on Thompson's latest play *Sled* with a reflection on his reading of Thompson:

It wouldn't do of course to limit Judith Thompson's plays to the kind of reading I have sketched out here; but you could do worse than to read her plays as "slices from the banquet of Freud." The return of the repressed haunts her plays, in both modes outlined by Freud: within the individual psyche, the Stranger who is not a stranger breaks through the defences mounted by repression; and, within the collective psyche of the urban society that is her subject, the forgotten beliefs of the past break through the defences of rationalism. ("Strangers" 32)

Nunn's analyses most often situate Thompson's work within a Freudian context, displaying the interplay of the conscious and the unconscious, the ego and the id. I have similar concerns to Nunn's, in signalling the ways in which Thompson's plays "break through the defences of rationalism," yet my approach is to situate her work within a context of postmodernism and feminism. Although I can recognize and read her works in an essentialist paradigm, at the same time I recognize that reactions to her work both in performance and as written text are anything but contained, confirmed, or settled. This provocation has to do with the disturbing visions of

⁸ See Nunn, "Spatial Metaphor in the Plays of Judith Thompson" and "Strangers to Ourselves: Judith Thompson's *Sled*."

identity which permeate her work and the corresponding uncomfortable relationship which is established between text and audience or reader.

It should be noted that I am considering Thompson's work within a framework of a particular kind of feminism. When asked in an interview if she thinks of her work as feminist, Thompson replies:

No. I suppose you could *interpret* it that way. But I never think, oh I mustn't portray that woman as a weak woman, although some feminists believe that you should only have strong women. ("Revisions of Probability" 19)

This interview, as Tomc states at the outset, was to discuss what it was like to be a woman writing for the theatre (18). The questions spiral in and out of a discussion of Thompson's experience in the theatre and the portrayal of her female characters, and Thompson ends by saying, "We haven't really been very feminist" (23). Of Dee in *I am Yours*, Thompson says, "I wanted to do a study of an amoral woman" ("Revisions of Probability" 19). Elsewhere she describes creating a character who "goes to the extreme of masochism" ("Judith Thompson Interview" 102):

And I'm certain that a lot of feminists would take issue with that and say that you are not to portray a masochistic female, because that's perpetuating a notion that's incorrect. To that I would say, no, it's examining an issue that's *true*, and until you examine what *is*, what exists, you can't do anything about it. ("Judith Thompson Interview" 102)

Thompson takes situations to the extreme of what is. As Margaret Hollingsworth says about Thompson's work, "All our worst fears are in her plays, not understated, but overstated--shouted, repeated, hammered home, almost to the point of absurdity" ("Collaborators" 17).

Indeed, Thompson presents territory which can be recuperated by the patriarchy. In an

article in *Language in her Eye*, where contributors are asked to address writing and gender,

Thompson again tries to address the feminism of her characters:

In preparation for this essay, I tried to look at my characters from a feminist perspective. To be honest, I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for, but what I saw is that none of my characters defines herself as a feminist, or as someone opposed to feminism. Most of them have been successfully brainwashed by the patriarchal society in which they live, and the others are in a fight to the death with themselves because of it. But there is one I have overlooked, I think, waiting patiently at the back of the crowd, her legs crossed at the ankle, watching me. She is waiting for me to see her. I will look at her now. ("One Twelfth" 264)

The rest of the piece goes on to describe this one overlooked, the "unfeminist feminist" (264), the one who is caught within patriarchal prescriptions at the same time as she tries to fight them:

She is uncomfortable with beautiful women, and at times has experienced monstrous jealousy towards them, hating them for their gifts, and wishing them ill fortune. She feels very happy, however, with fat or "ugly" women, because she is not threatened by them. Inwardly, she feels superior to the "ugly" women, and inferior to the beautiful. She hates herself for this. (264)

Similarly, Thompson's characters are conflictual in their attitudes and conflicted within themselves. Thompson begins and ends the piece with a reference to a dream she had in which she felt herself divided, like a worm, split over and over and regenerated in her plays. A question recurs which indicates not a whole self, but one which is always only partial: "Where are the eleven other Judiths?" (267)

Perhaps it is this unfeminist feminism which postmodernism can explain. Ric Knowles has noted the contradiction in Thompson:

Thompson does not present herself as a feminist, and in fact in her public statements she sounds very much like a traditional liberal humanist writing universal truths for posterity: "I want to write plays that last forever and transcend cultural context," she told the DuMaurier World Stage panel. Nevertheless, her plays revision dramatic structures and languages that feminist theorists have shown to be phallogocentric . . . as in much feminist drama (as pointed out by Helene

Keysaar in her book, *Feminist Theatre*) the inevitability of reversal becomes in Judith Thompson the potential for transformation (“The Achievement of Grace” 36)

Elsewhere, in an article entitled “The Dramaturgy of the Perverse,” Knowles develops an argument which formulates a definition of postmodernism as he sees it working in plays such as those of Judith Thompson. Knowles argues that Thompson, by perverting traditional Aristotelian and modernist structures such as recognition and reversal, presents characters who undergo not one reversal or recognition, but several. With reference to a scene from *Lion in the Streets*, Knowles describes the stories of the characters as “profound and very moving” (228), and yet, at the same time, he argues that “the identities of the characters seem to be contingent upon the changing stories they tell of themselves and one another” (228).

Jennifer Harvie also addresses the tension between the universalizing and deconstructing impulses in Thompson’s writing. She argues that it is possible to read Thompson’s work, particularly *Lion in the Streets*, both ways. In an article on *Lion in the Streets*, Harvie describes the “provisional fictions” of this work and their emancipatory potential:

The different oppressed subjectivities we identified in our unified realist reading need not be totally deconstructed and disallowed by this second reading, but may be contextualized as historically and culturally contingent fictions, not transcendental realities The “realities” which we read in our unified realist reading may thus be seen as necessary but only provisional. (“Constructing Fictions” 91)

Harvie draws attention to the “metarepresentational” imagery of the play and its implications for the subjectivity of the characters (90). She suggests that there can be a simultaneous installing and undermining of reality within *Lion in the Streets* and that these two readings are not incompatible; rather they are “necessary but only provisional” (“Constructing Fictions” 91).

It is with attention to this kind of sensibility and reading of texts that I will pursue my discussion of the plays of Judith Thompson. The tension that Knowles and Harvie identify (and which is also manifested in the mixed reaction and critical analysis of her plays) can be attributed to the tension there is between positions of mastery and non-mastery within her work: there is a lingering reluctance to relinquish what is stable and whole, combined with an impulse to shatter such notions of completeness in an articulation of an identity which is always contingent.

In this chapter, I focus on identity with particular attention to the representation of the body as a site of ambiguity. In my discussion of the plays, I will indicate the postmodern techniques which challenge the concept of the self: specifically in the violent images of the body, in characters whose articulation of identity is unstable, and in the self-reflexive nature of the plays themselves. The real impetus to change, compatible with a feminist agenda, is in the ways in which these plays question the viability of the self as a coherent, stable entity. Using the paradigm of subject/identity which I have established in Chapter One, I will read as postmodern feminist texts these selected plays of Judith Thompson: *The Crackwalker*, *Tornado*, and *I am Yours*, from the collection, *The Other Side of the Dark*, as well as two separately published plays, *White Biting Dog*, and *Lion in the Streets*.

The Crackwalker

In my discussion of this play, I will emphasize the different representations of identity that the characters of Sandy and Theresa offer. The oppression of Sandy and Theresa in *The Crackwalker* is painful to observe. Sandy is brutalized by her husband, Joe, who has possibly raped Theresa, Sandy's best friend. Where she is the whore to Joe, Theresa is the Madonna to

Alan, her own husband. Both positions are equally constricting. In addition, both Sandy and Theresa participate in their own oppression. As one reviewer says, "Theresa is far from being a feminist protagonist. Dim-witted and promiscuous, she is dependent on the state and on men for her survival" (Steed n.p.). In a review of *The Crackwalker*, however, Joanne McIntyre, who played Theresa, describes why she chose to do this script:

A couple of weeks before auditioning for *The Crackwalker*, I'd read for *Something Red* (a Vancouver play set in much the same stratum of small-time criminals and their suffering, masochistic girl friends, produced in the spring of 1980 at the Tarragon). It had the same gutter language as *Crackwalker*, and the characters even had the same kind of jobs--but no self-esteem, especially the women.

But when I read *Crackwalker*, I found the characters had self-respect. Theresa may be retarded, but she is the brightest slow person you will ever meet. She knows she's not a good mother--"I slow, Al, I slow"--but she knows what the problem is, and when she gets into scrapes, she gets out of them. (In Conlogue, "Crackwalker Brilliant Play" E1)

According to McIntyre, Theresa has an ability to overcome situations; she knows how to get out of scrapes. Although Sandy demonstrates indications of this ability as well, she does not embrace this instability as Theresa does. Sandy's adherence to a set of ordered and ordering principles situates her within a restrictive paradigm in which only serialized change is possible. There are moments of rupture, and cracks in her veneer, but these only suggest a fundamental instability that is manifested fully in Theresa. Theresa's mode of interacting is not based on the same kind of mastery. With Theresa there is no coherence or nostalgia for the past. She lives in a perpetual present. Theresa most often represents a different configuration of identity: identity as a site of ambiguity.

Sandy: Maintaining Order

One of the first scenes in *The Crackwalker* illustrates Sandy's mode of interaction and her attempts to assert agency by participating in a shifting dynamic of domination and subordination. When Sandy confronts Theresa with the rumour that Theresa had sex with Joe, Theresa tells her that Joe raped her. Sandy has already ensured that Joe won't be cheating on her again. Joe beat Sandy when she accused him of infidelity; she responded in kind. Sandy attacked Joe when he was sleeping and ripped his back with her high heels. The moment she asserts herself over Joe, and Joe's recognition of this, is emphasized by italics in the script:

SANDY. . . . You shoulda seen him, first I guess he thought he was dreamin, eh, so he just lies there makin these ugly noises burpin and that? And then he opens his eyes, and puts his hands up like a baby eh, and *then I seen him see the heel*. . . . (23)

The only way for Sandy to achieve agency is in a dynamic of domination and subordination, a dynamic which characterizes her relationship with Joe. Shortly after this scene, Joe returns and the power shifts when Sandy accuses him of raping Theresa. Sandy does not have enough evidence to sustain her accusation, and she retreats:

SANDY. I didn't mean it.
 JOE. It was a *joke*?
 SANDY. I was just--you said you liked her better.
 JOE. What?
 SANDY. You said you liked--pokin her better. (30)

The scene becomes increasingly intense and violent. Joe thrusts Sandy away from him; she rushes at him, trying to scream, but is stopped by a painful stomach seizure. Joe finds this arousing. Joe makes advances to her, but as the stage directions say, "*SANDY looks at him with hatred*" (31).

Joe is about to leave when Sandy calls him back:

SANDY. [*head down*] Joe.
 JOE. What can I do for ya?
 [SANDY *smiles*]
 Oh, ya *do* want it. Okay, why - why- don't ya take that blouse there off
 [*She removes her blouse*]
 Hm. And the skirt.
 [*She removes her skirt. She is left in a bra and pantyhose with a low crotch. He nods, looking her up and down*]
 How come ya like it like this? Eh? [*shakes his head*]
 I gotta be somewhere.
 [JOE *exits*. SANDY *remains onstage, not moving. Lights out quickly.*] (31)

In the development of this scene, the interactions build to a point of high dramatic tension so that Sandy's rejection is utter and devastating. Although her body rebels, with the stomach cramp, this arouses Joe. Sandy cannot even achieve agency by participating in a seduction of Joe.

Sandy is doomed to a cycle of repetition based on this pattern of domination and subordination. Her agency is limited to the situation in which she finds herself. The result is that she repeats a series of positions which essentially differ very little. Her reiteration of her subjectivity, in the terms of Judith Butler, is limited: she does not repeat differently. Joe leaves, comes back and then leaves again. Sandy swears that she will not take him back, but she does. Change is only external: when Joe is away, Sandy learns how to make a new drink, "a Dirty Mother," and a new way to apply eyeliner to make her eyes look bigger (59). At the end of the play, the only change they are going to make is one of geography. Sandy and Joe will move to Calgary to start again. In reviews of the play, one of Sandy's lines is quoted repeatedly⁹: "bein dead ain't no different from livin anyway. . . . It's just like movin to Brockville or Oshawa or somethin. It ain't that different" (45). This line epitomizes Sandy's philosophy and the extent to

⁹ See reviews by Richard W. Cadoret in *The City Dweller*, Mark Czarnecki in *Maclean's*, Doug Bale in *The London Free Press*.

which she makes any changes in her life. This serialization of positions as subject undermines coherence in the character of Sandy.

There are other moments when the coherence of Sandy is threatened. The discursive construction of identity is foregrounded in dialogue. Both Sandy and Theresa are continually “interpellated” by various discourses. One of the ways in which the unity of identity is interrogated in the plays of Judith Thompson is in the overt acknowledgement of discursive authorities. In *The Crackwalker*, discursive authorities, such as *The Reader’s Digest*, the “soshaworker”, and invisible others such as Bonnie Cain are invoked. Moments of an individual’s experience are affirmed and given greater significance by connections which can be made to a kind of ideal self in the movies, in literature, or in popular mythology. At one point, Sandy uses *Funny Girl* to describe how her relationship with Joe used to be: “I used to feel like we was in the fuckin movies,” she says and describes a scene from the movie with Barbara Streisand and Omar Sharif that she and Joe seemed to reenact (24). She looks to Alan for an affirmation of her sense of self: “Am I gettin ugly lookin?” (42). Through these consistently present reminders of the discursive production of identity, the coherence of an individual as a “self” is put into question. Agency as a subject is configured in a larger context of shifting relations of power, related to discourse.

A more substantial instability in Sandy’s identity is intimated at times. Sandy maintains order only superficially. She asks Theresa to stay overnight because she is scared to be alone. She hears a cat scream and wakes Theresa up. She goes into the other room and, as the stage directions indicate, “screams a primal scream” (53) for no apparent reason. She comes out to Theresa to say, “It was nothin” (53). Sandy’s instability of identity is only shown briefly like this,

or in the example of her severe stomach cramp, and then she quickly embraces order or reason to give her security. In an interview, Thompson describes Sandy's character:

Sandy believes that there's a right way to be and she's extremely Calvinist. She believes that the salt and pepper should be kept up in the second cupboard. She believes that when you butter toast, you butter it to the edges. She believes that you have a cup of tea at ten o'clock. You don't wear mismatching socks, you wear matching gloves, you have your buttons done up, you have your clothes cleaned, you have your supper at five.

In other words, the quotidian is what saves her from the abyss. ("Judith Thompson Interview" 95)

Sandy's obsession with the details and adherence to order is counterpointed by the disorder and chaos which characterizes Theresa. As this quote from Thompson illustrates, the threat of the outside is signified by the abyss.

Theresa: Negotiating the Abyss

The image of the abyss is similar to what Butler calls the "constitutive outside." The abyss is an image which recurs in Thompson's work and is most often a space of extreme ambiguity. She describes it variously as "death" ("Judith Thompson Interview" 95) and as a "nightmare" (In *Now* n.p.). The abyss is frightening and destabilizing:

The abyss is death. It's what you don't know You see an abyss when you're falling, in that dream where you're falling and falling and there's no bottom. ("Judith Thompson Interview" 95)

The abyss is a place where a different kind of repetition is possible. At the end of the play, when Alan kills Danny, his and Theresa's baby, Sandy puts the horror into perspective by taking care of business. She calls the police, arranges the funeral; she makes sure that justice is done. "I think it's better off dead," Sandy says (70). But her ordering and rationalizing are not able to account for

everything. When Sandy describes the funeral, she mentions the wreath of flowers around the baby's neck to disguise the mark of the strangle: "The flowers never hid it they just made ya look harder, ya know? They just made ya look harder" (71). It is the threat of the outside that keeps Sandy in check. What the makeup of Sandy suggests, the character of Theresa more completely embodies. The changes Theresa makes from one position to another are not reasoned away. Rather they occur quickly and without psychologizing. Theresa arrives at Sandy and Joe's, carrying her dead baby in a bag; she accuses Alan and he runs away. As they wait for the police to arrive, Sandy turns to console Theresa who is crying. She says that she's moving to Calgary with Joe and suggests that Theresa visit her. But Theresa has already switched allegiance to another context. She is working at Kresge's and cannot leave:

THERESA. [*tells story joyously with no trace of grief*] Down at Kresge's up with Ivy. Ha! She hardly funny she hardly get pissed off when I eatin icin she yellin. "Trese, if you eat one more chocolate icin I tellin Charlie I tellin on you, Ivy, snitchin butter tarts!" They're hardly good, though, them tarts. Ivy English ... Sorry I can't comin with ya out west, Sanny ... Ivy be piss off. (68)

Sandy is no longer Theresa's best friend; Ivy has replaced her. As the stage directions indicate, Theresa moves from grief to joy in moments. Seemingly with little thought, Theresa also moves from one sexual relationship to another. In her accusation of Alan she has already established a different discursive situation for herself:

THERESA. You goin up the river to Penetang, Al, you goin there tomorrow and you never coming out for what you done you not goin back with me I goin with Ron Harton he better than you he not stoppem breathin, he still livin up on Division up at Shuter's? I callin him up and I goin steady with him he better lookin you funny lookin I screwin him. (66)

Theresa acts and perceives her situations differently. Although she moves from one situation to the next, she does so immediately, without an insistence that things will change. This positioning is expedient and demonstrates its arbitrariness. By bringing to the fore the way in which Theresa is constructed as a subject and the way in which terms are interchangeable, Thompson presents an identity which is not a “reasonable” coherent self. Theresa’s changes are not explained away as Sandy’s are. She simply takes up a new position as it suits her.

It does not matter if things do not make sense; Theresa does not try to assert “truth.” Her hold on truth in the play is always precarious. She does not maliciously mislead; her truth is plural and dependent on context. She is a liminal character, one who negotiates between worlds of her own and other’s making. In the opening monologue of the play, she is ever aware of the ramifications of the “truth;” her story of when Mrs. Beddison threw her out is replete with contradictions. Danny and she are just friends, she says, “we’re just talkin, eh, we weren’t doing nothin” (19). Then as the story thickens, and Mrs. Beddison threatens to intrude, Theresa panics: “so I get scared, eh, so I tell Danny to get in the closet. We don’t got no clothes on, eh, so I put his jeans and that under the covers like I’m sleepin” (19). It is unclear whether or not she has been raped by Sandy’s husband, Joe. At first she tells Sandy that it is true:

 THERESA. He done it when I never wanted it it’s true.

 SANDY. It is, eh?

 THERESA. S’ttrue, Sanny. Don’t tell Joe, eh? (25)

But when she is confronted with a public situation, she is unable to counteract Joe’s “truth:”

 JOE. It’s true. I come in piss drunk I’m passed out on the floor and there she is down on all fours shovin her big white ass in my face. (29)

Neither a confession nor an accusation is forthcoming. Her truth is neither:

JOE. Tell em like it was Trese, and no crossin fingers.

THERESA. Go away.

SANDY. Therese is he tellin the truth?

ALAN. Theresa you never done that, did ya? Shown him your burn?

JOE. This is your last chance, burger, now tell the fuckin truth or I get serious.

SANDY. Don't lie to me Theresa. I can forgive a lot of things but not a lie.

ALAN. You can tell the truth, Theresa, I'll take care of ya.

SANDY. Eh, Trese?

[Pause]

THERESA. [*laughing*] Who farted? (29)

The representation of Theresa emphasizes the interchangeability of situations and of subjectivity.

In the postmodern world, the "truth" is contingent, and created by discursive practices. Theresa probably has been "sucking off the queers down by the Lido," but we never really find out for sure. This is the presentation of a different kind of identity and a challenge to the concept of a subject which is binarily bound in a subject/object dynamic. In the end no single designation or discursive authority works. Theresa is neither/both the "Madonna" Alan makes her out to be, nor/and the retard whore that Joe calls her. After Sandy's long monologue describing the funeral at the end of the play, Theresa appears briefly after sounds of a small struggle offstage. Her final words are haunting:

THERESA. Stupid old bassard don't go foolin with me you don't even know who I look like even. You don't even know who I lookin like. (71)

Whether Theresa still maintains her hold on Alan's designation, that she looked like the madonna, is uncertain. What is clear is that the pull of positioning within discourse is strong. Theresa, to a certain extent, needs to be recognized: who she's "lookin like." But as her struggle offstage reveals, this position is only temporary and replete with contradictions.

Other Images of Ambivalence

In addition to Theresa, the baby in *The Crackwalker* is an ambivalent figure. It imperfectly completes the picture Alan imagines: the madonna and child. But Alan cannot cope with a wife and a child who are not as they are supposed to be. Theresa cannot meet the needs of Danny who is not normal: he does not respond as a baby should. He is deaf, perhaps mentally disabled. He does not fit easily into the paradigms of the ideal family. The “not normal” does not belong. It takes up too much space. When Danny cries and cries, Alan finally silences him by strangling him. He is not able to cope with a baby who does not behave, with the world of the crackwalker, with a world where good and evil are not so easily distinguished.

When Thompson talks about her plays, as I have noted above, she often refers to her work in terms of psychoanalysis. Critics have duly pointed out the psychoanalytic interpretations that are possible of stage and script readings. Robert Nunn, for example, analyzes the spatial metaphors of *The Crackwalker*, *White Biting Dog*, and *I am Yours*, and demonstrates the constant emphasis on the precariousness of the conscious/unconscious divide. In the early productions of *The Crackwalker*, for example, the opening to a large sewer pipe was a dominant stage image:

It is a metaphor of the permeable barrier separating the world of the “conscious” from the world of the “unconscious,” waking from dreaming, sanity from psychosis. In social terms it is a metaphor for the permeable barrier between those who survive economically and those who do not. The image of a sewer as the access and passage to the “unconscious” is in keeping with the play’s dual stress on the fearfulness of what is just on the other side and on its familiarity--that is our stuff down there, always hidden under our feet. (“Spatial Metaphor” 10)

What these images emphasize above all is the precarious state of being between places. There is no stable, secure sense of self to rely on. Identity is in continual motion.

White Biting Dog

Whereas *The Crackwalker* eventually received great acclaim (after it returned from a successful engagement at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal), *White Biting Dog* received mostly negative reviews when it was first performed.¹⁰ Academic reaction is also mixed. Robert Nunn sums it up best: "I have seen it, read it countless times, am deeply impressed by it, and it slips through my fingers like quicksilver" ("Spatial Metaphor" 10).

Similar to *The Crackwalker*, this play presents extreme situations where the physical nature of the characters and their circumstances are emphasized. Interactions are dependent on a pattern of domination and subordination. This play concerns Cape's mission to reunite his parents, Glidden and Lomia, in order to save his father who is suffering from a debilitating disease incurred by the handling of sphagnum moss. Early in the play, Pony, a psychic, is summoned to help Cape. She goes into a trance and speaks in the voice of Lomia, Cape's mother:

PONY. Ooooooooooh that's lovely darling could you just do the inside of my arm, oh God that is delicious I just made a lovely thick fanny burp! (20)

Cape almost vomits (20). In a matter of minutes Lomia and her lover, Pascal, arrive destitute on the doorstep of Cape and Glidden's home. In the course of the play, Cape manipulates all. Pony falls in love with him and declares she will do anything for him. Acting for Cape, she is forced into actions which involve domination and conquering: she feels jealousy of Cape's attraction to Pascal, his mother's lover. She eventually turns on herself, "squishes" the old Pony and commits suicide in order to stop herself from acting in the way she has been. Lomia, Cape's mother, is a Jocasta figure. Robert Nunn goes so far as to say that the mother-son relationship is the only

¹⁰ See Lyle Slack, "Dog's Creator is undaunted by her play's poor reception." *The Spectator*. 9 Feb 1984.

relationship which matters in the play (“Spatial Metaphor”10). Cape forces Lomia to return to his father; he seduces her lover, Pascal. Both women are pawns of Cape. The agency which is afforded to Pony and Lomia in these positions is limited and involves a subjugation of the self or the *other*. Change comes when the borders which maintain such a self are put into crisis. In this section, I will consider the representation of Pony and Lomia as limited subjects. I will then consider the images of abjection, with reference to Julia Kristeva’s discussion in *Powers of Horror*. In this play the discourse of the rebellion of identity is written on the body.

Limited Subjects: Pony and Lomia

Although both women are pawns of Cape, they present vastly different female figures.

Pony is an innocent, connected in a naive way to a psychic world. Her credentials are somewhat dubious:

PONY. Like this isn’t a very good example, but up in Kirkland, whenever I wanted the traffic light to change, I’d just squeeze my bumcheeks together, eh, hard as I could, till I almost passed out but it worked, it worked every time. (18)

Both her language and her appearance suggest her “idiot savante” status. In the Tarragon 1993 production her costume and performance emphasized the character’s “geekiness”: she wore cat’s eye glasses and knee socks, for example, in contrast to the impeccably groomed Daniel McIvor who played Cape. Pony’s naivety as a character is realized when she is sexually dominated by Cape. She eventually internalizes this domination and hangs herself, not liking the “Pony” she has become.

At the other end of the spectrum is Lomia, Cape's mother. Her action is to seduce: her husband, her lover, her son. By all accounts, Jackie Burroughs' performance in the original production in 1984 was stunning:

Star billing, as much for her role as for her performance, must go to Jackie Burroughs as Lomia. This must be, and is in her performance, a strikingly sexual and self-dramatizing woman (Conlogue, "Funny, Exuberant Spirit" E10)

Lomia's overt sexuality empowers her to an extent, but also puts her into situations where she rejects or dominates, or is rejected or dominated. She and Cape play out roles of mother and son, switching domination and subordination. Cape grabs Lomia from his bedroom, where she is making love with Pascal, and drags her into the living room:

CAPE. You're coming with me whether you like it or not, young lady. (*places her in chair*) Now, in future, you come when I call! (51)

Moments later Lomia cajoles Cape:

LOMIA. Awww. What would you like to tell me, baby, that Miss Opal said your drawing of a horse was very very good? Well I couldn't care less, it looks like a blob to me!!

CAPE. I would like to tell you that father is dying. (*he has her in his control now*). (51)

Cape eventually dominates Lomia, seducing her lover, making her pretend to return to Glidden. But all plans fall through. They are both left at the end of the play, cowering together. The note on which the play ends is ominous. Mother and son seem to be undergoing some kind of transformation, but the result is uncertain. Says Cape, "Do you think it will make . . . any . . . difference?" (108).

The agency which Pony and Lomia achieve in this way is minimal. The subject is doomed to repetition, to ineffectual action which results in either hollow momentary triumph or

devastating defeat. Transformation in subjectivity is more evident in the replaying of identity which involves a more distinct destabilization. Robert Nunn identifies spatial images in productions of *White Biting Dog* which emphasize liminality, the tension between inside and outside. This is most often represented visually by the sidewalk: "The sidewalk is the place of the most dreadful pain, of loss and of the shattering of the self" (13). In the Tarragon production in 1984, as Nunn points out, the sidewalk was in the middle of the audience, connecting the fictional and real worlds (14). In addition to these spatial images, in *White Biting Dog* the liminality of the body is evoked. Rather than seeing this representation as reinforcing an Oedipal fantasy, I will discuss this play for the potential that such a "shattering of self" has for rebirth.

Liminal Spaces: The Subject

Kristeva's conception of the subject is a psychological space fraught with danger and peril, always threatening the clean and proper self. The introduction of this psychoanalytic concept here is in conjunction with a discursive consideration of its realization. This space is both loathed and necessary. My consideration of the subject is motivated by the potential for subversion which it offers. In this space, fluids commingle. Boundaries are blurred. A slippery, psychoanalytical notion, the subject is neither subject nor object. In this way, it is a useful way of conceiving of the articulation of an identity which confounds these distinctions. The subject is perhaps most easily defined by what it is not. Although the subject, like the object, is opposed to "I," it does not allow "I" to be more autonomous. It is outside of meaning:

If the object . . . through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, . . . what is *subject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is

radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.
(Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 1-2)

Abjection recalls the violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be (Kristeva, *Powers* 10). It recalls birth, the division from the mother, and also the advent into language and the accompanying repression of pre-Oedipal drives. The symbolic order imposes a singularity on identity. We can only “be” like someone else. The abject is that which we reject in order to assert this notion of identity:

Obviously, *I am only like* someone else: mimetic logic of the advent of the ego, objects, and signs. But when I *seek* (myself), *lose* (myself), or experience *jouissance*--then “I” is *heterogeneous*. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise. (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 10)

Abjection draws attention to the frailty of signification. It highlights the precarious nature of an articulation of identity. Associated with plurality and disorder, in *White Biting Dog*, the abject becomes a means of revolt, a perversion of the signifying structures which govern the worlds the characters inhabit. At these moments of confrontation between boundaries, the abject erupts, challenging form, language and notions of identity. Abjection is not so much a threat to health and cleanliness as it is a disruption of order, a disrespectful flaunting of the Law. It is manifested in food loathing, corporeal waste, and incest. These are the instances which I will consider the abject in *White Biting Dog*.

In the play, images of ingesting and expelling food are extreme and grotesque. Robert Nunn suggests that “All these metaphors of inhaling, ingesting and expelling carry emotional and psychological connotations of penetration and destruction” (“Spatial Metaphor” 15), metaphors which at the end of the play are replaced by “metaphors of invasion as salvation” (15). I agree

with Nunn regarding the ambiguity of the metaphors here; however, this could also indicate a struggle to overcome the binary play of good/evil, inside/outside, etc. These images are also supported by a metatheatrical, discursive play.

One of the most stunning moments of the play is Pony's serving of tea to Cape and his father. When they question why she has batter all over her face as she serves them, she relates a disturbing story. Troubled by her own participation in Cape's schemes, and her lack of control over herself, Pony becomes so hungry she gorges herself on batter made with Monarch flour. Still unsatisfied, she slices off chunks of the three frozen daschunds, Erica, Gretchen and Hans, crams them into her cheeks and runs upstairs:

PONY. . . . I mix in the dogflesh and I put it in my hand I eat and I eat it and I eat it till I almost faint, till it's coming out my tear ducts but I don't care! I don't care, eh, 'cause I feel good, I feel clean (93)

But the sight of Cape and Glidden makes her vomit the dogs, she says, makes the toilet overflow until she is left with no other option, but to throw up the dogs into the teacups. Not only does Pony say she eats the dead dogs, but she also serves them up to father and son in their tea.

The moment at which this abjection occurs is important. Pony is so enmeshed in Cape's story, and so overcome with love for him, that "the old Pony is almost squished" (101). By vomiting the daschunds, Pony is trying to assert control over her identity. As Kristeva describes it, this is an ambivalent action, where the spasms that protect oneself also abject oneself:

During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects. (3)

This, indeed, is what is happening to Pony. Unable to become a part of this system, yet also trapped within it, she psychically revolts. From the violent longing, the hunger for something perfect, to the equally violent rejection, she is caught at the borders, unable to achieve a coherent subjectivity.

The border of one's condition as a living being is also evident in the abjection that accompanies corporeal fluids and waste:

. . . refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 3)

In *White Biting Dog*, the female is most consistently associated with the “underneathness” (19), the abject. Pony used to be an ambulance driver; her favourite subject was dissection. Lomia, Cape's mother, “farts like no person should” (21). “I feel--” she says, “I inside I feel like ... (honest) like ... sewage” (68).

If the female is associated with the abject, it is the father who brings external order. Pony goes into a trance, to try to save Glidden, Cape's father. But she regresses to a memory of her own father, and the security and order he could bring:

PONY. . . . I would do anything, anything, to--to to just have him spit, to have him spit on his hanky and clean off my face, have him spit and wipe and I could smell it so strongly and...
(PONY faints and CAPE hugs her, hard. She is dreaming that her dad is wiping his spit all over her face) (77)

This reunion with her father, just like her giving over of herself to Cape, demands her suicide, a conquering of the abject. The division of identity, “I've never felt two thoughts at once before” (78), is too much to bear. In order to ensure the continued existence of Cape, she becomes the abjected corpse, a Christ-like sacrifice in order to bring new life:

Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new signifi-ance [sic].
(Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 15)

This revisioning of death as life, as suicide as rebirth, is tenuous. Redemption is not simple, and the end of the play is unclear. Are Lomia and Cape saved by the sacrifices of Glidden and Pony? Or are they left to attempt to exist with an ambiguous aching internal rift, since “*deep within them something has cracked*” (108)?

The relationship between Cape and Lomia is the focus of *White Biting Dog* and incest is often suggested. Both Lomia and Cape are unable to feel for others. “Nothing-gets-in.” says Cape (56). He kisses Lomia: “We--we--touched tongues,” says Lomia (56). Cape responds with violence:

CAPE. (*holding her closely, starts in a whisper*) I’ll tell you one thing I feel. I feel--I always feel--I want to take you by the hair (*does so*) and then and then bash and bash and bash and bash and bash your head against the wall
. . . . (56)

Cape is threatened by his mother; the sound of her lovemaking makes him gag. He counteracts his fear of “sinking irretrievably into the mother” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 67), by his own attempts to devour her.

The food loathing, references to waste and the corpse, and the incestuous overtones can all be read as resisting, refusing mechanisms which indicate the vulnerability of the symbolic order. They highlight the struggle between the pure and the impure, the outside and the inside, and even a struggle against these dichotomies. A reading of the abject in these plays undoes the concept of the unified self. What is usually repressed, rejected, or buried, in order for the clean and proper

self, the pure and simple truth to be illuminated, erupts and disturbs the order. A different kind of dynamic is set into play, one which reworks the shifting relations of power.

In *White Biting Dog*, several of these moments of abjection are presented provisionally. Pony's vomiting of the daschunds is, after all, a story. Whether she is telling the truth or not is subject to question. Her final scene, also, is to her father, in the light of a film projector. She is bathed in a white light which signifies both her ghost-like other worldly presence, and the mediation of herself as subject, as the representational apparatus is highlighted. Abjection is a different kind of signifying system, and explains, in part, why Thompson's plays can be so disturbing. Order and structure are necessary for articulation, just as chaos and disorder can nurture creativity. In *Sexing the Self*, Probyn advocates pushing

. . . beyond an "outside-inside alternative" to a place where we can think the two together: this is to refuse a logic of either "me" or "she" and move to a mode of theory that allows us to think difference together, outside of a binary logic, at the same time that the material and ontological conditions of difference are privileged.
(140)

It is in this troubled space, in the negotiation of the abject, that another manifestation of identity is suggested. Again, the ambiguous nature of this formation of identity must be acknowledged.

Although the abject provides a space of revolt, how far does signification and identity articulation change by such an invocation?

Let us consider the character of Pony in more detail as a means of coming to terms with this question. Pony is the character who most completely embodies this state of ambivalence. She attempts to assert agency, yet her "love" for Cape sends her into a space where she does not know herself. She finds this ultimately too much to bear and commits suicide. And yet this death

is not a state of finality. It is also a space of transition. Glidden is quite sick, and when his son expresses concern, Glidden quotes Auntie Grace:

GLIDDEN. . . . When Gracey was dying and I wouldn't eat wouldn't sleep wouldn't move from under her bed, just lay there breathing dust she said to me "Glid," she said, "Look at the kettle, and think of me. I'm WATER now, I will be STEAM." That helped. (*says it faster, like a kid's rhyme*)
Look at the kettle and think of me, I'm water now, I will be steam. I'm water now, I will be steam. That's all it is. (6)

This image recurs briefly in *Lion in the Streets* in a fragment of a dinner conversation:

GEORGE. St. Paul said, "We are as vapour," what is it? Like "vapour vanisheth" or--something. "We are no more." So I got up this notion of Martians--being these--wisps of vapour (19)

The image of death as vapour or steam is one of dispersion, of a different state of being. *Lion in the Streets* explores this more fully in the character of the dead Isobel, whose journey of identity focuses the play. In *White Biting Dog*, Pony describes this state to her father as an oddly hopeful space:

PONY. . . . it's not at all a bad thing. It's quite nice if you just give in to it. You know the feeling when you're falling asleep and ya jump awake 'cause you dreamt you slipped on a stair? Well it's like if you stayed in the slip -- if you dove right down into it and held your breath till you came out the other end. I'm in the holding your breath part right now, so I'm not sure what's on the other end, but I feel like I'm so big I'd barely fit into Kirk Community Centre (106)

At the end of the play, Lomia and Cape are also on the verge of an ambiguous renewal:

(LOMIA *looks at CAPE. They both feel, hope that a change is taking place; deep within them something has cracked. Maybe the only feeling they are experiencing is guilt, but that is something*)
CAPE. Do you think it will make ... any ... difference?
(LOMIA *looks up. Her hope shows in her eyes. CAPE just does not know.*) (108)

George Toles describes this scene as though “[t]hey have reached a juncture where it is possible for them to relinquish their posture of mastery” (121). Although Toles analyzes this space in terms of a journey of “soul-making” (120), it is also possible to consider the ending as a relinquishing of mastery as in postmodernism. Cape’s last line is, of course, ambiguous, but there is still the possibility of change. Despite the extreme and horrible circumstances in the plays of Judith Thompson, there are suggestions of other possible ways of being.

Elizabeth Gross sees abjection as “the underside of the symbolic” (89). Gross elaborates on the “border” which the abject negotiates; it is both and neither:

The abject is decidably inside and outside the body (like the skin of milk), dead and alive (like the corpse), autonomous and engulfing (like infection and pollution). It is what disturbs identity, system and order, disrupting the social boundaries demanded by the symbolic. It represents no definite positions, or rules, boundaries, or socially imposed limits. (90)

Thompson’s comments on her plays consistently refer to the “abyss” which her characters confront, the same term Elizabeth Gross uses to describe the abject: “the unspoken of a stable speaking position, an abyss at the very borders of the subject’s identity, a hole into which the subject may fall” (87). It is this state which the subject must negotiate in order to speak.

Thompson speaks of her playwriting process in very similar terms. She relates her gift of playwriting to fear, a fear comparable to the feeling she has during epileptic seizures and that fear induced by her phobia of snakes:

Every once in a while . . . I feel I am falling again down the terrible hole, with nothing to hold on to. And I believe this falling, this “identity panic,” is a result of my using the very essence of myself to create character in dramatic work. (“Epilepsy & the Snake” 6)

Thompson's remarks regarding this fear, this induction of "identity panic" can be related to similar fears her characters undergo or confront. In the negotiation of different positions as subjects within particular cultural and historical matrixes, a crisis in identity in *White Biting Dog* is played out in the conflict on the body. Images of bodily fluids and functions depict a body which, like identity, is unstable. Psychoanalytic readings like this can also be compatible with a postmodern feminism; the abject certainly contributes to the destabilization of the coherence of the rational self. In the end, there are indications of new possible ways of being in the constant shedding of discursive skins as identity is remade into ever new manifestations.

Tornado

Urjo Kareda introduced the radio version of *Tornado* when it was aired on CBC Radio as an "explosive examination of fertility."¹¹ The women in *Tornado* are tyrannized by either their desire to have children or their need to keep their men. Mandy and Jane, in particular, continually abase themselves and abuse each other in their competition to succeed. Rose overtly states her desire to have as many children as possible. By showing these extreme situations and by serializing these positions, Thompson presents a destabilized identity. In addition, the invocation of the constitutive outside recurs in the characterization of Rose and Mandy and contributes to this destabilization. In this way, mastery in the relations of power is critiqued.

¹¹ In the introduction to *Tornado* as broadcast for *The Second Generation* 1990. In this section I refer to both the radio version and its script included in *The Other Side of the Dark*. Recently a stage version of *Tornado* was published in *Canadian Theatre Review* 89 (Summer 1996). As this version is substantially different to the radio version, I will only make a few references in passing.

Rose and Mandy

Mandy is a middle-class government worker who has internalized liberal humanist discourses; at the beginning of the play she declares she is “*not a slave of biology*” (81). But this public proclamation is displaced by its exact opposite when her husband wants to separate because he is having an affair with someone who can give him something Mandy cannot: children. This changes what we know of Mandy. She does an about face:

MANDY. Why ... why didn't you ... tell me, Bill
 BILL. Well, because you're always ... telling everybody how you hate children,
 how that's the last thing you-
 MANDY. I WAS LYING! I WAS LYING, BILL, DON'T YOU SEE?
 BILL. Lying? Why?
 MANDY. FOR YOU! For YOU because I thought YOU DIDN'T WANT
 BILL. Why... why did you think that?
 MANDY. You never said! I wanted to let you off the hook. It's the way I was
 brought up; if a man doesn't mention something ... I ... I wanted to please
 you, Bill, I didn't want to pressure you ... I ... want ... a child, more than
 anything. (86)

On the one hand, Mandy is depicted as utterly dependent on her relationship with her husband in her determination of choices. On the other hand, the discourses which construct and afford choices are always emphasized. Both of these positions seem to be manifestations of a constructed paradigm of “woman.”

Rose, one of Mandy's clients, is also characterized in an extreme way: she simply wants to have lots and lots of children; she repeats the same position as subject over and over again. She is poor, an epileptic, and was abused by her father when she was a child. She is now on welfare, pregnant, and raising four children by herself, but she wants to have more:

ROSE. . . . So I want to have as many children as I can have so I can love
 them the good way, the way my mummy started lovin' me before. So I got
 these kids, these four kids, I love them more than my life more than your

life and this fifth one coming in five months... See, this is one thing I can do, I can do it some girls can't but I can I can love them and I know how from my mum (88)

The role Rose has found for herself within the patriarchy is taken to an extreme: and here in this almost parodic description of motherhood, she finds limited agency. She is representative of the ideal mother¹² whom Mandy tries to and starts to become, even literally.

Mandy finds limited agency within the discourses which construct her. When Mandy finds out she cannot conceive and plots to steal Rose's baby, she uses her power as a Social Worker to make Rose believe in her plot. In order to get what she wants, Mandy turns Rose's love back on to itself. She quotes studies which have proved that the fourth or fifth child of a woman who has epilepsy is susceptible to sudden infant death syndrome. Mandy uses a scientific discourse to achieve her goals:

MANDY. I'm afraid that these studies are so conclusive that the Minister of Health has ordered us to go into the community and ... inform women such as yourself of the situation and help them ... to find a suitable place for the baby ... After all you wouldn't want ... the baby to die. (102)

The foregrounding of this discourse and the accompanying power that Mandy is able to wield over Rose contributes to a destabilization in the coherence of self. Rose yields to the power of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser 143-45), that which functions to contain and perpetuate ideology without force, but through systems and institutions. The power that Mandy holds is substantial; it is, however, closely linked to the scientific discourse she employs.

The instability of identity becomes more obvious as the play progresses. The power which Mandy yields is temporary. The police, a repressive state apparatus (Althusser 143-45), ensuring

¹² Patricia Phillips' performance of this role on radio is haunting. Her voice and incantation of this speech are soft and lyrical. Above all the performance gives the impression of sincerity.

the perpetuation of ideology through force, arrive to take back the kidnapped baby. Mandy runs away, takes the child with her, and seeks refuge on a cliff. Threatened by a different discourse and assertion of a different truth, Mandy's identity is unfixed. As the police pursue, Mandy gradually begins to become Rose; she takes on her experience. She imagines she has given birth and she experiences the "tornado" effect of Rose's epilepsy:

MANDY. Nine months! Nine months I carried this child in my belly, I threw up every day for the first five and then I couldn't sleep for the last four months? And I kept fainting. All to bring your baby, your baby into the world, AND NOW YOU'RE TRYING TO TAKE HER AWAY FROM ME JUST BECAUSE I'M EPILEPTIC, WELL, I CAN'T HELP IT! I CAN'T HELP IT IF I GO TO THE OTHER SIDE, HOW DARE YOU HOW DARE YOU. (111)

Identification with Rose becomes the only way to temporarily attain the subjectivity she desires. Mandy's body responds to what her mind imagines. In the stage version of *Tornado* in the *Canadian Theatre Review*, the Mandy character (named Viola) becomes so like Rose that her breasts begin to leak spontaneously (63). In both the radio and the stage versions, she descends into an ambiguous seizure, imitating Rose's epileptic seizures. This replaying of identity destabilizes its unity. This repetition of identity is a device which occurs in a later play, *Lion in the Streets*. Identity is not coherent and consistent; it is fluid and found through engagement with others.

The Constitutive Outside: the baby, epilepsy, the tornado, the abyss

The baby is always an important and complex character/symbol in Thompson's plays. On the one hand, the baby provides Rose with a sense of who she is: a mother. The baby provides access to the outside world; it assures Mandy's identification within the patriarchy. When Mandy

has the baby, she also retains her hold on her husband. However, the baby is also the source of anguish between Bill and Mandy and Jane. The baby is in the realm of the constitutive outside: it brings Mandy's identity into being, but it also returns as a constant threat to her identity. This echoes a self/other dynamic of psychoanalysis. The *other* is both a part of and external to the "self." It comes to signify both in the intimate relations between people and within the larger communities. The extreme maternal role which Mandy takes up leads her into a whirlwind space of contradiction where binaries are collapsed.

The space of the baby also brings on chaos: epilepsy and the baby are intimately connected. Mandy uses Rose's epilepsy to spirit the baby away from her. The epilepsy that Rose experiences is tornado-like. When Rose has a seizure, she loses herself. She cannot care for her children; rather, she is dependent on them to see her through the seizure. In the following quote, Jake, Rose's son, talks his mother through the "tornado:"

JAKE. . . . you're turning upside down and around a million million times and as fast as inside a dryer and falling and faster and faster and ice picks and scissors and snakes and every sick sound like throwin up and crushin eggs and mean laughin and everybody's laughin and you're fallin, I know, fallin fallin so fast so fast and you're at the bottom you're at the bottom now covered with mud and if you don't breathe if you don't breathe the light will be covered with mud, black, covered with mud if you don't breathe you'll be dead underground (96)

The tornado in this play is what Judith Thompson calls the abyss. It is a place of "identity panic."

Jake makes her scream back to life:

JAKE. ... just scream, just scream mummy, scream your scream out and you'll fly to the top burst through the air let the scream take ya let it carry ya up bang! through to the air. (96)

At this point, Rose screams a "*blood-curdling scream*" (96). An ambiguous space of neither/nor, where distinctions between the outer and inner worlds collapse, the abyss is too frightening a

realm to remain in. It is a contradictory space of transition, a space which can also be considered as an image of a postmodern configuration of being, where these binaries are combined in an uneasy tension.

In imitation of Rose, Mandy also descends into this space, and it is on this note that the radio version of the play ends. When Mandy steals the baby and hides on the cliff, she takes on Rose's epilepsy as well. Having stolen Rose's baby, but now found out and running from the police, she too descends into the tornado. When she slips to the other side, Jake tries to talk her back, repeating the words he used to bring Rose back. This state of being is frightening: it is a place, like the space of the crackwalker, of suspension, where slippage in either direction is possible. Again Jake attempts to bring back Mandy to the place of light and order; he assures her that her actions are not in vain, that her extraordinary behaviour is meaningful:

JAKE. . . . you got taken by something that was bigger than yourself and that fit that takes can make for bad in the world sometimes but also for the-- bestest, most greatest human-bean-acts ... they know ... that you ... are a great human act. (113)

He's "like a saint" (113). He rejects Mandy's current husband and assures her of stability within a "new family":

JAKE. Him? He can't even grow a beard! Looks like weeds! NO. Mandy, we're your husband now, our family. (114)

But resurrection in this way is not entirely comforting, as Mandy descends into a fit. Although Jake calls to Mandy as he does to Rose, there is still an ambiguous ending. There is no final scream which signifies her resurgence to air.¹³ The stage version of the play also ends on an ambiguous note. Viola (Mandy) "*sits up, holding on to them, rigidly,*" but there is no salutary

¹³ In the script there is no indication of a scream; on the radio tape, there is only silence.

scream (64). As in many of Thompson's plays, there is the promise of forgiveness and salvation, overlaid in a Roman Catholic iconography, and yet the gesture at the end is uncertain; there is a potential to be realized, but it is a potential which is only completed imaginatively.

I am Yours

Again, in *I am Yours*, the roles which the female characters take up appear to be essentialized and biologically determined. Birth plays a primary role. Dee, after a one night stand with Toi, finds herself ambivalently pregnant. Unwilling at first to keep the child, she is also unwilling to let Toi have custody. She enlists the help of her sister Mercy to lie in court in order to prevent Toi's victory. Dee reunites with Mack, her estranged husband, but intends to leave him when the baby is born. Mercy, in turn, has very low self-esteem. Recently separated, she flirts with Mack. Pegs conspires with Toi; they steal Dee's baby when she unexpectedly gives birth during their visit. In this short description of the play, it is apparent that the roles that women play are limited. Women want to bear children. Women want to be acknowledged by the father. Women manipulate, connive, betray, steal. Women are not to be trusted. And yet there is a strange power, resonance and daring to this play. Again the topography of this play can be read not as a demonstration of the essentialized roles of women, but as a display of the lack of coherence to identity. Pegs, Dee and Mercy take agency from particular standpoints, but they are frustrated in their attempts to achieve meaningful action. This frustration is tied to the dynamic which the title of the play indicates: an imbrication of self/other. *I am Yours* is the title of the medieval German poem which is inscribed in the locket which Dee received from her father:

RAYMOND. Du bist mein
 Ich bin dein
 Des sollst du gewiss sein
 Du bist verschlossen
 In meinem Herzen
 Verloren ist das Schlusselein
 Du musst immer drinnen sein
 [*now, with understanding of the significance of the poem*]
 ... You are locked in my heart
 the key is lost
 You will always have to stay inside it...
 For always. (157)

Robert Nunn points out the the broken promise that the title, the poem, and the locket signify:

The locket inscribed "Ich bin dein"--the title of the play--ironically holds out the offer of eternal love, of the desiring subject finding its lost complement in the other, but in fact, for the two sisters who possess identical lockets, Dee's from her Daddy, Mercy's (maybe only in dreams) from Raymond, the locket signifies loss. The promise is always already broken, the desired object is always already a signifier of that which is absent. ("Spatial Metaphor" 20)

Nunn goes on to argue for the loss of the mother which is central to the play, and makes a convincing argument for the ending in which the gaze of the mother is proved to be either severed or illusory. It is important to consider, however, that the locket and the "ich bin dein" inscriptions come from the father. The relationship of "I am yours" refers to the imbrication of *self/other*, and mother-daughter, but it also refers to the relationship of father-daughter, and by extension, patriarchal society-woman. The loss here is abandonment on several levels, not only the loss of the mother. George Toles points out the corollary of the title:

. . . it has been the burden of the action to show us how these familiar words of self-surrender generally mean just the opposite, concealing a hard unyielding claim that "you are mine." (127)

It is also possible to consider the loss which the "ich bin dein" interchange constantly recalls as the insufficiency of a model of the subject which is based on a binary opposition, and a dependence on

an *other* to confirm its identity. The locket is both real and imaginary; the relationship between self and *other* is also both real and imaginary. Yet the dynamic of the locket is always doomed to failure, possibly because of the psychoanalytic loss which is central to all formations of the self, but possibly also due to the very limitations in the conception of a subject which is based on a hierarchical model, in which interactions with the *other* demand a domination and subordination. Subjects are formed in these exclusionary terms. Such positions prove to be limiting and unstable. An identity with possibilities for acting outside a dynamic of dominance and subordination can be read in images of the body. When, particularly in the case of Mercy, a new configuration of the *self/other* dynamic is offered, the potential for radical change is possible. In this section, I will consider the ways in which the subject/identity model is demonstrated in the characters of Pegs, Dee and Mercy.

The mother: Pegs

Like the other characters, Pegs searches for confirmation of “I” within the *other*. She is constantly striving to be recognized, but this acknowledgement is not forthcoming. She tells the taxi driver of her descent from being important where everything is “Mum this, Mum that” (151) to a state of uncertain recognition. Significantly, the story which Pegs tells as Dee goes into labour is another story of a lack of recognition. A friend does not recognize her at a high school reunion because she has put on weight: “Well I musta turned three shades a red,” says Pegs. “I could hardly speak but I did, like a fool, I turned to her and I said, ‘But Marjorie, here I am, I’m Peggy! Didn’t you see me?’” (169). As these examples illustrate, this struggle to take up a position as subject, an “I” where the recognition of the “you” is painful, illusory, and incomplete.

The instability of these positions of subject is amplified when other images of Pegs' identity are considered. Language is an important means of asserting power and ascertaining status. On the one hand, it provides her a means of asserting control. Here she relates the story of her reaction to an employer's criticism of her grammar in order to inspire Toi to action:

PEGS. . . . Well I turn around to her and says "You think I don't know the correct grammar? I know it's 'don't have any' but I say 'don't got none.' I CHOOSE 'don't got none.' I CHOOSE my grammar, cause I'd rather be dead; I'd rather be dead than anything like you." THEY HAVE US BELIEVIN WE CAN'T TALK, WE CAN'T DRESS, AND NOW THEY HAVE YOU BELIEVIN YOU DON'T HAVE A RIGHT TO YOUR CHILD! . . . (160)

Although Pegs asserts power in choosing her grammar, she also denies the functional use of language. She finds power in the sheer volume of her talk. She has what her son calls "the talk trots" (131). She uses language as a defense: she tells her long story about the highschool reunion as Dee is in the throes of labour. Through the juxtaposition of Peg's endless chatter and Dee's labour, a body/mind split is demonstrated on stage. Through an onslaught of language, Dee is rendered helpless. Denied the baby through the justice system, Pegs can use another means of discourse to get what she wants. She can make the symbolic order work for her; she uses language until it is devoid of its meaning and becomes an action. For Pegs, language is not "a transparent medium of expression" (Flax, *Thinking Fragments* 31), but must be used as a means to an end. In the excess of Pegs' talk, there is a refusal of binaries and of an unequivocal connection between thought and language:

PEGS. . . . I happen to need to talk to talk and talk and talk and talk and don't need nobody say nothing because I am talking and I am gonna talk and talk till our feet freeze off and our hands get frost bite cause when I am talkin I am swimmin in a big vat of English cream--cream--and talk and I want to swim and cream and talk and talk till we all fall over and freeze. (131)

Words are used not for their meaning, but as strategic tools; they even take on a sensuality. Talk is pleasurable; it is, after all, like “swimmin in a big vat of English cream.” This use of language as a means of resistance is limited, however. Pegs’ excessive use of language can only work to “jam the machinery,” to paraphrase Irigaray (102). Although Pegs renders Dee powerless and steals her baby, the choices she makes are again in the cycle of domination and subordination; at the end of the play, she lies slumped in the chair, unconscious or possibly dead (176).

Dee: at the cusp

Dee owns the original locket. She is the well-loved daughter, the desired woman. She most often invokes the dynamic of “I am yours/ you are mine.” Her actions are at the expense of others. Everyone is disposable. She dominates, uses and dismisses because she can. Although she inhabits these positions as subject, identity is also profoundly destabilized in the images that are associated with the birth of her child.

Dee’s interactions with others demonstrate shifting relations of power. The pain of this dynamic is best demonstrated in her interactions with Mack, her estranged husband. He comes back to her, seeking to understand why the marriage fell apart. He is unable to believe that Dee doesn’t love him anymore. Dee tells him to leave. He tosses the key back to her and makes to leave, when suddenly Dee begs him to return. She throws herself at his feet. They seem to be at the point of a tender reconciliation, when the power shifts and equilibrium is upset:

[DEE smiles. They are facing each other. After quite a silence they go to kiss very tenderly, but just as their lips meet, DEE speaks]

DEE. Youuuuu sucker, you believe me? I HATE you, I still hate you, I just was scared to be alone, don’t you get it, I’m using you I’M USING YOU, YOU WIMP. *[she starts to hit him across the face]* You suck, you suck,

you suck, you suck, get out, get out, get out. [*she pushes him physically*]
Get out! Go!!

MACK. I'm warning you.

DEE. I said get out of my life, and I mean it, don't believe the mewling
pisshead, in the hall, believe me, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!!!

[MACK *leaves*] No, stay! Please stay, please stay! Go! Get out, get out!

MAAAAACKIEEEEE MACKKKKKIEEEEE MAAACKIEE.

[*As DEE wails 'MAAACKIE' we hear a siren, louder and louder. She
collapses onto the floor*]

MAACKKKKIE what's happening to me? MAAACKIE MAACKIE

MACKIE. (127)

Not only is Mack confused as to what to do, so is the audience. As Sharren Friedman describes, this scene in performance provoked erratic laughter. Only the siren at the end forced the audience into silence (145). The ambivalence in the interaction causes discomfort in the audience. As Dee herself declares at the end of the scene, she does not know what is happening to her. She is found on the cusp of the either/or binary of domination/subordination. In this way, the mastery involved in the shifting dynamics of power is critiqued.

Dee's ambivalence and her unfixed identity are signified by her relationship to her unborn child. Again the work of Julia Kristeva is useful to illuminate the conflict in identity in the pregnant woman:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there."
"I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism.
("Motherhood" 237)

It is significant that this unrealizable space is also signified by Dee's drawing: her attempt to represent the meaningless. The baby in *I am Yours* is not just "like" a picture, as of the madonna and child in *The Crackwalker*; it is drawn by Dee, from its foetus stage almost till birth. It is alternately horrifying and beautiful. The baby is Dee's inner beast, the animal, ironically the

“constitutive outside” which she must grapple with in order to exist. She first communicates with it when she is in the hospital, and although she is ambivalent about it, her ability to recognize it is what prevents her from having the abortion:

DEE. Is that you? Are you ... speaking ... to me? I can hear you breathing, speaking. STOP, PLEASE! STOP you STOP. STOP talking to me - you're breathing, in my ears, stop. Please, no! I DON'T want to KNOW you, NO, PLEASE, I WANT TO GET RID OF YOU I - don't. Don't. DON'T make those ... [*she sees something that touches her--such as a baby's smile, a small hand, etc.*] don't-- no, no no no OKAY! OKAY OKAY OKAY YOU ARE! You are! You are!! YOU ARE!!! (142)

It is Dee's grappling with the birth of this child which frees her. Although she recognizes this baby (or new state of being) and delivers it, it is taken away from her. She must give it up into a society, a language, a cultural realm in which it is formed and birthed again, several times.

In a monologue near the end of the play, Dee comes out on a ramp facing the audience. A bright light blinds the audience. Dee is in the nursery, looking for her baby. The stage directions give some insight into the journey she has accomplished:

[. . .*She feels purified--through birth--and also through understanding her self-hatred, her guilt about her mother--she is now able to love after having grappled with her "shadow" or "animal." She is infused with this love. . . .*] (176)

There is always an uncertain, ambiguous, tangential end to the plays of Judith Thompson. Just as language is not “transparent,” so the metaphors cannot be read easily. After this scene, there is a cross-fade to Toilane, in a hotel room with Pegs ambiguously slumped, dead or unconscious. Toilane holds the baby, and calls out, bewildered: “Mum??” (176). Nunn links these moments together:

We see a montage of the severed bond between Toilane and Pegs and the imaginary bond between Dee and the baby (who is not there). The fact that Dee's

greeting is directed to every single person sitting in the theatre includes the whole audience in a dialectic of desire and absence. (18-19)

It is not only the montage of severed bonds which incorporates the audience here, but it is also the opacity of this image which achieves this effect. In these images, there is a figural visceral quality in which logical, binary order is broken down. The play ends on a note of uncertainty. The baby, like Pegs, like Toilane, like Mercy, like Dee, is many things to different people. Identity as realized through the interaction of Dee and her baby is an ambivalent, incomplete process, where unity is illusory.

Mercy: the unaccommodated identity

Mercy experiences some of the same rejections and categorizations as the others. She is also on the search for the illusory satisfaction that the “I am yours” dynamic implies. However, Mercy most actively moves beyond the binary terms of this equation. She most radically attempts to confound the boundaries, like Theresa in *The Crackwalker*, Pony in *White Biting Dog* and Mandy in *Tornado*.

Like Pegs, Mercy is constantly on a search to be recognized. She looks for a solution for her state-of-identity malaise. She wants to take up other people’s lives. She tries to steal her sister’s husband. She wishes she would get a brain tumour so that people would be kind to her (150). Unlike Dee, she does not conform to the ideal standard of “woman” and has always lived in the shadow of her sister: “If you’re--a woman and you’re--born ugly you might as well be born dead” (145). She has internalized the way in which she has been perceived. Cruel classmates called her “whoredog;” when she is rejected by Mack, Dee’s husband, she calls herself a “slut.”

However, she still tries and wants to become “loved,” the “centre” of someone’s life. Mercy is at the crossroads of discourses. She is subjected to two different discourses here, or perhaps two facets of the one and the same categorization: woman as disposable and woman as beautiful desired object.

Mercy experiences some of the same rejection that Pegs does: she is unable to achieve satisfactory recognition and reflection of herself. Her relationship with Raymond, an ambiguous lover from her past, alternately affords and denies her this recognition. Raymond was an older man who picked her up hitchhiking. Mercy says, “Like none of the other guys at school would even look at me, but this guy, RAYMOND, he SEES, see? He sees what I always knew . . .” (133). But Mercy is ambivalent about her relationship with Raymond. This conflict is realized theatrically in a dream sequence. Mercy is on a bus, and she dreams that the man beside her is Raymond. The stage directions indicate Mercy’s simultaneous enjoyment and denial of his attention:

[RAYMOND is bringing a rather guilty fifteen-year-old MERCY to orgasm by manipulating her vagina. She has an orgasm, and then immediately pretends that nothing at all has happened.] (120-21)

In this scene Raymond gives her a locket with the inscription “Ich bin dein,” the locket which her sister Dee received from her father. When Raymond asks her to skip school to spend time with him (he has, after all, brought prophylactics), she screams at him:

PROPHYLACTICS! NO! No, no, no!! You’re disgusting! You’re a disgusting old man and you make me feel like a greasy slut and I hate you for it, I haaaaate you, I hate you, I hate you, I ... (122)

At this point, Raymond turns back into the Italian man who is sitting beside Mercy on the bus. The transformation of Raymond into someone else illustrates Mercy’s conflicting desires in her

situating of him: she both wants and refuses his attention. The way she has constructed him also determines who he is physically.

Mercy's relationship with her sister involves a similar dynamic of rejection and recognition. When Mercy arrives at her sister's place, Dee does not recognize her: "I'm sorry-- were you at Joan's the other night, or" (137). Mercy is understandably upset: "I'M YOUR OWN SISTER WHY DIDN'T YOU RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN SISTER?" (139). Mercy attains Dee's recognition when she assists Dee by lying in her defence. Dee convinces her to lie on the witness stand in order to prevent Toi and Pegs from winning custody of the unborn child. In return, Mercy demands her love:

MERCY. Say "I LOVE YOU MERCY"--say it.

DEE. [*pause*] I love you Mercy.

MERCY. More than anything on this earth?

[DEE *puts locket around MERCY's neck*] (160)

But "I" confirmed as "Yours" is shown to be untenable. Although Mercy wants to be the "centre" of someone's life, to speak from a space of coherence, this is not to be.

The illusory nature of this wholeness is found in Mercy's passionate defence of television.

This monologue illustrates Mercy's conflictual state:

MERCY. Don't put down television. DON'T YOU FUCKING PUT DOWN TELEVISION, YOU SNOT, TELEVISION HAS SAVED MY LIFE. IT HAS LITERALLY SAVED MY LIFE, WHEN YOU'RE SO LONELY YOU COULD DIE. I MEAN SHRIVEL UP AND DIE BECAUSE NOBODY CARES WHETHER YOU GET UP OR STAY IN BED OR DON'T EAT, WHEN YOU'RE SO LONELY EVERY PORE IN YOUR SKIN IS SCREAMING TO BE TOUCHED, THE TELEVISION IS A SAVIOUR. IT IS A VOICE A WARM VOICE. THERE ARE FUNNY TALK SHOWS WITH HOSTS WHO THINK EXACTLY LIKE I DO. (145-46)

Mercy's accommodation as a subject to an Althusserian interpellation is evident in this example. As a subject, she is a "subjected being," formed and satisfied by discourses which construct models of behaviour, but with little ability to act outside that discursive construction. Characters are willing to debase themselves to extraordinary measures for momentary security and confirmation of identity.

A different kind of identity is realized, however, in some of Mercy's actions. More than any other character, Mercy moves beyond binaries. Significantly, she both testifies for and then betrays her sister. She lies on the witness stand in order to help Dee win her court case and win custody of her child; she then stands by while Toi and his mother steal the child from Dee, immediately after birth. The scene is a theatrical coup. Toi and Pegs arrive to talk to Dee; Pegs wants Dee at least to admit that her son did not lie. As Dee goes into labour, Toi and Pegs refuse to leave. Mercy does not move to help her sister:

TOILANE. I WANT MY CHILD. I'M GONNA HAVE MY CHILD.

DEE. You can't do this, this is sick, this is....

PEGS. My son wants his child and he got a right and you know he does. Now nobody's gonna hurt you. We're just gonna take what is rightfully ours.

DEE. Just for Christ's sake, can't you just leave. MERCEEEEEEE!!

[MERCY *stands up. Stands on her tippytoes. Lifts her hands high in the air. Eyes wide, turns around and walks out*]. (170)

Mercy finds herself at the untenable intersection of different possible ways of being. Her solution is to remove herself. In this example, Mercy reverts to a childlike display; she pretends to disappear. The consequences of this action propel her into another unstable territory: she is both "sorry" and "not sorry" at the same time. She takes this action, however, because she wants to act morally, and reverse, perhaps, the injustice she herself perpetrated by lying on the witness stand. But by doing what she thinks is right, she is betraying her sister; she is caught in a logical bind.

Either act has repercussions. There is simply no right, and no wrong. Mercy's resulting confusion leaves her in a transitional space:

MERCY. But I betrayed her, I betrayed my own sister. I thought, you know, I thought it was the right thing. I wanted to do the right thing for once in my life. I'm sorry you know but I'm not at the same time. Do you know what I mean? I mean I'm sorry but I'm not sorry I'm not I'm sorry I'm not I'm sorry I'm not I'm not I'm sorry. (173)

The limitations of language are exposed. In this example, as in most of Thompson's plays, the choices that the characters make are difficult ones. Mercy's contrition is not pure. Singularity of identity is questioned. Neither morality nor boundaries are clearly defined.

Mercy has a complicated relationship with the patriarchy: she desperately desires to be like Dee, to be her father's favourite. The "ich-bin-dein" dynamic has been denied her; she has never been assured of the father's love, and is angry:

MERCY. . . . you you FUCKER DADDY. I HEARD you, I SAW you giving her that locket "for my favourite daughter, *Deirdre*"--that heart with the ICH BIN DEIN engraved. What does that mean, anyway, eh? What the hell does that mean? (133)

In a world of language where discourses necessarily entail exclusion, identity is always unsatisfactory. In the case of Mercy, she failed to attain that special recognition by her father, and has been searching for it in relationships ever since. She seems to be even outside the code, the key that would give her access to that special meaning: "What the hell does that mean?" (133) she says about the German inscription. Her most powerful move is in the refusal of the terms of engagement of subjectivity.

Ambiguous Identities

We have seen how characters are subjects of and to discourses. The conflictual nature of the discourses renders the subjects themselves unstable. In this section, we have seen how the articulation of the self is also paradoxically dependent on, yet constantly rejected by the *other*. An ideal relationship where “I” and “You” form a symbiotic whole is desired, but always proves impossible. The result in Thompson’s plays is an emphasis on this state of being between. Perhaps it is in embracing that very territory that the only kind of liberation can come.

Again the baby is the central unarticulated identity in this play. Nunn holds that the baby-mother model is also a model for the audience’s dialectic of desire and absence (“Spatial Metaphor” 18-19). Towards the end of his article, he describes the way in which the ramp is used in the play:

The ramp is the focal point of the extraordinarily powerful affects that the play releases to seep through the wall of repression of which the “psychic distance” of the audience is a displacement. . . . the audience is addressed in ways which further accomplish the breaching of the wall. We are the door which slams in Toi’s face, and twice we are the infant whose voice and gaze seem to erase all absence and restore all that has been lost. (26-27)

I agree with Nunn’s assessment of the implication of the audience; however, I see this implication as a different kind of audience-stage interaction, one which neither confirms nor unsettles the psyche but rather attempts to articulate a different model of identity, which is both played out on stage and offered as a model for audience engagement. Over and over in Thompson’s plays, women are the central figures, struggling within patriarchal constraints. As Thompson says, most of her female characters have been “successfully brainwashed by the patriarchal society in which they live” or they are “in a fight to the death with themselves because of it” (“One Twelfth” 264).

Jennifer Harvie considers the possibilities of the *mise en scene* of *I am Yours* as a kind of dreamscape, with ambiguous viewing possibilities:

Like fantasy, the play straddles the border between the conscious and the unconscious, acknowledging the import of both. Also like fantasy, this composition allows the play's audiences a range of engagements with the play, so that they must choose whether to engage with a theme of love, or of love's prohibition. ("(Im)Possibility" 248)

In *I am Yours*, as is realized more fully in *Lion in the Streets*, there are these moments of fantasy or escape. A scene in which Raymond appears to Mercy, for example, is referred to ambiguously: "*This could be a dream,*" suggest the stage directions (171). It is this imaginative holding together of possible worlds which becomes an important part of Thompson's dramaturgy. Here there is the simultaneous entertaining of several possibilities which characterizes a postmodern feminism. Although Thompson uses strategies of realism, she also interrogates these very same strategies, by involving a dream sequence or a fantastical moment. These moments are not qualified or explained by the narrative; they have equal substance and authority as the other scenes in the play. In this way, Thompson is suggesting several possible narratives.

***Lion in the Streets*: the fictive unity of identity in narrative**

What *I am Yours* suggests in many of its dream-like scenes, *Lion in the Streets* realizes in its overtly non-narrative impulse. Scenes are connected by the characters who pass through them; the play is structured as a kind of "relay" (Knowles, "The Achievement" 34). The way in which the play takes shape appears to be accidental; the audience is encouraged to make connections only by the character who moves from one scene to the next. Similarly, the formation of identity is shown to be contingent. Characters become subjects according to their particular narratives. Their

identity is dependent on shifting relations of power within these narratives. The characters are several and are not maintained throughout the play. They appear briefly, in a series of emotionally charged scenes. Their crises cluster about Isobel, often reflecting or resonating with Isobel's character objective (Harvie, "Constructing Fictions" 84). Although Isobel is the only character whose progress we may chart throughout the play, and the only character who seems to sustain a transformation, she also occupies a liminal territory. The identity of Isobel proves to be fluid as she crosses boundaries of fictions and challenges borders.

Subjects in Crisis

Most of the characters in the play are shown in oppressive circumstances and in turn use desperate, aggressive measures against those who threaten them. Shifts in power are highlighted. Characters switch allegiance from narrative to narrative. Sue, for example, proves to be Isobel's first helper. She rescues Isobel from the attacks by the other children and comforts Isobel by telling her a similar story from her childhood. In this example, story-telling and the confirmation of identity are linked. But Sue's identity is not secure. It is tenuously held together, a precarious linkage of her positions as subject. Jennifer Harvie enumerates the number of positions which are constructed for Sue in her poststructuralist reading of the play and describes them in Julia Kristeva's term as "'slogans' which help characters to make sense of or contain only provisionally the 'lion' of a chaotic or threatening experience" ("Constructing Fictions" 88). Sue appears as Isobel's helper, but Isobel loses faith in her when she sees her lose her power. Sue finds out that her husband Bill is having an affair. She attempts to seduce him; she performs a striptease for him,

but he rejects her. Sue in this way is presented in a series of positions as subject. Her changeability from one position to another undermines a coherence in identity.

The discursive foundation for subjectivity is exposed as being vulnerable. Sue has been living on trust in a vow:

SUE. YOU TOOK A VOW! In a CHURCH in front of a priest and my mother
and your mother and your father and you swore to LOVE and honour and
cherish till DEATH US DO PART till DEATH US DO PART, BILL, it's
YOUR WORD your WORD.
BILL. I am breaking my word. (22)

The words and story in which Sue believes are unstable. Both the marriage contract and its dissolution, in this case, in the public display of Sue's humiliation, are socially determined. Word, language, narrative--that which seemed to be so reliable and indispensable--are shown to be as fickle as the people who employ them.

As Ric Knowles points out, the narratives of the characters in this play are conflicting:

Several sequences . . . can be seen as "duelling narratives," as the characters construct equally compelling but mutually exclusive biographies and autobiographies that involve one another in pivotal but conflicting roles in their own narrative strategies. ("The Achievement" 34)

Thompson foregrounds the instability of narrative throughout. Coherence is arbitrary and temporary. The pain of the characters is in the floundering they experience as they are caught between these places of coherence. One of the most forceful examples of the power of narrative and the construction of subjects occurs near the end of the play. Isobel follows Sherry, sure that she will lead him to the lion: "She ... I see, I smell the spray, the Lion's spray" (55). By this it is clear that Isobel has had a similar experience to Sherry. What ensues is a very painful scene between Sherry and her boyfriend Edward. Edward threatens to cancel their wedding unless

Sherry tells him what he wants to hear: that she's been dreaming about the rape that happened to her six years ago:

EDWARD. That was the best fuck you ever had, wasn't it? It was the only fuck you ever respected, wasn't it? WASN'T IT SHERRY? (58)

He badgers her until she agrees with him and retells the story, "Come on, tell the truth, the truth, truth, truth" (59), he says. The stage directions make it clear that Sherry is disgusted at what she is saying, but she agrees to his narrative, and as lines alternate, she relates a story which is at first his, and then ambivalently hers, and could be interpreted either way. These narratives do indeed "duel" until Edward's wins out:

EDWARD. The hottest sex you ever had!

SHERRY. And .. and ... I lie there for hours, passed out, all my blood pouring out onto the cement.

EDWARD. But happy, right? You finally got it GOOD.

SHERRY. Until the lady's puttin out her garbage!

EDWARD. And you told her the truth, didn't you?

SHERRY. What?

EDWARD. That it was all your fault?

EDWARD. That you teased the poor guy, that you wanted him to power you, it was the sexiest hottest sex ever you wanted to be HAD.

SHERRY. The lady, she helped me up, she--she gave me a Kleenex, and a glass of water, she--

EDWARD. You told her, of course, that you are the snake.

SHERRY. I ... am ... the snake?

EDWARD. Because SATAN tempts OTHERS to sin, right?

SHERRY. Satan tempts others to sin?

EDWARD. You were the snake with the diamond back, glittering!

SHERRY. I ... am ... the snake.

EDWARD. It was all your fault.

SHERRY. It was ... all ... my fault.

EDWARD. You ARE the snake.

SHERRY. I am the snake. I am the snake. I AM the snake. I AM THE SNAKE. I AM THE SNAKE! I AM THE SNAKE! I AM THE SNAKE! I AM THE SNAKE! I AM THE SNAKE! I AM THE SNAKE!! (61)

In this scene, it is the retelling of the narrative that is important to Edward. He must control the stories Sherry tells him and tells the woman in the past. Narratives construct positions for subjects which are linked to larger social narratives and contexts. By acquiescing to Edward's narrative, Sherry assures her participation in a larger social narrative: the Cinderella myth.¹⁴ Immediately after screaming that she is the snake (where she also agrees to the Biblical myth of Adam and Eve) and she breaks down and cries, she pulls herself together to claim her reward:

SHERRY. Eddie? Will you come with me tomorrow then to Ashley's to pick out a pattern? Like I've make the appointment and everything Ed, and after all, you are going to have to live with the dishes. I mean, I know guys hate goin in there, all guys do, but everyone that gets married goes to Ashley's, everyone that gets married--

EDWARD. Alright. But nothing with flowers on it. I just want something clean, maybe--white, with a black stripe. (61-62)

The power of these larger cultural narratives is exposed in this moment, as Thompson demonstrates the domination and subordination inherent in the subjects the narratives create. In the story that Thompson creates in *Lion in the Streets*, she also offers a different construction of identity which can also undermine such power structures as well.

One of the most arresting sequences of the play is the scene between Scarlett and Christine. Here there is an overt conflict in the narratives which construct the characters. Beneath the sanitized, formulaic words of the journalist, Thompson shows repressed violence. Despite the surface shock of her vocabulary and imaginative sex scenes, Scarlett desperately needs to fit into a larger social situation. Christine quizzes Scarlett for a story, creating an identity for her. On one

¹⁴ Judith Thompson uses this term to describe this scene to Jennifer Harvie (In Harvie, "Problematizing Truth" 157 n.6).

level, Scarlett, a woman with cerebral palsy, effectively disrupts the smooth patina of Christine's journalistic enquiry:

CHRISTINE. Scarlett, do you have any hobbies; that is, what do you do between volunteers, do you have favourite soap operas or game shows, or-
SCARLETT. I screw my brains out. (46)

Scarlett tells her story when Christine cautiously admits, "I think everybody deserves to -- have a happy sex life" (46). At first it seems as though Scarlett wins. As she describes her "midnight man" who comes into her room at night, Scarlett physically enacts it:

SCARLETT. He come every time there isn't no moon, in like a big cat sit on the bed, and me, like a big piece of fruit,
[*Dance music starts. SCARLETT gets up*]
explodin in the heat, exploding up and out the whole night, I can MOVE when my boy comes, [*she twirls*] I am movin, I know I am, I am turnin and swishin and holdin,
[*A MAN enters. He and SCARLETT dance romantically around the set. He leaves her back in the chari, immobile, and exits*] (47)

This fantastical moment is liberatory for Scarlett; again, it is not explained as a dream sequence, but stands within the experience of Scarlett. And yet, this mastery is temporary. The power reverts to Christine when she says that she is going to print the story regardless of her promise of secrecy. Scarlett panics. Because of other social circumstances, this story cannot be told:

SCARLETT. PLEASE!! PLEASE!! Please, Christine, my old lady and old man, they're old, my mum's had a stroke, my dad's got MS, this'd kill em, please!!
CHRISTINE. That is not my business, Scarlett, Scarlett, let go of me, LET GO!
SCARLETT. Reverend Pete and everybody down the church, they'd think I was a slut, they'd send me to the freakhouse. (48)

This story that Christine wants to introduce to the newspaper would have untenable social ramifications for Scarlett. Despite the inability to transcend the restrictions of her physical

circumstances, Scarlett's imagination transcends what Christine has. Scarlett negotiates several different identities dependent on context. Power repeatedly shifts in this sequence. Christine attacks Scarlett, viciously beating her in an explosion of her repressed anger. This scene also bridges reality and fantasy; but most importantly it triggers Christine to admit what her loss is: belonging. Scarlett has something which she does not:

CHRISTINE. . . . You shouldn't have made me do that Scarlett. You shouldn't have made me kick you like that. The way you, you, you talked to me like that. Like, like, like you belong. In the world. As if you belong. Where did you get that feeling? I want it. I need it. (49)

The imaginative possibilities of Scarlett release her from a stultifying constriction as a subject constructed in a singular fashion. Played out on her body, her cerebral palsy, like the epilepsy in *Tornado*, gives her a coveted ability: to go to the other side, to belong differently and severally.

Isobel's Story

Thompson's emphasis on the body is again realized in the portrayal of Isobel. Isobel is the ghost of a young Portuguese girl who was murdered seventeen years ago. She is the audience touchstone for the play: she is constant throughout and either participates in or observes all the scenes. Other characters are changeable and seen only briefly, in extreme situations which demand extreme measures. Change is found in stepping outside the cycle of structures which are based on a dynamic of mastery. Isobel presents the journey of a different kind of identity formation. Mastery is critiqued in the presentation of her story as a destabilized, ironized and interrupted narrative.

As Ric Knowles points out, the form of the play itself has ironic resonances with a more traditional dramatic structure: this is not a subversion, but rather a perversion of the Aristotelian

and modernist structures of containment (“The Dramaturgy” 226). With reference to the scene between David and the priest, Knowles illustrates how “the identities of the characters seem to be contingent on the changing stories they tell of themselves and one another” (228). Knowles points out the series of reversals that occurs in this scene and how this relates to Thompson’s discontinuous structure in the play. This perversion is contingent on Isobel’s reading and action in the play itself. The exposition of the play, for example, is a self-conscious address to the audience by Isobel:

ISOBEL. Doan be scare. Doan be scare. [*turns to audience*] Doan be scare of this pickshur! This pickshur is niice, nice! I looove this pickshur, this pickshur is mine! [*gesturing behind her*] Is my house, is my street, is my park, is my people! You know me, you know me very hard! I live next house to you, with my brother and sisters, Maria, Luig, Carla and Romeo we play, we play with your girl, your boy, you know me, you know me very hard. But ... when did tha be? Tha not be now! Tha not be today! I think tha be very long years ago. I think I be old. I think I be very old. Is my house but is not my house is my street but is not my street my people is gone I am lost. I am lost. I AM LOOOOOOOOST!! (15)

Things are and are not what they seem. The exposition of the play sets the scene, by telling us that everything which we seem to think is certain is uncertain. Isobel’s address indicates the stage, the “pickshur” they are about to witness, but her dislocation is palpable. The play becomes a search for this home or identity which also involves a redefinition of what identity might mean. “This pickshur is niice, nice!” Isobel declares. But what follows is anything but nice. The monologue is replete with contradictions. She speaks directly to the audience, telling them, as she tells herself, not to be scared although the stage directions indicate she is terrified. She appears as a nine-year old child, yet part way through the monologue she acknowledges how old she feels. She assures us that this is her neighbourhood, but at the end of the monologue she screams her distress. She is determined to be known, to be recognized. She is both at home and not at home. Although she is

the main character of the play, she is “dead”—her ability to affect and interact with others is limited. Already Isobel and the audience are in the precarious position of having to entertain two thoughts at once. The contradictions within this moment indicate again the paradoxes of the postmodern.

As Isobel is the only character who is consistently present throughout the play, we follow her viewing experience and chart the transformations that she undergoes. These come to her as she observes the story which is unfolding before her and creates her own role in it. The audience is put into a similar position of watching and potential transformation. Isobel in the first half of the play is searching for her helper, someone to take her home. By Act II she has undergone at least one “recognition:” she realizes she is a ghost, unlikely to find home or help, and she becomes an active pursuant of her murderer. Her search for Ben, however, ends with Isobel’s forgiveness for him; she does not kill him as is her intention.

Knowles describes how the transformation of Isobel involves an exhortation to the audience to do as she has done, and take back their lives through an act of will. It is also important to consider the change in the way that Isobel acts. Early in the play she is involved by physically fighting the children, or invisibly shooting the adults in the daycare meeting. These actions and this status are relinquished as Isobel acknowledges her status as a picture.¹⁵ This change occurs in the scene where Joanne, a woman with cancer, describes the kind of death she wants:

ISOBEL. AAHHHHHHHHHHH!! I am dead! I have been bones for seventeen years, missing, missing, my face in the TV and newspapers, posters,

¹⁵ Harvie discusses imagery in *Lion in the Streets* as a “potential destabilizer of meaning” (“Constructing Fictions” 89).

everybody lookin for, nobody find, I am gone, I am dead, I AM DEADLY
 DEAD! Down! It was night, was a lion, roar!! with red eyes: he come
 closer [*silent scream*] come closer [*silent scream*] ROAR tear my throat
 out ROAR tear my eyes out ... ROAR I am kill! I am kill! I am no more!

[*Music*]

[*to JOANNE*] We are both pictures now. WHO WILL TAKE US? WHO
 WILL TAKE US TO HEAVEN, HA? (36-37)

Isobel's journey is to a space of what others call redemption or moments of grace, or what I consider to be a configuration of a postmodern identity. Here Isobel's absence in this world is emphasized. She is "no more." Rather than a nihilistic state, this can be construed as a positive space of resolution: she learns to tell stories differently.

Isobel's temporary resolution of her own story is one of the ways in which she achieves agency. Although the other characters seem to be still mired in a state of contradictory discourses and circumstances, Isobel comes to represent a different kind of identity; she overcomes the limitations of acting to dominate or control. Isobel achieves a certain status which is conveyed in the ironic iconography of a religious transcendence. This can appear as an ironic comment on a traditional dramatic structure in which the movement of the play is a journey to closure: where Isobel is finally able to take back her life, to quiet her speaking heart. She finally tells the story of her rape and murder by Ben at the end of the play. She is only able to come to some kind of closure when she is at ease with the contradictions of her being. She comes to see Ben in the graveyard, and tells the story of the day of her abduction. The exchange is an attempt to assert her reality:

BEN. I'm hallucinatin.

ISOBEL. I'm Isobel.

BEN. You're a picture.

ISOBEL. I'm Isobel. (63)

She is able to “take back her life” not by killing him, but by forgiving him. In her last speech, the stage directions indicate she is an adult now (63). The tornados, the circles, the chaos of the other characters continue. It is only Isobel who is able to achieve an ironic catharsis by removing herself from the stories, by acknowledging both her status as a picture, and her participation in others’ stories. She is able to tell her story and give others hope by the sense she makes out of her own story-telling and by removing herself from the binarist configurations.

This reading of the character of Isobel may appear to be smoothing over contradictions, rather than highlighting them. The end of *Lion in the Streets* seems odd. Does Isobel forgive her killer, and therefore, as a good, self-sacrificing female, refuse to blame or to demand justice? Isobel clearly is working within the story-telling of Roman Catholic iconography; but as the stage directions say, Isobel ascends to heaven, “*in her mind*” (63). It is Isobel’s specific story which defines her transformation.

“As-if” identities: the contingency of community

Isobel’s imaginative ending to her story is one way to read her agency. In addition to the “as-if” enactment of the ending, Isobel’s resolution comes in her association with Sherry’s story. In *Lion in the Streets* the self/other split is displaced by a dynamic of identity and agency which is based within community. The imaginative incorporation and reworking of identity occurs in the ways in which actors transform from one character to another as subjectivity is at the same time unique and yet repeatable. Several times characters literally take up the experiences of other characters. Sometimes the transformation from one character to another happens on stage; it can even be integrated into the action. For example, when Laura brings up the story of Maria to her

husband George and insists, “how could you forget?” George eventually responds by taking on the role of Maria and repeating Laura’s words:

[GEORGE *grabs a tablecloth and wraps it around his head, like a shawl, speaking in a Portuguese accent*]
 GEORGE. How could I forget, how could I forget?
 LAURA. George.
 GEORGE. Looka this. Me? I donta forget nothing.
 LAURA. George I’m going to bed. Molly gets up in two hours and it’s always me that gets up with her of course.
 [*She walks around the circle*]
 GEORGE/MARIA. LAURA.
 [*Now he speaks as MARIA, ISOBEL’S mother. ISOBEL recognizes her*]
 LAURA. George! Come to bed.
 GEORGE/MARIA. LAURA.
 LAURA. Maria. (25-26)

Scenes and characters blend one into the other, illustrating the permeability of both. Not only does the play bleed from one scene to the next, but subjects live according to the stories of others, mirroring them through action and word. The embeddedness of identity in the *other* is complex: George plays Maria who describes how she becomes her husband, Antonio. As she folds the laundry she senses his experience:

MARIA. Like I fold myself too, and I go in his body, maybe, you know his ... hand to, wipe off his face when he hot and too sweat I am there;
 [*She walks operatically down-stage and delivers the rest of the speech, which should be like an aria*]
 I am foldin a light sheet of blue then and sudden, I can see through his eye, am at subway, in him, he stands on the platform, is empty, empty and I am his head, circles and circles like red birds flying around and around I am his throat, tight, cannot breathe enough air in my body the floor the floor move, and sink in, rise up rise like a wall like a killin wave turn turn me in circles with teeth in circles and under and over I fall!
 [*ISOBEL falls on an imaginary track in front of her mother*]
 I fall on the silver track nobody move I hearing the sound. The sound of the rats in the tunnel their breath like a basement these dark rats running running towards me I am stone I am earth cannot scream cannot move the rats tramp ... trample my body flat-ten and every bone splinter like ... (27)

In this scene both Isobel and her mother dramatize the story which is told to Laura. There is both an inscribing and an undermining of this event. Although Maria says that she experiences the fall on the tracks, it is Isobel who acts it out for the audience. The story is told by Maria, who is played by George. The effect is an odd resonance, for this is Antonio's story in the first place. There is a metatheatrical tone to the story as well, as the style of her delivery according to the stage directions is meant to be operatic. The story and the sense of self is not fragmented in this particular scene so much as it is shared.

In this way, identity is not so much owned, as shared by a community. It comes through and is situated within a community, within discourse, within several bodies. Although Thompson may consider this a tapping into a universalism, it may surely be considered a universality only insofar as similar circumstances are found. These are often the stories of marginalized characters, of women, for example. Sue comforts Isobel early in the play by relating a similar story to Isobel's. Sue and her sisters were terrorized by boys on bicycles who shot arrows at them. The stones that are thrown in Isobel's interaction and the arrows in Sue's story recall the children's rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." Names and naming, however, are very important in this play, especially naming home, experience, and ultimately identity. We are subjects both through the sequence of positions which we find discursively and the ways in which we relate to them as real. We empathize and find ourselves through others, just as Sue and Isobel do in their story telling.

That accumulation of small stories contributes to an ironizing of the narrative at the level of the play as a whole. It is difficult, for example, to make connections between characters, to tell

any kind of story of the whole which makes sense. Individual scenes are quickly and deftly sketched, but the connections are seemingly arbitrary. Rather than a unifying story, there are several smaller stories within stories, in a Chinese box structure.¹⁶

What the play involves, more than anything else, is a relinquishing of mastery. The result of such an involvement in the audience is striking. What is almost completely denied in *Lion in the Streets* is a specific implied singular viewing position. Isobel is always there; she guides us tangentially on her journey, and yet her resolution and ascension are almost so naive that they are unpalatable; it is impossible to configure the resolution as anything beyond a very specific narrative ending for Isobel herself. The other characters are left at loose ends, as is the audience, with resolution given to only one of the many we have seen. The options for a coherent sense of self may seem simplistic; the options for the postmodernist identity may seem overwhelming. “Take back your life,” Isobel exhorts us, but this is only in the “as if” key of telling stories (McHale 32). Stuart Hall also acknowledges the importance of coming to terms with the story-telling of one’s identity:

They [identities] arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the “suturing into the story” through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field. (*Questions* 4)

It is in this imaginary, fantasmatic realm where the plays of Thompson are most effective. The ending of *Lion in the Streets* is bittersweet: we are left to disentangle the strands of right/wrong;

¹⁶ David and the priest exchange stories. Rodney and Michael fight over stories from the past. The stories and interpretations for events that occur in the Sugar Meeting are also examples of the layers of story-telling.

vengeance/forgiveness; good/evil; as we want the security of answers and yet also the pluralism of difference. It is again useful to return to the paradigm of postmodernism for a consideration of this plurality:

While many reject the modernist “view from nowhere,” they question whether postmodernism would not lead us to the equally problematic “everywhere.” Are coherent theory and politics possible within a postmodern position? (Nicholson, “Introduction” 9)

Defining difference is paramount. These viewing positions are in an either/or configuration. A different kind of specificity, however, is possible in a postmodern frame of reference, one which is temporary and contributes to an identity positioning which affords agency, and yet does not imply unproblematic cohesion.

Conclusion

In the plays of Judith Thompson, there is a different kind of dramaturgy at work, one which demands a different kind of engagement on the part of the audience, a kind of fearful play. In his formulation of the dramaturgy of the perverse, Ric Knowles describes how this kind of playwriting provides emancipatory potential for its audience in the subject positions it offers (“The Dramaturgy” 234). Recognizing these positions as constructed, yet taking them up nonetheless, is, as Jennifer Harvie puts it, “a politics of the provisional” (“Constructing Fictions” 91). What I am suggesting here is the way in which this provisionality and plurality of subjectivity are linked to a tension between mastery and non-mastery and how this can be of use to a feminist politics. The characters only temporarily attain agency by acquiescing to a discursive construction, but this proves limiting. It is an important part of Thompson’s dramaturgy that her plays and her

characters are rooted in coherent concepts of the subject: part of their power is this ability to affect the audience so deeply. It is important, of course, that we see/witness the positions which the characters assume. The experiences of these characters on this level are affecting, even emotionally draining. This functions well and effectively, and is one way in which Thompson's plays have profound effects of identification. And yet this identification is also unsettled.

This unsettling occurs on many levels. The positions of the characters are changeable. Positions are relinquished as other opportunities arise, or as power valences shift. The serialization of these positions destabilizes any coherent sense of self. If these positions are many, they are also transitory and achieve only temporary change. Furthermore, the abusive situations within these plays perpetuate the same kinds of subjects. The discursive construction of subjects is foregrounded, both by the discursive authorities which operate as touchstones for identification, and also by the seriality of the positions which are taken up. The serialization does not afford any fundamental change in the institutions and discourses which prove to be limiting and inextricably linked to a binarist right/wrong, dominant/subordinate form of interaction.

It is only in the reworking of the "constitutive outside" that substantial changes in articulations of being and of social interactions can take place. It is the very incompleteness of this formation of identity which lends it political effectiveness:

That identifications shift does not necessarily mean that one identification is repudiated for another; that shifting may well be one sign of hope for the possibility of avowing an expansive set of connections. This will not be a simple matter of "sympathy" with another's position, since sympathy involves a substitution of oneself for another that may well be a colonization of the other's position *as one's own*. And it will not be the abstract inference of an equivalence based on an insight into the partially constituted character of all social identity. It will be a matter of tracing the ways in which identification is implicated in what it

excludes, and to follow the lines of that implication for the map of future community that it might yield. (Butler 118-19)

Figuring out desires, and articulating what one wants entails choices. By highlighting the exclusions and reworking of the “constitutive outside,” Thompson suggests a different dynamic of identity formation which does not involve imperialism or colonization. Located at contradictory interstices, thwarted by the dependence of the “I” in “You,” characters who most embody this state of ambiguity are caught in uncertain, transitional spaces; they are unable to articulate from a coherent space. There are recurring images in the plays of Judith Thompson, sites of ambivalence, where new ways of thinking about identity seem to be possible: characters who sail over the cracks,¹⁷ circular images of tornados, the recurring image of the baby as a screaming into being of the postmodern identity, the fractured beings of the abject. In particular, the ghost-like presence of Isobel demonstrates the different kind of reading and discursive negotiation which is necessary in order to achieve such an identity: she is able to find a story and a way of telling herself that allows her a negotiation of space in the world. The combined effect of the whirling contradictions of the postmodern terrain and the painful situatedness of the subject makes for a disturbing, often confusing viewing experience.

This is the territory, then, which this reading of the postmodern feminist identity negotiates. The where-do-I-stand and the what-do-I-do confusion which makes up the who-am-I in a postmodern world inevitably lives in a body, a gendered identity. Identity is perhaps best conceived as a “mode of holding together the epistemological and the ontological” (Probyn 4), for indeed, the ontological is what has been left out of much postmodern theory. This articulation is

¹⁷ Thompson in letter to Knowles dated 24 October 1984 (Qtd. in Harvie, “Problematizing Truth” 31).

realized by the reintegration of the material within and through the discursive in the plays of Judith Thompson. A similar template of identity can be seen in the plays of Margaret Hollingsworth; her strategies of articulation of this postmodern feminist identity, however, are much more narratively bound, less physically raw. But as I have shown with Thompson, the two are inextricably linked. In Hollingsworth as in Thompson, my reading of the plays will focus on the interplay of these determinants of identity, emphasizing how a mind/body split is reworked in postmodernism.

CHAPTER THREE

Stories that Matter: The Plays of Margaret Hollingsworth

JACK. Like a slimey green rug, heavin under your feet--and when you walk on it you feel it squelch ... you feel it under your feet, and then you're up to your knees in it and then it's up to your chin. They're on your shoulders, in your ears ... they're takin over! It's frogs. Your friggin frogs!
JENNY. Do somethi-i-i-i-ng! I hate them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Ki-i-i-i-ill! (*The House that Jack Built* 22)

Unlike the “unfeminist feminist” position of Judith Thompson, the feminist politics of Margaret Hollingsworth are clear. In 1985 in an impassioned article for *Canadian Theatre Review* entitled “Why We Don’t Write,” she advocates affirmative action to bring about change, arguing that theatre in English Canada, in particular, is terribly conservative and not receptive to works by women (26-27). In *Language in her Eye* she indicates what else must change: “Theatre is the last male cultural bastion, the men are doing their best to hold the fort and the walls aren’t about to tumble without a huge assault from playgoers” (144). Although she is persistent in her own work, she is not optimistic about immediate change for women playwrights:

No, I guess I don’t see the male hierarchy in the artistic directorates of theatres in Canada changing. Even when the tendency is towards change, I think women have become honed down very quickly to that male point of view. They have to if they’re going to survive. (“Margaret Hollingsworth Interview” 146)

Hollingsworth’s remarks come from personal experience. In the introduction to *Endangered Species*, she declares the collection was written “out of perversity, I suspect, and certainly not out of any commercial instinct” (7). She undertook the publication of it herself: “I became so tired of having plays just lying around with nothing happening to them. It occurred to me a long time ago that I should publish them myself, but that takes a lot of money and energy” (“Margaret Hollingsworth Interview” 148). Clearly the trajectory of Hollingsworth’s career suggests a playwright who is battling to write differently, to change audiences, to get them to think

differently. Her feminism comes in her forthright critique of the circumstances of women which she represents in her plays: “I call it as I see it,” she says in the introduction to *Endangered Species* (8). Her feminism also appears in the ways in which she challenges the conditions of playwrighting for women in Canada. My analysis will demonstrate the way in which her plays rewrite forms of identity as well. Before I examine the substance of her plays, I will situate Hollingsworth’s plays within a framework of reception and criticism. These remarks are crucial in order to contrast my discussion of Hollingsworth, as well as to account for what I consider to be a rather negative reception of these plays.

Reception

Hollingsworth’s plays are seldom produced; as she herself states, much of her feedback comes from academic circles (“Margaret Hollingsworth Interview” 149). The response to her plays by critics is harsh, suggests Hollingsworth:

With a couple of exceptions in Vancouver, I think I’ve been treated very roughly. Either ignored or absolutely panned with no attempt to understand where I’m coming from or what I’m trying to do. (*The Work* 99)

Generally it is her plays which are more conservative in structure and content that have garnered more attention. *Ever Loving* was praised for its “humanity” in the Toronto production (Conlogue, “Humanity” E8). Gina Mallet commends its ability to communicate true emotion: “Hollingsworth’s voice is thin, but it’s clear, and the emotions it evokes are profound because the actors invest them with a truth that is palpable” (D1). When other more experimental plays are also reviewed on this criterion, the success of the production is still linked to the ability of the

actors to communicate “truth.” Robert Crew finds the Tarragon revival of *Alli Alli Oh* and *Islands* in 1986 uninspiring:

Although I like *Islands* slightly more than the surrealist *Alli Alli Oh*, my problem with both plays is that they lack any spark of humanity. Despite the accomplished work of Gilsenan [the actor playing Alli], the relationship between Alli and Muriel does not ring true. (“Hollingsworth Plays” G2)

Part of the problem with these plays, it seems, is their dour perspective on life: “The message from these joyless, obscure plays seems to be that, man or woman, we are all islands; all relationships are doomed to failure” (G2). *War Babies* does not fair any better in reviews. This time Crew begins his review with an overt admission:

Margaret Hollingsworth is surely one of the more puzzling of contemporary Canadian playwrights.

It’s obvious to all that her work is strikingly original and written with keen intelligence. Yet it’s all too easy to get lost within those intricate mental landscapes. (“Intelligent Writer” n.p.)

Although Crew praises the “intellectual exercise,” he laments its lack of drama:

As theatre, however, it becomes dense, difficult, and ultimately unsatisfying in its lack of true emotional content. It’s all too easy to switch off and let things drift by. (n.p.)

Bob Pennington leaves *War Babies* “with a clear impression that the highly intelligent and commendably-compassionate Hollingsworth had exceeded her considerable ability” (n.p.). There is something disturbing but difficult about these plays. They do not easily satisfy. As Robert Crew says, “. . . what is being said about relationships has an unpleasantly bitter and pessimistic ring” (“Intelligent Writer” n.p.). It is both this unpalatable message and the unusual dramatic form which Crew finds frustrating:

Hollingsworth has some strong and vital thoughts to convey. She has yet, to my mind, found the right way of saying them in a form that constitutes compelling drama. (n.p.)

In a review of *Willful Acts*, a collection of Hollingsworth's plays, Don Rubin uses *Diving* to illustrate both the potential, but also the limitations of her work:

Here again, one finds all of the Hollingsworth signatures--multiple realities, a multiplicity of motives, loneliness and confusion at the centre of a female life, with anger, violence, and death just a breath away. One finds also a dramatist well enough in command of her tools, yet who tends only superficially to explore the essential questions her works raise. (137-38)

Again Rubin's remarks indicate a preference for a particular kind of psychological study. What these reviews indicate is a predilection on the part of reviewers to look for a recognizable, forgiving, and optimistic view of humanity as communicated by the playwright, with satisfying and familiar emotional content for the audience. This desire can be linked to a preference for classic realism. As Catherine Belsey says,

Classic realism tends to offer as the "obvious" basis of its intelligibility the assumption that character, unified and coherent, is the source of action. . . . inconsistency of character or the inappropriateness of particular actions to particular characters is seen as a weakness. (*Critical Practice* 73)

Hollingsworth herself says that her plays do not provide for catharsis ("Collaborators" 17), nor do they necessarily present characters to emulate. It is often the unusual form and particularly the unusual use of narrative in Hollingsworth's plays which bring about such uncertain, unsatisfied responses.

Like Judith Thompson, Margaret Hollingsworth is one of the playwrights that Ric Knowles mentions in his discussion of postmodernism in Canadian drama as a "dramaturgy of the perverse:"

Hollingsworth neither rejects the symbolic structures of modernism nor simply parodies them; rather she is engaged in a process of creatively perverting and reshaping those structures. (“The Dramaturgy” 230)

This creative perversion also extends to the forms of agency which the characters in her plays wield. Building on Knowles’ formulation and investigating the possibilities for a feminist agency within this postmodern perversion, I will discuss these selected plays of Margaret Hollingsworth with attention to the formulation of identity within the context of postmodern feminism: *Mother Country*, *The Apple in the Eye*, *Diving*, *War Babies*, *Endangered Species*, *Alli Alli Oh*, *Islands* and *In Confidence*. Here I will demonstrate the feminist politics of Margaret Hollingsworth, with attention to the possibilities for identity which her plays suggest.

***Mother Country*: story telling with the mother**

Mother Country, Hollingsworth’s first full length play, addresses one of Hollingsworth’s key thematic concerns: home. In an interview, Hollingsworth describes this continuing preoccupation:

Home comes in again and again in my work. It’s about relating to the place that you’re in and finding a place for yourself in a foreign environment, which is what I’m doing. Feeling out of context, out of place, motivates me and informs my work. Without it I wouldn’t be writing anywhere. It’s very important to me and yet at the same time it’s unsettling; it’s something I have to keep exploring. (*The Work* 93)

Home as a metaphor of identity recurs in Hollingsworth’s work and will be considered in more detail in the discussion of *Endangered Species*. The feeling of displacement which Hollingsworth describes here is key to my analysis of *Mother Country*. Although this play can also be read

allegorically as Canada's separation from England,¹⁸ my concern is to consider it as an exploration of the way in which the dynamic of identity is conceived. In this play, the self-contained individual is constantly impinged upon by the *other*, by a community, by discourse. The dynamic of isolation/imbrication in this play, in particular, is explored in the dynamic of child/parent.

Like many of Hollingsworth's plays, *Mother Country* is haunted by the absence of the father. The action of the play is straightforward. A family (*sans* father) is united to celebrate the retirement of Janet, the mother. Daughters Sally, Doreen, and Fran, Douglas, Doreen's husband, and Maurice, the neighbour, congregate at Janet's island home. The setting is odd: not only is the house on an island, but it has also been built to represent a captain's cabin. Therefore the living room where the play takes place is round, with porthole-shaped windows that look down to the garden (iv). The action of the play is confessional, as family secrets are revealed, and Sharon, the father's new fiancée appears as a catalyst to the action.

Mother and daughters both are obsessed with Rory, Janet's ex-husband. Rory is a media personality; his one "appearance" in the play is on television. Only his voice is heard; his image does not appear. He announces his new campaign in politics; Sharon has arrived in order to request that the family keep a low profile. The play eventually reveals that Rory and Janet have re-established a friendship, a revelation which causes much disharmony among the daughters who feel as though they have been denied his presence from birth and who resent the lies that have been told to "protect" them. They thought he walked out. As it turns out, Janet threw him out of the house. Says Doreen, "Why did you tell us all those lies? (*to DOUGLAS*) I used to spend

¹⁸ See Hollingsworth's remarks in *The Work* 98.

nights crying for my father” (57). Janet, however, seems to have come to terms with her life and her relationship with her ex-husband; her new found freedom is to do a doctorate.

The concentration in this play is on the displaced children. The abandoning father as a media personality may also indicate the lingering, amorphous patriarchal containment which engulfs the individual. The mother, on the other hand, who has made peace with the father, is also rejected and rejecting. The identities of the children, then, are left without moorings. The play is about their journey to come to terms with their own rootlessness. In this way, the nexus of the play in my reading is a search for a way of being which is a process of creation and story-telling. In this way, the play uses realistic theatrical conventions which are at the same time undermined.

In strategies of realism, the past figures largely. In particular, psychological reasons can be found for present problems. Janet’s children look for themselves in their past and in their heritage. Early in the play, they look at old photographs and attempt to relive their past. It is as though a realist dynamic is being self-consciously played out: the characters are searching to maintain an essential connection between who they were then and who they are now. There is one photo, in particular, which provokes an impassioned discussion. In the photo, Sally, who is slightly mentally delayed, has a bucket on her head. “Were we always cruel to each other?” Doreen asks (24). Janet had thrown Fran into the water as a child to teach her how to swim. Janet dismisses the question, saying they were all survivors, but Fran persists:

FRAN. Do I look like a survivor? (*to* DOREEN) How do you see me? (*to* JANET) How do you see us, Janet? Do you still see her [SALLY] with a bucket over her head? How do we see you? You’re not still the same person who threw me into that water ... we’ve all changed, haven’t we?
(24)

Despite Fran's assertion that they have changed, the daughters still search for a past reason for their identity. The development of characters in this sense is psychologically sound: the present is explained by the past. In this perspective we can see the development of character as progressive, rational, explicable. The daughters have not made good because of both the mother and the father.

For a further examination of these strategies of realism within the play, let us turn to Catherine Belsey's definition: "Classic realism is characterized by *illusionism*, narrative which leads to *closure*, and a *hierarchy of discourses* which establishes the 'truth' of the story" (*Critical Practice* 70). Through these realist conventions, the reader or spectator is invited to construct a particular history:

Through the presentation of an intelligible history which effaces its own status as discourse, classic realism proposes a model in which author and reader are subjects who are the source of shared meanings, the origin of which is mysteriously extra-discursive. It thus does the work of ideology in suppressing the relationship between language and subjectivity. (72)

These characteristics of classic realism are both employed and subverted in *Mother Country*. On the one hand, the history and possible future of the daughters, as well as their subjectivity as whole, contained individuals, are established as historically and psychologically inevitable at the level of the plot. On the other hand, the story-telling of the daughters is emphasized. The coherence of their identities is put into question by comments such as Fran's remarks. Illusionism and fourth wall realism are maintained, but these are also ironized. Again the tension of mastery and non-mastery is key to the formation of identity of the characters. The father is both present and absent by being on television. Similarly, narrative which leads to closure is both suggested and undermined. The enigma around which the story turns is the absence of the father. As the story

progresses, however, the enigma also becomes the story of the absence of the mother. When Janet goes for a swim, and her clothes are discovered by the beach, she is thought to be dead. Janet's disappearance causes havoc in the household. Searches are initiated; a helicopter is ordered. The daughters celebrate the "death" of the mother. Janet's disappearance is brief, however. She returns, puts back the celebratory brandy and re-establishes order. In this way, the story is both done and undone. The enigma is both present and absent. Expectations are both set up and then thwarted.

In this way, characters are constructed who are both whole and fragmentary. The overall impression of the play is one of psychological realism. And yet, at the same time, this coherence of identity is undermined and shown to be representationally contingent. One of the ways in which subjectivity is constantly put into question is through the device of game-playing. The daughters decide to dress up as one of themselves in the past. As it turns out, they all decide to dress up like their mother, Janet. They imitate her gestures and her voice. Each comes to make a confession about herself: Doreen admits she failed her real estate exams; Sally tells of a failed rebellious trip to town; Fran admits her own self-hatred (34-35). In their appropriation of their mother, they speak their own internalization of her standards and control. Their subjectivity is contingent on hers. The daughters' imitation of Janet is followed by a game of *Murder in the Dark*: "In this game Janet's death is inescapable as all the women playing it are images of Janet" (Parker 103). Through an ironized repetition of Janet, the subjectivity of the daughters is voiced. There is a simultaneous installing and undermining of identity.

Mother Country is one of Hollingsworth's earlier plays; in the introduction she describes the play's flirtation with naturalist and realist conventions:

The dialogue and action in this play are not intended to be straightforwardly naturalistic. A director should allow the details to build up on each other and the oddness and discordancies to be felt, until a slightly surreal effect is achieved reminiscent of a painting from the magic realism school. ([iv])

Dorothy Parker points out such surrealistic elements in the play as the helicopter and Sharon the fiancée as *deus ex machina*; she also notes a contrast in the symbolic setting with the “colloquial flatness in the dialogue to produce the incongruity basic to surrealistic style” (104). These incongruous features suggest the simultaneous existence of several levels of reality, which contributes to destabilized and fantasmatic identities. Mastery of an action or of a particular meaning is undermined. The “death” of the mother, for example, is always only imaginary. The most substantial act of defiance is Fran’s, in her beheading of the chrysanthemums. And yet also this act of destruction does nothing more for Fran than situate her within the same cycle of triumph/defeat. In this way, Fran’s attempts to act out against her mother and the confines of her situation do not achieve clearcut resolution. This qualifying of action is linked to a depiction of identity as also always in this tension of mastery and non-mastery. Hollingsworth says of the characters she constructs, “I tend to write a lot about people on a knife edge, about an emotional world where one leap in the wrong direction is going to be catastrophic” (*The Work* 93). This borderline condition is related to the destabilized linear narrative in Hollingsworth’s plays. This relationship between destabilized identity and destabilized narrative becomes more apparent in Hollingsworth’s later plays.

***The Apple in the Eye* and *Diving*: stories with no “hard, bright kernels of meaning”**

I am considering these two short plays together because of their similarity in content and form. In each play a woman is depicted as isolated and controlled by an offstage male voice. *The Apple in the Eye* opens with Gemma doing the cross-word puzzle in bed, calling out for help with answers to her husband Martin who is watching television in the bedroom. His construction of her is evident in many ways. He easily comes up with the correct responses to the puzzle. His answers are automatic. He calls the rules of the game:

GEMMA. My husband Martin taught me to do crosswords. It's really very easy. I read out the clues. He gives me the answers. I do them in bed on a Sunday afternoon. (19)

Here even the syntax reflects the order and routine which defines Gemma's life: the word order is simply subject-verb-object. Gemma describes the routine of their weekends, a routine which this short play depicts. It is Martin's voice which orders the actions of their lives: from doing the crossword puzzle to making tea to making love. Martin's external ordering of the world does not preclude any agency on Gemma's, but it certainly defines the parameters of her life. His voice offstage and his recorded voice lecturing are the structuring principles for Gemma's world. Martin's job is in Artificial Intelligence. Like the father in *Mother Country* who is involved in the media and Colin in *War Babies* who is an international journalist, the male character in *Apple in the Eye* is associated with a larger, media savvy world. The men are associated with a more pervasive discursive realm which constructs much of the “truth” the female characters experience.

Within the limits of her world, however, Gemma has agency. She undermines the authority of Martin's voice by interpreting his words differently. She imaginatively uses Martin's answers

for the crossword puzzle. One of Martin's answers, "arcane," for example, suggests to Gemma fantastical imagery. She describes her mind as an apple, split in two:

GEMMA. . . . One half of my mind contemplates the possibility of arcane amusements [*she giggles*], while the other half comes slowly to life, and the golden spider with eight-inch legs and a tiny diamond head nestling inside the etching, emerges and bites into the apple which is the two halves of my mind. (21)

Where Martin's responses are definitions, literally based, Gemma's creations are fluid and imaginary twists, inspired by Martin's words and yet spoken differently. In this way, Gemma takes her words from Martin, but uses them for a different effect.

As Martin controls her cross-word game, so the discourses of the patriarchy provide the discursive authorities which are the touchstones of her existence. Again, twisting the scene for her own purposes, Gemma ironically refers to Martin as Marat and playfully describes a bathtub scene:

GEMMA. . . . Here beside me lies my husband Martin. Large and pale, since he works with his mind and not with his body. [*Spells M-a-r ... a-t. Pause.*] Here beside me lies Marat in his bath. He has been bitten by the golden spider. His head drips blood, while into one ear, through a small plastic plug, flow the latest and greatest exploits of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and the Calgary Stampeders. My only love. (22)

Gemma refers to the discourses, like the sports play, the lecture, the science fiction reading, which construct Martin's subjectivity as well. Her mind is an apple, split in two whose shape reminds her of the buttocks of Saskia. The discourses which define Gemma and Martin are undermined in this way, playfully given a different meaning and significance by her imagination.

Gemma wrests a certain amount of control from Martin in these playful re-imaginings and use of Marat, the picture of Saskia, and her apple imagery. But in the final analysis, nothing in the

discursive situation of Gemma changes. Her agency is limited and virtually unnoticeable to Martin. He does not see the apple which is her eye/I which tumbles out and is now on the kitchen floor. He performs a “perfect lobotomy” (29) on the apple with his toe as he accidentally kicks it. We do not see this scene. We only hear Gemma shoo him out of the kitchen, offering to make the tea herself so that she can find the halves of her apple. She finds them, puts them together, “almost a perfect seal,” (29) and returns to the domestic duties which define her. But she is unable to make decisions on her own, even those most trivial:

GEMMA. . . . Almost a perfect seal . . . You’re getting smaller. Now the tray he said . . . And the mugs. We’ll have the Mickey Mouse mugs just for a laugh. No . . . he mightn’t think it’s funny. [*Lights dim as she calls.*]
 Martin? Should we have the Mickey Mouse mugs just for a laugh? Martin?
 MARTIN. Bring it in a goddamned samovar. I don’t care. (29)

The imaginative apple imagery is only effective for Gemma. In this way, her subversion of his world, particularly in the re-use of language, is limited.

In *Diving*, similar techniques are used to differentiate between male and female worlds. Again a male voice-off directs the isolated woman on stage. “Dive, Viveca,” he exhorts over and over. The stage is bare; Viveca is dressed in a maple-leaf decorated bathing-suit. Although she wears earplugs, she is still able to hear the male voice giving her directions; she has internalized the dictates of the male authority. Her actions are directed by his voice and she responds to him by “waiting for approval which does not come” (115), by looking up “fearfully” (117), and then walking up “petulantly” (117), at which point she says, “No one ever tells me what to do” (117). And yet they do, for Viveca does dive, after saying to herself, “Dive dog” (118), and then responding to the voice with a bark and a whimper. Although she parodies the roles she plays, her ability to act out differently is dubious:

MALE VOICE. Now!

VIVECA. Yes?

MALE VOICE. Yes.

VIVECA. Yes.

MALE VOICE. Yes!

VIVECA. Now! [*She dives, lights snap off. Blackout. . . .*] (118)

The dialogue reflects the ways in which Viveca obeys and acquiesces to the instructions of the male voice; she repeats his words, but she is unable to repeat them differently. Rather her actions are within the form orchestrated by the male voice. Imagery comments on the subjectivity of Viveca. When the lights come on after her dive, the skeleton of a salmon dangles at the place where Viveca's head was. The reprise of the male voice at the end is significant. His tone is now less authoritative, but he still commands Viveca. She attempts to follow his instructions, but is confused. She rewinds the tape, reducing the voice to gibberish, and it starts again. She follows the instructions as the lights go down, focussing on the water at the bottom of the pool.

Like Gemma, where Viveca is at the beginning of the play and where she is at the end are not much different. Although the taped voice is less sinister and she can control it by rewinding it, reducing it to gibberish, she still plays the tape again and follows the instructions. She is taking up a position at the end of the play similar to the one at the beginning: the repetition of her role is not cited or repeated ironically, rather the serialized pattern of her actions is emphasized. The mechanisms of the control of Viveca have been revealed, and have been shown to be constructed and themselves controllable, but it also appears as though Viveca has internalized the voice. The agency which she is afforded is limited and as the final position shows, involves a repetition of subjectivity with only minor modifications.

In summary, these two short plays show isolated women, controlled and constructed in their actions by male voices. Gemma and Viveca, within these realms, resist through strategies which take up the discursive measures already present. Nonetheless, this agency is limited. The positions which the characters take up are not significantly different; rather they are serialized, repetitive, and continue to play out the same discursive constructions, as they are dependent on shifting relations of power.

These limitations of agency, however, are connected to the limitations of the concept of a self as a fixed, contained individual. Defined and limited by hierarchical interaction, binarist ways of positioning the subject necessarily maintain a cycle of domination and subordination of limited political effect. The most interesting impetus for change comes in the ways in which a new model for identity is suggested. Another kind of story-telling is implicit in the play which suggests a revisioning of other narrative constructions of identity. The story, in some ways, is untold by theatrical devices which contrast with the dialogue.

In *The Apple in the Eye*, for example, the point of intelligibility of the story is geared toward a reading which involves a constant awareness of at least two levels. The audience is privy to both the perception of the world as seen by Gemma and as ordered by Martin. This play was originally written as a radio drama, and therefore the interior monologues would be signalled by a different tone of voice or by the proximity of the microphone. The stage version suggests that these differences in space and mind be realized through lighting effects: the lights dim when Martin and Gemma interact; they remain bright for Gemma's interior and imaginative moments. The dimensions of the worlds are closely defined and there are a few moments of overlap. The effect is a realization of identity as a constant movement, located between the dark and the light.

Ironically here the real world of Martin is in dark whereas the inner imaginative world of Gemma is in light. Gemma is shown in two worlds: her inner imaginative space and the outer external space in which she interacts with Martin. This binary itself, however, is also destabilized. The way in which it is theatrically signified is different than one would normally expect. The inner world is brightly lit; it is not the usual dark, mysterious world of the unconscious. In this way, the audience is encouraged to be a part of the world of Gemma's imagination. And yet both worlds are equally "real." They exist simultaneously and are juggled accordingly.

In addition, the two worlds collide. The imaginary world intrudes on the external world. Martin splits the apple, and at the end of the play, Gemma imagines how he swallows it whole. This overlap defies the perfect containment of boundaries. The images of Gemma are messy: the bloody Marat, the corpulent Saskia, the apple/spider scenario. The destabilizing effect may not come about in the overt presentation of Gemma's subversion so much as in the effect of the images and the interpretative task of the audience. As Ric Knowles says,

Audiences are left, not with hard bright kernels of meaning, but with the exposed modes and mechanisms of the production of image and interpretation. ("The Dramaturgy" 230)

Images are polyvalent. The apple is both the mind of Gemma and the fruit of Eve; the eye is how Gemma is perceived and perceives; it is also her "I," her sense of identity. The prismatic resonance of such images makes closure for the audience difficult. Interrogation may not occur on stage, in the circumstances of Gemma, but it may occur in the work which the audience does as an interrogator of images, who is taunted, like Martin, with the possibility of swallowing the apple whole. Mastery of meaning is disallowed.

Diving works in a similar fashion. A very short piece, there is little time or inclination to develop a psychologically motivated character or scenario. Viveca's limited subversion in the dialogue is counteracted by theatrical and imagistic interrogation which prevent the containment of identity. For example, there are several levels of voice which interact in this play. Story-telling is emphasized and linked to the formation of identity. A male voice instructs Viveca to dive. Viveca also relates the stories that her mother and her neighbour told her, instructing her where to live, and how to behave. Viveca herself describes her continuation of that cycle. Her mother gave her a dog:

VIVECA. . . . I called it dog. Dog come here. Dog fetch. Dog jump. Over the balcony, down to the parking lot. [*She laughs.*] Dive dog!
 MALE VOICE. Dive Viveca! [*She looks up fearfully.*]
 VIVECA. But he didn't. Dogs don't. (117)

Viveca is associated with the images of the dog and the salmon in the play. She barks like her dog and dives like the salmon. The stage directions indicate:

She dives, lights snap off. Blackout. A spot roams around the stage looking for her and finds the skeleton of a salmon dangling at the level where VIVECA's head was. A disembodied male voice sings "Oh For the Wings of a Dove." (118)

The transformation of Viveca is ironic. She is not able to be contained by any of the appellations which are given to her. She keeps coming back in slightly different guises. In the opening she is shown wearing an "*absurd swimsuit decorated with maple leaves*" (115); after her dive, she returns in a different ensemble: "*VIVECA enters briskly, no longer wearing leaves. She wears a jaunty maple-leaf patterned swimsuit and carries the towel over her shoulder*" (118). The image and the ending are ambiguous. On the one hand, the costume change signifies nothing but a superficial change in Viveca. She is less fearful, more assured, but as I earlier indicate, she still

follows directions. The leaves now have become a part of her suit; she is less fearful, but perhaps also less resistant. She is internalizing her subjection. On the other hand, the dog/salmon/leaf imagery destabilize any essential concept of self.

As in *The Apple in the Eye*, mechanisms of resistance are found in the layering and multiplicity of identities which are presented. The potential for change is there; it is not, however, activated on the level of the character in the play. If any action is to be found, it is to be found in the way in which the spectators must become actively involved in creating change themselves. There must be ways to stop the cycle. The final pose of Viveca is held: she has followed the instructions and now stares at the bottom of the pool, about to dive.

These two short plays, then, present female characters alone, who are quite literally discursively controlled by male voice-overs. They are shown in a series of positions as subjects, which afford them a certain limited agency, but do not substantially change the interactions which occur. There are, however, theatrical and imagist interrogations of the unity of the self: lighting in *The Apple in the Eye*, and voice in *Diving*, and images in both plays which are resistant to closure and containment. These kinds of interrogations encourage the interpretative mechanisms of the audience and imply the potential for change in identity formation. These will be more fully realized in later plays of Margaret Hollingsworth, particularly in the plays of *Endangered Species*.

War Babies: layers of story

War Babies is a work which is a *mise en abyme*, a complex play, which sustains an interest in identity as a site of ambiguity, most overtly in the depiction of different versions of the main characters. The focus in this play is on the relationship of Esme, a playwright and Colin, her

journalist husband, and the imminent birth of their child. Esme feels trapped by both her pregnancy and her relationship and finds release in writing a play about herself, her husband, and the friends who are on their way to see them. This play also comes to life, so that there are two versions of Esme and Colin to contend with.¹⁹ Identity as a site of ambiguity is sustained at both the micro and the macro levels of narrative in this play.

In the first level of reality, the constructing fiction of *War Babies*, the roles that Esme takes up prove to be unsatisfactory. She is already a mother, but she gave up her first son Craig at the age of three because she was unable to care for him. Although the end of the play sees the birth of her new child, a daughter, and a rather utopic reunion with her son, now seventeen, there is still a note of foreboding. The daughter is, after all, named Cassandra, and perhaps her warnings are once again not being heeded. There is no reason to believe that the same cycle of birth and abandonment might not occur. Again, the positions of Esme as subject are serialized; she takes up certain standpoint positions as the situation demands. These positions prove to be temporarily effective, but then they are summarily dropped as a new discursive situation and construction of herself as subject arises.

The positions which Esme takes up are not as confining and as apparently oppressive as the positions of the female characters in the plays of Judith Thompson. Where Judith Thompson works in extremes, Margaret Hollingsworth attends to subtleties and nuance. Esme is equal to her husband; he supports her emotionally and in her career. Their liberal values are, however, put into question: Colin, while on assignment in a war zone, killed a young boy. The event is never clearly

¹⁹ In this section the play within the play will be designated as PWP, as Hollingsworth does in her script. The characters within this play will be designated as Esme² and Colin².

remembered or realized; it represents an unanswerable scenario. Where are limits drawn? At what point justification? At what point truth? Is there any stronghold which cannot be spoken, filtered, explained away? These questions are reminiscent of Butler's remarks on the discursive construction of bodies and gender. In Butler's attempts to define materiality, she emphasizes the "effect of power" which materiality generates: "'Materiality' appears only when its status as contingently constituted through discourse is erased, concealed, covered over. Materiality is the dissimulated effect of power" (251 n.12). It is important to emphasize the realization of materiality through discourse. This fluctuation between realms is explored in *War Babies*. These distinctions are important because these indicators signal a different process of identity formation: one which is contingent on the "as if" mode of story-telling, but is in a constant motion with the constitutive outside which always marks its existence.

The fluctuation of power relations which contributes to a destabilized identity is foregrounded through the metaphor of war. Esme and Colin are always in a dynamic of opposition: they play at war. Both their jobs involve words. Their dialogue is a sparring match of games of songs and words. Early in the play Esme calls for a truce:

ESME. . . . Listen--can't we can the war games?

COLIN. What?

ESME. Can't we make out without playing games? I mean--we're grown up mummies and daddies now. When the kid comes--

COLIN. We'll roast him and feed him to the poor. You can write about it.

ESME. Not such a *swift* idea . . . (151)

Here game-playing is again used as a device in Hollingsworth to foreground the discursive construction of subjectivity. Esme herself cannot let go of the competitive pun making and

responds to Colin's allusion to Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. She herself initiates the war of words which defines their existence.

Words signify their link, but also their differences. Colin is a newspaper journalist, reporting, and distorting reality: "I've spent half my life recording history," he says (158). Recording history is a line which returns in *Poppycock* in a scene in Picasso's studio. While Picasso paints, Dora photographs the audience repeating, "Recording history. Recording history. Recoding history. Recoding" (66). History as a tenuous transmission of questionable facts is an ongoing concern in Hollingsworth. This obsession extends to story-telling about personal history as well. Esme accuses Colin of distorting reality, of obscuring the facts in order to sell a story when she finds out that he killed a young boy in order to get a story in the Sudan. But Esme also distorts "truth." The play she is writing is based on their lives; it becomes intertwined with the "real" Esme and Colin scenes Esme has also been responsible for the abandonment, if not death, of her first child, Craig, who now appears as the child/soldier in her play, who guards Colin² in prison. Thus Esme also is not without implication. Dorothy Parker discusses the merging of the two worlds: Esme asks her friends about the peacocks which only occur in the play world; she mentions to her son that she thought he was the policeman from the PWP (108). Parker comments:

The mingling here of two kinds of reality is reminiscent of Alli's monologues in *Alli Alli Oh* by the intercontamination of realism and surrealism. Hollingsworth is warning the audience not to reduce either play to over-simple formulations. (108)

Not only can neither "reality" be reduced, but they exist simultaneously. The effect of Esme introducing dissonant information into the PWP is not to suggest that she is crazy or that she is

wrong. Rather it simply shows how she is alternatively constructed in a different situation. Truth is not to be settled on because identity, like truth, is constructed contingently.

Esme finds a limited agency in her attempts to counteract the discursive authorities which construct subjects by creatively dispersing found texts into poetry. She uses news stories of Colin and creates “Media Mumbles,” not only a reference to Colin’s profession, but also a larger indication of the pervasive constituting presence of all kinds of “information.” Esme rewrites sections of Doctor Spock. Her acts are aggressive as she attempts to emphasize the rigid definitions that these kinds of writings demand of self and *other*. By breaking up the words, she is, in a raw sense, achieving the kind of effect that Barthes does in a book like *S/Z*, in his demonstration of the polyvalence of texts.²⁰ Here is a different kind of agency then, one that demands an active participation in the discursive constructions of identity and a “willful act,” as the title of this collection of Hollingsworth’s plays proclaims. Within this title there is the double meaning of a “willful act” which implies a transcendent self, and the “willful act” which recognizes the discursive construction of the “acts” within the plays themselves.

There is a double dynamic in this play. Although the discursive is artfully recognized and reminded, strong reactions are provoked. When Colin catches part of a public reading on his return from a trip, he is appalled at the license Esme has taken with his work. They argue, and he reacts violently: he throws a chair, narrowly missing her. Colin’s violent reaction is fraught with pain. He does not want to act the way he is acting, yet the dynamic in which they are caught leads him into such a reaction. Colin rings Esme at home to see how she’s doing; she tells him that

²⁰ In *S/Z*, Barthes meticulously classifies each phrase of Balzac’s *Sarrasine* to demonstrate the layers of meaning which resonate within the text.

Craig has arrived. He arrives home only to find that Esme has tricked him into coming: “He’s here now,” she says. She rubs her stomach: “In this room” (207). Colin again reacts in turmoil; the positions he is being asked to assume leave him conflicted:

COLIN. You ... you’re suffocating me, you know that? Years, years I’ve spent trying to be ... I dunno, trying to be some kind of--Rhett Butler to please you--don’t laugh!

ESME. [*Overlapping.*] Frankly darling I don’t give a damn! Sorry, I couldn’t resist ...

COLIN. [*Overlapping.*] So what *am* I supposed to be. Some androgynous flunky? Is that it? Yes ma’am, no ma’am, may I borrow your panties ma’am! Why don’t you make up your mind what you want?

ESME. I want you.

COLIN. And I don’t want to blurr the edges any more ... I have to work dammit. It’s women who have kids, not men. And why do you have to make me sound like a walking cliché ...? (207-208)

Colin and Esme are caught in a dynamic of subject/object, of heterosexual roles, which no matter how hard they try to make things equal, end up being determinedly competitive and function on a level of domination and subordination.

This play demonstrates the tension of mastery and non-mastery in the depiction of identity. Esme attempts to master the fiction: not only does she create the PWP which is an imaginative counterpoint to her lived experience, but she also manipulates the central action. As we have seen, she lies and beckons Colin home. She distorts the truth. Perhaps the criticism which is levelled at *War Babies* for its overreaching complexity (Parker 112) results from its refusal to provide simple, satisfactory answers. The *mise en abyme* of a play about a playwright writing a play about a playwright writing a play is dizzying. The play within the play is extremely melodramatic and critics have noted its “soap opera” tendencies (Zimmerman 120). But as a form it is countered by the many other kinds of writing and shaping reality which exist in the play: Colin’s own

newspaper reporting, the other plays of Esme, and her own foray into poetry making. Each has its own place and significance and momentary way of making sense and each is problematized for the inevitable ways in which it distorts “truth.” By flipping from genre to genre, the play heightens the contrast of forms, and the different effects such shapings have on the viewing experience of the audience. Although the play does not come to a final resolution, it acknowledges, as Colin² says, the need for containment or for resolution, whether it be in story or in love:

COLIN². . . . You think you’re in love--you try to narrow it down, you pin everything on one person--you put four walls around it. It’s a fantasy - you can’t contain it. It’s a fantasy, we’re always trying to contain ... look for limits. Without limits we go mad, don’t we? (177)

The two plays end extremely differently. In the PWP, Esme² robs a bank and sets up her husband for the crime. He is beaten, and taken away to prison. Immediately following this scene comes the resolution of the play proper. The “real” Barbara and Jack and Craig. The play ends in the momentary and largely unexplained reconciliation of Esme and her children: she embraces Craig, shows him her new daughter, and draws parallels between the appearances of her two children: “Like him. Like me. You have our face” (223). On this note of ambiguity the play ends. In this way, Hollingsworth ironically unifies the very different manifestations of identity. This play is very complex in its approach, particularly in the alternative narrative constructions it offers. It undertakes an extensive breadth of issues. This makes it confusing, perhaps, and even dramatically lethargic because of this impulse to tackle so many ponderous issues. In so doing, it may, as Parker suggests, run the risk of losing its spectators. This is endemic to the postmodern condition: at what point are the spectators so confused, so lost, so destabilized that they stop making sense or, as is the case in many of Judith Thompson’s plays, they are actually alienated from the

dramatic action? This is certainly a concern in a consideration of Hollingsworth's provocative plays because so few of them are produced or well-received. This issue will be addressed in more detail in a discussion of spectator pleasure in the conclusion.

Alli Alli Oh, Islands and In Confidence

Situated Subjects

These next plays by Margaret Hollingsworth articulate possibilities for identity formation for a lesbian within a patriarchal society. *Alli Alli Oh* and *Islands* are companion pieces and will be considered together. *In Confidence* is a more recent work in which Hollingsworth tackles an often unconsidered topic: the sexuality of older women.

Alli Alli Oh and *Islands* consider the lives of Alli and Muriel and their troubled relationship. In *Alli Alli Oh*, Alli was married for years; we find out she met Muriel in a mental institution when Muriel's former lover, Barbara, was admitted. The implications extend to sexuality: the lesbian in a patriarchal society is represented as mentally unstable. The schizophrenic split of living in two places at once is too much; she is literally an "eccentric" subject whose language cannot be spoken or heard within the patriarchy.

The limits of such a subject are obvious: agency is practically nonexistent. We find out in *Islands* that after Alli goes to the mental institution for a second time, (at the end of *Alli Alli Oh* she leaves the farm in a state of distress), she is given shock treatment. In *Islands*, she and Muriel are not able to resolve their differences. Muriel is finally able to come out to her mother who is visiting Muriel on the eve of her second marriage. The articulation of her lesbianism is finally achieved in a more public way, and yet the possibilities for action and change are limited on this

discursive level. Alli leaves the island again, this time with Rose, Muriel's mother. Muriel is left alone on the farm, returning to the plans she has for her new house. Alli and Muriel are unable to function in a relationship together; certainly the traditional masculine and feminine roles that they assume do not serve them well. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler discusses the possibilities for a self-conscious performance to destabilize gender roles:

Performativity describes this relationship of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a "transcendence" of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (241)

In this revisiting of a heterosexual paradigm in *Alli Alli Oh*, however, a subject/object dynamic is still in place. It is inevitably competitive and hierarchical and leaves little room for substantial change in the institutions or society. There is no parody or distancing in a butch/femme dynamic in their relationship.

In Confidence, a much later play, considers the possibility of a lesbian relationship between two older women. Hollingsworth deliberately sets out to explore the sexuality of middle-aged women: "a territory that has been pretty well unexplored on stages for the last two thousand years" as Hollingsworth says in the introduction (9). Although the women tell their stories separately, they do "merge slowly, in the fragmented, digressive style that women's storytelling often takes" (9). Again, Hollingsworth unabashedly sets out to explore a specific kind of writing and experience.

In Confidence uses strategies of realism in its attunement to nuances of accent and character. The lives of the two women are given great detail, as their husbands and descriptions of events complement each other. Their story-telling gradually unfolds the hidden complexities of

their desires in their lives and for each other, but also constructs the limits of their ability to meet each other. Each character is staged in her own area. Although suggestions are given for how one or the other echoes or responds to the other's words, each monologue is located in its own rigid space. The monologues are told sequentially. The two characters do not speak with each other. Rather, they are described and created by their own words. This staging technique demonstrates both their isolation and their desire. Each is in a heterosexual relationship; they harbour feelings for each other which they reveal through the course of their monologues, but they are unable to realize these physically. At the end of the play, the letter from one to the other remains literally unanswered. They are unable to be brought together in the physical staging of the play and therefore remain alone.

In this way, Hollingsworth demonstrates the constrictions which are present in their current configurations as subjects. What is significant about each of the monologues is the series of stories they tell about themselves, and thereby the series of positions they take up. But their ability to effect change is limited. The world they enter when they find each other is conveyed by the image of the hothouse. At Marianna's suggestion they buy vibrators. They hurry with their newfound purchases to the hothouse, tell each other their secret masturbatory practices; they experience their sexuality publicly. It is here and not within the realms of their homes where they can find such freedom. At home, Chrissie has to think a long time before she decides where to hide her vibrator. The most private of places still does not accommodate her desires. Explorations must be made outside the home, outside the realm of the known and the familiar.

Identity Destabilized

The destabilization of identity again comes in the ways in which stories are told. The fluctuation between the different plays and worlds of *War Babies* results in an unstable sense of identity. In *Alli Alli Oh* and *Islands*, there is a similar undermining of coherence in the use of images and metaphors. One of the images which recurs in Hollingsworth's dramas is the image of the house as a structure which constructs identity. In *Alli Alli Oh*, the farmhouse is in a state of disrepair. There is not even electricity. At the beginning of the play, Alli and Muriel are making plans to excavate the lot and build a new home. But as the play progresses, it becomes obvious that Alli is not ready to give up the past, to tear down a house which still affords a certain kind of shelter and security. Similarly she does not relinquish her own psychological paradigm; at the end of the play, she calls the psychiatric hospital to readmit herself. When the relationship is reprised in *Islands*, which takes place some six months later, Muriel is in the process of rebuilding the house. The play opens with Muriel in the process of assembling a drawing board in order to be able to work properly on the blueprints for the house. Her mother admonishes her ambition:

ROSE. You can't build a house. [MURIEL *continues to work.*] Not on your own.

MURIEL. I'll get help. If I need it.

ROSE. Your grandfather built our house. It nearly killed him. Look at your hands. [*Pause.*] I'm not against hard work. I've worked hard all my life. [*Points at the blueprint.*] That's man's work. [*Long pause.* MURIEL *works.*] (122)

Muriel does not directly confront her mother, but the evidence of the house in partial construction expresses the process of restructuring that she is undertaking and undergoing. At the end of the play, Muriel is left by both her mother and Alli. Alone she will continue the process of self-construction as she returns to putting together her desk.

The image of the house is one of the sites of contradiction and ambiguity which characterize the plays of Margaret Hollingsworth. It both provides shelter and yet proves confining for its inhabitants. The two women in *In Confidence* are depicted in their homes, their kitchens. As Hollingsworth says in her introduction:

I am writing about isolation--the isolation of women who become invisible in their late 40s--the isolation of women who have been in long-term relationships, of wives and mothers who feel it is important to honour these relationships and who don't know how to look outside for extra support and sustenance. Chrissie and Marianna are marooned--cocooned in their separate kitchens three thousand miles apart. (9)

Significantly the men find space within these houses for their own sins and secrets. Chrissie's husband, it becomes clear, was abusing their daughter when she was young and lived at home. Marianna's husband dresses up in her clothes. This is part of the reason they move to Vancouver, to put distance between Marianna and Chrissie, and also to put distance between Marianna's husband and his secrets now found out by the police department where he worked. Although they have come to resolutions regarding their behaviour, neither can sustain it. Marianna catches her husband at home. But Marianna's solution is to accept the way things are: "John Crow," she says, their secret word for enough is enough:

MARIANNA. . . . We've made enough adjustments, I said. Let's go back to how it was. We can keep it to ourselves, nobody knows us. What we had we have still. You don't have to change for me, you don't have to give it up for me. . . . (53)

Marianna recognizes and accepts their sexual explorations. She has just come from watching a pornographic movie. She comes home to see him watching the same one in her underwear. But Gus' response to Marianna is to scream his desire for normalcy, accusing her of being a "lezzie whore" (53).

Marianna's monologue is delivered as she sands a door on two sawhorses in the kitchen. In the final scene of the play, there is a combined essentialist/deconstructive move. On the one hand, Marianna peels off the accoutrements which construct her, as she reveals her inner self. Marianna peels off the gloves she's been wearing to protect her hands. She even peels off her false nails and drops her rings. On the other hand, her actions also result in a bleeding of space. She climbs on the door and recites an imaginary letter to Chrissie:

MARIANNA. Dear Mrs Sabatini
[She kicks off one shoe. It falls in CHRISSIE's space. She shuts her eyes.]
 Life's too short to be timid. Dear Chrissie. I hate this house.
[She kicks off her other shoe.] I hate this house, I hate this room, I hate this door.
[She peels off her beauty spot.] I hate his fucking sculpture. I hate his stupid sweatsuit, and his Adidas and his eighteen speed bike.
[She pulls out the padding from her bra and throws it into CHRISSIE's space.] Dear Chrissie. I hate having to smile. Keeping it in. Keeping it in. Everyone fearing to touch. Keeping it in. Keeping it in. Everyone keeping it in. Insulate and preserve. Insulate and preserve. Insulate and fucking preserve. Fucking aluminum siding. I hate it. I hate who he wants to be. I love him. I hate - I'm gonna smash your face in, John Crow.
[She throws her skirt into CHRISSIE's space, stamps on the door, communicating with the basement, and begins to dance]. (54-55)

Marianna's vehement expression is paired with Chrissie's action: she throws her now folded laundry up into the air. Marianna's faux striptease is liberating in its disclosure of the construction of her femininity. The scene ends on this note of possible freedom, and yet the ending is ambiguous: she is attached to Chrissie and she says of her husband: "I hate who he wants to be. I love him" (55). Substantial changes are possible, in the utopic gesture of both women literally throwing off the trappings of their roles, and yet we do not see the results of such a change.

Marianna yells the last line, “Me ne frega!”²¹ (55). Again, it is an ambiguous note, implying both freedom and indifference.

The real changes do not happen on stage; the possibility of a different formation of identity rests with the experience of the audience. This is suggested again by the form of the play with spaces and dialogue which almost overlap. A lesbian desire is not accommodated for within these plays other than in an exclusionary mode: in the hothouse, off stage, outside, in public. The play takes the audience through the story-telling of Marianna and Chrissie. It is in an imaginative re-telling that other possible stories and identities can be told.

Endangered Species

The plays in this collection, *The House that Jack Built*, *It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing*, *Poppycok*, and *Prim, Duck, Mama, and Frank* are four short experimental plays. These plays will be considered in more detail to allow for an in depth consideration of narrative techniques which are more distinctly postmodern and which elaborate on a significantly different conception of identity.

The House that Jack Built and It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing: narrative and counter-narrative

The metaphor of the house also occurs in the first two plays of the collection *Endangered Species*. *The House that Jack Built* and *It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing* are meant to be presented together (10). Considered as companion pieces, they comment on each other by

²¹ Hollingsworth notes that the closest translation to this expression is “I don’t give a damn” or “nothing matters” (56).

presenting stories and subjects which are foregrounded and contested. The representation of the women in these two plays is similar: in both plays, relationships with men prove confining, constricting, and oppressive on the level of content. A substantial difference is apparent in the forms of the two plays, however. Jack's story of his relationship with Jenny is paralleled by the house that he builds to contain her. Jenny's attempt to use language as a means of escape is only temporary. Her position as a subject is only momentarily disrupted; her rebellion is easily contained by Jack's discourse. In contrast, the destabilizing narrative techniques in *It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing* allow for an interrogation of the constitution of subjectivity. Other options of ways of being become available when the narrative impulse is relinquished and the confines of the house are challenged.

The House that Jack Built fluctuates back and forth between overt diegesis, the telling of the events, and mimesis, their enactment. Jack builds the house, and he also tells the story: as the primary narrating agency, he controls the events. By conforming to a traditional structure, he constructs Jenny's subjectivity:

JACK. . . . So I built her a house. I mean, what more can a man do for his wife? You meet a girl. It's too soon. High school, but what can you do when she's the right one. Chew on your nails? Jerk yourself off? No. You buy her a ring, right? You buy her a ring, and then you marry her. You do it right. You work for her, and you just have to hope she doesn't get herself pregnant before you've got her a house. That's the way it is. I mean you tell me different, don't matter who you are. There's no other way when you come right down to it.

JENNY. There's no other way. (12)

Jack aligns himself with a master narrative; he positions himself and Jenny within a heterosexual patriarchal middle class matrix. His narrative symbolically encodes gender difference. In addition, he interpellates, with his use of a universal "you," a spectator who is also heterosexual and male.

Jenny has internalized Jack's construction of her and has limited agency. She constantly censors her own attempts at narration. Early in the play she tells a story about Jack's canoe trip. He brought her back a thermos containing ice off an iceberg:

JENNY. We put it in our beer and it fizzed! But how did he know there was icebergs here back then? How did he know there was oxygen? 20,000 years ago? Jack!! [*Reaches out for JACK blindly.*]
 JACK. Hey, hey babe. (14)

Jenny panics at her incapacity before a history and knowledge which Jack seems to have access to and that she does not. The play takes us on a retrospective tour and demonstrates how Jenny was created as a subject accommodated to Jack's narrative. Jenny's desire does not seem to have a place in this story. She does not want to build a house, and her attempts at intervening in the narrative are simply not heard:

JENNY. What about a basement?
 JACK. You want a basement?
 JENNY. It's too wet for a basement.
 JACK. You want a basement you'll get a basement.
 JENNY. Don't all houses have basements?
 JACK. If that's what you want, you'll have one. All you gotta do is just say what you want.
 JENNY. I wanna stay on Queen.
 JACK. You just gotta say the word. Basement. (12-13)

Questions are quelled, and Jenny's desire--to stay downtown--is bowled over in the predetermined building of the house and the story.

Jenny attempts to assert some kind of control by turning to her own body. She describes how she privately binges and purges, how she finds a job at Canadian Tire, how she obsessively shoplifts sponges at Shopper's Drug Mart, how she attempts to sleep alone. But these serialized actions do not subvert Jack's narrative, or stop the building of the house. They provide only

temporary agency. Jack describes how he went to watch her once: “It was like watchin a stranger or somethin” (17). Despite these attempts to find a way of being with Jack which affords her more choices, she is still confined to his story. Sexuality will be contained in the narrative. When the house is built, Jenny starts sleeping alone on the futon in the guest room, with a poster of Meryl Streep on the wall. Jack intervenes:

JACK. . . . I took it down and hung it in our room. If she wanted to sleep with Meryl Streep that was okay with me, but I didn’t see why I should be left out of the action, right? (20)

All Jenny can do is stare straight ahead and say, “I love you” (20).

Finally a means of resistance is found within the very narrative that Jack creates: although the terrain where the house is built has been cleared of all its original species, some come back. Jenny hears a “noise” early in the play which Jack identifies as “friggin frogs” (12). In the course of the play, just as the house is a metaphor for Jack’s story, the frogs function as a means of resistance to that story. With this “noise” Jenny finds a way of resisting. Jack clears away the frogs when he starts to build the house, but eventually they come back. Jenny finds a new language when she joins a campaign to save the species who have been endangered by the subdivision.

Her resistance to the narrative is palpable now. It changes her language. She even refuses the narrative trajectory of the sentence: “A frog. Does not. Drink up. The pond. In which he lives” (20). She takes up the battle cry of the campaign; her remarks contrast with Jack’s lines:

JACK. . . . It was something to do with frogs.
 JENNY. Save the frogs!
 JACK. She got real excited.
 JENNY. The frogs didn’t come back that first spring.
 JENNY. [*Yells, full voice.*] Save the frogs! (20)

Jenny's feminist consciousness is raised. A new language and resistance are found in a community of women who are campaigning for the frogs. The women begin to change Jack's story; they invade the house. "Then I'd come home and there'd be all these women in rubber boots in our kitchen" Jack says, and later, "And I'd come home and there'd be all these women leavin coffee rings on my oak finish" (20-21). "Oh Jack!" says Jenny now able to dismiss him, endowed with a new knowledge and power (20-21). She doesn't even laugh at his jokes anymore.

Although the frogs give Jenny a new voice, she is not quite ready for the repercussions of her new engagement. The words of Audre Lorde resonate: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (99). The frogs function also as a "constitutive outside"; this outside territory is easily recuperated. When the frogs do come back, they bring chaos. "Just a few of them at first. Cute little green ones," says Jack (22). Then they move into the kitchen, and then the living room. When Jenny returns from a visit to Kapuskasing, Jack narrates the frogs' invasion while Jenny appears to us in the time of the story:

JACK. I told her they were in all the cupboards, in the sink ... when you sat on the toilet ...

JENNY. Where? Where?

JACK. I told her they were in the bedroom. They were jumpin and crawlin all over Meryl Streep's face. They were in the friggin bed. [*Jumps to his feet.*] The whole friggin house is overrun! The whole street! [*Jenny screams.*] Like a slimey green rug, heavin under your feet-- and when you walk on it you feel it squelch ... you feel it under your feet, and then you're up to your knees in it and then it's up to your chin. They're on your shoulders, in your ears ... they're takin over! It's frogs. Your friggin frogs!

JENNY. Do somethi-i-i-i-ng! I hate them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Ki-i-i-i-ill! (22)

The frogs presumably take over, in Jack's description, invading even the body. Jenny's outburst resolves the story complications, because she returns to Jack's narrative, to his control of the

irrational and the excessive. When the lights come up after the frog story, the imagined house and the pregnancy mentioned at the beginning of the story are realized in Jack's narration of the present situation:

JACK. I decided against a lawn. I put down gravel and cedar chips. The weeds go through so I kept a bunch of weedkiller in the garage. It's not hard to control them if you get the right stuff. (23)

The frogs, like the weeds, although potentially disruptive, are for the moment safely under control.

A great revolution is not at hand for Jenny, but the potential for subversion is there. By discovering the nodes of contradiction or instability, changes can be made, from within the narrative, but only if Jenny is willing to contend with a disrupted narrative and potential chaos. Whether the frogs come back or not is a moot point. It is Jack's telling of the story that creates the chaos. His enforcement of the narrative is not necessarily the only way to resolve the story; change is possible, as Hollingsworth suggests in her introduction to *Endangered Species*:

Jack . . . could grow, but only if his wife Jenny were to show him the way. He is caught in a web of expectations, he is a man and he must perform as men are supposed to perform. Jenny may succeed in changing things in time, but the question of how much time we have hovers in the background. (7-8)

The solution, of course, is not for Jenny to perform as a Woman, but for both performances of gender to be recognized as such, and through a revisioning of the possibilities for identity which reconfigures the *self/other* dynamic and subject/object relating. In order for this to occur, it is implied that narrative structures must also change to allow for different formations of identity. Clearly Hollingsworth is not advocating chaos. She continues in her introduction:

The characters are searching to introduce order into their everyday lives to help them make sense of the situations in which they find themselves. It is too frightening to abandon this search. (8)

What she does suggest is that there must be a different way of attaining that order. In the companion piece, *It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing*, Hollingsworth creates a different kind of narrative which also offers potential for a different kinds of identity.

Unlike *The House that Jack Built*, *It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing* provides no unifying narrative structure, no overt house which is built, and the result is frightening indeed. Order and sense are constantly undermined. The play turns on an enigma; it concerns a woman who has been called in the middle of the night to visit a friend who is seemingly involved in a domestic dispute: "Listen, if he doesn't kill me first I'll kill him" (27). The play opens with the cross-examination of the Visitor:

VISITOR. [*In a tight spot. She is being cross-examined.*] She shouldn't've woke me up. My God, I didn't even have time to dress properly. It was her voice. It sounded so weird ... I called a cab ... I didn't know the address--I don't know the East End--I mean I got no reason to go there have I?
[*Glances across at the kitchen.*] (27)

The lights come up on the characters, the story begins, taking us back in time. Something has gone wrong, but we're not exactly sure what. The Visitor is uncertain, she doesn't know the address. As the story progresses, events are filled in. Not in a linear fashion as in *The House that Jack Built*, but in a piecemeal manner. The women know each other from before, from Kapuskasing; they are now in Vancouver; they met in an art gallery and in a welfare line. Events in the present are equally ambiguous. The women talk, have coffee, eat trifle, dance, smoke, and cry. Gerry and the Man embrace; the Visitor gives the boy some money and jumps out the window. The logic behind the events is suppressed.

Whereas Jack dominated the narrative in *The House that Jack Built*, here the Man is silent for most of the play. His first line comes at mid-point: “That’s a lie,” he says, in response to Gerry’s suggestion that he doesn’t speak English (36). In the absence of a totalizing narrative, the characters are capable of negotiating new, if temporary, subjectivities. The freedom, for example, seems to extend to sexuality. The Visitor muses, in her inner voice, “She’s not as pretty any more. Still has those Mick Jagger lips though. Cracks. Little sexy cracks” (28). And Gerry, in her turn, makes a move to seduce the Visitor. She wants to dance the tango: “Think of yourself as Tina Turner,” she says, “Hey, I haven’t danced with a woman since I was in high school” (39-40). But the possibilities don’t end there. The Visitor is also attracted to the Man. They hold eye contact which Gerry has to break. At the end of the play, Gerry and the Man throw cherries at each other; they smash and smear trifle until the situation becomes erotic, and the Visitor is implicated in the triangle:

[. . . MAN *stands behind* GERRY, *puts his arms around her waist, nuzzles her neck, and bites her ear.* GERRY *licks the spoon.*]
 MAN. [*Speaking into GERRY’s neck; looking at VISITOR.*] So, are you gonna let me squash your cherry?
 GERRY. [*Turning on VISITOR*] You gonna stare at us all night you little whore? (44-45)

The Visitor stumbles backwards into the bedroom, where the Boy is watching TV. Feeling sorry for him, she drops some money into his lap. His one line packs a punch, “I come free,” he responds (45). These sexual encounters are stylized, almost parodied. We can see them being enacted, and the identity of the characters becomes the effects of those roles. But the Visitor finds the proliferation of possibilities for identity overwhelming: she escapes by jumping out the

window. Whereas Jenny tries to counter the narrative in *The House that Jack Built*, the Visitor is lost and confused without one. Uninitiated to the language game, she has limited power.

The Visitor opens and closes the play by standing in a tight spot, testifying before the law. It is as though she is called to account for her actions. How do they measure up against the laws, which determine exactly what can and what cannot be done? What if behaviour is not accounted for within a master narrative? The play doesn't provide the security of answers, nor does it offer stability of identity. The names of Visitor, the Man and the Boy are not stated. And Gerry, the woman who presumably put in the call, who started the story, who, more than anyone else, calls the shots in the narrative, is sometimes referred to as Harriet. Her identity is in question, as the Visitor's comments reveal: "That story they used to tell back in Kap--she once cut herself up--there was so many stories about her--" (29). And later, "Now that I knew her I started to listen to the gossip about her . . . everyone had a different story" (35). At the end of the play, the Visitor describes how her boyfriend, Manfred, responds when she telephones him for help:

VISITOR. . . . And he said stay there, I'll be right over. I'll take a cab. And I said, yeah, that's what you better do. I'll be waiting--I'll be right here--and I could tell, there was something in my voice--there was something in my voice Your Honour. (45)

The end of the story is a paradigmatic replacement of the opening, now the Visitor has "something" in her voice, like Gerry did at the beginning. Unlike in *The House that Jack Built*, the story syntagm is not completely enclosed or contained; there is no resolution. Subjectivities are shifted, not affirmed. The Visitor takes up Gerry's position by making a call for help; Manfred takes up the Visitor's position by responding to the urgency in her voice and taking a cab. The

ending puts into question the “truth” we’ve been hearing, the “enigma” we’ve been trying to resolve, the subjects we’ve been attempting to create.

In summary, then, these two plays, particularly when considered together, demonstrate subjects which are constructed through narrative. There is a need for some kind of narrative control in order to be able to speak and act effectively. And yet there is a double bind. Speaking within a traditional narrative structure involves subjugation to the rules of the discourses and accommodation to a position of subject which implies a mastery over an object. Jenny is unable to come up with another way of reacting to the chaos of the frogs which she unleashes, and which Jack turns on her. She reverts to a kind of mastery: “Kill them,” she screams (22). When there is a proliferation of narratives and several possible identities, as in *It’s Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing*, the ensuing fragmentation is overwhelming, and there is still an accounting which must be made within the master narrative: the Visitor is called before a judge or some kind of authority at the beginning and the end of the play in which she must make sense, assign blame, take responsibility. The implication here is that neither option is viable: not restrictive controlled narrative, nor a complete rejection of form and order.

What these two plays do demonstrate, then, is identity as a site of ambiguity. It is this destabilized identity-in-process which provides the impetus to change. The plays interpellate the spectators at the level of the macrostructure. The form of the play again plays a significant role in the interpretation of the process of identity formation. *The House that Jack Built* is not only narrated by Jack but is also narrated by slides which provide a contrast to the flow of the story as generated by the dialogue. The slides, with the exception of one, are representational: they are pictures of trees. The two-dimensional status of slides as a medium is important to consider. The

slides begin with an aerial shot of a forest, gradually become more and more specific, until a cross-section of a tree trunk is shown, the rings of the years commenting on the sequencing of events. The narrative of the slides moves from the exterior to the interior. When Jenny joins the environmental group, this third voice seems to support her opposition to the narrative which the dialogue invites. The only slide which deviates from the gradual diminishing of trees is a slide which shows a placard saying "Save the Frogs," the phrase which becomes Jenny's battle cry (20). After Jenny screams to kill the frogs, the last slide, a cross-section of a trunk showing the rings, lingers as the other lights go out. The slide then disappears, leaving the screen blank, and then finally there is a blackout (22-23). Although Jenny does not escape Jack's narrative in the microstructure, the macrostructure foregrounds the repressive nature of Jack's narrative and encourages resistance. The slides speak a third silent voice, exhorting the audience to still "save the frogs."

In *It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing*, the way in which the story is controlled through the inner voices of Gerry and the Visitor conditions the reading of the play. It is a recurring technique of Margaret Hollingsworth: inner and outer voices are distinguished by a light change, or, as Hollingsworth suggests, "a freeze, a mannerism, or even recorded voice" (27). This device highlights the contradictions between the speaking subject and the subject of speech: language is limited in what it can convey about the subject and its desires. The inner voice is not given more validity or essentialized. Rather it provokes smaller possible narratives, away from the main plot. The lack of hierarchy among the narratives is liberating. Here Gerry's desire for the Visitor is articulated; there are further possible configurations of identity. For the spectator, there are many ways to negotiate meaning, teasing out sense from combinatory choices of disruptions

and contradictions in the inner and outer voices, in the bizarre combination of events where there is no denouement to the complications of the plot, where a kind of detective plot genre is twisted and turned to produce an enigma, but no resolution. In this way, the spectator is engaged, disturbed, involved, and yet left without closure and satisfactory answers.

The pairing of these plays offers a potentially subversive reading of narrative itself. Subjectivity is caught in a peculiar bind. Although narrative can be a restricting structure, it is necessary to make sense, to create a temporary definition of identity. Jenny needs to tell her own story of the frogs, or find a way of living with Jack's in order to gain power. The Visitor has to choose and take agency in creating her own provisional truth in relation to the options which are presented her. Although there is always someone who wants to know the truth, the truth depends on the interpretive community which determines the historical paths and relations of knowledge and power. Traditional roles and power dynamics which are seemingly reinforced can be at the same time destabilized. Disengaging from narrative is not entirely possible, but perhaps an active foregrounding of the making and the playing of identity is.

***Poppycock* : the story of history**

The title of this play is an ironic reversal of Pound's dictum:

“As to 20th century poetry it will move against *Poppycock*, it will be harder and saner, it will be near the bone, it will be as much like granite as it can be, the force will be in its adjectives impeding the shock and the stroke of it. It will be austere, direct, free from emotional slither.” (62)

The play in its irreverent treatment of great men of history, its clowning techniques, and its plundering of letters and literature sets itself against the patriarchy and against history. Its

characters, more than any others in this collection, are struggling with the boundaries which are imposed by language and yet are necessary for articulation. A subject which is specific and historically contingent is countered by a performance style and structure which interrogate resolution and integrity of being.

The female subjects in this play are again serialized and discursively bound. Historical figures all, the women are, in fact, “real” personages and in that sense, there is also a self-conscious play with the already performed identities of Winifred Wagner, Dora Maar, and Hilda Doolittle. These are marginal characters from history, however, peripheral to their much better known, also historically performed, associates: Hitler, Picasso, Pound. Simply the last names of the men are sufficient to situate them historically. Whereas the female characters are played by different actors, one male actor plays the three male characters which define the women: Adolf Hitler, Pablo Picasso, and Ezra Pound. This centralization of male identity emphasizes the phallogocentric discourse which constrains the women. The man is quite literally universal, and is not limited to time or space. The first moment to the play is “The overture to Lohengrin, up to and including the fragment of The Wedding March” (53) during which each of the women introduces herself to the audience in her own language. Although the women are not in fact married to these men, this musical introduction signals the kind of relationship which exists. Each woman is defined by an object: a rose, a camera, a candle (53). Each of these objects becomes a way in which the man later on asserts ownership over the woman. Language affirms this right, as the man follows the introductions with his claim to each: “Mein. La mienne. Mine” (53).

Not only does the man own the women, but he also masters them in other ways with his language. He calls each of them a witch (54-55), thereby both conflating and flattening their qualities. He literally creates and initiates them. As Ezra Pound, he christens Hilda Doolittle:

EZRA. H.D.
 Imagiste.
 I will make you a movement.
 I will make you.
 A legend. (62)

In a scene with Picasso, Dora wanders into his studio, looking for her lost dog. Picasso, quite literally, paints her. He paints around her foot:

DORA. [*Dipping her finger in the red paint.*] Blood on my hand. I'm losing. It hurts.
 [*Gets behind the paper, out of sight.*]
 Rape!
 Curse!
 Cur!
 [*Pokes her hand through the paper.*]
 [*PICASSO paints round her hand, delighted. He is painting a portrait, cubist-style. He paints teardrops on the woman's face. DORA tears the paper and peeks out. PICASSO paints around her eye.*] (70)

Winifred Wagner was the wife of Siegfried Wagner who was related to Richard Wagner. She entertained Hitler. In the play she is very much at his beck and call. In their first scene together, she shows him various objects for his approval, as he surveys and claims the household: a portrait of King Ludwig, Wagner's spectacles, Lizst's piano. When she offers him Frau Cossima's opium pipe, he frowns:

HITLER. You have no need for crutches! [*Pulls the veil over her face.*]
 Women must be pure. (61)

As can be seen by these examples, the women are defined, named, and territorialized by the man. In a two dimensional and systematic way, they come to life through the men who name them.

They do, however, find ways to resist within the strictures of language and representation and domestic life. H.D. continues to write poetry after she has left Pound, but she takes on a new lover, a woman, Bryher (a woman who names herself) (72). Dora takes photographs of Picasso's work; she records history. In the last scene she breaks out of the picture into which she has been painted (73). Winifred denies any political involvement or interest; nonetheless, she exerts an influence: "Yes, I may have advised him to dissolve his cabinet, but who am I to give advice?" (69). As the end of the play seems to indicate, the women are marginally successful when they imitate the way they have been taught, when they take up the discourses in which they have been trained.

However, words are not sufficient for a full-fledged revolution. In a scene with Dora and Picasso, Picasso throws the camera from her hands and says, "Paint!" (66). She picks up a paint brush and begins, but like the medium, the words fail her:

DORA. Blue is the colour of God
 Paint blue
 Paint me blue
 Paint
 Paint
 Pain
 Pay
 Pan
 Pa--
 pppppppppppppppapapapapapapapa--. (67)

Here logocentrism and phallogentrism are united, as the word stripped bare becomes quite literally the father. Once again there are few positive images of women. Dora presents possibly the most active subject, in her attempts to reject Picasso's positioning of her. And yet her character at the end of the play describes the fixation of her subjectivity in what Picasso has done for her:

DORA. They asked him for a memorial to Apollinaire. He gave them a bust of me. It stands on a pedestal in a Paris square. White from sparrows. (74)

Winifred and H.D. repeat the same refrain they had earlier spoken: “Not accepting the darker side of man means not loving him enough,” and “The kindest thing I can say is that he was a little crazy” (74). There is little evolution or resolution for these characters. What is illustrated is the constraints of acting as a subject, a subject with limited ways of interacting. The women respond and react to the man; the effects of their resistance are minimal.

There are formal ways in which this play attempts to articulate a different subject/object relationship. This is a play of extremes, although in a very different way than the work of Judith Thompson. The audience is confronted by broad characterizations; the play was originally workshopped using a clown method although in the introduction to the play, Hollingsworth says she does not necessarily believe all subsequent productions of the script should be done in clown (51). Nonetheless, there is a specificity in performance style which does become part of the text. One man plays all three male characters. Objects, on the other hand, can become many things. The coffin in the middle of the stage is also a table, a piano, a fallen tree (51-51). In this way, identities are conflictual and unstable. The women, however, are always themselves: this highlights the specificity of their circumstances and the need to acknowledge and attend to the lived experience of women in combination with a theoretical revisioning. Extensive research was conducted and funnelled into the creation of these characters. The plundering of a variety of sources produces a pastiche of identity, with fragments of interviews, diaries, poetry. The women from history are self-consciously portraiture, quotes intermingled with hearsay and imagination, as Hollingsworth attests in her introduction:

The play is based on recorded interviews, poems and writings by and about these six people. It is a collage of what they actually said, or are reported to have said, with some imaginative recreations added mainly to provide continuity. (49-50)

In this way, the discourses of history as well as gender are interrogated. Knowing oneself and taking care of oneself demand situating oneself among discourses, desires, and psychological fluctuations, in effect, momentarily stopping the transformational forces. It is this temporary specificity which is an important component of a postmodern feminist identity.

Ultimately this play questions what is practically viable. How does one reconceive identity and still exist, function, and furthermore advocate change in personal interactions, in institutions, in society at large? The audience must work to put together meaning for the performance style; it must sift through fact and fantasy and reconstruct the identities of the women. The play attempts to rework interactions by getting the audience to think, conceive, and respond differently.

Audience members are given a parrot cage to hold/hide as Winifred prepares to receive Hitler (60). They are associated in the subjection with the women in one of the scenes with Hitler. He tapes off a red boundary of tape, using the laps of the audience as the perimeter, repeating the word, "Mein" (65). In an interview, Hollingsworth describes how she conceives of this play:

You read *Poppycock*, which is basically about women and power. In that play I took it to the extreme to see the effect when creative women are linked with powerful men who subsume and subvert their power. It all disappears! ("Margaret Hollingsworth Interview" 147)

The power relations extend to the audience. They are forced to confront this exercise of power at least, to give themselves up to the domination by the clowns and by the intimate interactions with the actors. They need to learn to cope without closure. Hollingsworth describes the ambiguity of her endings:

A lot of Canadian theatre is far more up-beat than I am: People want happy endings. They want *endings* above all else. They need things tied up and resolved. Now that's the buzz word these days: "resolution." Or "redemption."

I'm not particularly interested in either. Nor in being especially optimistic about something that I'm not optimistic about. . . .

For me, the major function of theatre is to challenge and disturb. And it's great if we can entertain along the way. ("Margaret Hollingsworth Interview" 155)

Coping with ambiguity involves relinquishing a need for a re-establishment of order. In

Poppycock, the controlled chaos of the clowns both foregrounds the construction of identity and unsettles the audience in its disturbance of hierarchies, boundaries, and ways of interacting.

Prim, Duck, Mama and Frank: Marking Identity

Where the exercise of power determines the characters in *Poppycock*, the exercise of rules determines the characters in *Prim, Duck, Mama and Frank*. Hollingsworth describes the characters in this play in terms of their adherence to the rules of socialized behaviour:

Duck's the one who can afford to be creative with the rules: he can make them up.

Frank knows exactly what the rules are. It's all very clear for him. Not so for poor old Prim. She just cannot get it right. Ever. She is always trying to learn what the man's rules are, but she doesn't even understand what happens when you take photographs. She worries about her insides getting photographed. And what if the photograph shows what she's just eaten? The terror, the absolute terror of being adrift in chaos is overwhelming.

And Mama can't get it right either, but she gets away with it simply because she's a mother. She's earned her status, and she lets them all know it. But in fact, she's as much at sea as the rest of them The two women, in different ways, are totally at sea. ("Margaret Hollingsworth Interview" 160)

There is a struggle to negotiate a balance between order and chaos. Elsewhere in the interview, Hollingsworth gives practical advice for making it in the world: "You've got to try to get ahead of the rules and understand" (162). The interviewer asks more specifically about Prim and whether Hollingsworth thinks she will survive. Hollingsworth replies:

No. I don't think so. Not a very hopeful character. Not a very hopeful play. I see *Prim and Duck* as a body containing worlds spinning within worlds spinning within worlds. Everything is finally in motion at the end. Some physicists have that theory, don't they? There's no order in the universe, only chaos, and to live in it, we must impose order. ("Margaret Hollingsworth Interview" 162)

But the imposition of order on the chaos comes at a price. Order needs to be rethought. Identity for Prim is more fluid and unstable than it is for Duck and Frank.

Both Prim and Mama are depicted in unstable terms. Although in many ways a strong character with the power to exert influence over others, Mama physically feels how she is separated from herself, how she is fragmented:

MAMA. . . . S'like the parts of my body they don't feel each other no more.
 See. I put one foot on the other and I stand on it and I don't feel nothin'.
 My toes see, my toes they don' touch ... see ... they don't wanna touch. . . .
 See, they don' wanna touch me neither. The parts of my body don' wanna touch no more Osvaldo. (85)

Mama's family, like her body, seems disconnected from its parts. Frank, the uncle, is uncommunicative, spending most of his time in the kitchen chopping vegetables or cleaning; he is always doing something. Duck, the son Osvaldo, has a mysterious and active connection to the outside world, involved in a band and perhaps involved in theft. Disconnection is most clearly played out in Prim; the others act upon her, and it is her search for identity that is the focus of the play.

Like her mother, Prim is trying to bring her various parts together. Her progress is impeded: the play opens with her struggle in shiny yellow ski boots. She clomps up the stairs, she clomps down. She changes socks and attempts to move: "*She stands. She staggers. She tries walking with various gaits*" (77). She retreats upstairs again and returns with a pair of cross-country skis and attempts to put them on. The obsession signals the first section of the play: Part

One is called “Feet.” The rest of the play similarly speaks to this fragmentation: “Hands,” “Body,” and “Head.” Nothing connects. The parts do not make a whole.

Where the others seem caught in their own loops of obsession, Prim, perhaps because the rules are so far away from her, is desperate in her search for sense, control and order. In the first scene, she is frantically searching for her contact lenses, her “eyes,” as she calls them. When she asks Duck if he saw them, he replies: “I drank ’em” (79). Unlike Prim, Duck marks the limits of the subject. The second part of the play, “Hands,” opens with an eerie scene:

PRIM is lying on the floor of the living room. DUCK is taping around her with white tape, making an outline of her body such as you see at the site of an accident. (87)

But after surveying the outline, Prim says, “Those aren’t my hands” (87). The representation she finds of herself in Duck’s work does not correspond to her own image of herself. Later in the scene Frank enters and snips off the fingers of one of his gloves. Prim rescues the tips, places them one on top of the other to make one long finger and stores it in her bra (92). She tries to retrieve and connect parts. She is always attempting to make sense, to knit herself together. She decorates her body in an attempt at marking herself. She paints her nails a pearly pink (94). In “Part Four: Head,” Prim is getting ready for a job interview. She wears elaborate makeup, paints eyelashes under her eyes and wears a frizzy bright green wig (99). When Mama interrogates her for her funny appearance, Prim asserts: “So they don’t hire me because of somethin’ I did. . . . It’s better’n not bein’ hired for something I didn’t do” (100). Prim, in her painting and primping of self, is trying to assert a measure of agency over her own destiny. This agency is subject to the limitations which language and representation necessitate.

Communication, for Prim, is difficult. Duck's language is often obtuse and self-obsessed. He doesn't need to explain himself. Prim is often left confused. When Duck talks about his outfit for the band, "Killing Time," he describes a thousand origami cranes--birds, of course. Prim, however, sees cranes on a building site:

PRIM. Cranes?

DUCK. I can string 'em together.

PRIM. Cranes. Like ... cranes ...? [*Looks up, seeing a towering crane on a building site.*]

DUCK. With wings.

PRIM. Wings?

DUCK. It'll be a blast. That's what I'll wear. A thousand fuckin' cranes.

PRIM. Why?

DUCK. Don't ask.

PRIM. Why not?

DUCK. Because you don't know.

PRIM. What don't I know?

DUCK. You don't even know that right?

PRIM. I don't know.

[*Long pause.*]

DUCK. Paper cranes, yeah ... hangin'.

PRIM. Hangin'?

DUCK. Hangin' from every part. Every part ...

[*Indicates his shoulders, each of his fingers, his wrists, his waist, his thighs, and his ankles.*]

PRIM. Hangin' from every part.

DUCK. See?

PRIM. [*Doesn't see.*] Yeah. (92-93)

Duck launches into a long discourse about cranes and their symbolism of long life and tries to convey to her the irony of a band called "Killing Time." Not only does Prim not have access to this language, but she actually sees things differently.

Representation is problematic for her. The reason, presumably, for the outline which Duck carves into the floor, is to provide Mama with a picture of Prim as a birthday present. Duck is confident that the outline is unique: "S a fuckin' fingerprint," he says. ". . . Permanent" (87).

When Prim says she wants a photograph, Duck replies that they fade. Besides, “this way she gets two,” says Duck (88). Again Prim does not understand:

PRIM. Two?

DUCK. Full lengths.

PRIM. Two?

DUCK. [*Sighs at her ignorance.*] One. [*Inside the outline.*] Two. [*Outside the outline.*] It’s a black and white negative.

PRIM. Duck ...?

[DUCK *covers the outline with a rug as if it were a body. The world is just too dumb for him.*] (88)

But Prim does not see herself within such binaries. She does not trust in representation. Should she get a picture taken by a machine, then? But, “[m]aybe it wouldn’t look like me. How would I have to look to make it look like me?” (88). She practises smiling in the mirror. She ruminates over a picture of Duck which appeared in the paper: “That didn’t look like you. But Mama still cut it out. She cut round the outline of you. She said she didn’t want the other people” (89). She quizzes Duck on what it feels like to be recognized. She doesn’t believe in the truth of mirrors. She looks at her reflection, and covers up her right eye with her right hand: “How do I know that what I see is what you see?” (90). Again, she tries to assert an agency or a control over the perception of herself by others.

Prim’s description of herself in a photo booth reveals her vulnerability, and how much her identity is determined by the outside: “. . . there’s all these pichers on the outside that the machine’s taken, and all the girls are smilin’ and all the guys are sorta ... not smilin’ know what I mean? All the faces ...?” (94). In order to be seen, one must imitate another and fit into a pattern. But this entails a certain amount of trust in the representational apparatus: “How would you know it’d take your face and not your knees. I mean--I mean. Mama’s not gonna want a picher of my

knees right?" (94). The right pose, the right perspective, is necessary, but there is also a certain vulnerability in being so exposed:

I mean supposing the camera doesn't know when to stop and it just goes on takin' pichers, and it gives you pichers of your stomach and stuff like that. Suppose it gives you pichers of your bones and your stomach and all the stuff you just ate like potato chips and Milky Ways and curry chicken, and the only way you know it's you is because you remember what you ate right? (94)

Prim's hold on herself is precarious. More than any other character, she has difficulty in believing the apparatus. Her dilemma illustrates Elin Diamond's concerns in her article "Mimesis, Mimicry and the True-Real," in her discussion of Platonic mimesis and the revisions of French feminists.

Diamond cites Irigaray's critique of representation:

She links the phallus to (Platonic, model-copy) mimesis: the female, lacking the organ of privilege, unable to symbolize her fantasies and desires in a male symbolic, is positioned as mirror to the male, reflecting back to him - *thereby demonstrating the truth of his centrality*--his own image, his Self-Same. Irigaray calls this specular operation of female erasure "mimesis imposed," the alternative for which is hysteria, a female miming that has no recognizable referent. (364)

Although Diamond goes on to favour a historical-materialist reading over a postmodern one, the points she makes are valuable. Strategies of realism are problematic:

Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it *produces* "reality" by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths: this *escritoire*, this spirit lamp, affirms the typicality, the universality of this and all bourgeois drawing rooms. Human signification becomes no less teleological. In realism the actor/signifier, laminated to her character/signified, strenuously seeks admission to the right class of referents. (366)

As in the narrative play of *The House that Jack Built* and *It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing*, the representational apparatus is questioned in *Prim, Duck, Mama and Frank*. The structure of the play is overlaid, as it were, on the body proper. The play in this way rewrites the body through its discursive representation.

Attempts at rewriting identity come through the individual instance. Prim, in fact, tries to rewrite/rename her own body. She turns to the mirror for assurance, for affirmation in an identity which is as solid as any of the objects she touches:

PRIM. [*Takes her wig off. Underneath it she is wearing a wig cap. She looks into the mirror, then touches the mirror.*] Mirror. [*Touches the glass.*] Glass. [*Picks up the comb.*] Comb. [*Picks up the lipstick.*] Lipstick. [*Touches the lipstick.*] Colour. [*Pause.*] Colour? [*Looks in the mirror.*] Prim Iaccabuci, Prim Iaccabuci ... [*Repeats it over and over.*] Primavera Iaccabuci, Primavera Iaccabuci. [*Intones the words and gradually a tune develops, the hymn tune Holy, holy, holy. [Nicaea] She fits her name to the tune of the hymn, tentatively at first, but then she gets right into it.*] (102)

This moment is similar to the faux strip tease at the end of *In Confidence*. There is a suggestion of an essential self (the “real” Prim or Marianna) beneath the clothes and the makeup. At the same time, there is a recognition of the construction of identity. Here Prim literally puts her name to the tune of a hymn. She can only combat and work within discourse. After she completes her hymn-song, she looks at the tapes Duck has dropped on the table, finds one she likes, puts it down the front of her dress, and returns to the mirror: “So mama, who is my papa? . . . For sure? I mean, for sure” (103).

Prim’s uncertain identity revolves around her lack of origin. The closest to a father substitute, Frank has an unusual position within the play. Little is known, or revealed about him. In the *dramatis personae*, where the other characters are given ages, Frank is listed as “ageless (probably ex-Army)” (76). He seldom interacts with the other characters; he is always doing something, usually a domestic task: chopping vegetables, stripping the table, pouring flour in preparation to bake something very large (97). Frank is even an outsider within the family. Mama urges Prim to be careful whom she marries:

MAMA. . . . And you make sure he's Italian too, otherwise you don't know what you're gettin'. That's what's wrong with your Uncle Frank. (101)

The embodiment of action, he does not engage in dialogue with the other characters, yet he is the only character who has his own scene. Where the other dismembered "Parts" of Feet, Hands, and Head are scenes of general disarray and non-linear narrative, "Part Three: Body" is wholly and completely Frank's. He alone speaks and acts. He is preparing to clean the wall where an outline of Prim's body has been sketched; he prepares to erase her. Unlike Prim, and Mama, and even Duck who at various points ruminate about the past, and about memory, and about the future, Frank is steadfastly in the present task at hand. Words and actions are laminated together: "First I put the bucket down Now I put the cloth in the water Now I take the cloth in my right hand and squeeze Now I view the problem area" (96-97). Prim's indecision and confusion, her wailing "D-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-ck!" (78), are counterpointed by Frank's straightforward approach to tasks and decision-making. Whereas Prim is hampered by trying on skis in the living room and bumps into three-foot plaster nymphs (79), Frank is precise, orderly, well-defined, a parody of efficiency. When he puzzles over how to begin erasing the body, he lists all possible avenues of approach: from the head? the feet? He thinks of everything in his decision making process. Absolutely nothing is left to chance:

FRANK. . . . Overlooking factors such as intuition leads to ineptitude and an uneconomic use of time and materials which are at your disposal. [*Pause.*] Now I will make my decision. [*Pause.*] I have decided. The decision is made. (97)

Ironically, Frank spends the whole monologue declaiming, describing his approach, and it is only at the end of the monologue that Frank is really able to begin: "Now I am ready to reduce the body" (98). Frank has, of course, in one sense already reduced the body, by completely

enveloping it in words. Prim's outline is etched into the floor by Duck: a physical engraving which Prim does not even agree with. Then, the shadow of this form, the corresponding outline on the wall is verbally reduced by Frank in his preparation to erase it. In this way, the representation of Prim is contained in and by ideology as exemplified by both Frank and Duck.

Frank's narrative, "Body," is, however, contained within the complete story of *Prim, Duck, Mama and Frank*. A different kind of spectator is interpellated when the play is taken as whole. In fact, the play is a series of parts which do not make up a whole. In some ways, the characters provide the keys to different interpretations of texts. Frank, we have seen, gives us one, a traditional reading model: approaching, deciding, consuming. His object as a reader is to divide and conquer, to accept representation as it is, to make imperative statements of what to do with it, rather than to interrogate, or accept its source. The other characters have different approaches to making sense of the world. Duck has a peculiar fascination with language. Like Frank, he is confident of his actions, and his word choices. He can skilfully play with double meanings, with "cranes" with "poles" usually to the confusion of Prim. His offstage dealings are suspicious: is he a thief? Like Mama, and unlike Prim, he moves with a certain amount of ease in society, albeit on the margins. Within the family, Duck is obviously favoured. Mama's way of reading the situation is shown to be false. She is so caught up in her own world and her own desires that she is unable to see Duck as a thief, for example. She misinterprets Prim when she emphasizes that he is in the parking garage "tryin' the cars" (101). Rather than recognizing Duck's illegal activities, Mama sees him as the perfect son:

MAMA. Tryin'? So he's tryin' to choose which one he likes huh? That's my Osvaldo, don' buy before you know for sure and for certain ... don' buy before you know. Don' go takin' your mama to the country in some ole

can o' beans and not knowing if it's gonna get her back the same as she left the house. That's the way his papa was ...

PRIM. *Our papa.* (101)

Prim is constantly overlooked in favour of her brother. Prim reacts against Mama's reading and her attempts to situate her within a master narrative. Mama is an example of the Althusserian self-policing subject: having internalized patriarchal prescriptions for being, she perpetuates them. She is constantly exhorting Prim to "behave well;" Prim finally acts out:

MAMA. And who is it left the kotex in the bathroom again huh? You think that's such a beautiful sight for the man in the house to see? For your brother to see, even if there is a rose painting on the box. How many times I have to tell you huh? [*Sits on the chesterfield.*] What kinda woman who tells the whole world she don' care about her feet. Who stands in here with yellow ... with yellow ... who leaves her boxes in the bathroom huh? Huh? You tell me huh? What kinda woman would do such a thing to her Mama huh?

[PRIM *puts down one ski and takes the other in both hands. She bops MAMA on the head. Hard. She exits through kitchen, and clomps upstairs. She appears in the bedroom and sits on the bed, watching DUCK. Meanwhile, downstairs, MAMA sits motionless on the couch, head sunk into her shoulders. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, FRANK cracks three eggs into a glass bowl. He turns on the electric beater. Beats. The noise is very loud.*]
(86)

In this example, we see Prim's attempt at a reading strategy. She acts outside the parameters of the story. Just as she creates herself differently for the job interview, in order to gain some control over the outcome, here she takes on a role in the play which is contrary to the dominant realist aesthetic. In this peculiar twist, Prim can act out her frustration with Mama's unending tirade. She physically stops Mama's prescriptions. The body is the site where behaviour and rebellion take place. Like the excess in Judith Thompson, here extremes in behaviour and marking of the self ultimately signify control and agency. When Prim bops Mama on the head, she stills the stream of talk which tells her how to be. The final scene of the play is the most significant manifestation of

this marking. Prim watches as Frank responds to Mama's cry for coffee. He methodically prepares a tray for her, with a cup that has the word "Mama" on it. His actions provide an accompaniment to Mama's lament:

[. . . He pours the coffee into the cup, but does not stop when the cup is filled. The coffee brims over into the saucer, onto the tray and onto the floor. MAMA sits motionless. DUCK sits motionless. PRIM watches. FRANK pours.]

MAMA. *[Without moving.]* So how come nobody calls me Giulia no more huh? How come I'm either mama or signora or Signora Iaccabuci. Or nothin'. How come nobody calls me Giulia huh? Giulia Iaccabuci.

[DUCK begins to unwrap the toilet roll.]

Giulia Iaccabuci, Giulia Iaccabuci ... *[Repeats it carefully, as if it might explode.]*

[PRIM approaches FRANK, walking slowly, her hand out, palm up. FRANK continues to pour. PRIM picks up the cup and saucer while he pours. She puts it on her upturned palm. FRANK continues to pour. The coffee splashes on PRIM's wrist, on her wrist, on her arm, on her shoes and ankles.]

PRIM. It's hot. *[Does not move.]*

[DUCK sets fire to the toilet paper with his Bic.]

[Blackout. The flame grows and then it is extinguished.] (104)

Rather than stopping and beginning again, only to perpetuate and continue the same model of behaviour, Prim makes a different choice this time: to keep in a painful holding pattern.

The poignancy of this image is in its ability to hold the contradictions in tandem: it is both empty and full. It is a place where binaries are confounded. It is a painful process and the promise of agency is uncertain. What it does provide, however, is a model of identity which is not in a pattern of domination and subordination with others, but rather it is embedded in communities and demands imaginative choices.

The fragmented subjects in this play are in complicated worlds where power and knowledge and therefore agency are not pure and simple; oppression is common. Mama is situated among discourses which clearly afford her agency, but nonetheless are continually

restrictive. The kind of agency she finds is not from a sense of play or foregrounding of the constructed nature of her identity, but is always bound back to a patriarchal ideal. Duck is the centre of his Mama's world, clearly feels superior to Prim, but nonetheless exists on the margins of society. He is just as conflicted as Prim. Frank is perhaps the only still centre, but he exists in a world which has imploded on itself. So assured and checked are his actions that they are without significance. Working outside already determined parameters in the "constitutive outside" is not possible, and ultimately leads to inaction. Prim, painful as it is, is the one who feels and is inevitably marked. The urgency is with her, with her hand in the stream of hot coffee, and in the poignancy of this image. For it is a state of being in both places, marked and in pain. The agency of identity in terms of a postmodern feminism can also be conceptualized in this state: being in two places at the same time, of pleasure and pain.

The impenetrable nature of this last image works in combination with Mama's lament of not being known. This play is very much about the limitations of representation. What passes for "realism" doesn't work. Concomitantly, the model that is the nuclear family has collapsed. The father is absent; his existence is uncertain. Consumable images are replaced with something harder to access. Containment is possible, but not always secure. The body leaks. Like the "friggin frogs" that return, the cherries that are crushed, the *Poppycock* that persists, the body is scorched through its own making.

Conclusion

I have been arguing for a combination of postmodernism and feminism and as my analysis of the plays progresses, the question of the role of the spectator becomes more and more persistent.

Issues of spectatorship, like issues of implication, are clearly important in the theorizing of a postmodern feminist identity. The patterns by which identity is constructed within the texts are intricately linked to reception and subject-object identification. Although there is more of an emphasis on female identity in the plays of Margaret Hollingsworth, and a more identifiable feminist politics, there are similarities with the work of Judith Thompson. Subjects shift according to relations of power. The dominance implied in such subjects is critiqued by the serialization of these positions, and in Hollingsworth, especially by images and formal and narrative devices. Identity which is in a tension of mastery and non-mastery. There is no moral insistence on good and bad, nor a firmly embedded difference between self and *other*. Hollingsworth variously reworks stories from childhood, history, and genre. As she does so, a formation is achieved which is in keeping with Stuart Hall's definition of identity and Judith Butler's discursive groundings.

Hall articulates the need to consider the fluid process of theorizing this kind of identity:

. . . identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we came from," so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (*Questions* 4)

The films of Patricia Gruben take this study even further into the realm of the personal. In her films, she quite literally asks what represents herself. She asks the questions of origin in conjunction with destiny. As Hall's remarks indicate, this is not an isolated, individual process, but one which is very much an interpretive journey which foregrounds the participation of the spectator in the undoing of a subject/object dynamic. In the next chapter, I will consider selected films by Gruben and possible positionings for the postmodern feminist identity that she offers.

Issues of body and narrative in my discussions of Thompson and Hollingsworth have proven to overlap. This interplay will be a focus for my discussion of Gruben.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Routes” not “Roots”: The Films of Patricia Gruben

grübeln: to brood, to ponder the imponderable

The films of Patricia Gruben provide ample opportunity for the exploration of identity in terms of postmodernism and feminism. Although the criteria for considering film are different from theatre, the analytical overlay of the model of subject/identity is still relevant. Here the interplay of body/narrative which I have been considering in Thompson and Hollingsworth is always apparent. Gruben’s films are thoughtful treatises which specifically situate identity within an already particularly subjective medium. In her interrogation of the discourses which construct identity, Gruben addresses patriarchal institutionalized discourses of science and language as well as the filmic medium itself. Again, the subject is situated among discourses; identity is ambiguous and contingent on shifting relations of power. Mastery is critiqued as the subject is serialized; identity is not contained in a singular body, but is interrogated as narrative and filmic techniques are also interrogated.

In all her films, most especially *Ley Lines*, Gruben addresses her own need to tell stories and to seek out origin. Gruben’s interest in origin can be traced to her training in anthropology and her early work in documentaries. She has described the focus of her films as “the ambiguities and contradictions of consciousness” (In Bachman 1) and “how we know what we know” (In Bailey n.p.). Her films reflect and combine these interests as eventually she becomes the subject of her own inquiry.

Reception

Like the work of Margaret Hollingsworth, the films of Patricia Gruben are not widely known. She is well-known within experimental film circles and on university campuses, but distribution, even for her feature-length films, is limited. Reviewers lament this condition:

Access to audience is, in fact, the most commonly missing element in the chemistry of Canadian films; and without this--without the filmmaker/audience relationship which is a dynamic of challenge and critique--the entire process of production (including the expense, energy and ideas required) stops short. The work is unleashed into a vacuum. (Mason 43)

In "The Best Canadian Films You've Probably Never Seen," which discusses *Low Visibility*, Geoff Pevere expresses a similar frustration:

Considering how difficult it is to see Canadian movies even under the most generous circumstances, this admittedly is something of an exercise in hair-splitting. Nevertheless, there are certain Canadian movies that, for one reason or another, are even less visible than most and which, in many cases, are infinitely superior to the chosen few that do enjoy some form of fleeting notoriety. Therefore, what follows is a highly subjective account of some of the undeservedly lost Canadian movies of recent years; those films that, after a festival screening or two, simply dropped through the floorboards of our cultural memory. (34)

Gruben's attempts to accommodate her films to a more mainstream market have not been successful. In 1990 she made *Deep Sleep*, a psychological thriller, starring Megan Follows, in which a young girl attempts to discover the reasons for the murder of her father four years earlier. Reviews panned the film. In most reviews it was criticized for the "scattergun" approach to the script and Gruben's "intellectual fuzziness and esthetic clutter" (Groen C3). Her attempts to fuse more experimental techniques with a mainstream plot were met with confusion:

The most solid aspect of her film--the sharply-focused dream images and the deliberately anti-naturalistic "religious" dialogue--is also the most extrinsic, and is conceptually at odds with the more mainstream plot . . . (Harris 21)

The fusion which Gruben appears to have attempted here is characteristic of her other work and in many ways is one of her strengths. Like Thompson and Hollingsworth, there is a dual impulse to her films; they simultaneously situate a subject and undo its moorings. Gruben's other films have also received mixed reviews and reactions. On the one hand, *Sifted Evidence* was voted one of the top twenty films in the world by Village Voice critic Jim Hoberman in 1983. On the other hand, *Ley Lines* was described by Joe Leydon in *Variety* as "a ponderous and self-indulgent vanity production" (n.p.). These mixed reactions to her films can often be attributed to the challenging ways her films incorporate issues of subject/identity formation.

Her concerns are feminist in their consistently complex inquiry into the positioning of women in a patriarchal society. The idea of a postmodern feminist identity which I have been exploring involves identity as a site of ambiguity. The tension of mastery and non-mastery is again demonstrated in the series of subjects in Gruben's films. Confined and constricted, these subjects need a language to speak. Her films also offer spaces for a different kind of subjectivity, in which coherence is undermined, both by technical strategies and thematic concerns. The workings of a postmodern feminist form of identity can be found in the images and transgressions which happen simultaneously with the ongoing serialization of the subject. I have chosen to consider four of Gruben's films here in extensive detail, for their particular situating and exploration of the subject/identity dynamic: *The Central Character*, *Sifted Evidence*, *Low Visibility*, and *Ley Lines*. As in the chapters on Thompson and Hollingsworth, I will discuss both the situating of the subject and then consider the ways in which the identity of characters, as well as Gruben herself, is presented as destabilized. Gruben uses several different techniques both on the level of the synchronized and the voice-over text to articulate this crisis of identity. Gruben negotiates the

border of chaos and order, and the ways in which we construct identities out of the amalgam of stories we tell and are told about ourselves. I will also consider the films individually for their specific concerns of problematizing identity at various intersections with the *other*. The imperialism of the masterful subject is problematized in Gruben's films. Where Thompson and Hollingsworth work with non-linear narrative, where different "realities" seem to exist simultaneously, Gruben constantly foregrounds the construction of the filmic medium, drawing attention to the different forms of representation and therefore the several constructions of identity which are possible.

The Central Character is an early feminist film which both addresses the restrictive roles of women and incorporates several experimental techniques as an alternative to the concept of a unitary identity. The film unravels so many stories that its character is left diffuse, rather than "central." *Sifted Evidence*, as its title implies, layers the subject, and overtly addresses the ways in which it is implicated in the *other* and the *other's* oppression. The film both accommodates and undermines narrative, probing the implications of both language and desire. *Low Visibility* relinquishes the subject even further. Here, even more overtly than in *Sifted Evidence*, the subject is constructed by other discourses, and acts upon others in its attempts to achieve agency. Other more playful possibilities for a delineation of the parameters of identity involve an ironic, foregrounded use of language and an awareness of the mediations which construct a viewing experience. In *Ley Lines*, the filmmaker turns to her own identity, and traces the lines she draws in an attempt at a personal definition. The film undertakes a problematic search for origin. At the same time, it articulates the impossibility of arresting and maintaining such parameters of identity, here in the case of Patricia Gruben herself. Margaret Hollingsworth undertakes a similar venture

in *War Babies* with the interrogation of Esme, the playwright, but here the study that Patricia Gruben undertakes destabilizes her own authorial status as filmmaker.

The Central Character: Containment and Disorder

This film is the most anti-realistic of all the texts I am considering. The “central character” does not have a distinguishable character, or identity, or history. There is no specific narrative in the traditional sense which orders her story. A domestic world, structured by words, blueprints, and photographs, is contrasted by the world of the garden. It is to this space that the main character escapes. In some ways, *The Central Character* can be read quite simply as an earnest feminist tract, exposing the constrictions of a domestic role for woman. The two spaces of the film, the colonized and the exotic, nature and culture, can even loosely represent the patriarchal world of order and its other counterpart, the disordered space of the feminine. Kathleen McHugh insightfully analyzes the use of space as determinant of identity in Patricia Gruben’s films. She describes the juxtaposition of the ordered domestic space of the kitchen, and projects a process of liberation as the woman moves into the organic space of the garden. McHugh contrasts the beginning of the film with the ending, and suggests the liberatory association the film makes with nature:

The drudge and monotony of the domestic becomes exotic as it dissipates in the aural, vegetal riot of the outdoors. And the elusive central character? Originally constituted as an ordered, ordering function in the kitchen, the woman disintegrates into an organic effect, a liberated growth that exceeds the constraints, the original context or containers of her own cultivation. (111)

There are limits to such a utopic vision of feminism, however, in its oppositional positioning, and there are ways in which this vision is undermined in the film. The reading of the film which I

propose is one which reduces the opposition of binaries and, again, proposes a site of ambiguity in its restructuring of identity. These two worlds do not oppose each other in this film so much as intrude on each other, to no satisfactory conclusion. The film problematizes such dichotomies while still availing itself of these discourses. The film becomes an interrogation of both spaces, and turns the title of the film back on itself: who is the central character? How to remake the central character differently?

Let us first consider the roles which the film presents as being available to women within a patriarchal society, and the means of resistance which are present. In *The Central Character*, the domestic role of Woman as homemaker is self-consciously foregrounded. A nameless woman is shown trapped by her kitchen, her grocery list, her domestic chores. Her voice is disembodied as words which scroll on the screen, describing a loose narrative of a woman struggling to the house with groceries. The woman is also contained by a voice-over which recites a list of groceries. A blueprint of the kitchen is shown on which appears the following text:

Entropy is the biggest problem in the modern kitchen. Regulating traffic flow, keeping fingerprints, food particles and other unhygienic intruders out. A nucleus of order must be maintained. A kitchen is white steel and chrome for earlier detection. Why is it that disorder is more contagious?

White words across a black screen detail other written texts which are not traditionally significant: a list of groceries, a recipe for Mediterranean Potato Pie. The woman's status as a subject constructed by these discourses is clearly articulated. These words identify her tasks: fetching groceries, cooking meals. She is identified primarily with respect to her function in the kitchen. Her movements are prescribed; in fact, the shots which illustrate her actions are stills. The broom which sweeps the floor is caught in a moment. McHugh describes these moments as indications of

“the woman as merely an agent of order; we never see her” (111). Rather, she is serialized in her actions.

As the scrolling text continues to tell the story, possibilities of resistance arise from within the discourse. We have already been told about the “rainforest of zucchini.” It is in the disorderly space of the garden where the woman finds resistance. Her function throughout has been to clean, to keep order, to cook. It is the disorder which encroaches and overcomes her. She tries to keep things under control, but she cannot. The potato she grows as an experiment sprouts everywhere. It is a growth which “feeds off the flesh of the mother.” The woman is also associated with the potato; she is seen partially submerged in a bathtub, floating just on the edge.

Just as the noise of the frogs exists already within Jack’s discourse in Hollingsworth’s *The House that Jack Built*, so too do the constant tasks of preparing food and cleaning the house provide within them a small means of resistance. She has been trying to keep the excess, the dirt of life at bay, but she cannot keep everything contained. She cannot keep up with the growth of the potatoes. The words which scroll over the screen document the growth of the potatoes, but also seem to lose their focus:

During this time the potatoes were active.
 Their growth rate was phenomenal.
 She would like to measure their rate but
 is unable to set up her apparatus.
 Long vines curl around the kitchen windows
 and across the cupboard doors. The footprints
 of North American wildlife are to be seen on
 her freshly waxed floor. She has to
 pull the vines off the dish cupboard door
 to reach the bowl for her vegetables.

Here the kind of language used to describe the eternal task of maintaining order is a parody of an official, rational discourse. The narrative is unable to contain the disorder which encroaches. It is from within this use of language that the disorder appears. The corresponding action of the “plot” is similarly parodic: the woman escapes outdoors to eat the vegetables; she then leaves the house completely in the fairy-tale like ending of the first half of the film, as she scatters a trail of seeds to guide her back, reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel scattering breadcrumbs on their way into the forest, away from home. Of course, the birds promptly eat the seeds, as the voice-over tells us, sealing her fate in the woods. Thus the woman’s escape is also ironically contained.

The woman leaves the house, ostensibly to find more “containers” for the potato plant which is overwhelming her kitchen. This transition into the exotic wild space of the woods is accompanied by a significant formal change. No longer do texts scroll across the screen. As McHugh points out, “the woman’s aural presence, her voice, merges with the cacophony of the outdoors” (111). It is also significant that this scenario, in the woods, is the first time the woman’s body is shown in entirety; other shots have shown only fragments: a hand, a head, a shoulder. In the scene where her full body is shown, she is prostrate on the wet ground. When she rises, she has ground in and around her mouth and on her clothes. She looks directly into the camera, as though recognizing that she is momentarily caught visually, at least, if no longer with interposed text. She then flees. A voice-over intones: “I would like to say that I would like to say that” in an incessant loop. This moment of recognition of the female subject is an almost direct refusal of traditional representation. As Craig Masterman says, “Symbolically, the loss of language corresponds to the woman’s fall from the patriarchal order” (19). She will not be captured in language, either written by texts, or seen by the camera.

The woman's "escape" to nature, however, is not unproblematic. The inability to speak is painfully evoked. Rather than woman as "an organic effect, a liberated growth" (McHugh 111), it is possible to see the limitations the film expresses about this construction of identity. The woman fumbles towards identification, as yet unborn and unable to speak, or to be heard. The woman is positioned as an "eccentric subject," as Teresa de Lauretis would say ("Eccentric Subjects" 145); this affords her the ability to see what others cannot. Nonetheless, the woman's words are frozen; her desire unable to be spoken. The film in this sense shows the imbrication of language and desire. The repetition of "that I would like to say" indicates the circular, serialized playing out of this role as subject, trapped in an endless cycle of speaking in pre-recorded phrases, unable to give voice to what it is that she would like to say, and yet also unable to determine her desire without words. Although the woman runs away when she recognizes that she is seen or caught by the film, that she is for an instant "re-presented," the voice-over which begins immediately following this encounter shows the limits of such a leap into the exotic, presumably unrepresentable unknown. In its repetition and inarticulacy, this technique conveys the need to speak and to be heard. At the same time, language is broken down by its sheer repetition, not unlike the "talk trots" of Pegs in *I am Yours*. As Kathleen McHugh says, "Meaning becomes a mantra" (111); the meaning is in the act of repetition of the words, rather than in the words themselves. Here a form of resistance is found. And yet this resistance is minimal. Although the texts such as the recipe and scrolling narrative on screen no longer construct her, in exiling herself from language, the woman must express herself differently. She is without language and the limitations it entails, but this does not mean that she is in a more exotic, liberatory terrain. She must negotiate interactions

differently. The exotic here can be related to the “constitutive outside” of Butler; only in forays to the “outside” can change be made possible.

Other images repeat the motif of the inevitability of containment, and the ineluctability of the unmediated. Hands are taking pots out of pots out of pots, a veritable *mise en abyme*, as the layers of the onion are peeled back, to reveal no essential core. What remains instead is the empty shell, that which holds the dirt, the disorder. This space is not necessarily more liberating than the domestic space of the kitchen; it is its reverse as signalled by the use of high contrast, negative film footage. The camera tracks the woman’s journey in the woods and to a junkyard. She finds a radio, and vainly attempts to tune in a station, to make contact. She opens a book and voices on the soundtrack pour forth. She is still on a search for civilization; she attempts to domesticate the outdoors by serving dinner. A makeshift table is set and a salamander and frog placed on the plate. As the woman prods the frog with her fork, it leaps off the table. The voice-over is a distorted recitation of proper table etiquette.

In this film, there is an ambiguous relationship to the containment of disorder, to situating an identity satisfactorily within society. This containment is restrictive, yet necessary. Representation is inescapable, even if it is in language, as the final image of the film shows: it is a pencil drawing of the woods, and, as Mike Hoolboom points out, “Carefully scrutinized, it reveals a woman’s face staring back from inside one of the tree trunks, her body merged with her surround” (Qtd. in *CFMDC* info sheet). The voice-over is frustrated: “why is it that disorder is contagious?” Like the dirt that is everywhere, spilling over, there is an inability to contain all, and even an inability to separate chaos and disorder, or nature and culture. A potato is planted in the kitchen, and gradually takes over the space. A blueprint of the kitchen is shown as evidence of the

growth of the potato as it encroaches everywhere, provoking the remark: "Who took my chair?" There is a vitality of life to the disorder, just as there is a necessity for containment for articulation.

This film shows the limitations of the position of the woman in the first half of the film, and especially the limitations of mastery: of the woman, of space, of language. The alternative is not clearly articulated because of its dubious complicated nature. A moment early in the film articulates a state of subjectivity which exemplifies this ambiguity. As a fern dangles over her head, a woman floats in the bathtub in which only her head is shown in the shot. She is both below and above the surface, on the cusp. Her head sometimes sinks lower, but is never submerged, and never comes out of the water: this is the state of the female subject in this film. She exists, literally, in air and in water, in two places at once. The trick is to maintain a precarious positioning. Ironically the "central character" is not centre-based at all: it is both everywhere and nowhere.

In this way, the film encourages the active piecing together of the film and the fragments which form the identity of the central character. Two different, linked processes are implied. Left with a disjointed narrative, the audience is encouraged to fill in the gaps in the story by making the links and connections between events and images. At the same time, there is a blurring here of the woman as both subject and object. Identity is again a state of liminality: it is evoked between the disorder and the chaos, neither exotically transcendent in an association with nature, nor chained to the domestic realm of the kitchen. Although the woman as the subject of the film does not attain an agency which serves her, the audience, through the interpretive signposting and the fragments of narrative, is compelled to imagine other possible ways of reading and viewing which

in turn activate sites of identity formation. Again, the idea of identity which is here played out is that of Stuart Hall, which is a concept “operating ‘under erasure’ in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (*Questions 2*). This concept of identity is clearly articulated in the later films of Gruben which engage more fully with narrative.

Sifted Evidence: Desire and Narrative

Although more solicitous attempts are made at spectator engagement in *Sifted Evidence*, there is still a suspicion of viewing as consumption which pervades the film. A different audience engagement is demanded; the film inquires into the nature of desire in narrative, and narrative in desire. In my consideration of this film, the construction of characters as subjects is evident. The power which they wield and their ability to order, colonize, objectify and categorize is related to this position of mastery. Yet at the same time, this impulse is put into question. Agency which is achieved is limited; the subject as such is serialized. I will also suggest ways in which the film suggests a concept of identity as a site of ambiguity and offers a viewing experience which is thwarted in its attempts to consume. The self as a coherent entity is destabilized at both the level of content and form in this film. Where *The Central Character* explores the dynamic of mastery in the formation of identity as positioned between civilization and nature, *Sifted Evidence* considers it more explicitly in the imbrication with the *other*.

In this film several subjects are realized. The central story of the film, a woman’s experience as she attempts to visit the ruins in Tlatilco, Mexico, is claimed by one woman in the outer frame of the film, but the “story” is experienced by a different woman, a different actor.

Different bodies take up the same story. This is an important feature of the film. On the one hand, it undermines the coherence of identity and story: what happened to whom is questioned. On the other hand, it establishes a commonality for the experience of subjects; women have been treated similarly and do experience similar situations. This is realized elsewhere in the film. The search is, after all, for archaeological evidence of female deities. The early part of the film depicts female divinities of ancient Mexico and discusses their position and appropriation within cultures. This sequence moves into a more general discussion of the way in which women are configured in society. The objectification of women is shown through shots and comments on women's bodies, in various poses: "We are billboards on the street," proclaims the voice-over. "Woman" as a mythic subject is considered. Yet this does not suggest that there is a coherence and stability to this idea of woman. The female divinities are examined more closely: there are two heads, two faces. Why the double image? This thought provokes a discussion of the mind/body split. Connections are made between these different modes of mastering an Other. The film becomes a meditation on the negotiation of a way of being which recognizes and attempts to rework this impulse of mastery. This inquiry is achieved by formal mediations which suggest a different attempt at negotiating knowledge and interactions which relinquish this impulse to dominate.

It is in verbal language in the film that this impulse to contain, control and dominate occurs. At the beginning of the film, discursive authorities are seemingly reinforced. A documentary, academic tone sets the terms of the inquiry: this is a discussion of female deities in a small village in Mexico with a feminist perspective. Point of view is emphasized: we must "fix the frame, set the zoom, pay strict attention to the cross hairs." An image finally comes into focus. But the irony begins: a mildly pontifical voice declares, sententiously, "To reach that spot, we must

proceed from where we are.” The truism is turned on its head. The question becomes instead a matter of figuring out exactly where “we” are coming from in the first place, as well as an interrogation of the imperialism of “we.” The story is as much about the search for an understanding of the woman’s own complicated subjectivity as it is about her archaeological search.

The film is situated at the beginning within the realm of the public; the documentary inquiry, however, quickly shifts into the realm of the private. The subject of the film finally appears on screen: a woman stands in a room, with her suitcase open, looking at what she has brought back from Mexico. She plays a tape of Spanish lessons which now becomes the background sound. As she fingers the items, she says, “These are the elements of voluntary bondage.” She has a bus ticket, a statuette, a bunch of dried flowers: “These represent the ideals of adventure, mystery, and romantic love.” She looks directly into the camera. This complex beginning to the film sets up the intricate parameters of the narrative structure. The documentary tone provides an ideological frame for what is a personal story. The film moves from a pseudo-objective stance to the very intimate. The disembodied voice of the documentary is shown: the objective tone is now situated within a particular scenario. The universalizing voice and proclamations at the beginning, therefore, are shifted into the realm of the particular.

This shift is also paralleled by the formal devices of the film as they are self-consciously foregrounded. A series of different kinds of shots and filmic techniques signals the settling into perspective: words which scroll on a screen, shots of the globe, a shot of a child looking through binoculars, and a series of slides as the goddesses are delineated by a female voice who gives an account of female deity in Christianity and other religions. This pedagogical tone is then

abandoned when we hear the slide projector being shut off, and the story, the personal story, begins. The white screen also provides a deliberate pivotal point for the film. A woman, whose story, presumably, we are about to hear, walks into the shot. There are now close-ups of the woman, looking very concerned, and pans of her room where her suitcase lies open, souvenirs, her own personal artefacts displayed. In this way, the film situates the story of the woman within a larger historical and theoretical framework. This situating is paralleled by a cataloguing of the devices which Gruben uses in her film. As Kass Banning says,

The opening sequence literally catalogues the materiality of the cinema: the white screen, the projector, the disembodied voice track, etc. They provide the elements (such as the rear projection technique in the film) which are later reworked. (163)

This film is self-consciously, discursively embedded in both history and the filmic medium.

The repetition is emphasized throughout. The character in the film is on a search for the ruins at Tlatilco where two-headed female deity figurines were said to be found, but she is also on a search to make sense of the personal artefacts which she has retained. It is in this sense also a search through her own memory to recreate the past. Simply the reiteration of the various female deities emphasizes how the subject is repeated: both the same and different. Both Woman's experience and woman's experience are brought into tandem. This doubling of images is further carried out when the actual telling of the personal story begins with the introduction of the trip to the ruins in Tlatilco. With no explanation, the woman who is on screen in the Tlatilco sequences is not the same woman as the one in the hotel room. The film is framed by a different character than the one who is experiencing the story, a woman whose name we only later, and rather incidentally, find out is Maggie.

Maggie is also reconstructed in her various guises according to her context. There is no intrinsic nature to her identity; she is situated by circumstance. Her power and ability to master a situation or meaning is dependent on context. As a white woman tourist in Mexico, she has the money to be able to hire people to guide her. Since she does not speak the language, she is dependent on her guide. Hers is a cautionary tale, doomed to repeat a story told in the voice-over in the early part of the film. Early in the film, the first narrator relates the story of a Canadian woman who was kidnapped and held for several days. She did not speak Spanish and could not make herself understood. As the narrator says, "The man who took her didn't understand her words, mistook her curiosity for desire. Who knows what they finally meant to each other." Maggie, although not kidnapped, finds herself in a similar experience with Jim Lilly, the Mexican man she hires to be her guide. As she cannot make herself understood and he speaks some English, he translates for her. However, he misreads her signals; he thinks she is flirting with him. Their relationship is ambiguous. As the voice-over says, "Who knows what they really meant to each other." The repetition of these words again aligns Maggie with the woman whose story was told earlier. Not only does this draw attention to the material circumstances of women, but it also sets up the inevitability of interactions which are modelled on a subject/object relationship, of domination and subordination.

As Banning writes, the filmic techniques set up in the early sequence of the film are put into practice in the "story" of Maggie. A different filmic texture predominates in Maggie's story, suggesting a different but co-existing reality: some touristic shots of Tlatilco are used, but most of these sequences are stills and front projections used as a backdrop for the action of the characters on screen. This technique foregrounds the constructed nature of action and character. The voice-

over at this point in the film is also different. For those who are aware of it, it is the Texas drawl of Patricia Gruben. She performs a kind of translation of the film, a “he-said, she-said” relaying of information which effects another level of distancing from psychological identification. The result is a complex layering of foregrounded story-telling in the film, so complex that spectator expectations are constantly thwarted. In this way, documentary blends into feminist tract into personal story into experimental study of subjectivity. The texture of the film changes chameleon-like. What story is being told? Whose story? Why? As questions rebound, further conflicts and discrepancies arise. As the way in which the story is being told is put into question, so the identity of the characters is shifted and unsettled.

The conflicts which occur between Jim Lilly and Maggie are linked to the different stories they tell about themselves. The characters are acting within their own narratives. Because of the way in which the film is constructed, it appears as if the narratives are “duelling” rather than the characters.¹ Like Thompson, Gruben foregrounds the struggles of characters who are differently discursively determined. Kathleen McHugh draws attention to the tension that results:

Ultimately, the evidence we must sift through concerns the tension elicited from their conflicting representations of what is ostensibly the “same” story. The viewpoint of Jim Lilly AKA Charlie though mediated through the woman’s voice-over narration, presents a perspective that differs from, if does not overtly challenge, Maggie’s point of view. (113)

In this way, characters are shown to be subjects only insofar as their respective narratives are concerned. Who they are is determined by who is speaking and who has control of the story. Maggie is rendered immobile by her inability to speak the language of the foreign country. She is also rendered powerless by the misreading of the sexual politics of the situation. These are not the

¹ See “duelling narratives” in Ric Knowles, “The Achievement” 34.

only ways in which she is constructed as a subject, however. The film complicates the interactions between Jim Lilly and Maggie by the way in which it communicates their interactions.

Just as Maggie's experience of Tlatilco is moderated by what Jim Lilly chooses to tell her, the film exploits the manipulation of voice and language in the diegesis. A very complex voice-over is used in *Sifted Evidence*. Kay Armatage analyzes the image-voice relationship in her article, "About to Speak: The Woman's Voice in Patricia Gruben's *Sifted Evidence*." The separation of voice and image, as others such as Doane and Silverman suggest, is a positive feminist move, for it rejects cinematic codes which in traditional Hollywood films lead to voyeurism and fetishism of the female. The image of the character in Tlatilco is seldom synchronized with her voice. As Armatage notes, the disjunction between voice/image is achieved by the use of a female voice-over and a he-said/she-said relaying of action on the screen (300-301). This is not used to translate. On the contrary, sometimes the voice-over is obviously relaying word for word what the characters are saying, as their lips can be read. This is at times disconcerting. By adding another dimension to the filmic experience like this, it forces the spectator to slow down in his/her "consumption" of the film. A much more active viewing experience is required. Checks and balances are made: is she telling us exactly what they are saying? The disembodied omniscient narrator is not accepted seamlessly. Furthermore, the audience is made to question an investment in a singular truth. What is to ensure that we are receiving the information correctly?

As the film progresses, the narration changes slightly. These moments are significant and chart the intimacy of the characters. Maggie and Jim Lilly miss a bus and are forced to spend the night at a hotel. She gets sick, he looks after her, and accuses her of giving her the wrong signals: he has amorous intentions. When they discuss their encounter over breakfast the next morning,

the voice-over declares, “during one of the long pauses he said he’s fallen in love with me.” Here a shift in narrative perspective happens, as the narrator moves from third person to first person: she aligns herself more overtly with the protagonist. She begins to intervene in other ways, directing her heroine, letting the audience know her name: “Maggie, look over to your left.” The actor/character complies and sees that the bus is coming. The voice-over not only narrates the action, but also directs the action. “Look to your left, Maggie,” she says, when the bus is arriving. In the crucial scene in the hotel room when Jim Lilly attacks Maggie, all objectivity is lost. As Armatage says, “the voice-over of the filmmaker returns to intervene in the woman’s dilemma: ‘Just stop it, stop it and go!’” (302). The narrator overtly aligns herself with the woman.

The sequence in the hotel room, where Jim Lilly pins Maggie to the bed, is remarkable for its synchronization of sound and image. Narration stops. Events are experienced in “real” time. The characters speak for themselves. As Kay Armatage points out,

Not only does the hotel room scene re-posit the conventional unified spectator, but it argues once again the relation of woman to the fully illusioned, hierarchically integrated cinematic world. It effects the return of the woman as a helpless object of desire, characterized by and victim of her lack. (302)

It is ironic to consider that now that the woman has a voice, she is even more objectified, given the cumulative effect of viewing codes of Hollywood films. The repetition of the subject is emphasized in this sequence, as traditional Hollywood codes of viewing and the scene of an objectified, nearly raped woman is revisited.

It is important, however, to consider the effect of such a scene as it works against the narrating convention that has been set up. The “he-said, she-said” narrative technique has been used for so long that it is accepted as equally natural. Kathleen McHugh interprets the switch to a

more “realistic” mode of interaction as a way that the film self-reflexively questions this form of representation:

The film that provides the context for this scene also undermines its validity in a representational sense. The realistic conventions that inform it become apparent when juxtaposed with the modes of presentation used in the scenes that precede it. The film thereby presents diegetic realism as just another mode of representation with no privileged claim to truth. (114)

In addition to these observations of Armatage and McHugh, it is important to emphasize the effect of such a switch on the spectator. The jolt from the usual method of narration catapults the spectator into what is a more traditional filmic product. Because it is so unexpected, it is disturbing. It is also important to remember that before the narration, the image of Maggie in the bedroom is filtered through the louvers of the window. Therefore, the voyeuristic experience of the spectator is foregrounded; he/she is implicated. In this sense there is the demonstration of these positions as subject which are societally, culturally and representationally conditioned and available; at the same time, there is an inquiry into a subject/object dynamic. As the viewing experience is problematized, the conditions for the repetition of such a subject formation are questioned.

The subsequent scenes now resonate differently. A further change in the intimacy of subject/viewer occurs when Maggie wakes up. It is very early in the morning and she takes this opportunity to head out to the ruins by herself. A further dimension to the layering of identity is added. Each voice-over this time is echoed by a dreamlike German translation. Maggie’s German heritage has been alluded to before, in conversation and in references to Rilke, but here it becomes an important reminder of another layer of her experience. “For our heart transcends us still, as it does in ancient times” is repeated throughout the film. The heart, desire, is unable to be

quantified, or accounted for completely; nonetheless, it is formed by cultural prescriptions and codified ways of interacting. Choosing, shaping, reworking, redefining one's representational matrix are perhaps the limits of autonomy although this agency is also put into question.

There are other ways in which the coherence of the subject is undermined, and visions of a different concept of identity are made possible. All of these techniques refer back to the viewing experience and implicate the spectator. One of these sites of ambiguity is the frustration of narrative. In many ways in this film, narrative is given over to narration. Very few things happen and those events that do are highlighted. There is always an attempt to catch a bus, to move, to make the story work, but this impulse is always frustrated. As the voice-over says, "We don't experience the continuum of time, just each moment as we pass through it." It is this kind of story which is given credence here. Events and spaces are left uncolonized. There is little impetus to move the story forward. If events are not understood, they are left hard, whole, counter to the story, undigested. There are spaces which are not made familiar but rather are left in their confusing ambiguity. The narrative technique supports this. Gaps in the narrative and in the continuity of events are left as such. Rather than smoothing over inconsistencies, the film exposes unexplained moments and overtly questions their placement within the story. When Maggie and Jim have to stay at a hotel, having missed the last bus back to town, they wait by the pool. The voice-over questions the turn of events, and changes which have occurred: "How did they get from one step to the next? Where did she get the bathing suit?"

Stories, which begin at least twice, once as a documentary, once as a personal reminiscence, fall apart and never reach completion. The documentary quality is dispensed with after the beginning. The personal story, which is set up as an intrigue--who does what? how does

it happen? how did she end up here? will she get back home?--becomes less and less of a concern. Instead these questions are superseded by those of a more metaphysical nature: whose story are we hearing? what is the nature of home? Narrative desire, then, is not so much denied as it is diverted. What does become evident is the way in which that desire is constructed. The plot becomes a clever parody of the foreign adventure. A trip abroad does indeed become a means for "finding oneself." In this way, the dominant paradigm is reworked from within, gently critiqued, but not overturned.

Narratives break down, possibly because so do words. The reason Maggie is stymied in her voyage so many times is because of her inability to speak the language. The Spanish lessons frequently recur on the sound track, mocking her feeble attempts at progress. But there are also other issues at stake here, a colonization of another sort. In speaking about her films, Trinh T. Minh-ha says,

Any person who has had prolonged interactions with country people and villagers --whether from their own culture or from another culture--know that you have to learn to speak differently in order to be heard in their context. . . . Translation, which is interpellated by ideology and can never be objective or neutral, should here be understood in the wider sense of the term--as a politics of constructing meaning. Whether you translate one language into another language, whether you narrate in your own words what you have understood from the other person, or whether you use this person directly on screen as a piece of "oral testimony" to serve the direction of your film, you are dealing with cultural transition. (127-28)

These remarks regarding cultural transition are appropriate here, although this film is a fictional rendition, because Gruben's work is similarly dealing with the space of the *other* and the complexities in negotiating identity, and also, or perhaps concomitantly, desire.

In *Sifted Evidence*, issues of race and class form part of the process of identification for this privileged white woman. This is the classic postmodern failure: the privileging of the loss of

subjectivity at the expense of those who have not ever attained that space. Gruben makes comparisons if not equations between varieties of colonization which are occurring: the Aztecs by the Spaniards, women by men, and perhaps her implication as a tourist in Tlatilco.

Again the substance of the film is found in the particular. What the film addresses, subtly, never overtly, is the female tourist's desire for her Spanish guide, and his for her. Not only is Jim Lilly's desire to dominate Maggie problematized, but Maggie herself comes under question in both her ambiguous relationship with Jim Lilly, and her colonising desire regarding the ruins of Tlatilco. The exotic on both sides is eroticized, but never resolved; both desire, neither dominates. Jim Lilly is objectified as much as Maggie is. His body is described in great detail. She sits by the pool in her bathing suit, in display. Maggie sits out too long in the sun and gets sick: from the sun? from the tequila? Jim Lilly takes care of her and the closeness perpetrates an encounter. They discuss each other's behaviour: signs that have been misinterpreted. The next morning over breakfast, he says she doesn't even know his real name. Indeed she doesn't. As the waiter informs her, his name is "Charlie." He tells her he loves her. He sings her a song: "You led me on." She comments on the cliché. But they do not leave each other. There is a constant push-pull between them. She continues to miss buses and taxis. Her movements towards escape are ineffectual. Again they end up in a hotel room where the final, most intimate encounter between the two occurs. Jim/Charlie comes to say good-bye to her. He says he has a date, she suggests he leave. When she attempts to leave, he grabs her and wrestles her to the bed. She screams. Suddenly the texture of the film changes, and synchronization between voice and actor occurs, as mentioned earlier. "I'm sure they heard me," she says. "I'm sure they did," he says. They separate, but no resolution is reached. No responsibility is taken. No one responds to the scream. Rather than

resolving the action, the moment at which the voice-over stops and the body speaks is disconcerting and ambiguous still.

The ambiguity of the relationship and the circulating desire between Maggie and Jim Lilly is illustrated in repeated images of movement. The two of them are almost always on the way to somewhere, by taxi, motorcycle, or bus, but they are unable to get where they are going. The most important scenes of the film happen in the waiting spaces: the cafe, the hotel. It is in this liminal space where Jim Lilly finally dwells. One of the last sequences of the film uses the now familiar blue-screen projection. Maggie is on the bus, finally leaving Jim Lilly and her quest behind. As the bus drives away, she sees or imagines him running behind, eventually gaining on the bus, until, in the bizarre overlay of film and front projection, he is framed in the back window of the bus, larger than life, as she gazes at him. Then the bus turns a corner, and as she and we watch, Jim Lilly turns and runs away from the bus. In this film identity is problematized by the narrative frustration. Images such as these also suggest how the subject/object dichotomy is based on domination/subordination, and how this dynamic is easily reversed and the cycle perpetuated.

From cultural story to gender critique to personal reminiscence to travelogue, *Sifted Evidence* continues to shift shape, suggesting the perils of acting in the terms of a linear narrative structure, and offering possible ways of a different configuration of identity. One of these ways is in the archaeological motif, and the visit of the stranger to a foreign land. *Sifted Evidence* is also about a psychic colonization. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva uses the trope of “foreignness” as a way of describing the venture into psychic space unknown, “a constant quest for welcoming and going beyond the other in oneself” (75). She describes how St. Paul spoke to the psychic distress of his followers and how he “proposed a journey between two dissociated but

unified spheres that they could uncover in themselves--a journey between 'body' and 'soul'" (77). The foreigner is thought of as "one who does not belong to the state we are in" (90). In many ways, Kristeva's theorizing of the foreign as a psychic space of "perpetual transience" (3) is a trope that recurs in Gruben's work. As Kristeva says, "the space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping" (7).

In *Sifted Evidence*, the foreigner and her invasion have a multitude of resonances. The psychic transience of Maggie is represented by the layers that code her experience: the several voices and the various filmic techniques. She is not securely located in one place. The foreigner can also be considered a visitor to the "constitutive outside" that Judith Butler describes. Tlatilco, as a place of exclusion, is a place where she can journey in order to configure a new way of being. As in *The Central Character*, the exotic space of the other realm is problematized; distinctions between zones are blurred, just as Maggie's desire and Jim Lilly's desire fluctuate. The traveller ventures into unknown territory to learn something. In this case, Maggie is looking for lost female deities, a search which has almost been forgotten because it has been so often deferred. But her search is important because it is a search for origin and a search for the mother. I am not suggesting that this motif is a search for completion. Rather these *others* (Jim Lilly, the female deity, the mother) come to Maggie through this realm of the "constitutive outside." It is the process by which they are reintegrated into the film and constantly coded that brings us back to the discursive terms of this discussion. Dan Nadaner points out how this film constantly interrogates the production of meaning:

We are constantly reminded, through a string of original textual and visual devices, that meaning is culturally coded and that authenticity is therefore problematic. The woman wants to know, for example, the precise moment when Jim Lilly fell in love

with her. While she was drinking tequila in three feet of water in the pool “It was a pose I’d copied from a travelogue” (sic). (14)

Just as this experience is doomed to repeat the story of the Canadian traveller who was kidnapped, so too here there is another repetition, an imitation of form. Visually and thematically, the film questions its own production and attempts to find ways out for a different articulation of identity. On the one hand, there is Maggie’s own posing and participation in bringing about her own situation. On the other hand, the female traveller here is not understood, (language is a constant struggle); she is fearful, alone and pursued. She is in a land coded by male gestures.

The identity which results from the journey of the foreigner is a reiterated, fragmented being. The woman who frames the film is not the same as the woman who represents her in the story sequence. The narrator of the story sequence uses other voices, most significantly that of Patricia Gruben herself. Dan Nadaner emphasizes the voice of Gruben, who is Texas-born and retains this grain of voice:

Gruben is a master of the drawl. Drawl--the slow, twanged speech of southern and western Americans--is conventionally interpreted as having to do with heat, open spaces, slow thought, slow action. Gruben’s drawl, however, is intermeshed with a complex multi-layered narrative, not a yarn told on the front porch. This unconventional content changes the meaning of the vernacular speech, just as the vernacular changes the meaning of the content. The tone of voice becomes the experiential meeting ground between “natural” (as in non-intellectualized) lived experience and the debilitating shock of intellectually self-aware uncertainty. (15)

As Nadaner goes on to note, Gruben’s German heritage also infiltrates the film. Her voice, her story, perhaps the “fiction,” of the film with its multiplicity of voices and distancing techniques, is more “real” than the short sequences which frame it. The “real” of Patricia Gruben is set into a space which is framed by the intellectual voyage of the woman in the hotel room, even more conventionally shot and consistently realized than the synchronized voice/image attack in the

bedroom sequence. The woman in the hotel room, reminiscing in a Proustian fashion over her mementoes, exists on a different plane. These strategies of realism are put into question. Is the spectator now also introduced to a foreign territory, as he/she is plummeted back to conventions which smooth over the constructed nature of reality? Here Gruben chooses to stop (literally stop) the film at the point when the character returns to the hotel room. This sequence is filmed in a manner which erases all evidence of the filmic apparatus; no rear projections or voice-over techniques are used. The film ends in a shot that is inscrutable. The woman, who clearly appears upset, looks at the camera; the shot is frozen. The film ends abruptly, questioning the possibilities of narrative engagement and the viability of the conventional subject. Although the voice works against the look and thereby challenges conventional narrative and patriarchal structures, no coherent answer is provided. *Armatage* qualifies the autonomy, or ability to speak of such a subject:

The “evidence sifted” has provided no answers to her quest. As if to assert the impossibility of resolution or escape into a finally activated alternative discourse, the woman is suspended in a freeze-frame just as she turns to the camera and opens her mouth. She is frozen in silence--about to speak. (303)

The final sequence of the film is fascinating. It is useful to consider the visual lead up to this shot. There is a pan of pictures on the wall, of Mexican village shots, until the woman is shown, framed in the doorway. The shot is an interesting composition, for the woman is in the doorway, on an angle slightly facing to the viewer’s right. On the wall on the other side of the doorway, slightly facing left, is a picture of a woman, resembling the woman in the Tlatilco sequences. As the film ends, the spectator, at least, is ironically offered up the two-headed deity which was introduced as the intrigue at the beginning of the film.

This ironic resolution can be considered a liminal space, where the unity of humanism is rejected, stopped, disallowed. It is not only the patriarchal construction of a female subject which is critiqued, but also the humanist unity of self. Beyond this, an alternative discourse is perhaps already articulated in the multiple truths, voices, and identities which co-exist in this film. *Sifted Evidence* does more than reject patriarchal constructions of the self; the model of subjectivity it offers involves a different kind of identity formation. Stories are equally as limiting. The need is to tell stories, perhaps without ends. The film, like this final shot, is perhaps a meditation on this space between, in the constant push and pull of narrative. In a postmodern feminist identity-in-process inadequate words and the desperate need to speak coalesce.

Low Visibility: “a growth which feeds off the mother”

In *Sifted Evidence*, the story does not put forth the thoughts or perspective of Jim Lilly. He is, in this way, not known. In *Low Visibility*, Gruben’s first feature length film, part of the enquiry of the film is just this: to speak the male subject. In a newspaper article, Gruben describes her search:

Of *Low Visibility*’s incoherent hero, known as “The Man Who Ate The Nurse,” she muses: “I wasn’t aware til the film was half shot that it was about how I can’t presume to speak for men.” (In Bachman 1)

In an interview, she elaborates on this particular inquiry into subjectivity:

I wanted to make a film using a man as the main character, but I’m outside of male subjectivity, of course. It goes back to the idea of making a film about the limitations of my own imagination and the medium itself. The Bones character is an absence rather than a presence--people feed into him what they want to get out. (“Interview” 21)

The central character of this film is Mr. Bones, an amnesiac who was found wandering near the site of a plane crash. The film engages a desire for narrative as clues about Mr. Bones' story are pieced together. At the same time, the film re-constructs his identity. At the hospital, various doctors and nurses attempt to get Mr. Bones to speak and relate to them: "I just want to know how far we have to go to get you back here with us," says one of the doctors. The male doctors employ clinical tests and use objects in an attempt to get Mr. Bones to retrieve the use function of language. The female nurses take a less orthodox approach. They tease and joke with him, and christen him Mr. Bones because he likes to play with chicken bones and because he is the straight man for the nurses. Later in the film the name takes on other resonances when it becomes apparent that this man cannibalized the other corpses in order to survive. The film is an interrogation of the discourses which construct identity, as well as a study of the impossibility of knowing another's experience.

Although Mr. Bones presents an interesting study of the construction of the subject, I will focus on the central character only insofar as it relates to the identity of the women. This film uses cannibalism as a metaphor for the consumption of the *other* in the subject/object dynamic I have been discussing. It is discovered that Mr. Bones cannibalized a nurse on the plane. She was pregnant. As in *The Central Character*, a recurrent theme is the "growth which feeds off the mother." The nurses at the hospital, ironically, are the only ones who are able to elicit a response from Mr. Bones. They give him a name. They reach him tangentially, through jokes and possibly through the unconscious. They dream about him, their voice-overs tell us; they dream about all their patients. These nurses, in their white uniforms, represent the subject in an endless cycle of repetition. Attempts to change the configuration of identity are few.

The psychic provides an interesting counterpoint to this type of identity. She is a site of ambiguity, embroiled in the psyches of others. The identity which she has is intricately linked and dependent on others. In this way, she is portrayed as a contingent being, a way of knowing which is not self-contained, but fractured in its integrity. Interestingly she plays a significant organizing role, yet she is never seen on camera. She is employed by the police to help unearth the truth, but she is unable to come up with any substantial clues.

The psychic can be read as a means to a different situating of identity. Her vision and her way of understanding are undermined at points throughout the film. At one point aerial shots of the forest and mountains from a plane are accompanied by the voices of the psychic and the pilot or detective who is accompanying her. She directs the plane through a pass that they have already passed. The man points this out. The psychic sighs, "Oh, I don't know." And yet at other points, she gives us the only real glimpses into the crash site: through her eyes we see brief clips of trees, snow and wreckage. At the end of the film, there is a shot over fog, high in the air, where trees and landscape are only barely glimpsed. The voice-overs are of the psychic and the nurse who was cannibalized. The dialogue is enigmatic:

Where are you? (Falling, I'm flying)
 Are we in the plane? (no)
 And the baby? (It's moving)
 It's you I want, you know; he was just all we had - the alive one.
 Did you tell them yes? (Yes? oh no, I couldn't. I couldn't talk; they never asked me)
 You don't need to talk now? (Can I now? Can I talk?)
 The blue wings fade and it's all only blue ... (Qtd. in Mason 44)

As Joyce Mason suggests, perhaps the psychic hints that "we may have been following the wrong story all along" (44). Again, the film teases and tempts the spectator to seek out the subject and to

relate to it in a particular way and then it frustrates and thwarts these attempts. Mr. Bones is never really “known,” not by the spectator, nor by the nurses. As Gruben says, this film is also about the filmmaking experience. The conceit of Mr. Bones’ re-education is realized through the language games of the doctors and the nurses, but it is also mediated through different filmic media: sometimes through shaky hand-held camera shots, as though an on-spot news item is being filmed; or through a video surveillance camera in the hospital; or in a more realistic strategies of filmic representation. In addition to the filtering of the images, video footage, or television programming frequently is part of the scene. Sometimes this creates a dizzying effect of *mise en abyme*. Scenes from earlier in the film are replayed to Mr. Bones at a later point. These scenes show Mr. Bones participating in a game to help him identify pictures of people who are dead.

Gruben discusses how she used to work in a hospital videotaping group therapy sessions:

In one case there was a schizophrenic (sic) patient who didn’t have any sense of his own body, and we would tape him doing things like brushing his teeth, and then the doctors would play the tapes back to show him to himself. (In *CFMDC* info sheet)

This replaying of scenes emphasizes the way in which subjectivity, as Butler points out, is attained by reiteration. If Mr. Bones could figure out how to repeat himself properly, he would be welcomed back to society. Not only do the doctors want Mr. Bones to watch himself, they also want him to watch other people, especially on television, to gain an understanding of correct behaviour and interaction, to be like other people. The conditioning of Mr. Bones as such is emphasized. The shows on television take on an ironic significance when a documentary features ants eating other ants. Smarties are used as a reward for the correct answers to the games the doctors play with Mr. Bones; Pavlovian responses are rewarded. The film emphasizes the

arbitrariness of language, and the way in which it constructs obedient well-behaved subjects. In another sequence, a slow pan of television monitors in a room reveals five different “realities” playing out, among them one of the previous episodes of Mr. Bones and an RCMP officer, and a flight attendant demonstrating emergency procedures. Finally the camera stops on a woman who is watching one of the monitors. She is watching a news story about Mr. Bones. Again this technique emphasizes how context determines emphasis and shapes relations of power.

It is again the psychic who demonstrates the slipperiness of language and the importance of contextual readings. Her voice describes what she is seeing, which the detective and the spectator assume to be part of the crash site. In her attempt to connect with the man, she sees glass and an orange parachute; she hears a crash. As her voice enumerates these items, the film shows Mr. Bones in his hospital room. There are close-ups of the ice-filled water pitcher, a melted orange crayon, and items falling to the floor: the counterparts to the images that the psychic evokes. Here the imperfect relationship between language and thought is highlighted. There is no single, fixed meaning. The spectator is given at least two dimensions/regimes to entertain at once. As the film progresses, it becomes more and more evident that language or any kind of attempt to make a direct representation of reality is unsatisfactory. Only glimpses of a temporary clarity, like the ones the psychic experiences of the crash sight, are available.

A direct relationship between language and function, such as the doctor demands, is restricting. In one of the games/tests he orchestrates, the doctor displays several items on a table: a comb, a toothbrush, a lighter, etc. The doctor begins each of his requests with, “As completely as possible, tell me what you do with this.” Mr. Bones, however, does not comply. He picks up

the comb, and he brushes his teeth with it. The doctors, with their scientific and rational discourse are trying to get Mr. Bones to comply to their kind of logic:

. . . the police, like the doctors, can only examine him. Moreover, they can only do so from across the distorting distance dictated by a normality defined in oppositional terms (to what is “wrong,” “bad,” “abnormal,” etc.), and protected by closure: what keeps the doctors and the police and the authoritarian values they serve and protect safely inside the structures of socialization is precisely what shuts Mr. Bones, and the radical alternatives to “normality” he represents, out. (Pevere, “Radical Marginalia” 56)

Mr. Bones already speaks from a place outside of binarist terms. It is the psychic and the nurses who are able to gain access to that space.

The nurses find Mr. Bones attractive. They gossip about what might have happened, but they also refuse to presume what his experience was like. As with the nurses, the film establishes the character as likeable. What is remarkable about many of the reviews is their commendation of the performances of the actors:

Few fringe filmmakers are as good at directing actors as Gruben, and Larry Lillo develops a convincing portrait of traumatized insanity. Never hysterical or obvious, he unfolds the character as the point of unity in the film. (Kaja n.p.)

In particular they stress the “reality” of the performances:

The characters are fascinatingly well-played, their peculiarities making them so “real.” Delightful idiosyncrasies, whether the inadvertent result of peculiar acting styles or intentional characterisations, elicit a response of pure delight in the variety of human expression/communication. Both the clichés and the individuality of human behaviour are evident, presenting the familiar in a way which makes us *recognize* it--giving the sense of knowing it better for knowing it *again*? (Mason 44)

Where the performances of the actors emphasize reality as coherent in their psychologically motivated performances, there is always a meta-filmic awareness of how experience is mediated.

For example, the video clips which are used in the television sequences that Mr. Bones watches

are, according to Gruben, intended to elicit those responses which are then frustrated by the film itself:

All these stories turn around questions of survival and consumption, and “cue” the progression of a film which finally doesn’t progress at all but doubles back on itself, like the mad trapper walking in circles. (In *CFMDC* info n.p.)

The film not only questions the coherence of identity through the use of the psychic, but it also achieves this effect in the way in which it works on the viewer. The experience of watching the film is dislocating. Expectations are set up which are not dashed so much as queried. A certain amount of empathy is gained for Mr. Bones in the sympathetic, “realistic” portrayal of him, and yet at the same time, this empathy is complicated. The film is both an exploration of the limits of understanding the *other* and an exploration of the embeddedness of an identity within the *other*.

The question remains: is it a “growth which feeds off the mother” or a growth which is communicative and interactive? An argument can be made for Mr. Bones as the empty centre of the film. If it is an empty centre, it is also paradoxically full, for the viewer is constantly projecting bits of information, trying to filter through the noise of the film, inevitably frustrated in this search for coherence. As Gruben implies, the film implicates the audience in the territory between the fictional and the real:

I’ve always had a terrible conflict as a filmmaker and a writer . . . because I’ve always really wanted to work in fiction, as opposed to documentaries. But I never felt like I had the right to fool people. And so, although I really hate reflexive films, I always feel I have to sort of admit to people that what they’re watching is a construction in some way. That way, I leave some openings for them to draw their own conclusions. Or at least they can be aware of how they’re being manipulated. (In Leydon, “A Meditation” E1)

The audience awareness of manipulation also extends to an active construction of meaning and a different construction of identity.

The enigma of what happened and of who is responsible is brought to a form of closure by language itself. A final clue at the crash site is found: a diary. The written words implicate Mr. Bones in the crime, but it is still impossible to know the truth. The writer of the diary describes a broken leg. Mr. Bones has no broken bones. The woman's name, we find out, is Mary Agnes. She was pregnant. The diary ruminates on her death, and on the possible death of her baby. It asks whether it keeps feeding on the mother. Mary, the archetypal mother, is also Agnes, the sacrificial lamb. She is finally reached by the psychic, in the confusing last scene of the film which I have quoted above. The film continually shows how things are seen, not who the victim, or Mr. Bones or who the psychic are. Identity, it seems, is contingent also on perceptions of others. Mr. Bones, who is often on screen, is not understandable. This unity in a main character is denied. Instead, as in *Sifted Evidence*, the spectator makes the correlation between unspeaking subjects and fragmentary voices; bodies and voices are disjointed. Gruben herself describes the ineffable nature of this final scene:

It's difficult to understand the scene because it depends on recognizing the voices of two characters--the clairvoyant and the nurse. The clairvoyant has entered the mind of the cannibalized woman, and the nurse has entered the mind of the clairvoyant. The nurse asks the clairvoyant/dead woman, "Did the men ask you whether it's okay to kill and eat you? Did you tell them yes?" And the clairvoyant/dead woman answers, "I couldn't talk," and then "The blue wings fade and it's all only blue." The plane is disappearing into the fog here and they're entering a place where you don't need a plane to fly, they're taking off in a psychic sense. Because we haven't gone through what they have we can't follow them, so the film has to end here, at the limit of what it's able to represent. (In *Low Visibility CFMDC* info sheet)

This comment ultimately brings to the fore one of the issues which this model of the postmodern feminist identity implies: to what extent does comprehension or more properly, lack of comprehension hinder the meaning of the film? How is different spectator satisfaction ensured? Is

it necessary? Evaluative terms come into question. Although complete subjectivity or relativism is not an option for feminism, as it already asserts specific terms in its agenda, where are limits established? This film turns on itself for answers, questioning the consumption or colonization which is implied in both filmmaking and storytelling:

It's a film that's finally about filmmaking and empathy. Movies show us events and characters we're expected to believe in, but if it's not our story, how do we know whether it's true? I'm not saying we can't know, but what sort of tools do we apply to these experiences to test whether they're authentic or not, and in an extreme case of survival, how can we imagine what that's like? (Gruben in *CFMDC* info sheet)

As Gruben suggests in these comments, there are necessarily limits to representation, and perhaps there is even a necessary cannibalizing in the desire to imagine the experience of the *other*. The active foregrounding of this questioning and reframing of authenticity, however, is in itself an attempt to deal with an idea of identity in which reasoning does not have all the answers. This formation of identity also implies a different way of understanding which may mean that it is also on the knife-edge of comprehension, always willing to consider what is impossible to consider. In this regard, the title resonates: *Low Visibility* indicates the foglike comprehension of the film, the difficulty in both being seen and in seeing.

***Ley Lines*: (auto)bio-mythography**

The questioning of the dynamic with the *other* and the theorizing of an identity within the community at large is also the focus of *Ley Lines*. This is a fascinating film which now fully catapults Gruben into the middle of her own theorizing. This time, rather than tangentially questioning her own ontology, she literally becomes the central character. In *Ley Lines*, Gruben

uses her search for her origins of identity as a way of seeking out the place of the particular within the whole. In this respect, this film is perhaps the most postmodern of all her works, for it is the process of writing a “petit récit,” as Lyotard would say, while trying to grapple with the overarching presence still of the master narratives, which, although crumbling, still form a skeletal structure of existence.

In *Ley Lines*, the extraterrestrial seems to be one way, at least, of escaping earth-bound ways of thinking. Ironically the film opens with an ending. The first shots are of the last sequence of the film, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. As the man gazes up at the heavens, he contemplates his own liminal state of being: “What was I? Still a human being or a man of the future?” He decides that despite his tininess “to God there is no zero. I still exist.” There is a point where the infinite and the infinitesimal meet. The idea that existence begins and ends is man’s conception, not nature’s. The credits are shown: “the end” comes across the screen.

It is no coincidence that Gruben self-reflexively begins her film with the end of this film, and piggybacks her own musings onto this conclusion. The voice-over, Gruben’s own voice, ponders:

When I was a girl, that was my favourite movie and just like him I couldn’t stop thinking of myself as the centre of the universe. But what would happen when the incredible shrinking man became too small to have a brain? It would have been too scary just to disappear. I had already given up on Sunday school. I had to find something.

The master narratives that places such as Sunday school provides were not sufficient answers for the young Gruben. It seems unlikely that there will be any resounding conclusions like the one we have just seen. Yet, a response is necessary; disappearing is not an option. *Ley Lines* is almost a response to *The Incredible Shrinking Man* insofar as it features the “incredible expanding

identity” of Patricia Gruben, for her quest for understanding her identity takes her across the world. Texas, Germany, and Tuktoyaktuk become geographical counterparts for the expanse of her thought, for her ability to adapt herself and construct herself from various discourses. Gruben’s answer is in fixing the ley lines of her life across an expanse of the world, and in becoming bigger, rather than smaller. Or rather, perhaps like the *Incredible Shrinking Man*, the answer is in discovering that there are ways in which the infinite and the infinitesimal meet.

The juxtaposition of this old black and white, rather pompous footage, with Gruben’s reminiscence of her own childhood memory creates a dissonance which provokes humour. Serious questions about the universe are countered with childlike musings. It is part of negotiating this inner/outer tension, this curious compulsion to situate the particular within the whole, which is also the inscribing of the identity of Gruben. The self-conscious fictionalizing is foregrounded: the question becomes not so much “where do I belong?” but “what represents me?” or “how do I represent myself?” Patricia Waugh describes how, in a patriarchal society, the question “Who am I?” is better replaced by “What represents me?” for this question recognizes the impossibility of an ultimate unity and fixity of being (11). To this I would add Stuart Hall’s remarks on a concept of identity which is “not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our ‘routes’” (*Questions 4*). In *Sifted Evidence*, the very title indicates the approach to representation: finding the evidence, the archaeological clues to reconstruct an existence. In *Ley Lines*, Gruben’s search of family and personal history is marked by leys, a metaphor for the siting systems of her life:

Leys are invisible lines that can only be traced by the points that mark them: sacred springs, ancient trees, temple cities, beacon hills, standing stones.

As Gruben's voice narrates, shots of these leys are shown, a realistic documentary technique. The voice-over corresponds to the objects shown. Yet we quickly discover that these are not at all the leys that she means. Her choices of leys end up being quite different, almost random. As leys are insignificant alone, so are the events in Gruben's life until she imposes a pattern on them, until she views them through her sights and marks her territory, until she names the "routes" she has taken.

After the description and sequencing of leys, a child's voice asks: "Wouldn't it be neat if you could find those lines in your life so they all make sense about why you were born and who you knew and how you were connected to the universe?" "You mean like connect the dots?" comes the reply. And it does seem to be a kind of transformative game with the leys you find. Once the triangle is formed by the leys, then "would you be inside the triangle or would you be the triangle itself," Gruben asks. "Well, what is you?" asks the child. "You know," says Gruben. But the child persists. "Where do I leave off and the world begins?" In this transitional space, what is me and what is not-me? How to make use of the objects I play with? How to represent me?

With the ley as the conceit of the film, there is already a removal from the coherence of the subject. Identity is posited as being found between the straight lines marked out by the leys. There is a lingering linearity in the connections between the leys, just as there is a sense of identity as being dependent on the accrual of subjects. These separate subjects which feed into this identity illustrate the tension between mastery and non-mastery and the singular and the plural. Five voices constitute the voice-overs of the film, according to Gruben, and the film is classically structured:

It's constructed classically in a Prologue, three Acts (Texas, Germany, Tuktoyaktuk) and an Epilogue. The Prologue introduces the thesis and the five Narrators of course are the five voices of the Subject: the Filmmaker; the Little

Girl; the Academic; the Old Texas Aunt; and the German Woman. The sixth voice, the Inuk Woman, is also a subjective voice but doesn't show up till the last Act as befits her alien status (alien to me, that is). ("Letter")

These voices are all subjects which assert a momentary coherence in order to contribute to the narrative which is *Ley Lines*. A formation of identity as a series of subjects is evident in these voices. To signify the ordering elements of narrative, Gruben has chosen particular moments of coherence which are both parts of herself and parts of her community.

The film is most frequently narrated by Patricia Gruben herself and an inquisitive young child, often in dialogue. The child's voice transcends time. She is both present and past, wise beyond her years, and yet unborn, unrealized. The child may be the younger Gruben and in this way represent the "now" which in retrospect has been given a position, a meaning within a narrative. In any case, the child is exceedingly inquisitive, probing Gruben to explain exactly what she means. The other voices of the women are interwoven in the complex narration. The Texas Aunt is obsessed with ascertaining facts and constructing the family tree. A slightly accented German voice speaks poetry. As in Gruben's other films, the sound track is complex. It is impossible to retain all. But this is also part of her technique, for the spectator, too, overwhelmed, confused, bombarded, must sift through the experience and connect the leys for guidance. Have I read Marx? Do I understand German? Have I seen *Giant*? How many cultural, literary, philosophical, historical references will I cull on a first viewing? Obviously this is a concern for any reading of a work of art, but in *Ley Lines*, the horizon of expectations of the spectator is emphasized. The film is so dense that it is impossible to retain all; momentary choices must be made, and the impulse to understand and consume all must be relinquished.

There is a power to this film in its desire to take on almost more than it can handle. Ruby Rich describes the way in which the film manages to cross genres, to be both large and small at the same time:

Rarely do women take on epic forms or dare to inhabit universal positions. All the more power, then, to Gruben: she's taken the form of the personal documentary, cross-fertilized it with experimental asides and conceits, then cast her whole genealogical search for origins as a philosophical discourse between herself and a young girl. (n.p.)

Gruben eschews neither the universal nor the particular, but manages to come up with a voice that negotiates this territory carefully, always aware of the participation of the individual within larger cultural and historical discourses without losing sight of the specificity of experience. *Ley Lines* in this way addresses both the various subjects which make attempts at agency and at the same time, in its overall positing of identity, offers a different model for knowledge and interaction.

One of the ways in which this model is achieved is through the multiplicity of voices. These voices are very specifically oriented, as Gruben herself so carefully outlines. In their interactions, however, they also probe and question one another, so that their combined dialogue undermines the individual coherence of each subject. The voice of the little girl pushes the filmmaker herself to stumble and say, "I don't know." The answers which are to be found are simply temporary and of the moment.

In addition to voice, which always plays an important role in ordering Gruben's films, objects and space are also significant. Gruben's ley lines lead her to Spur, Texas, to Köln, Germany and finally to Tuktoyaktuk, NWT. She is not able to find nor confirm her family history, but she does present a kind of cartography of her identity. The leys she reviews in the images are finally not geographical, but personal images from the film which are now reprised: men in Spur

playing dominoes, a miniature golf course with a paper cathedral burning in Köln, images of eyes, roads, and watches. The child's voice repeats at the end of the film: "Wouldn't it be neat if you could find those lines in your life?"

From this short description of the texture and substance of this film, several techniques are clear. Although sequentially arranged in the film, the proliferation of leys suggests a random selection. They must be imbued with significance by the reader. There must be a special connection there for the onlooker, the one who is seeking, just as there is a special connection for the douser, whose search for water is compared to the search for leys in the film. The stick starts vibrating when water is known. The douser must approach from several different directions in order to validate the find. Similarly, identity is found in tracing the lines of significance in marking his/her life.

In the film, several leys are documented; the voice-over is polyphonic. Out of this density of references, however, Gruben succeeds in making a very personal film. The territory which she covers is perhaps best described by using Audre Lorde's term: life-writing as bio-mythography. Lorde uses this term to describe her own life-story in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, her own poignant account of her life. There is both the assertion of particular speaking place, a security in an agency, accompanied with the continuing postmodern lack of belief in any master narrative.

Bio-mythography has a significant space in postmodern writing, for it puts into practice so clearly the theorizing of identity which obsesses postmodernism. As considered by Linda Hutcheon, postmodern autobiographical writing problematizes the "notion of the 'centered self'" (*The Politics...* 40). As Hutcheon is wont to do in her definition of postmodernism, she emphasizes its complicitous nature. But it is possible to see this kind of life-writing as other than

complicitous, for this implies a collusion with the politics of a particular project. Rather there is a way of theorizing this work as the rewriting of identity in a fearfully playful action. There is certainly an anxiety to this work. Yet there is also a playfulness in the questioning of narrative structures and integrity.

“Truth-telling,” as exemplified by other filmic techniques, is always dubious in *Ley Lines*. Discursive authorities, when evoked, are equalized across the board. Scientific fact, philosophical musings and literary references are counterpointed with shots from films such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, and *Giant* starring James Dean. In this way, scientific rationalism is balanced by popular movie iconography. All are instrumental in the construction of Gruben’s belief systems. As dense as the language of this film is (there are long difficult quotations which scroll across the screen; voice overs which barely give time for absorption), words ultimately fail. The etymology of “Gruben” is traced to German words: finally “grübeln” is settled upon, meaning “to brood.”

Like *The Central Character* and *Sifted Evidence*, *Ley Lines* is relentlessly anti-narrative. The emphasis of the film is not on events that happen. Instead of action, the film is a process of unfolding, of teasing out meaning. And yet at the same time, Gruben plays with narrative desire. In some ways, the film is set up as a kind of detective story. The film follows Gruben to the North West Territories, and waits expectantly for her to “discover” her roots, for her to find out who she is, but the key to the story, Eddie, is not where he should be. We listen to her phone calls trying to track him down. We experience her thwarted attempts to find things out. We finally only hear Eddie’s intermediary: “Eddie told me to ask you what you want here.” This pointed question momentarily stops the pursuit and questions Gruben’s narrativizing. It forces Gruben herself to

finally come to the point of what her film is asking: “I’m just trying to find out what happened to my father.”

In this sense, Gruben’s search takes on a different dimension. She is indeed looking to explain, as part of her search for identity, what happened to her father, a “golden boy” in his youth, who left the church and eventually drank himself to death. Gruben describes this as a kind of a climax of the film itself:

The climax of the thing is really the acknowledgement that it’s my father that I’ve been looking for all this time. That came very late.

That’s the thing I didn’t understand that the film was about until I was well into making it. That my father, who had had a very promising youth, went off into WWII and came back, and was not able to realize what he had expected to have in his life. And I never understood--and still don’t understand. (“An Independent Showcase” n.p.)

If the film is about Gruben’s search for her failed father and a personal coming to terms with who he was and how he interacted with his children, it can also be read as an exploration of alternative possibilities for the workings out of identity. In many ways, Gruben is asserting the need to allot specific leys to one’s life: complete fragmentation, or loss of all moorings, leads to nowhere but destruction and nihilism as it did in the case of her father. Rejecting his fundamentalist beliefs and being forced to bomb Germany, his country of origin and yet always strange to him, propels her father, according to Gruben, into a spiral of self-abasement (In “Letter”). The instability of her father resembles a crisis in patriarchy, a loss of master narratives. Rather than re-inventing a similar foundational system for an essential self, Gruben comes up with the idea of *Ley Lines*, a metaphorical interstitial spacing of identity, in which specific narrative choices of connecting leys through communities determines who she is. She describes the film in similar terms:

It's a film about how we invent ourselves as individuals based on myths from our cultures and our family histories and how they are altered to suit our need for both uniqueness and belonging. (In Letter)

Ultimately Gruben's search through her past is also a feminist search for a way of being in the postmodern world. When Gruben is asked to consider the implication of the absent father in her works, she acknowledges the significance:

It's interesting that you tie my absent father to the missing protagonists in my other films--you're right of course but I guess I hadn't thought of it in that way. The guy in *Low Visibility* is a mystery in a similar way; so is the father in *Deep Sleep*. And the women characters in *The Central Character* and *Sifted Evidence* as well as *Deep Sleep* and *Low Visibility* are these kind of protean, unfixed subjectivities that are dancing around these mysteries trying to solve them. (In Letter)

The absence of the father and the reworking of identity go hand in hand. In this film, Gruben herself is "protean, unfixed;" she herself is a site of ambiguity.

Gruben's musings are particular and global at the same time: at one point, a computer search for a family tree comes on screen: her name is typed in. In this scene there is a fascinating overlaying of the particular individual and technology, as the individual is virtually located among several discourses. The filmic screen becomes a computer screen. As the Old Texas Aunt leads us through the process of searching on the data-base, the name Patricia Gruben appears in type. The search is entered. Data displaying a family tree results. This scene in some ways is emblematic of the film as a whole. For here the filmmaker traditionally erased and invisible, literally becomes both the subject and the object of inquiry. The newfound subject-object relationship, however, does not involve mastery. There is no consumption. As has been illustrated, these searches are for several possible answers, not necessarily one. There is a whole different method of inquiry which is operating here. As Lyotard says in *The Postmodern Explained*,

. . . objects have languages; to know objects you must be able to translate their languages. Intelligence is therefore immanent in things. In these circumstances of the imbrication of subject and object, how could the ideal of mastery persist. It gradually falls out of use in the representations of science made by scientists themselves. Man is perhaps only a very sophisticated node in the general interaction of emanations constituting the universe. (21)

The film does not hurtle towards conclusions, but relinquishes this impulse of mastery over its objects, and attempts to negotiate meaning making with its audience differently.

Again, in the form of the film, there are contradictions which indicate this push-pull of assertion and relinquishment. Gruben herself points out the deliberate classical structure of the film, with three very distinct sections, and a prologue and epilogue. Despite this rather rigid structure, however, there is a fluidity and experimentation in the texture of the film itself. For example, images and metaphors which are evoked and the ways in which they are conveyed indicate a plurality of interpretations. Similarly, meaning is not goal-oriented. The Tuktoyaktuk section is particularly evocative in this sense, perhaps because in this section, Gruben has come to the last ley, and yet is continually frustrated in her attempts to find answers. Like the great expanse of snow and north where Gruben must wait, meaning is fragmentary and only momentarily coalesces.

The North, in particular, gives Gruben an imaginative terrain to evoke and plunder. She charts an ice floe that moves imperceptibly. Like time and memory, it is virtually impossible to tell that change is happening. Questions such as these recur: “How do birds know how to take off without colliding with each other?” She asks a man, “when you are going somewhere on a skidoo across miles of white snow, how can you make sure you get back to where you started from?” The answer again suggests that the mooring of identity is relative: whenever he goes somewhere,

he makes sure to look back over his shoulder. The ice presents other metaphors: you cannot get to the bottom of anything here because there is no bottom. It is underwater, almost depthless. Goals, answers must be given up. In one example, the camera starts on an expanse of white, pans to a ship with the name *Ungaluk*, and moves off to white again, and then, seemingly without interruption the same shot is shown again. Three times, this sequence is shown. Although there are no overt connections made between images and metaphors like this and Gruben's search for identity, the similarities resonate. The leys are many and she leaves them for the audience to connect on their journey through the film. The boundaries of subject and object are confounded, mingled for an instant.

As Gruben looks for the leys to mark her life, she negotiates the space with the *other*, and perhaps tries to become more accustomed to a space which is not so clear in its distinctions of separation, or of difference. Resolution resides in spaces between, within and without, in a playful interaction between the constructedness of language and lived social experience. In writing about his music, John Cage describes the interplay of the sounds of the environment:

There is no rest of life. Life is one. Without beginning, without middle, without ending. The concept: beginning middle and meaning comes from a sense of self which separates itself from what it considers to be the rest of life. (In Schmitt 25)

There is a similar kind of philosophy at work here. The boundaries of self/*other*, of actor/character, of subject/object are blurred: a perennial transitional space is evoked. To an extent, the spectator or listener is propelled into a different position as well: a co-creator, co-conspirator in a conversation, and perhaps catching one's own "I" as well. In her conclusion to *Thinking Fragments*, entitled, "No Conclusions," Jane Flax returns to the conversational model:

To pursue promising ways of understanding our experience is not necessarily to seek “truth” or power in an Enlightenment sense. Rather it entails a commitment to responsibility and a hope that there are others “out there” with whom conversation is possible. It also entails and reflects a commitment to nonnarcissistic concepts of subjectivity, to assume that there are others out there existing independent of my fantasies about them. (223)

As Schmitt describes in *Actors and Onlookers*, the kind of performance technique which characterizes postmodernism is one in which there is a different relationship between character and actor. She discusses Joseph Chaikin’s conception of character (Schmitt 125). His comments consider the kind of character study that method acting usually engenders:

As frequently taught, characterization is an exploration of the limits of a person. The borders of the self, the outline, the silhouette, tend to be the actor’s study. . . . It sustains the stereotyping of people, the stereotyping of ourselves. (Chaikin 11, 19)

Schmitt elaborates on the significance of a different approach to performance:

Without the idea that the self has distinct boundaries, the study of character becomes a study of boundaries, of which the character’s or actor’s identity is a function. It is not fixed. If a character does not constitute a discrete whole, no aspect of the person being portrayed can be seen as subordinated to another. Moreover, individual character can be seen as central only if identity is understood as separate from both other people and the environment and fixed over time. The idea of interpenetration vitiates the central importance of character conflict in drama, of the opposition of fixed forces in opposition. (125)

Gruben does not just trace one ley, but several. In so doing, she illustrates the multiple ways in which sense can be made. This search for sense is not only of what has happened to her ancestors, but what they were like, what caused them to do the things they did. In the second section, for example, she dwells at length on Nazi Germany. One of the quotes which she presents on screen for consideration is from *Mein Kampf*, and the role that the individual should relinquish for the

group. But Gruben shows how the individual and the group must remain in tandem. It is necessary to keep both in hand simultaneously: they are neither one, nor the other.

These kinds of contradictions permeate the film. Tuktoyaktuk is the last stop for Gruben. Here she is not even sure if she has relatives. She makes comparisons with the other places she has visited. She says, "I could feel my family all around me in Germany, but they were invisible." In a physical sense, the plurality of identities which has been evoked throughout the film is realized. In Tuktoyaktuk, out of a population of 956, 213 by birth or marriage are named Gruben. Although Gruben traces the significance of John Gruben's lineage, she is never able to satisfactorily determine her place in the ancestry, or the community. She wonders if he is the missing brother of her great grandfather, but she is never able to find out. She thought of Tuktoyaktuk as a doppelgänger for Spur, Texas, where she was born. But now Spur has nothing: no one remembers her, or her family. Tuktoyaktuk, by contrast, is a growing, booming town. Identity, for Patricia Gruben, has become a matter of investigating and linking several possible stories and origins. As she says, "The Gruben family seems elastic here."

Where *Sifted Evidence* in its search for female divinities is a maternal search for origins, *Ley Lines* is a study of the lost Father. Gruben dedicates the film to her dad, and the last shot lingers on him, old, wasted by alcohol. It is not only literally her father in this sense, but the patriarchy which she sifts through, trying to figure out how to position herself within such a legacy. The answers and accommodations that she makes are not nostalgic, but neither are they vehement rejections. Rather what most characterizes her search for a new awareness of identity is a prescient awareness of an economy of difference. Gruben discovers instead stories without ends, families without origins; truly the "infinite and the infinitesimal" do meet in a postmodern feminist

search. In *Ley Lines*, Gruben comes to something of a resolution of her question of identity by negotiating an almost perpetual existence in a transitional space, because of the shifting nature of the leys. Her relations with others and her fictionalizing of her experience operate in a place of flux where play can produce possibilities for change. She takes a patriarchal culture, a paternal heritage, and creatively transforms them, to “disrupt” the chain. The subject/object relation is interdependent; each affects the other.

Conclusion

Gruben’s films consistently question both the spectator’s and the filmmaker’s investment in narrative, in viewing, and in the imperialism of the subject. “Story” and “character” are ventured, but they cohere only momentarily. The desire for closure is frustrated, the limits of the subject made clear, and the need to watch and to relate differently is asserted. A patriarchal discourse constructs a humanist subject which is whole, but limited, particularly for women; an alternative discourse, articulated marginally by the film, involves multiple truths and identities, workable only when a singular, linear story is relinquished. This particular treatment of narrative has been referred to as “new narrative,” both by Gruben herself and by other critics (“Desire in Ruins” 38). According to Gruben this is not well received. She cites Bruce Elder’s critique of narrative, but points out how he collapses narrative forms. She summarizes the arguments against new narrative succinctly:

. . . the two arguments against new narrative: that it “conspires”, as if mounting a concerted attack on the avant-garde in order to undermine it from within; and that it compromises in a “sideways motion”, as if the deconstruction of narrative were merely a compromise on the part of former members of the avant-garde who secretly want to be Spielberg but know it isn’t cool. (“Desire in Ruins” 37)

She associates a revolutionary potential with a “new narrative” and feels much of the fear comes from its feminist use:

I think part of the threat of new narrative is that it is associated with feminism, and it deploys feminist concerns into areas which have within Romanticism as well as modernism and the avant-garde been roles for men—specifically, opposition to bourgeois culture. (“Desire in Ruins” 39)

And yet there are those who argue against “new narrative.” They take issue with film as capable of representing, and argue that feminist film making is of necessity experimental:

The present impossibility for women to represent themselves properly, accurately, has led to an awareness not only of the inadequacy of the aims and intentions of dominant cinema but also of the impossibility of the main task: to represent. We wish to finally acknowledge this and to move on to a use of film that attempts no mastery of meaning, assumes no ultimate knowledge of reality through film. (Cartwright and Fonoroff 137)

But this kind of divestment of the real does not take into account the reception of film. Narrative desire can only be frustrated by being engaged. Again the tension of mastery and non-mastery recurs. Gruben revises narrative, turns it on itself. As she says, “I simply want to find a place for narrative in its heterogeneity, its radical possibilities (“Desire in Ruins” 38). She makes a compelling argument for the usefulness of narrative engagement, using as an example a film class at Simon Fraser University. She describes what happened when one production class was taught by a sessional who insisted, unlike the regular staff, that the students articulate their ideas more completely:

When I saw their finished work, my first thought was of how unusually politically naive they seemed to be—blaming “television” or “Amerika” in broad strokes for all our ills. Gradually I realized that the ideas were no different from before, but by questioning some of the obscurative imagery, our sessional had forced the students’ hands. In our efforts to protect their “artistic intuition” the rest of us had allowed visual style and obliqueness to mask unexamined opinions and aesthetic choices. (“Desire in Ruins” 36)

In this way, with her adherence to narrative in most of her work, there is a postmodern “perversion” of traditional form similar to that noted by Ric Knowles in the the work of playwrights such as Judith Thompson and Margaret Hollingsworth. Here there is a different use of form and narrative, not a complete and utter rejection of it. This project also involves situating identity differently. Elsewhere, in a discussion of *Low Visibility*, Gruben describes her work on subjectivity:

The best we can hope for is a fractured subjectivity ... and maybe, transcendence to another level of subjectivity. (In Bachman 2)

What Gruben terms “transcendence” can also be considered a different kind of formation of identity, of a postmodern feminist configuration. The effect is an unsettled identity and an unsettled viewing position. As in plays by Thompson and Hollingsworth, in Gruben’s films identity is experienced as an ongoing process, involving both the engagement of subjectivity and its constant destabilization.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions for Possible Emergent Identities

Using a strain of postmodernist thought, inflected by feminism, I have shown how identity in these plays and films can be considered a site of ambiguity. Identity is presented as a series of formations as subjects, roles which are temporarily engaged and then dismissed, according to shifting relations of power. These works illustrate the cycle which binarist models of behaviour perpetuate. Identity is in a tension of mastery and non-mastery. This tension is demonstrated through the serialization of identity, through images of the body, and through destabilized and interrupted narrative. Sanctity of self is threatened in the works of Thompson, Hollingsworth, and Gruben. Identity is an unstable state of the liminal: the about to be born, the about to break free, the about to speak. Borders are consistently threatened: inside/outside in the instances of the abject in Judith Thompson; inner and outer voices in Margaret Hollingsworth; the public/private in Patricia Gruben. Oppositional realms, such as these, are intermingled so that identity must be thought of as conflictual, excessive, and in process.

Identity as a site of ambiguity involves a relinquishment of a subject/object relationship, of binaries such as right/wrong and self/other. New possibilities for identity are possible only when borders are transgressed, and hierarchical models are broken down. The ramifications of such a consideration of identity are several. What kinds of possibilities for agency does this critique of mastery involve? What kind of spectator pleasure is afforded in such an aesthetic?

The Question of Agency

Since the subjects are serialized and there is no depth or adherence to this position, agency must be revisioned in relational terms. In *Moral Voices, Moral Selves*, Susan Hekman discusses

Carol Gilligan's research on the moral reasoning of women and girls and in interpreting her work, argues that "particular moral theories are inextricably linked to particular epistemologies" (30).

Hekman interprets Gilligan's model to be a replacement of the "disembodied knower with the relational self" (30). The result is that truth is necessarily plural:

The knowledge constituted by this relational self is connected, a product of discourses that constitute forms of life; it is plural rather than singular. Gilligan hears moral voices speaking from the lives of connected, situated selves, not the single truth of disembodied moral principles. She hears these voices because she defines morality and moral knowledge as plural and heterogeneous. (30)

Plurality and heterogeneity in knowledge do not mean relativism. Rather agency can be construed as a series of informed choices which result from a combination of discursive positions. Clearly one's moral choices come from the discourses in which one is imbued. But it is the recognition of the severalness of these discursive formations which allows for choices which are both situated and yet entertain difference. Agency is not precluded; rather, the question of an obsession with self must shift to a consideration of the implications for actions in communities. It is only through risking difference that change can occur. This entails a relinquishing of mastery, but not of choice.

By asking questions differently, possible answers can be formulated. What is my investment in what represents me? How long will what represents me continue to represent me? What discursive tools are available to act out differently? After the postmodern theorizing and negotiating of boundaries, perhaps there must be a shift to a different kind of question, one which is not so obsessed with the self, but is rather focussed on achieving change. Wendy Brown suggests that feminists take up an actively political stance. The very fact that there are no universal truths to rely on, to stand on, means that one must be active in the creation and discussion which produces truths. This is an active political engagement:

Such judgements require learning how to have *public* conversations with each other, arguing from a vision about the common (“what I want for us”) rather than from identity (“who I am”), and from explicitly postulated norms and potential common values rather than from false essentialism or unreconstructed private interest. (80)

This shifts the focus from the individual to the community, while always maintaining a vision of and a tension between the two. This kind of interrogation involves constant checks and balances, a constant revision and discarding of no longer workable identities and communities.

Identity within Community

Identity within community is not another label for universality. Rather, identity within community is a concept which recognizes the discursive and social constructions of identity. It also affords a sense of pluralism. We can find such an articulation of identity within community, and the specific temporary choices which are involved, in a play such as *Lion in the Streets*. Isobel, at the end of the play, acts “morally” in her forgiveness of Ben, her murderer. She temporarily takes up the discursive position which Catholicism affords; but her choice is not everyone’s choice. It offers the possibility of triumph for her, but it is clearly situated within a particular community.

This pattern of interaction is found in the plays of Margaret Hollingsworth and the films of Patricia Gruben as well. Esme in *War Babies* negotiates her identity within her play, and herself within her life, so that she is able to make peace with her children. The audience is privy to two representations of Esme, neither one being whole, each being representationally and contextually contingent. Nonetheless, she needs to take action and make some kind of resolution, even if it is suspect. In *Sifted Evidence*, the layered representation of the viewing apparatus and the main

characters induce an identity vertigo, in which there is no ending, no secure sense of identity to rely on. The individual is in the continual process of being re-invented. This re-invention of identity within community is most apparent in *Ley Lines* when Gruben “finds herself” in a very displaced way: the many Grubens in Tuktoyaktuk provide one possible community, her German heritage another, her family context another still.

Community provides a legitimate temporary grounding for identity; community is a better term than “home” because it recognizes the pluralism and even the political engagement and solidarity which acting as a subject implies. It is in the negotiation of one’s identity, then, within discursive communities where positions of agency can be achieved. These plays and films send the interpretative game back to their discursive communities, teasing the audience’s desire for recognition, sometimes satisfying, always implicating. Rather than giving up on meaning because there is no singularity in a self, it is possible and reasonable to still look for and articulate sense, justice, morality, without being hegemonic:

The search for intelligibility and meaning is not necessarily the same as the imposition of reason. It need not enmesh us within the “metaphysics of presence.” One can seek meanings without assuming they are rational, context-free, or fixed “forever” or that meanings can be attained only through or depend on the use of reason. Play, aesthetics, empathy with, or being used by other’s feeling states are also sources of meaning and intelligibility. (Flax, *Thinking Fragments* 223)

It is in this playful interaction of fixedness and mobility that a concept of identity can be found in the postmodern without losing the agency of the feminist. The self-consciously discursively constructed and manipulated subjects of these plays and films are counterpointed by an undermining of “roots.” The kinds of agency which occur in these plays and films, as exemplified by the characters and offered to the spectator, are ephemeral, fleeting, and guardedly optimistic.

To return to a place of origin, of home, of psychic safety is not completely foreclosed. The suggestion, rather, is that these places need to be reconfigured without the imperialism that is implied in their creation. A place of home or of identity in solidarity with others is still possible, but these works suggest that these places must be continually re-created. This is the terrain which is to be negotiated in the postmodern, where forays to the “constitutive outside” provide an ongoing negotiation with *otherness* so that the dynamic of mastery is also continually reworked and destabilized. This inscribing of identity within community is a story-telling of subjectivity and an engagement with narrative. This situating can also explain the aesthetic which is employed by Thompson, Hollingsworth and Gruben.

The Aesthetic: Destabilized Linear Narrative

The aesthetic which facilitates such a simultaneous demonstration of subjects and their constellation in identity is a hybridized aesthetic, implicated in different relationships with realism. The debate in feminism between realism and anti-realism is ongoing. Realism is difficult to accept because it denies its own construction. Realism tends to support a singular and dominant vision of reality and a vision of identity which is unchanging.¹ Although anti-realism can be effective for the way it unsettles and problematizes such conceptions, it can also run the risk of alienating viewers, of not being understood. The plays and films, as I have discussed them, have been arranged on a continuum of deployment of the strategies of realism, from the most realist to the least, from the

¹ In the introduction to *Making a Spectacle*, Lynda Hart recounts the impetus that swings away from realism, for “this is the master’s way of seeing” (4). In an idealistic turn, “reality is exposed as illusionism and the woman playwright can begin to be heard” (4). As Hart acknowledges, this theory is much indebted to film theory and Laura Mulvey’s article on the male gaze in mainstream cinema (5).

least obviously feminist to the most. Thompson has a great attunement to specific places and specific patterns of speech in her plays which would indicate an attempt to convey a particular illusionistic realism. Hollingsworth's plays vary in their deployment of realist strategies; some are specific about psychologically motivated characters; others are overtly anti-realist. Gruben's works, as I have indicated, seldom present coherent protagonists or situations which erase the filmic mediation. On the contrary, the filmmaker's investment in illusionism is always questioned. Although Thompson, Hollingsworth and Gruben employ varying strategies of realism, they do coalesce in their interrogation and destabilization of a linear narrative structure. In this section, I will suggest how this anti-realist strategy is connected to the depiction of identity in these plays and films. Destabilized and plural narratives establish different "routes" for identity formation.

Thompson's plays, with the exception of *Lion in the Streets*, are the most linear in structure. A story is told from beginning to end. Closure, however, is seldom forthcoming. The endings of all plays are left open to plural interpretations. Often the realm of the other-worldly or fantasy provides a place for the entertainment of possible conclusions. In *Lion in the Streets*, for example, the ghost of Isobel appears, participates in the drama, and finally creates her own reality, in the final moments of the play when she ascends to heaven. Similarly Pony in *White Biting Dog* comes back from the grave to speak to her dad, the projectionist and to explain her own "squishing" of the old Pony. In *I am Yours*, the paintings of the foetus and the several possible dream sequences suggest alternative visions of the world. In the stage version of *Tornado*, Viola's chest is soaked with milk; she is inexplicably able to breast feed. Two (or more) worlds exist simultaneously; the dual possibility then, of defeat and redemption for characters like Isobel or Pony or Amanda/Viola must be entertained. The cross-fade at the end of *I am Yours* pairs

presence and absence; Dee imagines she sees her baby in a happy moment of fulfillment, while Toi holds the baby and asks “Mum?” to Pegs who is slumped in the chair, possibly dead (176).

In addition to these ambiguous endings, throughout Thompson’s plays, monologues punctuate the story-line, providing an interruption of the flow of the action. Here characters reveal their insecurities about themselves in haunting poetic images. These moments which resist containment in Thompson’s work are never undermined or explained by another, hierarchized narrative of “reality.” Single narrative is fractured into many smaller narratives, especially in *Lion in the Streets*. Although the story of Isobel structures the play, the relay form of the play itself demonstrates the constructing power of story, and presents an open-ended alternative in which other ways of being are possible. Scenes proceed not by cause and effect but through accidental connection of character.

Margaret Hollingsworth makes more overt connections between destabilized linear narratives and destabilized, often liberatory, identities. She contrasts linear structures with circular spins. The controlled narrative structure of *The House that Jack Built* ultimately confines Jenny, whereas the circular, fluid structure of *It’s Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing* allows for other representations of identity. *In Confidence* pairs two monologues which themselves are interrupted and woven in a circular fashion. Connections between the women are found when boundaries of story are overcome. Other times, provoking images are used in Hollingsworth’s plays to interrupt the narrative. These images persist as a memory and are not explained by the fiction of the play. They speak on a different level. Prim’s pouring of the coffee over her hand, as it burns, yet is frozen in immobility, is a significant focus at the conclusion of *Prim, Duck, Mama and Frank*. Sometimes the interrogatory nature of these moments is made more explicit. In plays

such as *Diving* and *Apple in the Eye*, interior “surreal” moments which individual characters undergo impinge on the patriarchal worlds and disrupt the reading of a linear narrative.

Gruben’s work is most radical in its interrogation of linear narrative structure and in its foregrounding of formal devices. In *Sifted Evidence*, for example, different actors take on the roles of the main subject, Maggie, thereby breaking down singularity and unity in identity. Stories begin several times. Even different genres of story are evoked: travelogue, documentary film, personal reminiscence. One system of representation, however, is not hierarchized at the expense of another. The frame of *Sifted Evidence* competes with the interior story of *Sifted Evidence*. In *Low Visibility*, words and images are fractured to reveal a myriad of possibilities. Although glimpses into Mr. Bones’ world are periodically offered, and the desire to understand the enigma of his story is aroused, no conclusion or satisfaction is afforded. In the final sequence in which the psychic and the victim converse, Gruben inquires into the limits of her own story-telling. As Gruben says, the film has to end here, “at the limit of what it’s able to represent.” (In “*Low Visibility*” CFMDC info sheet). In *Ley Lines*, Gruben takes this study even further into the investigation of what constitutes her own identity. Here lines are blurred even more; the containment of the individual by simply one means of narration or representation is impossible. Subjects are engaged alternatively and repetitively so that identity becomes an effect of these positions, not as they are held together, but as they are fractured and discontinuous. If identity is itself a process of telling a story of one’s life, then it follows that a destabilized, interrupted narrative indicates also identity as a site of ambiguity. Identity is in a constant interrogation of its own narration.

In these plays and films, however, narrative is never completely rejected. *The Central Character* by Patricia Gruben is the most anti-narrative of all the texts considered, and yet even here Gruben playfully uses narrative techniques and story-telling devices. There is the overlay of a fairy-tale escape into the woods and the adventure of the woman's flight from the domestic realm of the kitchen into the wild woods. As Gruben herself says, she is looking for a place for narrative "in its radical possibilities." ("Desire in Ruins" 38). Thompson and Hollingsworth engage more fully with narrative, and therefore, more coherent characters result. Perhaps this is an effect of theatre itself, as it already foregrounds its own construction with the possibility for interruption and change already present in the audience's attendance and participation. Every performance is different. These issues of destabilized identity and its relationship to destabilized narrative bring the discussion to a consideration of the spectator's identification and pleasure in the play and film.

A Different Relationship for the Spectator

The destabilized linear narrative involves a different identificatory process for the spectator and a different kind of spectator pleasure. Here some distinction between theatre and film spectatorship is necessary. Theatre is not a finished product; its "look" cannot be contained in the same way as the look of the camera. There are certain similarities between theatre and film, however, which Susan Bennett in *Theatre Audiences* discusses:

Both are public, generally take place in a building specifically designed for that purpose, and invariably their audiences watch in a darkened auditorium. Both audiences generally react as a group (John Ellis's term is co-voyeurs). (80)

Bennett emphasizes here the voyeuristic impulse of both theatre and film. This impulse is particularly evident when the role of narrative is considered. John Ellis describes the position of the spectator in the narrative film in terms of separation and mastery:

The film is offered to the spectator, but the spectator does not have anything to offer to the film apart from the desire to see and hear. Hence the spectator's position is one of power, specifically the power to understand events rather than to change them. (81)

The dynamic of mastery in viewing pleasure is linked also to the mastery which a single subject position and a single narrative imply.

Using psychoanalytic theory, Laura Mulvey links visual pleasure to narrative and to a male spectator. Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* sees possible intersections for theatre spectatorship:

The gaze in performance, although not as carefully controlled as in film, is also based in a narrative paradigm that presents gender and sexuality as a factor in the exchange of meanings between performers and spectators. (14)

Referring to the dominant illusionist tradition in theatre, Dolan suggests that the performance apparatus directs its address to constitute a particular subject position, intelligible to a particular spectator:

Historically, in North American culture, this spectator has been assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male. That theatre creates an ideal spectator carved in the likeness of the dominant culture whose ideology he represents is the motivating assumption behind the discourse of feminist performance criticism. (1)

Where Mulvey suggests a counter-cinema (17), Dolan advocates "textual and performance interventions that undermine the tyranny of male narratives of desire" ("In Defense of the Discourse" 101). Dolan forcefully suggests that postmodernism presents the best option for this kind of criticism:

. . . a postmodernist performance style that breaks with realist narrative strategies, heralds the death of unified characters, decenters the subject, and foregrounds conventions of perception is conducive to materialist feminist analyses of representation. (60)

These visions of spectatorship in both film and theatre advocate radical contestings of linear narrative structures and coherent character development, linking mastery to a narrative structure and an illusionist tradition.

Rather than proclaiming the “death of the subject,” however, the works of Thompson, Hollingsworth and Gruben proclaim provisional identities and provisional truths. Mastery is critiqued, but it is not completely rejected. This is a feminist project which is engaging in Elin Diamond’s proposal to rethink mimesis. In “Mimesis, Mimicry and the True-Real,” Diamond proposes that a provisional engagement with a position to speak from is necessary:

Feminists, in our different constituencies, with our different objects of analysis, seek to intervene in the symbolic systems--linguistic, theatrical, political, psychological--and intervention requires assuming a subject position, however provisional, and making truth claims, however flexible, concerning one’s own representation. (365)

This project can still be asserted by the kind of postmodern feminism that I am suggesting. Again, it is important to keep in mind the epistemic changes of postmodernism, which make such a vision of the world possible:

. . . postmodernism can be characterized by the rejection of epistemic arrogance for an endorsement of epistemic humility. Such humility entails a recognition that our ways of viewing the world are mediated by the contexts out of which we operate. This means not only are our specific beliefs and emotions about the world a product of our historical circumstances but so are the means by which we come to those beliefs and emotions and by which we resolve conflict when dissent is present. This does not entail the position that there are no solutions to epistemic dilemmas, merely that there are no final ones. (Nicholson, “Feminism and the Politics” 84-85)

These plays and films provide, as Nicholson suggests, temporary solutions, from a place of “epistemic humility,” and offer temporary ways of engaging with identity. The relationship between narrative and identity is questioned, and yet it is not completely disavowed. What is achieved in these plays and films, to varying degrees, is a foregrounding of the connection between the two. Again, to replace mastery with non-mastery would reinstate the terms of an either/or scenario. The postmodern feminist strain which I am suggesting questions this very distinction and always operates on the border.

Spectator Pleasure

With the destabilized, but not disavowed, narrative and identificatory processes, these plays and films engender unsettling responses, and necessitate different reading strategies. This can be seen in several critical observations. George Toles, for example, has this to say about the ways that Judith Thompson’s plays work on the spectator:

Thompson always aims her plays at the fault lines in our internal defence system, the places where the self has no “prepared responses.” (130)

The kaleidoscopic effect of some of these plays and films with their disregard for continuity can have a dizzying effect on the audience, as identification is both engaged and thwarted. One of the ways in which this is achieved is in the mixing of genres:

Thompson repeatedly dislocates the audience, as she propels the spectator, with no transitional scenes and few abatements of intensity, from troubling comedy, to nightmare panic, to breakdown, and back again. Every thought or impulse that arises in a scene immediately splits into its opposite, Pirandello-fashion, so that emotion and comedy both end up having the same source and the same value. (Toles 130)

Discursively constructed subject positions collide; in effect, new discursive formations are produced in which a singular response is unlikely. This is found in the dissonant moments of audience and critical response. The disruptive and scattered responses that these plays and films produce can be attributed to the very variety of subject positions offered in the collision of discourses within the works. The spectator is forced to respond severally and differently. Teresa de Lauretis discusses a similar sentiment in viewer and reviewer reaction in her consideration of *Born in Flames*, a film by Lizzie Borden:

The “discomfort” of Borden’s reviewers might be located exactly in this disappointment of spectator and text: the disappointment of not finding oneself, not finding oneself “interpellated” or solicited by the film, whose images and discourses project back to the viewer a space of heterogeneity, differences and fragmented coherences that just do not add up to one individual viewer or one spectator-subject, bourgeois or otherwise. There is no one-to-one match between the film’s discursive heterogeneity and the discursive boundaries of any one spectator. (“Rethinking Women’s Cinema” 142-43)

This type of response is linked to the kind of aesthetic which these plays and films employ. In her discussion of Thompson’s plays, Julie Adam suggests a similar scenario, in which borders are crossed and different spectatorial positions engaged: “Naturalistic illusionism is precluded but scenes of communion between characters and audience rely on another form of illusion, that of art and life inhabiting the same realm” (27). Here Adam indicates the paradoxical process which this viewing process entails: a new kind of illusionism in which art and life are not thought of in complete separation. This is to reconceive modes of interaction and viewing pleasure.

Susan Hekman in *Gender and Knowledge* suggests that knowledge is not to be gained through abstraction, but through contingency (12). This same kind of philosophy is at work in the spectatorial positions which are encouraged by plays by Thompson and Hollingsworth and films

by Gruben. Ric Knowles, in his discussion of *War Babies* by Hollingsworth, indicates how mastery is replaced by contingency:

In *War Babies* it is the element of “liaison” rather than conflict, of pull rather than push, and of “where she perceives herself to be” rather than “where she is” (that is, where others perceive her to be) that takes over the action and informs the ostensibly conventional reconciliation at the end of the play. There is no reversal of (external) action, but rather a shift in the subject position of the assumed *spectator*: the perceived has become the perceiver, and the audience sees from the point of view of the woman who is “normally” the object of its perception. (“The Dramaturgy” 234)

The juggling of subject positions which is implied here has a political efficacy. The destabilization of identity is achieved in the ways in which the audience must make sense of these contradictions and uncertainties. It is unsettling to watch these displays and to have to make choices about narrative or visual interpretation. In their attempts to create identity differently, these works set into motion a complex reaction in the spectator, perhaps only the beginning of which is to disturb. Knowles argues for the “perversion” of traditional dramatic devices and structures such as plot and character and catharsis by dramatists such as Hollingsworth and Thompson, and, I would add, filmmakers such as Gruben:

The revisioning of those [Aristotelian and modernist] structures fractures traditional concepts of focus, unity and action, and perversely twists them out of shape in order to divide and multiply the prisms through which we see, and to extend the subject positions available to Canadian theatre audiences. (234)

The implication for the spectator is a disruption of “the complacent and voyeuristic satisfactions and containments provided by dramatic catharsis” (226). The simultaneous investment in several realities and the dislocating effect of different scenes and devices which fragment identity result in many perspectives, many avenues of access to the play or film.

The most significant “perversion” of modernist and Aristotelian dramatic techniques for this project is the reformulation of anagnorisis. The recognition of one’s true nature or plight is no longer possible. The spectator does not attend the presentation of a self who recognizes his/her own true nature, and is thereby satisfied or chastised. What is implied in the shuffling of identities is the recognition of several different subjects, several different possible truths. Where tragedy in ancient Greece formulated a sense of an ideal self on stage, and preserved and inaugurated a particular conception of the hero, here notions of identification with a hero or an ideal self are constantly undermined. If anagnorisis happens, it happens several times. This serialization undermines a coherent identity and a unified response.

This is not to suggest that these works offer rampant relativism, or that the plurality of subject positions offered open the doors to a colonising, appropriating experience of the *other*. Rather, the spectator is offered the “as-if” engagement of subjectivity at the same time that mastery of this position is undermined. By foregrounding the reiteration that constitutes subjectivity and by suggesting forays into the “constitutive outside,” the dynamic by which identity is achieved can gradually be reworked. A different viewing pleasure dynamic is implied: one which is not consumptive. Therefore the audience/performance dynamic mirrors a different subject/object dynamic; mastery is relinquished. Rather what is achieved is the possibility of an interactive, communicative process for identity formation.

These plays and films are in some way, then, left unexplainable. There is often a precarious border between empathy and revulsion, between coldness and critical engagement, between in depth examination and studied self-absorption. The question remains, how do we give up mastery and at the same time retain understanding? This can be, therefore, difficult, dangerous terrain;

however, it is also exciting and provocative, and can expose audience members to a potentially transformative experience. Again, we must return to the distilled moment, the individual discursive situation, which is one of the recurring characteristics of these works: the series of roles as subjects which are performed and then discarded. As readers and viewers of texts we are encouraged to take up similar temporary spaces of viewing pleasure, compromised, complicit, uncomfortable as they are. As de Lauretis says, “we are both invited in and held at a distance” (143). And yet, we watch, as we construct stories, in an “as-if” frame of mind (McHale 32). By entertaining possible stories, possible subjects, we can come to different possible combinations in the narratives we create out of these positions. The ultimate project must be the continual change in dynamic of discursive situations in order to effect a substantial change in the dynamic of identity.

Difference Differently

Although this guardedly utopic positioning of identity as plural may seem paralytic to some, it is always important to return to the question of difference. Difference can only be sustained if the temporary and conflictual nature of one’s discursive position is acknowledged. The subject/identity dilemma is a concern now more than ever with the bombardment of discourses in society. The individual, of necessity, plays several different identities. It is only in a relinquishment of mastery that the several possibilities of other identities not the same as our own can exist. What postmodernism seeks is a radical disruption of the *self/other* dichotomy. Making a difference does not necessitate repudiation of the *other*. For difference to be heard, it needs the support of a community. For a language to be spoken, it must be understood. In this sense, there

needs to be an accumulation of a project, a rallying of support, from others who have felt the same, for a difference to be made. This involves a consolidation of specific identities as “routes” through communities, not “roots” within a self.

The very suggestion that change is possible implies that another world is already envisioned, that a particular goal, or direction for the “route” is in sight. To negotiate towards this goal without imposing prescriptions and agendas, and excluding others, is difficult. Jane Flax, in *Thinking Fragments*, discusses the problems of situating herself within her work and attempts to come to terms with her location and implication. After citing her biases, she concludes inconclusively:

There may be no way out of these dilemmas. Yet there may be at least better or worse ways of living with them. The better ways would seem to include a continuous struggle to be conscious of how philosophies and persons respond to differences and ambiguities: our fear of erasing them, our desire to do so. (43)

It is the question of our desire to erase difference which is the movement of this thesis. This is also implied in Stuart Hall’s discussion of identity:

Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always “knowing” (the language of consciousness betrays us) that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a “lack,” across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate--identical--to the subject processes which are invested in them. The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is “hailed,” but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an *articulation*, rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places *identification*, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda. (*Questions* 6)

As the quote from Hall indicates, this process of identity formation is inherently unstable and predicated on absence. Instability recurs in these works, especially in a frustrated search for origin, where the absent mother, father, or *other* is not to be found, much less colonized. Rather

this search comes to signify the ongoing negotiation of a formation of identity which is a “moveable feast” (Hall, “The Question” 598), where there is an ongoing engagement with an “as-if” frame of mind. Barbara Freedman suggests that theatre provides a model for postmodernism, “as it is always setting into play the subversion of its insights (391):”

A refusal of the observer’s stable position, a fascination with re-presenting presence, an ability to stage its own staging, to rethink, to reframe, switch identifications, undo frames, see freshly, and yet at the same time see how one’s look is always already purloined--these are the benefits of theatre for theory. (391)

The “purloined look” is also a useful way to consider the impure, reiterative nature of identity formation. This process is inherently unstable; the combination of postmodernism with feminism makes it even more so. Situating identity temporarily, monitoring dealings with difference and attempting to curb, perhaps, the desire to consolidate permanently, may be the best ways to let differences exist, to negotiate, without conquering or appropriating.

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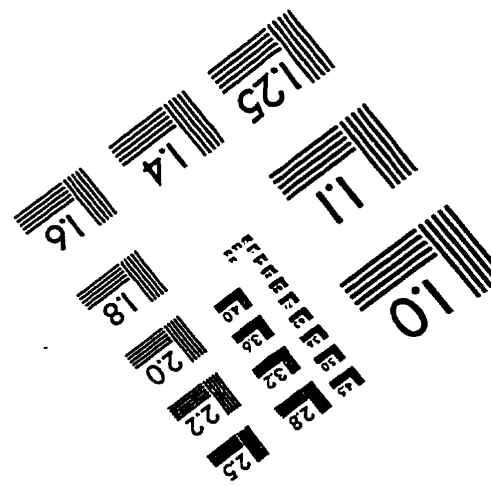
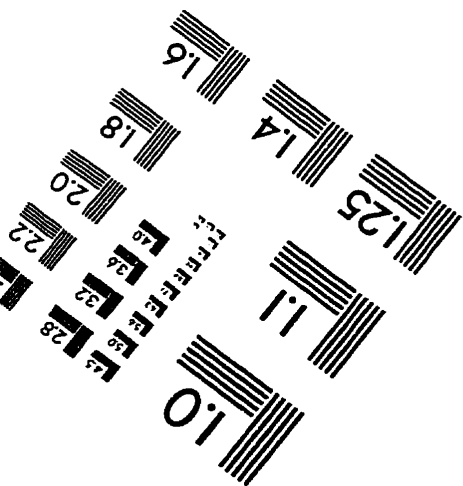
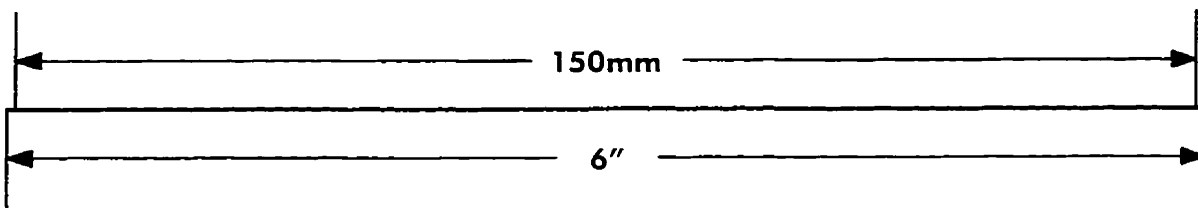
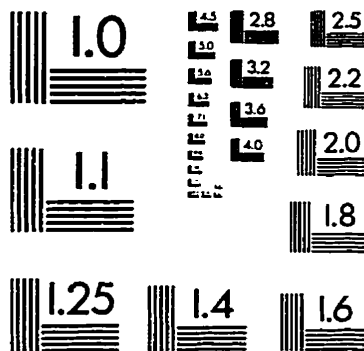
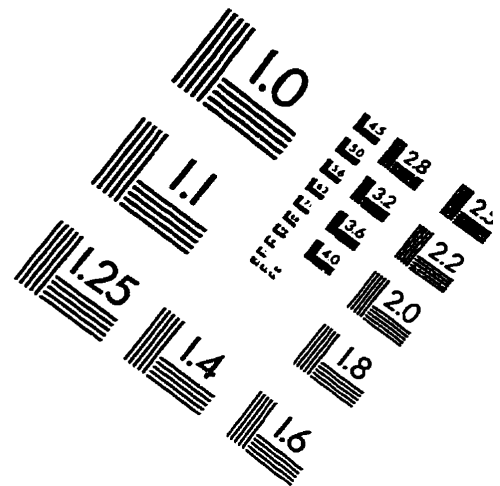
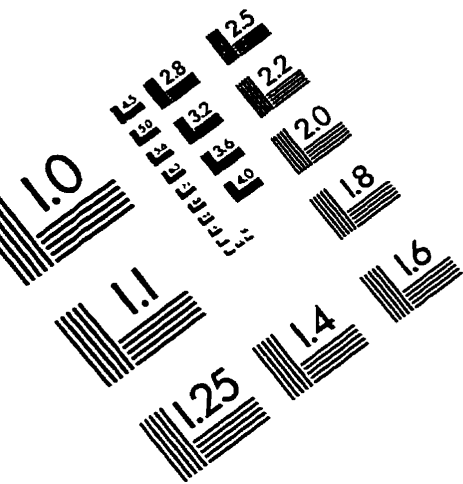
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