



***Swimming: Writing Childlessness***  
**A Novel and Exegesis**

**Volume 2**

**The Exegesis:**  
***Really Talking: Writing Illuminating Theory as  
Theory Illuminates Writing***

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*We can conceive of a life lived, like we can a journey, as a game of connect the dots. Moments in experience, like points on a map can be linked to reveal a pattern. The result is a network of beginnings, destinations and bridges that only make sense when they are plotted against other visible cultural patterns. (Huffer 1998:118-9)*

*I think that when you have something different to say then you are forced to say it in different ways and so you have to seek out a form that's going to suit your needs... because you've got to be able to challenge the way that people read, and you've got to make them sit up a bit so that they actually take notice of what's in there. (Susan Hawthorne in Bartlett 1998a:112)*

*If patriarchy can take what exists and make it not, surely we can take what exists and make it be. (Brossard 1988:103)*

# Introduction

In my twenties people asked, *what work do you do?* My responses: teacher, youth worker and even, if I was feeling particularly brave, writer, lead to conversations about the nature of education, the problems faced by young people, new novels and favorite books; they created openings. Over the next ten years, people added—*do you have children?* These days they, women especially, ask—*how many children do you have?* They assume I am a mother. My response: *none*, has become an obstacle in the conversation; people plough through it, asking: *why not?* Others come to a standstill, visibly discomforted, unsure how to proceed, and unable to find a way around it.

The first time I revealed my intention not to have children, I was a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl sitting with my girlfriends on a wooden bench outside one of the portables at the back of an all girls' high school in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I had thought it through; I had other plans and ambitions, and already I could see that motherhood would stand in my way. My girlfriends' responses—*everyone has children, you'll change your mind*—did not surprise or sway me.

It was the early seventies, and some of second-wave feminism's most influential texts had already been published.<sup>1</sup> I had not yet read these books, but the ideas they articulated, especially in relation to the oppressive nature of marriage and motherhood, filtered through teachers, through novels, articulated in the rising public debates on abortion, and on women's rights in the workplace, had already influenced my thinking. Feminism created a space in which I could imagine another kind of life, a life in which I would have more choices than my mother, more independence and more control. I dared to imagine a *childless* life.<sup>2</sup>

My continued insistence that I would never have children through my twenties evoked, in all but a small

Little girls are promised a safe position in the conscript of marriage—and child-getting if they are submissive, good and neat, they will be admitted to society on the arm of a man... without children a woman might as well never have lived... Yet although there isn't a woman alive who doesn't understand all this early in childhood and is not perfectly aware of the ignominy, detestation and social death that awaits her if she does not conform, there are a lot of women who cannot conform. (Allen 1989:93)

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1. Including: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1953), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1972).

2. Recently, Virginia Haussegger argued: 'the point is that while encouraging women in the '70s and '80s to reach for the sky, none of our purple clad feminist mothers thought to tell us the truth about the biological clock... The one that would eventually reach exploding point inside us' (Haussegger 2002). Haussegger's sentiments are not mine. I am forever grateful for the efforts of my feminist mothers to create a world in which I could have greater opportunities and choices than my foremothers and as Cathy Sherry says in part reply to Haussegger, 'As mothers and social critics... it is impossible to have a crystal ball' (Sherry 2002).

circle of feminist friends, impassioned responses that echoed those of my adolescent girlfriends but they too failed to persuade me. It wasn't until my early thirties, despite understanding that motherhood would interfere with my work and a baby would monopolise my time, that I changed my mind.

The desire to have a child began slowly, slipping into dreams, slithering into half thoughts in the early morning, seizing hold of me as I watched mothers and their children walk past my window during the day. Soon I could not shake loose from its grip and though I continued to tell people that I did not intend to have children—*never*—finding it impossible to acknowledge this change of heart/spirit even to myself, the yearning for a baby intensified, and then flourished. By my thirty-fifth birthday, I could no longer keep it silent or talk myself out of it. I no longer wanted to deny it.

Was it a biological yearning? An inevitable desire to fill the empty womb? Or was it social conditioning? It is impossible to separate the biological from the social, impossible for me to know absolutely. I can never escape my biology, my conditioning, my history; I cannot separate the 'material and symbolic forces' (Braidotti 1991:219); I cannot rip them apart and test them separately.

My quest for a child resulted in four miscarriages over eight years and numerous failed attempts to conceive; a journey dominated in my memory by frequent and invasive medical tests and an insurmountable grief that flowed into all the corners of my life. And—anger, envy and frustration. Although for most of my life I had not wanted children, and even though I had established my identity as a writer and as a teacher, not being able to have a child shook my sense of self, of being a *woman*. I watched pregnant women younger and older; I watched women with children, watched *World Vision* advertisements with starving mothers and malnourished babies and could not believe that while all these women could have a baby I could not. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I do what other women did so easily? I started to buy into the negative discourses of *childlessness* and to see and think of myself as barren, incomplete, and somehow broken.<sup>3</sup>

My doctor informed me that one of his patients with my condition had thirteen miscarriages before she had a baby—I knew I could not bear another one. Another doctor suggested IVF. While I understand other

The body... cannot be reduced to the biological, nor can it be confined to social conditioning. In a new form of 'corporeal materialism,' the body is seen as the inter-face, a threshold, a field of intersection of material and symbolic forces; it is a surface where multiple codes of power and knowledge are inscribed... (Braidotti 1991:219)

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3. Morell suggests there are three dubious discourses about childless women: 'They are discourses of derogation (these women are morally flawed); and regret (the only future for the childless) and, compensation (not-mothers' activities and attachments are simply efforts to make up for the absence of children)' (Morell 1994:76).

women's decision to use reproductive technologies, IVF was a difficult choice for me. I had (have) strong political and ethical objections to the allocation of substantial proportions of health funding to reproductive technology at the cost of other health programs, and even in those moments when my longing for a child was most intense, I distrusted the 'child at any cost' solution to my *infertility*. There were also other concerns. By this stage, I was aware that the chances of success (if success is measured by a live birth, which is not always the case with IVF statistics where often conception is the measure of 'success') were much lower than those presented by the fertility clinics and the media; I was reluctant to take more medication; hesitant about continuing with the endless medical tests and procedures; and apprehensive about what I intuited was the beginning of an obsessive pursuit to have a child.

'You'll regret it later,' the doctor said. 'If you don't try everything.'

Well-meaning family members and friends told me to *keep trying*. They, too, were concerned I would *regret it later*. A few of them continued to point me in the direction of reproductive technology with anecdotal evidence of miracle babies, others to alternative medicine and even Italian witches who would remove the evil eye but their efforts to convince me, to help me find a solution and a cure only reinforced my sense of failure.

*Would I regret it?*

Will I regret not having children? Will my life be less meaningful as a *childless woman*? What does it mean to be a *woman* who never has children? These questions haunted me, merging with my grief over the miscarriages running through my dreams, until I knew they could not be ignored.

How do I identify myself—the adult *woman* without children? I don't regard my life as barren nor infertile—my life bears much fruit, there is and continues to be enormous growth and new shoots appear all the time—even the desert is populated with living things. I do not see myself as a tragic figure to be pitied her inability to bear a child; *childlessness* has not manifested into a life-long burden. Though my *infertility* is the reason for my *childlessness*, I think of myself as having agency in the decision to remain without children—not going on IVF was my decision, not pursuing adoption was my decision. *Childless by choice? Childfree?* These labels do not name my experience nor do they describe who I am.

My grief, most intense during those years of miscarriages when I was on a medical rollercoaster ride, subsided. Nonetheless, as with all loss, there continue to be moments of longing and sadness. Moments when

No large-scale study of the plight of unsuccessful acceptors of IVF has ever been done. Nobody cares for the women who are not part of the success story, who greatly outnumber the ones who are. (Germaine Greer cited in Cannold 2000b)

[Dr Annily Campbell, author of *Childfree and Sterilised: Women's Decisions and Medical Responses*], in the course of her research, has found... across-the-board evidence that the medical profession is insultingly partial in favour of the childbearing. 'All the women I talked to had used contraception and found it unsatisfactory... Sterilisation was not a sudden, nor unreasonable, decision. And yet none were taken seriously... They felt, "How dare a doctor say to me, at the age of 32 or 35, 'You are going to regret it'"'. (Williams 2004: 43)

What we are calling passionate knowing is the elaborated form connected knowing takes after women learn to use the self as an instrument of understanding. (Belenky et al. 1986: 141)

the sound of a child's laughter reduces me to tears, and I mourn once again the child I had imagined into existence with each pregnancy. But these are only moments now and then, they don't consume me; they are not present every day, not even every week. My life has returned, come back.

In 1999, after reading Susan Johnson's *A Better Woman*, (Johnson 1999) a memoir of her experience of childbirth and motherhood—a poetic, revealing, brave book, by a woman willing to disclose herself—I went to a talk Johnson was giving in a local bookshop. The audience was all female and, as it turned out, predominantly made up of women who were mothers. The women, admirers of Johnson's book, listened to her read, asked her questions, and then shared their appreciation of her willingness to tell her story, one of the hidden, never-told stories of motherhood, in which, they said, they could find themselves.

In the midst of this discussion a number of women vented their anger against a reviewer who had called *A Better Woman* 'self indulgent'. 'She would not understand, she's childless,' one of the women called out. Oblivious, or indifferent, to the fact that *childless* women may be sitting among them, the women joined in a tirade not only against the reviewer but also against all those 'selfish and bitter childless women,' who 'can never understand what it's like to be a mother.'

Silenced by the fever of their antagonism, I did not declare myself. Though I longed to stand up and speak in defence of *childless* women, it seemed impossible to argue with their key premise that a woman without a child could never understand what it was like to be a mother.

Discovering myself as the *other* among this group of women did not surprise me. Most of them were middle-class women of English-speaking background who had moved to Yarraville over the last ten years as it has metamorphosed from working-class and undesirable, to trendy and highly-sought-after. As a woman of non-English-speaking and working-class background, I have often felt the outsider. However, I found this division between them as women with children and myself as a woman without children disturbing, especially, as it was laced with such hostility. This division between mothers and nonmothers began to consume my thinking and flowed into my discussions with other women. One friend admitted she felt compelled to share with me the most negative aspects of her mothering experience so that I might appreciate how hard it is to be a mother. But she doubted, she said, that I would ever be able to understand. Even those women with

If motherhood is, indeed, the deepest knowledge a woman can experience, childless women are forever excluded from women's ways of knowing. How can we be real women?... if motherhood remains the *deepest* knowledge, whatever I construct will be shallow in comparison. (Morell 1994:75)

Thus, although traditionally in feminist thinking woman has been defined as 'other' in relation to the male norm... it is possible to argue that the 'infertile' and/or 'voluntarily childless' woman: the non-mother...is 'other' or feels that she is 'other' to the feminine 'ideal'. (Letherby 1999a:369)

children who said they envied my freedom made sure I understood this freedom came at a cost, at the cost of the most intimate and crucial of human relationships.

The Australian birthrate is at the lowest ever and the Australian Bureau of Statistics predicts that 28% of Australian women will remain *childless* (Gray 1999). Some women are *childless* by choice, others due to circumstances, and some because of medical conditions that have rendered them infertile or unable to carry a pregnancy to full term. While this increase has led to a growing acceptance in some circles, at least, that a number of women *will never* have children, we remain a pronatalist society and the negative discourses surrounding *childlessness* continue to be perpetuated in the media as well as popular books, films and television programs.<sup>4</sup>

In the twenty-five years or so between my first declaration that I did not want children and the realisation in my early forties that I would never be able to have a child, there has been a marked shift in feminist thinking about motherhood. A clearer distinction and recognition that it is the institution of motherhood and not being a mother that is repressive for women, has led to a renewed willingness to embrace and celebrate mothering, and to increasing (though not yet comprehensive) feminist scholarship on mothering, on discourses of mothering and critiques of the institution of motherhood. Yet, (with only a few very recent exceptions), the meaning of *childlessness* in women's lives has remained largely unexamined by feminists, and the negative discourses surrounding *childlessness*, have remained uncontested.<sup>5</sup>

My experience of *childlessness* is the major inspiration for this thesis and one of its key reference points; it prompted my questioning, my research and my imagination. The two components of the thesis—novel and exegesis—are very different texts, however, central to both components is the question: 'What is woman?'

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4. Recently the reduction in birthrates has become a concern for the governments of countries like Australia, Japan and Italy, with economists and social planners predicting 'the emergence of unfavourable ratios between workers and that part of the population dependent on government assistance... [and that] the taxes of the ever-shrinking working age group... [are having to] provide social security for a growing aging population' (Manne 2003:2). This reemergent focus on women who do not bear children as in some ways traitors undermining the society and the future of our world/race/culture (Faux 1984:110), highlights yet another way the 'institution of motherhood [continues to] not only shape the lives of women who bear children, but also assigns a lesser value to those who do not' (Albury 1999:143).

5. The documentation of the experience of 'childlessness' is generally confined to psychology, sociology, oral history and autobiography; these are personal reflections, case studies or 'evidence' of what has been and continues to be perceived as the problem of being 'other' (Marshall 1993; Sandelowski 1993; Martin 1994; Hampson 1997; Peacock 1998; Burkett 2000).

So much of the writing surrounding childbirth and motherhood really amounts to a litany of things that non-mothers cannot possibly comprehend... There is no room here for analysis or imagination—for women, at least, experience is all. If we are to accept this as truth, then non-mothers exist in a kind of cognitive half-light, and we are inchoate and immature. (Williams 2004: 43)

Women are no longer prepared to sacrifice themselves on the altar of maternity, or to be doormats for their families. They want a life... if we refuse to let them have it, something has to give... that something will be having children. (Summers 2003:59-60)

Even in women's accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are strangely absent... in both literary and theoretical texts about mothers, mothering and motherhood. (Daly et al. 1991: 1)

From the beginning, feminists set out to break two taboos: The taboo on describing the complex and mixed experiences of actual mothers and the taboo on the celebration of a childfree life. But for reasons both inside and beyond the women's movement, feminists were better able in the long run to attend to mothers' voices than they were able to imagine a full and deeply meaningful life without motherhood, without children. (Snitow 1993:145)

If she isn't having children, then a woman is increasingly told she's letting the whole country down. (Summers 2003:12)



exemplified here in the tension that arises between the hegemonic social construction of woman = mother and the existence of women who are not mothers.

The novel, *Swimming*, is the fictional narrative of one woman's life and her experience of being *childless*. Kate, the protagonist of the novel, is not me though she has a number of similar experiences. Kate is the subject of her own narrative, a woman, whose existence presents an *alternative figuration* of the *childless woman*. The exegesis is a theoretical exploration and interrogation of the process of my feminist fiction writing as manifest in the writing of *Swimming*.

Crucial to the development of both texts is the relationship between the *real childless woman* and the desire to represent the *real childless woman's* experience. In this sense *real* is used to denote the embodied (flesh and blood) individual woman without children. However, this notion of *real* is not what Stuart Hall refers to as 'a traditional' view of 'the subject' whereby the individual is seen to be 'fully endowed with consciousness; an autonomous and stable entity' (Hall 1997:55). In this thesis, the individual subject is understood to be complex and multiple; *woman* is understood to be a 'subject-in-process' (Braidotti 2002:12); and subjectivity an 'ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one interacts with the world' (de Lauretis 1984:159).

This poststructuralist positioning of the subject contests the notion of the *real woman* and problematises notions of experience and representation. In thinking through these issues I found the 'politics of location' particularly pertinent, as it acknowledges as its beginning point the differences between women (and even within each woman) and insists on 'political accountability (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials...' (Braidotti 2002:12). The 'politics of location' demands a self-critical, reflective and vigilant approach. An approach that exposes our perspectives as limited and positional, and acknowledges, in this case, that *the childless woman* is many women, whose experiences of not having children are very different depending on a range of factors including their race, class and sexuality. It posits experience and all representation, whether stereotypical or not, as socially constructed.

I have borrowed Braidotti's concept of 'alternative figurations' as a starting point, or more precisely a *sparkling* point, to further explore questions of representation. Her 'figurations' that 'materially embody stages of metamorphosis of a subject's position towards all that the phallogocentric system does *not* want it to

To locate myself in my body means more than understanding what it has meant to me to have a vulva and clitoris and uterus and breasts. It means recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go. (Rich 2001b:68)

become' (Braidotti 2002:13), provides a way of thinking through the writing of the particular *childless woman*. Writing Kate as an *alternative figuration* of the *childless woman* illuminates the 'limitations of our locations, truths and discourses' (Braidotti 2002:13) and challenges the discourses of the general.

During those years of trying to have a child I was writing—though I only wrote about my miscarriages and failed attempts to get pregnant in private journals. Writing is my way of making sense of the world and this was an experience I needed to make sense of, however, if this had been my sole purpose my writing would have remained personal reflections in private journals. But I believed that by sharing my experience of infertility and loss it could become fertile and that by writing a novel that gives a *childless woman* a voice, I could contribute to the understanding of what it means to be a *childless woman* in Australia today.

For me writing has always been, and continues to be a political act. Whether the stories I tell are about migrant women, working class girls, or *childless* women, I write fiction because story telling is a powerful mechanism for challenging our perceptions and creating a deeper understanding of ourselves and each other, like Richard Rorty, I believe:

Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and the humiliation of other unfamiliar sorts of people... This process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as... the novel. (Rorty 1989: xvi)

The importance of this process of seeing 'other human beings as 'one of us' is what I understand Rushdie is implying when he says, 're-describing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it' (Rushdie cited by Brady, V. 1996:79).

When I recalled Susan Johnson's talk, I contemplated the possible responses I might make to the antagonism those women voiced towards the *childless*: I could remain silent and continue to resent them, or feel excluded by them or to be angry and dismissive of them or I could engage in arguments with them. These are all avenues, likely to increase the divide between us. Instead, I have chosen to tell them a story. In the same

By figuration I mean a politically informed map that outlines our own situated perspective. A figuration renders our image in terms of a decentred and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity. The definition of a person's identity takes place... in the spaces that flow and connect in between.... A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self—it is no metaphor. Being nomadic, homeless, an exile, a refugee... is no metaphor... These are highly specific and geo-political and historical locations-history tattooed on your body... Figurations attempt to draw a cartography of the power-relations that define these respective positions... and thus can help identify possible sites and strategies for resistance... [these are] significant sites for reconfiguring political practice and redefining political subjectivity. (Braidotti 2002:2-3)

I don't understand things until I write. It's a way of getting to that lower level and understanding it in my own terms. It's by writing that I come to understand what is at stake in an inner way. I can't imagine how I would manage without writing, it's part of my grounding. (Drusilla Modjeska A7)

way that Susan Johnson allowed me to connect with her experience of mothering when she wrote *A Better Woman*, I hope that *Swimming* will allow them to connect with Kate and her experience of *childlessness*. This has been my intention: to write a novel that will increase the reader's sensitivity to the character's 'pain' and 'humiliation' as well as her joy and laughter not only so the reader will empathise with the particular woman but so she may come to appreciate the 'positivity of difference' (Braidotti 2002:177) and recognise the limitations of her own position. It is important to me that the readers (female and male) see aspects of themselves in Kate's story, so that the *childless woman* may become, 'one of us' rather than one of 'them', not as another of the same, but as *alternative figuration* of the possibility of being *woman* and of being *human*.

The novel, a work of imagination, has also been informed, inspired, and shaped by substantial research. This kind of research, as Tess Brady argues in an article exploring the nature of research undertaken in the process of fiction writing, not only involves being 'a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things... [but] requires its own skill. The skill to locate quickly, sort through, and accurately select all the blue pieces' (Brady, T. 2000). This approach transforms me into one of Rosi Braidotti's nomads. The nomad is an attractive metaphor for the feminist fiction writer who like the nomad find herself:

'in transit', moving on, passing through, creating connections where things were previously disconnected or seemed un-related, where there seemed to be 'nothing to see'. In transit, moving, dis-placing... In the feminist context it also implies the effort to move on to the invention of new ways of relating, of building footbridges between notions. (Braidotti 1997: 76)

The research for the novel began with an exploration of implications and consequences of being a woman without children—drawing on my own experience, on informal discussions with other *childless* women, and on published interviews, case studies, autobiographies, novels, short stories, plays and poems written by and about *childless* women. I followed this (and sometimes interrupted it) with a study of feminist, psychological, social, cultural, historical and medical research and theory that focuses either directly or indirectly on *child-*

My alternative to saying what feminist research is, is to illustrate what feminist research includes, i.e., to collect, categorize and examine the multitude of feminist research voices... feminists have used all existing methods and have invented some new ones as well. Instead of orthodoxy, feminist research practices must be recognized as a plurality. Rather than there being a 'woman's way of knowing,' or a 'feminist way of doing research,' there are women's ways of knowing. (Reinharz 1992:4)

*lessness*, as well as motherhood and women's position in society. I have also read literary and cultural theory and works on creative writing, mainly, but not exclusively, feminist, concerned with the creative writing praxis.

In response to the more specific requirements of writing the novel (developing the characters and setting) I also researched and read in what I have labelled, 'the miscellaneous areas,' that include: Vietnamese culture, loss and grief, sculpture and a range of other subjects including the sorts of shells found on the Australian coastline.

Evidence of where I have been cannot be easily traced in the novel, the texts I have read are not quoted or cited, not referenced, rarely mentioned, the novel is a 'work of art' and as such it must liberate itself from the research. The fiction writer is a hungry nomad and the research (coupled with imagination, observation and language) is her nourishment providing the inspiration and energy for the writer to continue her fiction-making journey.

While the exploration and writing of new figurations of *childlessness* is the major objective of the novel, the exegesis concentrates on the interconnections between the creative process and my political intention as a feminist fiction writer. Let me say from the outset that I find problematic the notion of creative work as a spiritual, mysterious and magical process that is beyond explanation. For me:

writing [is] an interpretation and thus a political contestation over the significance of the signs of culture; that is to say, like reading it is a discursive and political practice and not an effect of the private and direct intuition of a genius; that is, of a floating transhistorical consciousness. (Zavarzadeh & Morton 1994:87)

Art, like science and philosophy, is one of the ways we think through the issues, questions and concerns that confront us both as individuals and as communities. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, art is thought through 'sensations' but it is nevertheless 'thinking' just as philosophy (thought through concepts) and science (thought through functions) are thinking, and 'no one of these thoughts is better than another or more fully completely or synthetically "thought"' (Deleuze & Guattari 1991:198).

All creative work is a form of cultural production and social construction and as such it can be and should

Myths of creativity focus on the irrational, spontaneous functions, on the capacity for the elements of chance or unconscious connections to be made. These are acknowledged aspects that contribute to the creative process, but they can also be reductive; their focus on the individual is at the expense of the social functions... (Freiman 2003)

be interrogated. This interrogation is important to me as a feminist committed to being ‘politically accountable’, as a creative writing teacher working to establish creative writing as a discipline in an academic environment and especially as a novelist writing to challenge our perceptions and create deeper understandings of ourselves and each other.

This said I acknowledge that, whatever the discipline, it can be difficult to clearly articulate the creative and imaginative process. The writing of this novel inspired by my *childlessness*, informed by research, directed by my politically motivated intentions, has occupied my thinking, and my life over the last four years. Everything I have read, heard, seen, touched and smelt has at some level fed into the writing. Sitting in a coffee shop I caught a glance of a man with a ponytail sketching at the corner table and instinctively I knew what the character ‘Tom’ looked like even though he did not look exactly like the man sitting at the table. In a session at the Melbourne Writer’s Festival listening to Marina Warner talking about myths it occurred to me that Kate’s mother loved to make tapestries and to sew and that these creative outlets shaped her life and were part of Kate’s rich inheritance. Lynne’s dementia was born as a consequence of spending time with a favourite aunt who was diagnosed with dementia and went into a nursing home around the time I began writing this novel.

The works of Hélène Cixous, especially her theory of *écriture féminine* founded on a commitment to the power of women’s writing and the call on women to take up the pen as a revolutionary act, resonated with my desire to write my *infertility*, my longing for a child, my miscarriages and my desire to write my female body. In both my reading and writing I was absorbed from the outset with finding a way of writing this novel so that it could act as a ‘path of resistance’, so that it could make visible those aspects and experiences of women’s lives that are often invisible. I experimented with the *écriture féminine* style—including the stream of consciousness and the play with an invented new ‘women’s language’ but found that for me and for the writing of *Swimming* this style was limiting, and incompatible with my desire to explore *childlessness* not only as a physical and biological experience (if at all)—*from the body*—but in its social, cultural and historically constructed manifestations. But Cixous’ writing/theorising did inspire a greater consciousness of Kate’s internal dialogue, and a willingness to take risks in revealing her most intimate thoughts and dreams—some of which hover on the border between sanity and madness.

If we, as artists can understand and situate our practice then we can own the practice. (Stewart 2003)

The issue that concerns me now is not whether women do as a matter of course write differently but whether feminists as a matter of strategy ought to do so. Feminists need, in my view, to write in a way that will coax the reader to sit up and think, because, as readers, only what we have thought through for ourselves prompt us to active intervention in the world beyond the study. Agreement is not enough. In the twentieth century women novelists from Virginia Woolf to Toni Morrison restlessly and brilliantly experimented with form, genre, modes of address, styles... (Belsey 2000:1158)

There are also a number of images and ideas, the genesis of which I cannot locate at all, among them: a woman standing outside a deli looking at another woman's baby and thinking about snatching him and a naked old woman coming out of the ocean. It is almost impossible, and probably of little value, to try and identify the genesis of every idea, every scene, and every character, more important, as the novelist Rose Tremain puts it, is to accept that 'the imagination conjures gifts, what the ungrateful, unsentimental part of the mind has to do is unwrap them, find fault with them, see them for what they are and then alter them' (Tremain 1993:5-6).

The writer with her intentions encounters the fruits of the imagination.<sup>6</sup> The image of the naked woman, for example, became the older Kate and the image of her coming out of the ocean part of a photographic exhibition attempting to present alternative notions of aging, that anticipates some of the novel's concerns.

This exegesis is 'an attempt to theorise the relationship between literature and life, discourse and experience, and fiction and politics' (Rose 1993:355) and to 'unmask' (Muecke 2002:126) the creative writing praxis of the feminist creative writer and the theorising practice of the feminist theorist by bringing together the feminist fiction writer/s and the feminist theorist/s in an active dialogue/conversation that forces each to interrogate themselves and each other.

It is my contention that all writers who are also feminists have a political 'intention' and though the 'intention of [the writer does not] construct the meaning of the work' (Barrett 1999:110) it is a crucial aspect of the fabric that forms the work. Our intention, along with a self-reflective, critical approach to our own fiction-making, is crucial to our work as feminist writers writing 'from and toward women' (Cixous 1975:351) in a society that continues to be dominated by patriarchal values. I am calling this 'vigilance' in this exegesis because vigilance implies a watchfulness and an alertness, and is the state of being awake to both our conditioning and to our 'locatedness'.

The exploration of creative writing in this exegesis is a theoretical exploration of the process of writing a novel that 'thinks' through the issue of childlessness; a theoretical exploration primarily from a writer's perspective, and like Toni Morrison, I want to:

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6. I use 'fruits' purposely here. If a tree is to bear fruit it must be tended, watered, fed, have access to the sun, as Pasteur said 'chance favours the prepared mind'. (Knowles 2003)

be clear at the outset that I do not bring to these matters solely or even principally the tools of the literary critic. As a reader (before becoming a writer) I read as I had been taught to do. But books revealed themselves differently to me as a writer. (Morrison 1992: 3)

The exegesis, like the novel, is a narrative; *Swimming* is the subject of this narrative, and the *Novelist*, and the *Theorist* are its main characters. The *Thesis writer* writes this introduction but in the main body of the exegesis, the *Thesis writer* metamorphoses into two, the *Novelist* and *Theorist* in order to create critical dialogue. The *Novelist* tells the story of her fiction-making, the story of *Swimming*, in order to illuminate the creative writing process, the process of making fiction and fiction-making, of the work of the novel *becoming*. The *Theorist* brings her theorising of the creative praxis to the dialogue, so that the process of creating and writing theory is interrogated and ‘unmasked’ by the creative praxis. Writers who have written about their creative process in memoirs and in collections on writing, along with the literary theorists writing about the praxis of writing, form the background, and context, against, and in which the dialogue between the *Novelist* and *Theorist* is set.

The intention of both *Novelist* and *Theorist* is to bring *alternative figurations* of the *other* into view, so that not only is she heard, and presented in all her complexity but so the *many childless* women and the *many* feminist fiction writers can be made visible. In this dialogue both *Novelist* and *Theorist* acknowledge and explore not only the role of inspiration, creativity and imagination but also of experience, intellect, research, rigor and political motivation; and their embodied and located positions, aware that they ‘can’t write truthfully about people and how they live together without being involved in the power structures they’re part of... [without] a political dimension’ (Grenville 2001:3).

This approach will by necessity challenge some of the myths about the creative process including romantic notions of creativity; the assumption ‘that creativity and authorship are only individual (or even individualising) acts and are available only to those with “talent”’ (Brophy 1998:14); that the imagination is fragile; and that too close a relationship with politics or theory can ‘dry up the writer’ (Jones, R. 1989).

The research for the exegesis overlaps with that of the novel outlined earlier. In addition, however, I interviewed seven Australian women writers whose novels are at some level concerned with *childlessness* or

the lives of *childless* women.<sup>7</sup> By exploring questions of creativity and intention, of aesthetics and politics with ‘feminist’ writers writing in contemporary Australia, the interviews also inform the dialogue between the *Novelist* and *Theorist*.

Just as the question of how to write the *childless woman* preoccupied me during the writing of *Swimming*, the search for a structure, form and language to illuminate the process of fiction-making in a theoretical context has preoccupied me during the writing of this exegesis. The development of a dialogue structure for the remainder of this exegesis was inspired by feminist writers and theorists calling for alternative models of academic writing that are ‘dialogic in nature’ (Morris 1993:164); and that ‘break out of the masculinist mode of communication, and in breaking free, [allow us] to explore the deepest parts of ourselves as we relate to the texts...’ (Nelson 1995:xvii).

In a recent article, *Writing as a Feminist*, Catherine Belsey suggests ‘a form of writing that resembles or incites dialogue’. In the development of the dialogue that follows I have been influenced by her argument:

Dialogue makes space for an interlocutor, where monologue is unremitting... Feminists want readers to look up occasionally from the text, not to read another necessarily, but to reflect, compare, differ—in a word to consider. Discontinuity helps here. Where the rules prescribe seamless transitions, might we not make the stitching visible, and thereby problematic? Moves from the personal to impersonal change the frame and alter perspective. Variations of register—from theory to anecdote, from polemic to playfulness, even in academic prose—can position the reader as active interpreter, offering at best a plurality of readings, a range of possible connections. Such shifts punctuate the text, make breaks for intervention... [but] the ultimate enemy of dialogue is surely closure. (Belsey 2000:1159)

To attack linearity and binary thinking in a style that remains linear and binary itself would indeed be a contradiction in terms. (Braidotti 2002:8)

To support this exegesis’s dialogic approach, I have developed a three columns format. This format has also been adopted to highlight that no novel is written in a vacuum, and that both the *Novelist*’s understanding

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7. I wrote to thirteen Australian women fiction writers whose novels include the narratives of childless women. Of these thirteen, seven writers agreed to interviews. See Appendix A for full list.



of fiction writing and the *Theorist's* ideas on the theorising of fiction writing have been influenced and shaped by other writers and theorists, and form a complex web of interconnections.

The dialogue between the *Novelist* and the *Theorist* is situated in the central column. The ideas, concepts and notions that have influenced the *Novelist* and the *Theorist* are found in the two side columns. In the left hand column I have placed quotes from creative writers, in the right hand column, those from theorists.

However, contributions from Hélène Cixous, Adrienne Rich and Virginia Woolf are positioned across all three columns. Not only because they are both theorists and creative writers but also because their writing and theorising has had a major influence on my thinking throughout the development of this thesis.

As a reflection of my commitment to ensure the diverse experiences of individual women is paramount in my writing and theorising, comments made by *real childless* women, quoted from texts that explore *childlessness* through interviews and case studies, (even though these are understood to be constructed and positional) are always located across more than one column. This is a metaphorical move to reflect the inadequacy of any single narrative to contain *woman*.

Situating writers and theorists in the margins of the dialogue between the characters: *Novelist* and *Theorist*, is an illusion, a two-dimensional representation of a more complex relationship. I prefer to imagine many dialogues and conversations, a huge and complex web, woven overtime, stretching across many cultures and disciplines, of which this is one small section. The dialogue between this *Novelist* and this *Theorist* is central here and to itself, in the same way that each of us, and every human being, is the centre of their own universe, and simultaneously only a tiny speck in the real universe. The dialogue like each of us cannot exist without the rest but it can make a contribution to it. Therefore the dialogue is multi-voiced, and it is informed, interrupted, and layered, by the many voices of other writers and theorists.

It has been my intention to develop an open dialogue which allows the reader to be Belsey's 'active interpreter' encouraged to look 'up occasionally from the text... to reflect, compare, differ—in a word reconsider' and to this end, I have used a number of strategies including those suggested by Belsey: the shift from theory to anecdote and back again, the use of personal and impersonal language, and a refusal to succumb to the academic practice of conclusion and closure. In addition I have resisted the urge to make the two characters (who are after all two aspects of the one person, the *Thesis writer*) easily and consistently distinguishable

To me the critical essay is... a way to extend the conversations I have with other critical thinkers. When I begin writing a critical essay, it is never the starting point for any discussion; it emerges as the site of culmination or a location for prolonged engagement, an invitation to work in a sustained manner with ideas. (hooks 1999: 38)

It is this centrifugal force, a destabilising force, which researchers have feared and which we now invite. Whether we call it feminist or postmodern... the inclination is to openness and growth, to take risks, to create critical spaces.... We can learn more when our pen is a tool of discovery, not domination. (Neilson 1998: 262)

in a way that would negate their commitment to the 'transdisciplinary' or impose on them stereotypical characteristics, for novelists often theorise and the best theorists are always creative.

There are dangers in positioning the novel and the exegesis together so I am tentative in my beginnings. I do not want to 'offer an interpretation or directive [that may]... diminish the point of creating the artwork' (Perry 1999). I don't want to explain the novel nor to direct or preempt its reading and hope that the reader will discover in it her own truths.

The novel is an artefact, the reading of it, like the writing a personal experience. It is not my intention to dissect *Swimming* in this exegesis: 'the whole can be more than the sum of its parts. Just as the wetness of water cannot be found within molecules of H<sub>2</sub>O...' (McCrone 2002:11), the experience of the novel will not be found in its separate elements or the author's intentions. Therefore I request the novel be read first, so that the reader comes to it before reading the authorial intentions and interpretations that follow in the body of this exegesis.

Besides requesting the novel be read first, I make no other recommendation as to how this dialogue should be read, there are a number of signposts but I am not issuing a road map. The reader may choose to read across the three columns page by page, or to read the central dialogue between the *Novelist* and *Theorist* without reference to the other two columns or to read each column one at a time. The reader may choose to treat the side columns as footnotes, or as interruptions or as a diversion. The reader, I hope, will map her own route, and that way create her own interpretation of the landscape of the exegesis.

The question, 'What is your book about?' has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did. (Winterson 1995:165)

## *The Dialogue*

I died for Beauty—but was scarce  
Adjusted in the Tomb  
When One who died for Truth, was lain  
In an adjoining Room—

He questioned softly ‘Why I failed’?  
‘For Beauty’, I replied—  
‘And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—  
We Brethren, are’, He said—

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—  
We talked between the Rooms—  
Until the Moss had reached our lips—  
And covered up—our names—

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Emily Dickinson

*I am standing in a large room that opens onto the beach, swimming in ocean sounds: the pounding of waves on rocks, the hiss and howl of a heavy wind. I can see the wide stretch of low-tide sand, the pink-tinged breakers, and the misty horizon. As the rising sun finally pushes through the dark clouds into a patch of blue and the morning light fills the room, as I turn away from the ocean, I, the Thesis writer, metamorphose into two—the Novelist and the Theorist.*

*The walls of the room are covered in bookshelves overflowing with books. There are two armchairs on either side of a small table. As we greet each other, sit, pour coffee and prepare ourselves to begin a dialogue on the writing of the novel **Swimming**, other writers and theorists enter the room. We have invited them in, aware that while our intention is to illuminate the process of writing this particular novel, both the writing of the novel and our ideas about novel writing are influenced and shaped by other novels, and by the many writers and theorists who have, over centuries, talked and written about the fiction writing process.*

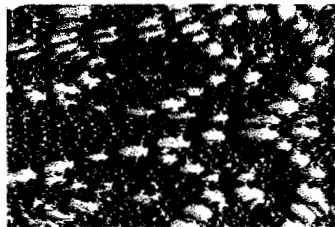
## *Beginnings*

**Novelist:** The scene is set for this dialogue; the ocean and the wind are playing their part, all that remains is for us to begin speaking. Beginnings do not pre-exist, they cannot be found, they have to be constructed.

**Theorist:** Our coming together for this dialogue is an act of good will, and a good place to begin. I can smell the scent of desire and expectation and also a little trepidation but this is the nature of setting out on a new journey.

**Novelist:** Let's begin then with spinning and threads, for if we take the *Thesis writer's* metaphor, this dialogue is to become part of a huge and complex web, woven overtime, stretching across many cultures and disciplines. Let's spin the threads of our practices, fiction writing and theorising, and join them to the main web with a dressmaker's slip knot. I will begin with connections to other women...

When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory... You make the path boldly and follow it... (Dillard 1989:3)



A section of Rosa Gandolfo's doily

I have been reading *The Writing Life*, by American novelist, Annie Dillard. It is an insightful and poetic narrative of her working life as a writer. Dillard begins the memoir where writing begins with the first line of words on the blank sheet of paper. Probe, pick and gouge are her metaphors for the writer's words that once written impel her along a writing path. I add scissors, needles and crochet hook, as my metaphors, because these are my mother's tools. Ever since I can remember my mother has taken thread, wool and cloth; knitted, crocheted and sewed. From these materials she has created doilies, bedspreads, tapestries, jumpers and dresses.

As a child I watched her escape into her own world in the back room of our weath-erboard house, or in front of the television set at night, sketching designs and bring-

The only truly unselfconscious time I have is when I am sitting at my desk deep within the fiction I am writing. I love it. I have no thoughts, no memories, no concerns about chores and no worries... (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

It's like eating, like hunger. I am hunger. I must eat, and it's time I wrote. (Jessica Anderson A:3)

*A line will take us hours maybe  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's  
thought  
Our stitching and unstitching has  
been naught  
(from Adam's Curse by W.B. Yeats)*

A work in progress quickly becomes feral. It reverts to a wild state overnight. You must visit it every day and reassert your mastery over it. If you skip a day, you are, quite rightly, afraid to open the door to its room. You enter its room with bravura, holding a chair at the thing and shouting, 'Simba'. (Dillard 1989:52)

Books have demands of their own... the book got written the only way it could, given the nature of the material I was grappling with... I was caught in the process of writing and the process of trying to make sense of it drags you along, willy-nilly. (Drusilla Modjeska interviewed by Rivers 1997:320)

ing them to life. This work, which my father—in the way some men do when a woman's attention strays from them—has constantly discouraged, gives her purpose, a place beyond the family that he and her children cannot reach. It connects her with the world of her childhood and the sewing circle in her mother's house in the small Sicilian village where she was born. It connects her with her grandmother and great grandmother whose doilies and embroidered table cloths she displays on special occasions in her home in the western suburbs of Melbourne, and from which the rich echo of their lives reverberates. From her I learned that imagination and creativity give life, and sustain the spirit even in the darkest times. From her I learned that inspiration is only and ever the first step on the long road that begins the journey towards creating something new—it takes work, hours of it, knitting and unraveling, sewing and unpicking; many pieces are discarded, many never come close to the vision. It takes years of continual practice, my mother says, to understand one's craft/art.

From my mother I learned you must be the one that believes in the work, that holds the vision even when what you make is not appreciated, when it is dismissed and ignored; even when those around you try to drag you away from it, demanding that you be a mother, a wife, a sister, that you come and cook their meals, that you make the dress that they desperately need for the birthday party or the wedding, that you iron their shirt or sing them a song to help them fall asleep. There are times when you do allow yourself to be torn away, but you know you must return to it.

I am not much of a dressmaker, or a knitter, and in my hands cotton and crochet hook wield only misshapened, slightly crooked scarves. Words are my tools and I, like my mother with her tools, sit with them for hours, writing them down, crossing them out, shaping and reshaping the sentences, the paragraphs, the chapters. This

Kerouac took three weeks to write [*On the Road*] in 1950, but then it was seven years in the rewriting. (Brophy 1998:14)

I write in part because I can write. I feel very strongly that if we have talent, we also have a responsibility to be a good steward to that talent. It hasn't been given to us for our own ego development... [but] so we can share something that is the destiny of the writer. Therefore the quality and the content of what you share are very important. I don't always like to write. When someone says, 'You must have a wonderful life. I'd just love to be a writer.'...I think you have no idea how abominable it is in some ways. Weeks and months and years for only moments of great pleasure. (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

is what writing is for me: the glimpse of something, a vision or idea or image followed by a search for the words, the form and shape, and the metaphors, that will bring it to life. The hours, days, months, years spent bringing that vision, or image or idea to the page so that it might come to life for the reader, so that the vision that was just a glimpse might be fully formed like one of my mother's crocheted cloths spread over the table; like her tapestry framed and hanging on a dining room wall.

My mother's doilies, bedspreads, and tapestries, have the scent of olive groves, vineyards, of prickly pears ripe with red and yellow fruit; the tremble of earthquakes that woke her as a child and sent her running into the street. They are woven with the stories her mother told of saints and angels appearing to lone travelers lost and searching for home; the bitter sweetness of leaving home forever to come to a new land; and the thread of a connection from a long line of women through many generations. This is what my writing or should I say, what I, in my writing long to accomplish.

**Theorist:** The word theory comes from the Greek *theōria*, which according to *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, means contemplation, speculation, sight. This is what the practice of theorising is for me. It begins with observation of the world, of the specifics, be it literature, art or the art that some people call craft, and then contemplating, and then speculating as to why things are done, seen, experienced in certain ways. This hypothesising is followed by research, by thought, by debate aimed at testing the theory to see if it can stand as an explanation of the world around us; it is the practice of exposing beliefs, values, cultural assumptions that have us see our reality as real, our truth as absolute. It is reflective and, at its best, illuminating.

My mother's work: the dresses, the doilies and bedspreads meant very little to me, even less to my father, and so because no one, other than a few older women, prized her work, I thought of it as worthless. It was not until I began to read feminist theory in my late teens that I questioned where and how I came to give my mother's work so little value. The feminists whose books I read—de Beauvoir, Greer, Mitchell and others—highlighted the gendered and sexist nature of society and exposed the consequent devaluing of women and women's work. It was this that brought me back to my mother's work, to sitting and watching, to talking and questioning and exploring, to look again, to speculate and to contemplate anew. This was the genesis of my desire to understand the nature of these women's 'crafts', what their function was/is for both their creators and those of us who are given them as gifts, or given the gift of seeing them created, and then displayed. I sought to understand why my culture and society devalued these works, why they were craft and not art, why they were not hanging in a gallery, why my father seemed so determined to stop my mother making them, and why I was too embarrassed to hang them on my dining room wall.

*Theory—the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees—theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth. (Rich 1987:213-4)*

Through the study of theory I learned to question the *truths* I grew up with and the *realities* I took for granted; I learned to make connections and linkages, to see the culture beyond the text, the society beyond the individual, the power structures beyond the language; to see the patterns, the forest as well as the trees. Theory is my tool, sharper than scissors, more diverse in its uses than a knitting needle, but beholden to those tools and to the women who wield them. I theorise as resistance, as political activism—as a way of creating the possibility of artist for my mother; of displaying with pride her doilies that echo the Sicilian village of her childhood; of gallery walls covered in women's work. More recently I have learned the impor-

Theory is a critique of intelligibility. As a result of such a critique, readers in a culture become aware of the ways in which signifiers are always organised so that through them the world is produced in such a manner that its 'reality' supports the 'reality' of the interests of power, gender, race, and dominant classes... Theory, as Gramsci has suggested... is an ally in political and ideological struggle: theory as resistance, not the resistance of theory. (Zavarzadah & Morton 1994:53)



tance of never losing sight (and cite) of my mother in my theorising of her work.

**Novelist:** The way you talk about theory, your passion for it, your willingness to speak in the *I* is enticing. But theory and I have a past. And I am still resistant to it.

In the late seventies, in the days when Leavis was God and I was an undergraduate studying literature at a Melbourne university, the theorists/critics always had the last word; the novel or poem turned into a means for their theorising ends.

I planned to major in English Literature but by the end of my second year, disillusioned I moved across to Politics and Geography; too late already, for my love of literature had been tainted, by academics who thought their reading of *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice* was the one and only true reading and my interpretation not valid at all. In the intervening years literary theory and criticism has evolved, but a lingering sourness, a vestige of that experience remains—during those years, theory closed the door on literature, with the same paternalistic fever that my father tore books from my hand and insisted I wash dishes or fold laundry instead of *wasting my time* reading. Theory retains this voice of authority even in its poststructuralist guise, even as it asserts there is no absolute, no reality and no truth.

After dropping English at university it took me a full year to return, to prise the door open, to return to fiction and poetry, to plunge once again into its embrace. Stephen Muecke, in his essay *The Fall: Fictocritical Writing*, in a collection aimed at writers, seduces me with promises of the ‘delicious shudder’ that comes with the exhilaration of the ‘fall’ into a writing that is multiple, that is both fiction and criticism. But he also warns me, at least I take it as a warning, that literary criticism’s purpose is to ‘unmask the secrets’ of literature.

The whole artifice of literary criticism was built in order to do one thing really; to unmask the secrets of art. And fiction was always there re-enchanting the world by putting on the beautiful masks again and again. (Muecke 2002:127)

Ahh! I have suddenly noticed the sexual nature of my language—entice, seduce—it seems I have an attraction to theory even as I resist it, but is this healthy?

I am not interested in one-sided relationships—I gave them up in my twenties. I am not interested in dialogue where theory interrogates fiction for its own ends, where theory has the authority. I am not interested in theory that reduces and categorises—I know this has its uses—but writing does not always fit into the neat boxes that theorists tend to build.

Traditionally literary theory/criticism is concerned with the completed text, the artefact. It is in this context that the French theorist Roland Barthes announced the *death of the author*. He argued that the text's meaning lies with the reader and that the author's intention is not a necessary or even desirable avenue for interpreting the text. But I want to work with you to bring theory to the writing of fiction, to the process of creating the work, rather than to the completed work; to the process of its *becoming*. I want us to interrogate my distinctive and individual production of fiction, and theorise it and then interrogate theory from the writer's point of view and bring to it some of the joy and passion that I find in writing as my mother finds in knitting and sewing. I refuse to lie down and play dead.

My desire and hope is that this dialogue will bring both of us a greater understanding of the feminist praxis, of both fiction-making and theorising. But is this possible? Everywhere fiction writers more experienced than me warn that too close an association with theory will 'dry up a writer' (Jones, R. 1989:11); that under too close an examination creativity will dissolve. Is it negligent of me to ignore their warnings? Will I regret it? Will my fiction writing suffer?

To my mind the writer writes and the theorists put the stuff on top. (Susan Varga A:6)

When you've written a book... there'll be lots of things which arrived unconsciously. [They] are perhaps the most interesting things to the critic, whose role it is to see what you can't see. Very often you can't see things that are placed slap in front of your face, in the same way you can't in life... On the other hand, I think there's a lot of danger in 'The Death of the Author', and it's interesting that that movement in literary criticism happens at the point at which women are achieving the kind of subjectivity, the social confidence, the position... in which we are at last being able to speak our own authorship. We have to be careful not to let them whip the carpet out from under our feet at exactly the point at which we can stand there and say I think, I experience, I know. (Drusilla Modjeska interviewed by Rivers 1997:324)

I suspect that too close an acquaintance with literary theory may indeed dry up a writer because theory is essentially sceptical and creative writing essentially receptive. (Jones, R. 1989:11)

A text is made of multiple writings... a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes 1988:171-2)

Theory always norms practice. When you practice... you construct a theory and irreducibly the practice will norm the theory... What I am interested in now is the radical interruption of practice by theory, and of theory by practice... (Hutnyk et al. 1986:44)

In her last novel [Willa Cather] works out and toward the meaning for female betrayal as it faces the void of racism. She may not have arrived safely... but to her credit she did undertake the dangerous journey. (Morrison 1992:28)

**Theorist:** This is a fear that thinking too much will block or even kill creativity. Our conditioning, our upbringing, is always pulling us back toward the masculine. It is vital we stay awake. This kind of scare mongering works to reduce writerly responsibility. Surely the imagination is not so easily dried up, not so fragile. Fiction writers take risks all the time, what Toni Morrison calls the 'dangerous journey' (Morrison 1992:28). Venturing into new territories is something we are both familiar with; it is the essence of our work, and the only way we can move ahead.

**Novelist:** I take your point. Who said the imagination was fragile anyway and what was their purpose? Already I see the benefits I might reap from this dialogue—a shift from the fragile to the robust imagination—arrived at with a just a little theorising.

**Theorist:** The author that Barthes pronounces dead, is the author as authority—coming as it does from and through history from a time when knowledge and the ability to read and write was in the hands of a small elite—it is a discursive positioning of the author as having knowledge or wisdom to impart. It gives rise to a sense of the sacredness of the words, of the sentences, of the narrative that is spun in the heavens and the writer as conduit; or as a one-in-a-million, a genius who is godlike and able to see what the rest of us are blinded to. Your commitment to illuminate the process of fiction-making is already challenging these notions, as the creative process transforms from unknowable to knowable or at least to explorable.

Theory does categorise and reduce in order to understand, to make connections and links—but I am willing to concede there are other ways. This dialogue as an opportunity to illuminate both your fiction-making and my theorising, requires a

There is actually no singular, fixed, or uncontested... meaning in the text. (Morton & Zavarzadah 1994:85)

No one method, form of writing, speaking position, mode of argument can act as a representative, model or ideal for feminist theory... feminist theory seeks a new discursive space, a space where women can write, read and think as women. This space will encourage a proliferation of voices, instead of an hierarchical structuring of them, a plurality of perspectives and interests instead of the monopoly of the one—new kinds of questions and different kinds of answers. (Grosz 1992:368)

collaborative approach and a willingness to trust and allow our relationship to unfold in the process.

Jane Tompkins, in an essay published in a collection of women's 'autobiographical-critical essays,' contends that women need to resist the argumentative mode and the formal distance of traditional academic writing. She proposes we write theory that recognises the importance of the personal as well as the more academic response. In this form of theorising, by giving voice to my experience of theory and fiction, to my experience as a woman and a feminist, I can transform theory and criticism into a kind of creative writing that acknowledges that we theorists are producing our own meanings outside of your text. It contests the allocation of objectivity and authority to the theorist/critic. It refutes the apportioning of a fixed meaning to the fictional text. It dismantles the notion of writer as godlike and genius and transforms you into a thinker, thinking thought and then writing it. You think 'through... sensations,' through percepts, different but no more thought than my thought through concepts. This is already a new place to speak from, that positions theorists and novelists on equal ground and allows us to see *the forest as well as the trees*.

By voicing our experience of theory and fiction, in the context of our relationship to our mother/s we have already begun to take a similar approach. I propose we name our work: feminist literary creation theory/criticism. A political approach concerned with the way feminist fiction is written and emerging out of fiction-making itself. A theory that includes the feminist writer and her politically motivated intention in its discourse; a theory that is concerned with the feminist writer's experience and supports her claim to speak her own authorship.

The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of your professional work. You have to pretend... whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) transcends the merely personal... I'm tired of these conventions that keep discussions of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart. The public-private dichotomy, which is to say, the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it... The political problem... is this: to uphold the conventions is to uphold a male standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge. (Tompkins 1993:24-26)

...art should not be thought to be like a synthesis of science and philosophy, of the finite and infinite routes. The three routes are specific, each as direct as the others, they are distinguished by the nature of the plane and by what occupies it. Thinking is thought through concepts of functions or sensations and no one of these thoughts is better than another, or more fully, completely, or synthetically "thought." (Deleuze & Guattari 1991:198)

My hope is that this process will give us, you and me, theorist and writer, both feminists, a new entrance point, and some insight into how feminist writers, theorists and novelists, together rather than against each other, can prepare ourselves for future journeys into the writing *from and toward woman*. If you allow me to walk with you along the writing path, along side you as you trace the writing journey, as you sketch an outline of the roads you walked, the lanes and alleyways that diverted your attention, the trees that provided shade while you rested and ate your lunch, the forest that you became hopelessly lost in, the valley where you discovered a rare orchid and heard the call of the elusive lyrebird, the dead ends and the openings, we might discover new territories where women's voices shape the landscape.

[For Castoriadis]... radical imaginary conditions praxis. Praxis is a twofold relation of doing and thinking. Here, theory and activity work together, and theory cannot be given beforehand 'because it constantly emerges out of the activity itself. (Naranch 2002:70)

*It is in writing, from woman and toward woman, and in accepting the challenge of the discourse controlled by the phallus, that woman will affirm woman somewhere other than in silence, the place reserved for her in and through the symbolic. May she get out of booby-trapped silence! And not have the margin or the harem foisted on her as her domain! (Cixous 1989a:111)*

Trinh T. Minh-ha has something to say here. She says that it is by exposing the fiction-making process that women writers can both possess and dispossess themselves of the power of writing. She calls this *Bliss*.

By laying bare the codes of literary labor... She writes finally not to express, nor so much to materialise an idea or a feeling, as to possess and dispossess herself of the power of writing. *Bliss*. (Trinh 1989:19)

**Novelist:** *Bliss*—what does she mean by this? *Bliss* takes me to the dance, to the moment when I become lost in the music and my body's expression of it. Rapture. Happiness. Joy. *Jouissance*. But I don't think this is what she means for the music is an artefact too, constructed, orchestrated. Am I really free to dance or is the music forcing me to move in particular ways I am not even aware of?

**Theorist:** *Bliss*—is also a transporting to the heavens, a state of reaching paradise. Maybe this is the feminine sacred space of writing, be it theory or fiction—where we can dispossess ourselves of, disinherit, exorcise all that writing and theory is, all

that it has been made to be through history and then possess it, take hold of it, own it and make it our own. To say, 'dance to our own music' is too clichéd. Not what Trinh T. Minh-ha means at all. But maybe the music will play to our dance.

I am interested in the nature of the creative experience; it gets talked about in a rather naïve way. Well, maybe naïve is not the right word, but talked about in a way that can make it sound rather spiritual and unworldly. The historical, political, and theoretical material goes in—but somehow out of that comes a mix that if you bring that to life through the lived characters, those characters have a life, and that's got to be generated by you. ( Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

I am interested, then, in two dimensions of writing: a) the movement of the imagination, that is to say, the darting gestures of thought, and b) the strategies (feint/tricks/devices) writing adopts to make the figures of the imagination materialize. (Brossard 1988:91)

The sometimes-justified suspicion of the thought-out as opposed to the felt, often with rooted beliefs in the Muse or the Unconscious or the Body nourishes a mystique of the inspired artist. But this wish for spontaneous, untutored originality conflicts with the very etymology of 'narrating', which means 'knowing'. (Harrison 2003)

**Novelist:** The notion of genius was never mine; it is a masculine concept but I am not even sure it works for male writers any longer. Trinh T. Minh-ha also says that a writer—she is focusing on the non-white, Third-World woman writer—can no longer (if indeed she ever could) ignore the fact that she is a historical and cultural subject. Though the implications are obviously different for a white Australian woman writer, it is crucial that I too be aware of myself as a historical and cultural subject. There is still some of the old Marxist left in me. I understand the writer and her tools, my tools, words, metafictional devices are 'not neutral' (Macherey 1978:41). As a feminist committed to writing, that opens up possibilities rather than perpetuating dominant hierarchical structures, I find it impossible to write without questioning my relationship to culture, to language, to literature and to the practice of writing itself. As a feminist I also interrogate myself, my reactions, my responses, as I go about my daily life, not just in the process of writing, this interrogation, a self-critical and reflective living impacts on the writing. A feminist writer must keep both eyes on herself and on her work

In my mind, and in my fiction-making process, the imagination and intellect are not two separate entities, not binaries but rather my fiction writing is a synthesis of both the intellect and the imagination. When writers talk about writing even in this myth-making construction of the sacred and spiritual imagination, they also talk about research, about thought, philosophy and ideas. To narrate the story of a life it is vital to explore its possibilities, to know its rhythms, to have a sense of the material world that it arises from.

It is increasingly difficult for... [the non-white, Third-world woman writer] to turn a blind eye... to the specification of the writer as historical subject... but also to writing itself as a practice located at the intersection of subject and history... writing, which when carried out uncritically often proves to be one of domination... it has become almost impossible for her to take up her pen without at the same time questioning her relation to the material that defines her and her creative work. As focal point of cultural and social change, writing weaves into language the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender and the practice of literature as the very place where social alienation is thwarted differently according to each specific context. (Trinh 1989:6)

*What are the conditions in which women lived, I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble on the ground... Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps but still attached to life at all four corners. (Woolf 1945:43)*

There is an organicity to emerging novels, if the intellect is monitoring you don't have good fiction. (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

Some writers and artists would argue this fusion of imagination and intellect is detrimental to the imagination. But this is a view of the imagination as 'fragile' and the intellect as the enemy out to kill it. It places the imagination in the unconscious beyond language but I doubt that the imagination is ever totally outside history, outside culture. Or at least I question it, for even if the imagination could be truly free—the translation of the imaginary into language brings it back under the clutches of history and the symbolic.

But I also believe in the ability, through my writing and therefore through my imagination, to create new possibilities, for as Adrienne Rich says 'writing is renaming'.

*If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming. (Rich 2001:21)*

I do think that is a mysterious process... though I don't understand it. You have to surrender to it... I wonder if there isn't a component of this happening in science... those leaps that happen, where there is a sudden shift, there is a reason they make a sideways move, something comes to them. Creativity in the sciences is a sort of discovery... It is very exciting... when you're writing and something comes up, which is not you... and connections are made... one has to trust there is an unconscious ingredient. I do think that writers can try to deny or minimise this. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

In my writing I am challenging what I know, twisting it round, turning it on its side and inside out to see what new figurations I can create, and how that might transform my thinking and my world. My feminist fiction-making is generated in this paradox: on one hand letting the imagination take flight, to play, unheeded and to allow the sensations to lead the writing, to write themselves; on the other hand, critically interrogating what I have written and its possible meanings. A fiction-making that is both a form of production, shaped by culture, history and the economic and political environments it is part of, and a creative practice, which at its best aims to reveal, interrogate and contest the taken for granted assumptions of that same culture, history and economic and political environment. This I contend is what all

Language is a social act; the function of language as discourse is what makes a social event. It creates a horizon or 'veil' between the dream, or unconscious function, and consciousness. Language brings the creative act into light, it provides social meaning for the contents of the dream. (Freiman 2003)

The problem of understanding the nature of literary creation is part of the larger problem of understanding the nature of consciousness, which is currently preoccupying specialists in a wide range of disciplines... it is said that consciousness is the last great challenge of scientific inquiry... (Lodge 2002:110)

The artist is always adding new varieties to the world. Beings of sensation are varieties, just as the concept's beings are variations, and the function's beings are variables. (Deleuze & Guattari 1991:175)

My project rises from delight, not disappointment. It rises from what I know about the ways writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, and the way they tell stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text. And rises from my certainty that writers always know, at some level, that they do this. (Morrison 1992:4)

Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. (Lawrence 1972:123)

As I wrote [the novel] I realised... what I wanted to show; that's the crucial thing your intention becomes clearer as you write. Although, the novel was published before I realised both my novels began with a death. How could you notice that? (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

At some level it's true that writers don't make those decisions. But I've always felt, when I've been in an academic position, that it's rather disingenuous... [for] artist, the writer [to] hide behind a kind of creative myopia. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

creative thinkers do whether they are artists or philosophers, musicians or scientists, writers or teachers. I believe, as Toni Morrison does, that we are aware we do this, and it is this that gives us such delight and drives our passion for creative work.

How do I articulate my practice of fiction-making? In a recent essay, *Literary Criticism and Literary Creation*, the novelist and theorist, David Lodge, warns the creation of literary work is a process in which the writer discovers what she wants to write as she writes, and any explanation is 'retrospective extrapolation' that bears little resemblance to the actual process. I think Lodge is partly right.

I have been writing *Swimming* for four years. The initial impetus was my own experience of being a woman who could not bear a child, but other ideas, images, experiences, sensations have gone into the mix and I am not sure I can articulate them all. In addition, I find, like Lodge, that I discover things as I write, both in the process of writing and in the process of reading what I have written, and sometimes not until another reader has pointed them out. These discoveries trigger other ideas and images. I think, research, experience, imagine, engage, read and write. I write, read, think, research, experience, imagine and write. It is a circular and flowing process and some aspects occur simultaneously. There is much *stitching and unstitching*. The writing is created/produced by me, from all those sources and I take responsibility for it. However, though there are aspects of my work, which can be traced to their genesis, followed to their source like one might follow a river back to the mountains, always there are the untraceable underground streams.

**Theorist:** The *truth* of any process can be difficult to articulate so Lodge's contention may have some validity. But 'retrospective extrapolations' may not be the only way to reach an understanding of the creative process. After all it is not only the

I rather enjoy explaining how I write my novels... But I would not... claim that the picture of the composition it gives bears more than a highly selective and artificially tidy resemblance to the actual process. There are many facts about the composition of my own work that I could never recover and many that I would never divulge... Writers discover what it is they want to say in the process of saying it, and their explanations of why they wrote something in a particular way are therefore always retrospective extrapolations, working back from effect to cause—wisdom after the event. (Lodge 2002:109-10)



Impressionism, is named for the quality of spontaneous 'impressions' in the paintings of this period. Monet became perhaps the most famous Impressionist. It would be a mistake to consider his work was accomplished simply with spontaneity. It was accomplished in a painstaking manner... Monet boasted... about the extremes of weather he endured, obscuring the fact that he worked obsessively on his canvases in the warmth of his studio, sometimes unable to finish a painting for several years... To see how calculation was crucial to Monet's achievement of a spontaneous effect is not to expose him as a fraud, but to see again that creativity is never simple, that it operates with and through signs that have social, cultural and historical values. (Brophy 1998:13)

In fact, I embroider, I put things in parentheses, I don't tell you the exact words that I heard... first because I have forgotten them and then because, even if I knew them by heart, they wouldn't translate the reality that I lived. (Cardinal 1997:21)

scientists who can find underground water—nomadic and indigenous tribes, farmers, explorers and gardeners, those who are willing to spend time to get to know the land. And anyway who is to say your interpretations of the process are not 'culturally legitimate sources of knowledge' that will illuminate the process of feminist fiction-making.

David Lodge also points out writers have a tendency to keep secrets. I want to ask—are you willing to divulge all?

**Novelist:** Am I willing to divulge everything? This sounds like the question of a theorist who wants to 'unmask the secrets of art'.

**Theorist:** Our disciplines will continually pull us back to established forms, old habits die hard, it is too easy to be caught up in the fear especially in the academic world, as Jane Tompkins says, that if we 'break convention [we] risk not being heard at all' (Tompkins 1993:24-26). If you and I cannot bring ourselves to speak out, divulge all that has not been divulged before, then the myths will continue to be perpetuated. Together it is possible that we may find a way to follow those underground waterways.

**Novelist:** I do believe it is important to be honest about the process of fiction-making in this dialogue so I do promise to be as honest as I can be. However, your mapping metaphor worries me, it is a rationalising of the journey, and I am not sure that it will be as illuminating as we might hope. Back to Lodge's point: after all it is impossible to construct a map that does not by its very nature distort. A map creates a landscape, a representation of a particular place, and is dependent not only on the mapmaker's perspective which makes her blind to what she does not

Landscapes can be self-consciously designed to express the virtues of a particular political and social community. (Schama 1995:15)

have the language to see, but also on the mapmaker's ability to articulate the many aspects of the journey—some of which she is not consciously aware of herself. A map may in the end alter the 'folds' of the *real* experience of the fiction-making journey.

When you start the characters, you can start from certain theoretical positions, but then you get into a position where you suspend judgement. Characters do what they want to do and there is a certain point, a liberating moment when you stop worrying about the novel and it takes off. The novel is going to be what it wants to be... it goes off where it's going to go, and part of becoming a writer and doing that fulltime is being accepting of that fact—at a certain point that's how it goes. (Delia Falconer A:2)

What will you see if you follow me on my writing path? How do I/we map the smell of wattle that leads to a right turn instead of a left, or the sound of that elusive lyrebird that took me hours out of my way; a bird I never saw but whose trail led me to places I might never have gone. And all those other unmappable aspects of any journey, the swish and smack of the wind through the trees, the river running over rock, the tease of rain on the tip of my tongue, the memories of other journeys and places that this one brought to mind. How do I map the water journeys, the swimming in the bay or the open ocean, the taste of salt on my skin, the exhilaration of riding a wave to the shore, the tickling of seaweed, the sharpness of rock, the buoyancy of my body floating in the sunshine. Momentary glimpses, fleeting sensations, never fixed, shifting, impossible to grasp.

I am notoriously bad at following maps, even though my first degree was in Geography and I was required to both create my own and read numerous maps drawn by others. The lines, the names, the 'Xs' that mark the spots on maps are so far removed from the topography that I often find myself lost in an unrecognisable landscape. Though this sometimes makes me late for appointments, it has often led to insights and discoveries that a strict reading of the map would never have allowed.

Is it possible or even desirable to draw a map that attempts to illuminate every aspect of the journey? What kind of map would that be?

The 'scriptural' changes evidenced in the drawing and re-drawing of the map themselves affect and alter the 'folds' of the real in such a way as to conjure a different truth, a truth amenable only to a logic of the hallucinatory. (Punter 2002:5)

Every story has a story. This secret story... is the history of its creation. Maybe the 'story of the story' can never be told, for a finished work consumes its own history and renders it obsolete, a husk. (Lodge 2002:109)

A work of art is never produced by or for the sake of technique. (Deleuze & Guattari 1991:192)

What theory will arise from this focus on fiction-making? What fiction will arise from this theorising? What kind of interruptions and disruptions are possible?

*I need to understand how a place on a map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create.*  
(Rich 1987:1212)

**Theorist:** This is a new kind of mapping that retains a sense of the 'unrepresentable' but acknowledges and takes responsibility for challenging the past maps, that carry with them a certain authority, that posits them as *true* and *real* representations of the writing journey. The nomad has an 'intense desire to go on trespassing and transgressing' (Braidotti 1994:36), and their cartographies 'opposed to fixity' are not flat and two-dimensional.

Nomadic cartographies need to be redrafted constantly; as they are structurally opposed to fixity and therefore to rapacious appropriation. The nomad has a sharpened sense of territory but no possessiveness about it. (Braidotti 1994:35-36)

**Novelist:** Trespassing and transgressing echo with promise of adventure and the possibility of discovering new landscapes. I find my feet are starting to tap, itching to move, to discover the dance that dictates the music.

## *Confessing and moving forward...*

**Novelist:** So this dialogue has begun and you will note that I have named myself *Novelist* and sometimes refer to myself as *fiction writer* relinquishing the title *creative writer* as my first concession in this dialogue. I don't want to appropriate the descriptor *creative* from you, the *Theorist*; so I begin by acknowledging that all original 'thought' is both imaginative and creative; that the novelist, the poet, the artist, do not have sole access to *being creative* or even to the imaginary.

**Theorist:** In the spirit of this dialogue, I have a confession to make; for a long time I have resented the view of theory as the parasite relentlessly feeding on the *creative writer*, on the *practitioner*. After all I am a practitioner too, I practise theory like you practice fiction and in my best writing, which is always a theorising, I use the devices—metaphor and narrative for example—that are associated with fiction writing. I also want to acknowledge, that I often take your work as a beginning point or even place it at the centre and let my imagination—yes my *imagination*—spin around it, and that your work has inspired my thinking, my creativity. Is it possible we are not so different from each other? Two feminists intent on challenging and disrupting the hierarchical structures rooted in a politics of domination.

**Novelist:** In this moment of conciliation, at the beginning of a new dialogue, I have a confession to make too: I have found theory inspiring more often than I have admitted, and yes, sometimes I, the novelist, as you can see, take pleasure in a little theorising.

This discussion between us is beginning to highlight to me the arbitrary nature of these divisions; artificial divisions that separate us into disciplines, constructed like

The intellectual isn't somebody who is just parasitic on creative writers. It's somebody who is generating his or her own ideas. An intellectual is somebody... who doesn't have much respect for [the] boundaries. (Terry Eagleton cited in Capp 1995)

Refusing to accept [the distinction between creative and critical writing] was and remains a rebellious act, one that can challenge and disrupt hierarchical structures rooted in a politics of domination both within the academy and in the world outside. (hooks 1999:37)

Blurring the rigid and, to me, absurd distinction between 'critical' and 'creative' writing, a 'feminine' writing entails relinquishing the pseudo-objectivity of conventional critical discourse and implicating ourselves as writers, accepting our role in the signifying process as well as the way language itself works on and shapes what we write. (Sellers 1990:194)

the Berlin Wall—they have been built over time; first by our white male ancestors, and more recently by our feminist foremothers and we continue to relate to them as if they can never be pulled down; we continue to repair and reinforce them, giving them strength with arguments that when interrogated highlight that like the Berlin Wall they can easily, and with much joy be destroyed.

**Theorist:** bell hooks argues that the distinctions between creative and critical are dangerous for they are founded in a desire for domination and power. But so entrenched are they that I sense a reluctance in myself, as we speak, as if I am collaborating with the *enemy*—maybe *enemy* is the wrong word—with a foreigner maybe or a stranger. I feel like the anthropologist who suddenly realises that the *natives* she has been *studying* have been studying her, have been performing for her and that she been blinded by what she has thought was real active engagement and objective observation. This disciplinary amnesia not only makes real connections impossible, it perpetuates the very hierarchical structures we say, as feminists, it is our intention is to dismantle.

Your metaphor of pulling down the Berlin Wall and walking across and into each other's spaces is a powerful one, weighty with historical references to the pervasiveness of arbitrary divisions purposefully imposed. Unfortunately, as black feminists and lesbian feminists have pointed out, there are many examples of this within feminism. It highlights the need for a paradigm shift so that another way to think, to live, to be, is possible. The theoretical distinction between the 'interdisciplinary' and 'transdisciplinarity' can make a valuable contribution here. The interdisciplinary allows friendly neighbours to share gossip and produce over the back fence, and though in this exchange they may take new ideas from each other back to their

I do not distinguish between creative and critical writing because all writing is creative... And all writing is critical requiring the same shifting, selection, scrutiny and judgement of the material at hand. The distinctions are not useful except to people who want to engender another with whom they can struggle and over whom they can gain power. And because they are useful in that way, they are dangerous. (hooks 1999:37)

own spaces they will remain bounded by the same old fences. Transdisciplinarity on the other hand is transgressive; it highlights the arbitrary nature of fencing, its placement like your Berlin Wall as historical, political, cultural and/or economic, and not necessarily logical or useful at all. The transdisciplinarity has a tendency to dismantle fences, creating whole new spaces that previously could not be imagined.

If we are willing, like Rosa Braidotti's nomads, to create new connections and new landscapes, elements of the terrain we were previously blinded to will be revealed. This is a transdisciplinary move that will allow us, like Jane Tompkins, to reject the oppositional and hierarchical modes and develop new ways of thinking about creative writing and theory; and new ways of being feminists writing, theorising and living. There may be moments when we will not be sure where we are or where we are heading but a nomad can read the land—that is their strength. They can create and recreate the landscape, discover and rediscover it; they are able to make their home over and over again; they bring with them what they know, but are prepared to adapt each time to the new land, its topography, its climate, and its more permanent inhabitants.

Those neighbours on either side of the fence, like the two Germanys on either side of the Berlin Wall, are not the *same*. Different histories, different influences have shaped them. They may pray to different gods, align with different political movements. They will have different genealogies. They will see the world from different perspectives. But the dismantling of the fence may give them the opportunity to see themselves, each other and the world in a different light. An illumination that could lead to new understandings and to *alternative* futures.

'Transdisciplinarity' [is] a 'transgressive' space [that highlights] the institutional arrangements of knowledge - 'discipline' [as] historico-political rather than merely logical. (Zavarzadah & Morton 1994:66-7)

'In transit', moving on, passing through, creating connections where things were previously dis-connected or seemed un-related, where there seemed to be 'nothing to see'. In transit, moving, dis-placing... In the feminist context it also implies the effort to move on to the invention of new ways of relating, of building footbridges between notions. (Braidotti 1997:76)

Once the fence between us is gone what new landscapes will we discover? This is where my passion for theorising and for reading your fiction lies, and my excitement at the possibilities of this dialogue.

I return to my mother for a moment and the connections and interconnections between her and me. In my adolescence, and to be truthful even in my twenties and early thirties, the divide between us seemed insurmountable. She comes from her Sicilian village and is a stranger in my country. Born in the 1930s she did not see a car until she was fourteen. Born in the 1950s I cannot imagine my life without one—or a computer and a phone. Whereas in my childhood I found my family suffocating and I longed to escape their hold, she loved spending time with her mother and sisters, hours, days, weeks around a fire in the kitchen knitting, sewing and telling stories. She loved her village and was happy living within its boundaries, held in the embrace of her large family. She tells me she never longed to be anywhere else.

But she did cross the ocean and the world. Leaving behind her mother to join a sister and three brothers in Australia, torn between two sections of a family split up by economics and the promise of a better life. She crossed the ocean and the world and now so have I, several times, back and forth; and on one trip I sat in the kitchen of her childhood home listening to her sister's stories. These days the fence between us is a memory and only a fading line remains. Now she weaves my theories into her tapestries and her tapestries colour my theorising.

The theoretical and the creative—how difficult it is to leap across into the 'transgressive' space of the transdisciplinary when the language keeps pushing us back into our disciplines. They have labelled me critic, theorist, thinker, therefore appar-

We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism and other damaging social practices where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. (Braidotti 1994:170-72)

If we look at the aesthetic literature of the late eighteenth century... A man with genius was like a woman... but was not a woman. (Battersby 1989:8)

ently hard and solid, masculine (*even when female and feminist*)—and you the creative writer, are called genius, ruled by the imagination, airy and light, poetic, feminine (*but even with all these feminine attributes 'the literary genius' is still a man*). Yet when I look across at you now the divide between us does not seem so deep and it becomes possible to liberate ourselves from these taken for granted notions that posit intellect and creativity as masculine. This is a liberation of the value placed on these skills and by remaking them, by reshaping them so that they suit us as individual feminists articulating our intellect and creativity via our writing whether that writing and thinking takes the form of fiction or theory or a hybrid made up of both, we disturb the binaries and at once become *feminine* and intellectual and creative. This is *Bliss*.

**Novelist:** In this transgressive space we could both be writers, both be thinkers, we could dance across and with each other, we could learn each others steps and the rhythm of each others music not only take them back into our own dance to make it richer, but to create new movements that might even surpass dancing. We could both acknowledge differences and celebrate them—this kind of border crossing could lead to a linking of our separate communities together and make us both stronger.

**Theorist:** This is Braidotti's practice of 'theft', taken from Levi- Strauss's notion of 'bricolage', an extensive and deliberate borrowing of ideas, concepts, and theory, from where one finds them in the writing of others and transforming them; crossing boundaries, creating new theories, a form of 'conceptual creativity' that allows us to articulate our experiences; that refuses to be policed by old rules and rulers whose intention is to silence us, and to keep us fenced in.

She who writes well 'writes like a man' and 'thinks like a man'; that used to be the highest praise a male reader could bestow upon a woman writer... (Trinh 1989:27)

...transdisciplinarity across boundaries it constitutes a practice of 'theft' or extensive borrowing of notions and concepts that as Cixous puts it are deliberately used out of context and derouted from initial purpose. (Braidotti 1994:36-7)

The only theory I feel I can practice is that which... is a form of creation... that can help me think about change, transformation, living in transitions. (Braidotti 1997:30)

Fictionalise my theories, theorize my fictions, and practice philosophy as a form of conceptual creativity. (Braidotti 1993:4)



This must begin with us 'really talking' a notion I take from *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al. 1986), an act of careful listening so that together we can create the room for new ideas to grow. A space where we can speak our secrets out loud, where we can divulge all our practices.

'Really talking' requires careful listening; it implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half-baked or emergent ideas can grow. (Belenky et al. 1986:144)

I have noticed we are using each other's language as if it is at some level interchangeable. At times we sound like each other, would anyone listening be able to tell us apart?

**Novelist:** This is one of our problems in this dialogue and in our work. We want the audience/readers to hear the differences and yet to see that we stand together as feminists creating spaces where old distinctions are meaningless, and the diversity of women's voices can be heard. I am not my mother even though I can see her face reflected in my mirror, and even as I weave her stories into my writing.

**Theorist:** This issue of difference is one I want to return to later, but you mentioned dancing, and now dancing is on my mind. This talk of dancing has raised my spirit. I love to dance, and here I see that we could allow ourselves to dance freely with the music and with each other—this is how something new can begin to be formed.

**Novelist:** I am beginning to see you more as a companion, maybe—tentatively anyway—as a partner and friend—and the possibility that I could dance with you through this dialogue and discover who I am as a writer, and how I write. This dialogue gives me that same heady feeling I get when my friends and I sit up talking through the night. Often in those conversations, long joyful sessions of 'really talking', I find aspects of myself long ago forgotten or previously undiscovered.

The mother-tongue... expects an answer. It is a conversation, a word, the root of which means 'turning together.' The mother tongue is language not as mere communication, but as relation, relationship. It connects... its power is not in dividing but in binding. (Tompkins 1993:28)

## Why I Write?

Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark—readings when the knowledge that we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge. (Byatt 1990:471-2)

For me, literature is about reaffirming core human values, stepping back and taking a somewhat deeper view of the life that otherwise just runs past us. If someone comes out of reading a book of mine with a richer, more patterned, more complex view of what life is about, if it helps them re-examine their own relationships and their own lives giving them some insights into how life is to be lived, then I'd be happy enough. (Susan Varga A:6)

**Novelist:** From the very beginning, stories and storytelling have been very important to me. The pleasure and excitement of the first stories I heard as I sat on my grandmother's lap when I was very young and listened to her magical tales of a distant childhood in a foreign land. As well as their power, especially, later when I learned to read books on my own and could carry them with me wherever I went—from bed, to the back seat of the car, to the dinner table where they helped me block out my parents arguments, to the lawn where I lay soaking the summer sun—and they transported me into new worlds. Stories – novels mainly—have shaped my identity, my desire, and my sense of the world as surely as any real lived experience. It is no surprise that from the first time I realised that someone wrote those books, I wanted to be a writer.

At fifteen, Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment*, challenged forever my sense of black and white, of good and evil, and introduced me to the world of ever increasing shades of grey. Prichard's *Coonardoo* connected me to a black Australian Aboriginal woman so that she could no longer be the native Other; Toni Morrison's *Beloved* gave me a sense of the weight of history on the black American that I had failed to understand even after a year of studying American history. And Rosa Capiello's *Oh Lucky Country* gave me insights into my own mother, that lead to conversations I had not imagined possible. I could continue for pages here, and list many novels whose impact has been crucial in my development as both a writer and a person.

As a teenager I wanted to change the world, to eradicate sexism, racism and poverty. I thought about going into politics, the diplomatic service, about becoming a

social worker, about volunteering abroad, about journalism and teaching but I did not imagine a career in writing, though I longed for it. A teaching studentship made it possible for me to go to university and led me to the classroom but my desire to write only grew.

Writing is an act of hope, a sort of communication with our fellow man. The writer of good will carries a lamp to illuminate the dark corners... if possible, a change in the conscience of some readers. (Allende 1989:48-9)

Writing is one of the ways I participate in the struggle... in the transformation... Writing is one of the ways I do my work in the world. (Bambara 1980:154)

The fiction writer has the opportunity to offer people something entertaining but, at the same time, might be able to change a person's outlook on life or their direction, perhaps toward the more loving and optimistic—in spite of the often-grim vision of the writer. All sides of human life can be looked upon. (Jolley 1991:138)

What I am writing at the moment is much more like fiction... yet I want it to do some of the things history or politics does. I want it to map an era, a time, a complex set of ideas so although it is still only, partially formed, I have a clear sense of actually wanting that. With *Poppy* too... I wanted to say something about that time and the way things pressed on women in particular, but also on men. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

For me writing always was (and continues to be even in my older, more cynical persona) a tool for generating change in the world. A way of bringing the voice of the *other* into being, 'writing as an act of hope' and as a way of 'illuminat[ing] the dark corners'. This view of fiction writing as a powerful and a political vehicle that can effect change is seen as problematic by some—among them theorists and writers—and supported by other—both theorists and writers. But for me it is the reason for writing, it is the source of the passion I feel for putting words on paper. It is my prevailing *intention*.

It is *intention* I want to talk about—some people may call this vision but I have named it *intention* purposefully to earth it, to ground it in the material world. The novelist's *intention* is two fold, first there is the *intention* that makes the novelist into a novelist and second the more specific *intention* for the particular novel.

My fiction writing has always been motivated by the desire to challenge perceptions and create a deeper understanding of ourselves and of each other. I wrote *Swimming* to contest the stereotypical representations of the *childless woman* that rendered my experience and me invisible.

The *intentions* of the writer are always present in the act of writing and are therefore a crucial part of understanding the writing process; a part that is often forgotten in discussions that posit fiction writing as being totally in the realm of the imaginary.

A feminist aesthetics should not be post-patriarchal; it should be anti-patriarchal. A feminist aesthetics cannot simply be an openness to Otherness; feminists have to concern themselves with what is involved in writing or creating as a female—as a subject positioned within the social and historical networks of power. It is therefore premature to announce the death of the female author. (Battersby 1989:148)

I stole the title... from George Orwell... I like the sound of the words: Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I

I

I

In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It's an aggressive, even hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want... but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space. (Didion 1980:17-8)

The novel [has] its own morality... it's about putting ideas and putting character into a form and into this other space. And that it's something about the formal rigours of writing, about the structure, about giving life through the tropes of the novel that is actually the great power of the novel. (Delia Falconer A:2)

Writing is a permitted way of exploring taboo subjects, or taking seriously subjects that are usually trivialised: and writing is a way of making visible the invisible bias of our culture. These taboos or attitudes can't easily be tackled head-on, but they can be embedded in the rich and seductive texture of the novel. (Grenville 1994:143)

*Why I write?* I take this question from Joan Didion's essay *Why I write* as she takes it from George Orwell in the spirit of conversation and dialogues between writers about their work over time and through history.

I take it from Joan Didion because of her emphasis on the 'I', and on 'the act of imposing oneself,' for that is what we must do as women and as writers to ensure our stories are heard. I take it from her, because like Joan Didion I am aware always of my desire to invade the reader's world, and to impact on it.

Milan Kundera in his novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, describes the desire of his character, a writer, to influence the masses, as 'graphomania'; he calls it a form of tyranny. Graphomania like Didion's 'street bully' posits the writer's *intention* to impose on 'the reader's most private space', as a hostile act. I am unapologetic in my intentions to enter the reader's world, however, it is in the spirit of illumination rather than conquest, of putting another view of the world to the reader, of opening up possibilities rather than closing them. I believe in the power of fiction, and it retains that power, especially as we understand in our postmodern world that the author is not the authority which 'graphomania' implies, and that the reader in the end will make his or her own meaning from my text.

As Richard Rorty argues, fiction, like all storytelling, connects us with other people and other worlds, allows us to enter into an intimate relationship with 'unfamiliar sorts' of people, and the fact that these people are fictional characters and not real living human beings does not reduce the impact that getting to know them has on us. Where else, except in the most intimate of friendships are we privy to a person's private thoughts and desires. Fiction has the power to increase our sensitivity and understanding of both other people and ourselves; this is its power, an illumination

that can change our perspective, our points of view, and our experience of the world.

**Theorist:** But that is only one part of what Rorty says, I believe he adds, 'this is a task not for theory but for genres such as... the novel.' Are you being too polite?

**Novelist:** Yes I confess, I chose not to mention the negative comment on theory—not out of politeness but because I don't totally agree with Rorty for as I have already admitted some theory has had a significant impact on my thinking and my life. I have to admit that I find fiction, at its best, more powerful than theory but surely that goes without saying—it is why I have become a novelist.

This is Braidotti's practice of 'theft'; I am 'borrowing' from Rorty the notion of fiction's power without having to dismiss the power of theory.

**Theorist:** As a theorist I was initially trained to take the *I* out of my writing, recently I have been putting it back in, but whether stated or implied the *I* has always been there. My *intention* is always political. Theoretical writing is for me an 'expression of [my] political praxis', it is my tool for resisting the 'politics of domination', and is motivated by a desire, like yours, to challenge perceptions and create a deeper understanding of ourselves and of each other.

As you have already pointed out a number of writers and theorists have contested what Rorty says, and some of these thinkers would contend that both literature and theory's political impact is negligible. These arguments about impact aside, political intention is, I think, acknowledged by most to be a fundamental aspect of theorising. In contrast, it is often argued that political intention creates poor fiction.

I labor to critically think and write in a manner that clearly names the concrete strategies for radical and/or revolutionary interventions I use in everyday life to resist politics of domination. As a conscious strategic choice, this practice makes it possible for my life and work to embody a politics of transformation that addresses the concerns of individuals and communities in resistance. This means that the work of critical thinking and theorizing is itself an expression of political praxis that constructs a foundation wherein individual action can be united with collective struggle. (hooks1999:43)

It would be arrogant and foolish to believe that studying literature... might change the world. (Haslett 2000)

Of course there are also many writers and theorists who, to varying degrees, and for a variety of reasons, believe in the power of all writing, including, and sometimes, especially, fiction. Hélène Cixous tells writing has the power to transform the world. Luce Irigaray talks of mimesis, of writing to recover a place in the dominant discourse without being diminished by it, of making the invisible visible. Martha Nussbaum argues that literature extends us, and our world.

To disrupt conventional reading that's the reason I write fiction. I want to have the freedom of... absolutely open-ended imaginative writing and it is why I love fiction. You are confined by absolutely nothing. The only valuable thought is a new thought that takes you away from the familiar. That is the wonderful, wonderful thing about fiction. If I wrote fiction that only confirmed what people already consciously knew—I am not interested in being sentimental, not interested in that sort of level of confirmation. (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

Julia Kristeva in her essay *Women's Time—'Why literature?'*, asks, rhetorically why literature is important to women who are faced with social norms that represses them? She believes literature provides a place where women can name that which has never been named before, where the prevailing order can be disrupted and space created for women's voices to be heard.

This writing is empowerment. This writing and storytelling has the potential to break through the isolation that women feel in a society that excludes our experiences by providing as Kristeva intimates a 'more flexible and free discourse' or in Rose Lucas's words, a space 'relatively unbounded by paradigms of the phallogocentric'.

But how do women writers writing in a male centred language achieve this? Are you able to bear witness? Is your writing of the *childless woman* exposing the 'unsaid'? Is your writing able to name those experiences that have never been the 'object of circulation'?

**Novelist:** One of the central questions I had when I began this novel was about that—about fiction's ability to intervene in the discourses of the *childless woman* as *not normal, incomplete and damaged*, and about challenging the binary logic that

Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling. (Nussbaum 1998:206)

Why literature... Because it thus redoubles the social contract by exposing the unsaid, the uncanny? And because it makes a game, a space of fantasy and pleasure, out of the abstract and frustrating order of social signs, the words of everyday communication... [Because] this identification [with the imaginary]... bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contact off their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex? (Kristeva 1981:873)

The language of the fictional or the imaginative... offers a discursive space that is relatively unbounded by the paradigms of the phallogocentric, in which a potentially new set of interactions... might be envisaged. (Lucas 1998:36)

Without stories about other women, women live in isolation and are without the insight or power to name and define ourselves. (Pagh 1995:127)

I was aware that by putting a childless woman who was, relatively speaking, a rounded person, at the centre of the novel I was going against a bit of a norm. Making her childless and reasonably happy was something I wanted to do. It was part of the game plan of setting up a series of scenarios where we are not talking about ordinary 'happy families' but about other sorts of attachments that form. (Susan Varga A:6)

seems to always locate the nonmother as the negative opposite of mother and doing this while at the same time not disguising the 'enigmas of the body, the dreams, the secret joys' and especially not the 'shames'. Writing fiction provides an open space for imagining a *childless woman* that is not bounded by these phallogentric discourses.

As a producer of text, rather than a consumer of them (though I am that too), I write my experiences, my *difference*, to make *woman* visible; I write my experiences to expose their constructed and positional nature, and to create the space for other women and their experiences. Writing is both a way of breaking the silence, of speaking out and a 'springboard for subversive thought' and action. This is the theory that I write my fiction into.

*Writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (Cixous 1975:350)*

My novel is political in the broad sense. I wanted to write a very accessible book about women who may have had complicated lives and are not deprived when men are not in them. (Susan Varga A:6)

**Theorist:** How do you do this? How do you disrupt all that fiction writing has been and is, the way it reinforces the position of woman as *other* by its very nature, by its structures and its language?

After all isn't all writing political? The writing that does not appear to be political is the writing that reflects, without question the values of the dominant culture. The Mills and Boon romances, the 'pot-boilers', they are all political writing, if they work to perpetuate myths that keep women in their place.

Even if the telling condemns her present life, what is more important is to (re-) tell the story as she thinks it should be told; in other words to maintain the difference that allows (her) truth to live on. The difference. He does not hear or see. He cannot give. (Trinh 1989:150)

'No position' is also a position, for 'I am not political' is a way of accepting 'my politics is someone else's'. (Trinh 1989:44)

How do fiction writers—how do you—create the narrative of woman's life that does not follow what Judith Wilt in *Abortion, Choice and Contemporary Fiction: the Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct*, calls the 'sunny narratives' that have come to represent a universal truth? To what degree are you able to create a woman whose identity is not linked to motherhood?

**Novelist:** That is the question I hope this dialogue will illuminate.

The social narrative of women's lives, the telling of true stories in public, itself has a kind of history to it... Much sacred storytelling from the dawn of the art reflects the narrative on (sacred) women giving birth... the focus of narrative moves to the crisis point of sexual and social initiation, courtship and marriage, as society charts the preparation for its women for giving birth. (Wilt 1990:8)

[The 'sunny narratives' are] accompanied by (at least) three shadow narratives, stories of woman's fall, disaster, wreck, which emerge whether in life histories or works of art, when social arrangement meets the human female fact. (Wilt 1990:8)



## *What sort of writer are you?*

**Theorist:** Before we go on, I want to talk about the importance of locating ourselves, our positions not just *Theorist* and *Novelist*, not just our history and our culture broadly—but more specifically, and politically. Who am I? Who is *I* that speaks in this dialogue? By exposing our subjective positions we open ourselves up to critical questioning, we open the dialogue and make it possible for other voices, standing in other positions, to give their perspective and be heard.

I am a Black feminist, lesbian, warrior poet mother doing my work... who are you doing yours? (Audre Lorde cited in de Lauretis 2003)

*What sort of writer are you? What sort of theorist am I?*

When Audre Lorde declares her position she challenges our essentialist notions of *woman* and wakes us up to question our own position and values, and how they shape our perspective. She holds the mirror up to our faces and our work, and in the reflection we see our positional selves illuminated. It is important that we all answer Audre Lorde's question especially those of us, who are part of the 'dominant groups', of the 'first world' to highlight that 'white' and 'heterosexual', for example is as positional, and as subjective as 'black' and 'lesbian'.

It needs to be explicit—not only that am I a woman, white, Australian and of non-English speaking and working class background, heterosexual, *childless* and in my mid forties but also that I am a feminist, with a strong left leaning. None of these positions is fixed or stable, none of them guarantees a consistent perspective. We need to acknowledge that there are differences between women, not just between men and women, the 'second sex' is not one. Women may have common experiences but even this is questionable. For example, how much does giving birth in a

The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. (Haraway 1991:196)

The most effective writing on locatedness sees 'I' not... as 'a site of authoritative discourse' but rather as a site of critical questioning. (Eagleton 2002:133)

The concept of woman as positionality shows how women use their positional perspective as a place from which values are interpreted and constructed rather than as a locus of an already determined set of values... woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are 'objectively identifiable'... by highlighting historical movement and the subject's ability to alter her context, the concept of positionality avoids essentialism. (Alcoff 1989:324-5)

Melbourne hospital have in common with giving birth in a southern Indian village? The 'politics of location' are vital to this dialogue and to our writing both yours and mine (Braidotti 1994:158-163). It reveals something of our perspective and our awareness of differences.

*This body. White, female; or female, white. The first obvious lifelong facts... The politics of location. Even to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that my body had more than one identity. When I was carried out of the hospital into the world, I was viewed and treated as female, but also viewed and treated as white—by both Black and white people. I was located by color and sex as surely as a Black child was located by color and sex—though the implications of white identity were mystified by the presumption that white people are the center of the universe. (Rich 2001:67)*

Beth does not really regret not having children. She wonders what it means, and I think that comes to every childless woman at some point or other. It must. I make very little of it because I believe that for a lot of childless women it is a very small problem. But our conditioning is such that children are seen as central to our being and, given that you, would have to be inhuman if every now and again you didn't think, 'what if, should I have?' (Susan Varga A:6)

How can we know the dancer from the dance? (from *Among School Children* by W.B. Yeats)

**Novelist:** My position is where I write from whether I want to admit to it or not. So here I am but let me say this is not who I am—these are just some of the places I stand. I doubt whether I will ever know myself so well as to be able to tell you who I am, or that I will be the same 'I' I am now in an hour's time (or even in the next moment). Over the years, for example, I have been happily *childless*, miserably *childless*, indifferent and unsure about whether or not I wanted to have children. To imagine ourselves as stable, knowable and fixed is to discount the pervasiveness of the all those influences—cultural, historical, political and familial, to name a few—and can be a dangerous move if the result is less critical questioning of ourselves.

When I dance I sometimes become completely lost in the music and my body moves in ways I cannot easily articulate.

I, too, am a woman; my parents are Italian migrants who worked in factories in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I am their middle-aged, heterosexual, *childless* daughter, and they are elderly now and without grandchildren. Like you I am a feminist, with a strong left leaning.

When I write—in this case *Swimming*, a novel in which the protagonist is a woman without children—I am writing the particular story, of a particular woman, an *alternative figuration* so as to ‘embody stages of metamorphoses of subject position towards all that the phallogentric system does *not* want it to be’ (Braidotti 2002:13) hoping that this *alternative figuration*, this particular story, will bring into question the general stereotypes of the *childless woman*.

Identity is complex and not completely knowable, as Eagleton warns, to believe otherwise can lead ‘one down some treacherous paths.’ What does it mean that I am an Australian woman, or that I am a woman in her forties who has never had children? At what level and in what way am I influenced, affected, made and re-made by these and other factors?

As feminists, and you especially as a feminist theorist, how do you/we avoid talking of *women* as a collective group, how can we take any political action if we cannot gather together as *we women*?

**Theorist:** *We* is even more problematic than *I*. Speaking of women as *we* can be essentialist and a form of universalising that cloaks our differences. But we, that is you and I, and all feminists, cannot abandon it. We must speak and write for ourselves, and in our speaking and writing make it our first task to destroy the view of *woman*, as a *truth* constructed in patriarchal terms. Our second task, even more crucial, is to recreate *woman* as many, as multiple and complex, as constantly changing and shifting, and as a legitimate voice.

**Novelist:** Now this is what I aim to do in *Swimming*, I tell the story of the particular woman, Kate, and as you read her, my *alternative figuration of childless*

Becoming ‘I’ is full of pitfalls... There is the danger of fooling oneself that one’s identity can be fully known so that, with some moderate endeavour, the duplicity of memory, the psyche, and self-interest can be conquered and then, once fully known, that self can be cocooned from influence on or by others... ‘I’ is the most beguiling word to lead one down those treacherous paths. (Eagleton 2002:130)

The difficulty of saying I... But once having said it, as we realize the necessity to go further, isn’t there a difficulty of saying ‘we’? You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us. Two thoughts: there is no liberation that only knows how to say ‘I’; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through. And so even collective pronouns become a political problem. (Rich 2001:75)

Our first task, it seems, is to always thoroughly dissociate ‘women’ (the class within which we fight) and ‘woman’, the truth. For ‘woman’ does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while ‘women’ is the product of a social relationship... ‘woman’ is not each one of us, but the political and ideological formation, which negates ‘women’ (the product of exploitation). ‘Woman’ is there to confuse us, to hide the reality of ‘women’. (Mairs 1997:313)

woman, I hope you think of the diversity of women's responses to childlessness, to infertility and even to motherhood.

**Theorist:** I must join in collective action with other women; collective action is vital to feminism, and to all *women* the problematic *we*. You and I, and all of us problematic *women* together must of course remain 'alert to the dangers of universalising' (Eagleton 2002:130) while strategically, as Spivak warns, we must stand together in ways, which may be essentialist and universalising, but provide us with the possibility of combating patriarchal forces constantly working to disempower the individual *woman*. The key is to speak as a collective without 'extinguishing others' (Rich 1995:85), without losing sight of the differences. This takes both commitment and *vigilance*; and the courage to speak out and to speak together as you and I are doing here in this dialogue, and to write—both theory and fiction.

**Novelist:** *Vigilance*, I love the sound of that word, its weight—though like all words it is loaded with meaning—it says something important about my practice of writing—and brings into play the act of being watchful and awake that we have already recognised as crucial; being aware all the time of who we are, where we are standing and the way what we write or speak excludes others but not letting the problems associated with that stop us from speaking, writing and acting. There's that famous quote: *the price of freedom is eternal vigilance*.

*This kind of worklife means vigilance, for the old definition of 'inner' and 'outer' still lurk in me and I feel the pull of false choices wrenching me sometimes this way, sometimes that. But if we hope to mend the fragmentation of poetry from life, and for the sake of poetry itself, it's not enough to lie awake... listening only to the sound of our own heartbeat in the dark. (Rich 1995:53)*

**Theorist:** *Vigilance*, I have taken in part from Braidotti's 'rigor' combined with courage too—the courage to speak, write and act. This *rigor* and *vigilance* is concerned with making theoretical and political connections, and 'putting real-life

Spivak says I think it's absolutely on target to take a stand against discourses of essentialism, universalism... But strategically we cannot. (Grosz 1984:18)

In feminist theory one speaks as a woman, although the subject 'woman' is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference and others... One speaks as a woman in order to empower women, to activate sociosymbolic changes in their condition. (Braidotti 1994:4)

The act of reading and writing about women leads us to rediscover the bonds that allow us to rescue and repair our selves. Yet... we can never be fully fore-armed... our motives require continual reassessment. (Graulich 1993:188)

experience first'. But there is a need to bring *vigilance* to this notion of *real* too, for *real* is subjective. The stereotype representations of the *childless woman* are patriarchal *misrepresentations* of the *real* material *childless woman*; though they may echo some aspects of some *childless* women's experiences, they do not equate with the complex nature of my experience of *childlessness*. However, I also recognise that my experience of *childlessness* is only *real* in the moment and for me, not necessarily over time or for all women without children. You write the story of the particular woman to illuminate, to interrogate, to challenge notions of what it means to be a woman, to be a woman without children; not as an authority speaking on universal *childlessness* but as one woman sharing one particular experience of *childlessness* and by doing that exposing the *misrepresentation* of *childlessness*. It is only by articulating your particular, located position that you can see, and give others some possibility of seeing, how the dominant discourses of childlessness have been constructed to create a false universal representation.

**Novelist:** We need courage and *vigilance*. For every time we speak, write, someone is there trying to silence us, to stop us from speaking and writing. Sometimes we silence each other—by *we* now I mean those of us who call ourselves feminists. When Helen Garner published her book, *The First Stone*, on a sexual harassment case at Melbourne University, it was primarily feminists who attacked her. It seems to me, even though I disagreed with her point of view, that this was not *vigilance* but the gathering together of 'vigilantes': *angry* feminists with a *paternal* fever, ready to attack one of their own who had spoken out, had said something that they did not agree with, taking it upon themselves to act on our behalf, to protect us (here is the danger of *we*). Garner had the right to write, we had the right and an obligation—this would be *vigilance*—to critique her writing but this is very different to the mounting of personal 'attacks' whose purpose is to silence.

It seems to me that the rigor feminists are after... emphasizes the necessary interconnections—connections between theoretical and political, which insists on putting real-life experience first and foremost as a criterion for the validation of truth. It is rigor of passionate investment in a project and in the quest of the discursive means to realize it. (Braidotti 1994:93)

I am even more amazed, however, by the simplistic, often viciously personal and sometimes violent reactions to *The First Stone* and to Garner herself. I regard as intellectually indefensible the behaviour of those who declared it correct-line not to buy or read the book but did not let that prevent them discussing it freely... as politically frightening the claim that the book should never have been written... extremes of binary thinking—what Rosemary Sorensen, called 'picking sides for the mud wrestling'—kept the level of debate... pretty low. (Goldsworthy 1996:68-9)

**Theorist:** This is the result of believing that *we* feminists are one universal group rather than a multiple, diverse collective of individual women coming from many different positions. It places *we* feminists within the boundaries of the same, and therefore others, those that don't agree or are not the same, become *they* and are positioned outside, on the margins, and thus constructed as a threat. This is an exclusionary strategy. It is designed to keep us within the bounds of the same and to exclude those that are different. This generates fear, a fear that feminism is vulnerable and needs our protection, which results in a belief that we must not show—not in public at any rate—our differences. This takes me back to our earlier discussion, to the need to be willing to take 'the dangerous journey'; to be willing as Carla Kaplan says to take the risk of conversation, of speaking to each other and speaking out, even when we don't know where the conversation will lead. There are many examples in feminism of the power of this: take the black and lesbian feminists who were willing to be critical of the way many white western feminists have universalised women's experiences, and who by speaking out and by writing their experiences increased our understanding of the diversity of all women's lives.

But! And there is a *but*—we must take care not to speak our particular or a particular experience at the cost of stereotyping or putting down the experiences of other women. When some feminists criticised Garner it was, as you say, *paternal* fever, intent on silencing her point of view. However, other feminists had a genuine concern that in her writing she had rendered silent the voices of the young women who had been 'harassed' and those of the women who had supported them so that they became the silent *other*. Collections such as *Bodyjamming* edited by Jenna Mead took what I would class as a vigilant (rather than a vigilante!) approach by ensuring that the issues at stake—sexual harassment especially—were seriously discussed.

The outcome of any conversational exchange, however strong its appeal, is always variable and contingent. It can never be presupposed at the outset or theorized purely in the abstract. Which means that we cannot take for granted whether speaking out will work, or how it might fail... we need to acknowledge that opting out of the conversation because of its dangers is hardly a solution. Even our silence, after all, would be part of the cultural conversation, not a move outside of it or a transcendence of it. (Kaplan 1996:7-8)

Garner's use of language bugged me... The first thing one notices is how words are used to distance, to split and fuel dissent and to effect distance... In her narrative, contemporary feminism as practised by 'young' women is the ultimate Other... (Kong 1997:70 and 73)

**Novelist:** An important point, and one I have been preoccupied with during the writing of *Swimming*, how to represent the women whose choices are in opposition or seemingly detrimental to the protagonist? How to represent Mai, for example? When I began the novel Kate was teaching English to migrant women in a factory. Mai is a strong character from this early writing. She was always Vietnamese. From the very beginning I knew that she would fall in love with Tom, or at least take the opportunity of him loving her to have her own family. But all the time I worried about her being Vietnamese, of my making the other woman Asian, the *other* of the *other*. The marginal woman further marginalised as the mistress. Kate lives in a suburb with a strong Vietnamese community, why wouldn't Tom fall in love with a Vietnamese woman—why not? If I turn Mai into Anglo-Australian Ann or Susan that would be safer, but another form of exclusion.

**Theorist:** Mai should not be seen or created to be representative of all Vietnamese women or all women who have affairs with married men. However, the particular woman you write does raise questions about the nature of all women's lives, and stereotypical or two-dimensional representation are not only bad fiction but perpetuate the very patriarchal notions that it is your *intention* to work against, so I understand your concern.

**Novelist:** I believe an effective strategy for countering racism in fiction is to ensure the person is not *other*, and not stereotypical, and therefore it was always my *intention* to give the reader some access to Mai and the particular details of her life. While Leesa (Mai's daughter) is clearly not *other* in the novel I still have some concerns about Mai and it is those sections of the novel that involve her that I return to over and over again.

Certainly representation, or more particularly the act of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involves a violence of some sort to the subject of representation... what we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the kind of authority which... has been repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those represented. (Said 1990:94-5)

[The] easiest and most 'natural' form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible. (Langton 1993:24)

When you write you have power, whether you admit it or not. And my position is that you must be responsible with your power, that no matter who you are when you write, what goes on the page has a life of its own. You have to think for the future... You need (in fact the state of the world requires of you) a vision of reconciliation wider and more generous than that of most of your predecessors, a vision big enough to allow a bridging of all borders of race, gender, and religion and national origin. (Brown 1993:158)

Though the Mai I imagined is a strong individual with her own rich narrative, the novel is written from Kate's perspective and it is not in Kate's interest, especially once Mai and Tom's affair is exposed, to be sensitive to Mai. She constructs Mai as *other*. To counter this, and to ensure Mai is not completely the *silent other* in the novel, I have Leesa talk about her mother; I have the earlier pieces in *Writing Sarah* in which Kate describes her friendship with Mai, and Mai has the opportunity to narrate, at least, some part of her own story and the history she has been shaped by. I have also included, for this and other reasons, Kate's recognition that her perspective is subjective, and her realisation that she has constructed Mai as *other*—mistress/mother/Vietnamese woman; the realisation that Mai is only *other* from her perspective. From this, I hope, the reader will recognise that Kate is ascribing otherness to Mai, and that from Mai's perspective—after all she is a storyteller too—Kate, may well be *other*. This is my *intention*: to expose the constructed nature of *otherness*.

**Theorist:** Postmodernist feminists have questioned Simone de Beauvoir's notion of 'otherness' as negative. They believe that the condition of being *other*, understood to be socially constructed, provides a space for women to look critically at the patriarchal culture. That it can be an empowering position/location. Rosi Braidotti contends that the state of 'being in between' (Braidotti 1994:13), which is the state she finds herself as both a woman and as an Italian-Australian 'constitutes a vantage point in deconstructing identity' (Braidotti 1994:13).

**Novelist:** I think Kate as a *childless woman* does have this vantage point, but does Mai? The writing of difference is one of my major concerns as a writer, not only in this work but in all my writing. Though when we refer to the writing of the *other* and writing in marginal spaces it takes us back to the old binaries I want to

The central issue is the interconnect-  
edness between identity, subjectivity,  
and power. The self being a sort of net-  
work of interrelated points, the ques-  
tion then becomes: By what sort of in-  
terconnections, sidesteps, and lines of  
escape can one produce feminist knowl-  
edge without fixing in into a new  
normativity? ... A sense of identity that  
rests not on fixity but on contingency...  
The feminist postmodernist task is to  
figure out how to respect cultural  
diversity without falling into relativism  
or political despair. (Braidotti 1994:31)



avoid. The *other* is too general, and makes the individual disappear. However, difference that posits some as *other* is about power, who has the power over who in the *real* world. While I understand power is constructed discursively, it takes more than slight-of-hand change in our discursive referencing to change the power dynamics. I write Kate's experience of her *childlessness* but will the reader who views the *childless* as abnormal be able to read her in any other way, can my writing shift their view?

The discursive is a place to begin, and there are many of us who recognise and work to expose, challenge, resist and dismantle the various *centres* that inevitably exclude and disempower those who are *outside* or *on the margins*.

**Theorist:** In a postmodernist move you desire the dismantling of the distinction between centre and periphery and in so doing nullify its significance. Can we move away from these binary concepts of margin and centre, but still recognise that there are dominant structures, that some people have more power than others; can writing allow us to see the world in different ways?

This dialogue is situated in the space where theory and fiction-making meet; if this space is not centre or margin, it forces us to place/locate ourselves in more specific and more telling ways so that the power structures we inhabit become visible. As a white person I have been taught that *different* is something those other people are, and that becomes the truth; they are different to me. Inside the world of the Black American, or the Australian Aboriginal, for example, from their centre, I am in the margin. In an interview with Toni Morrison an Australian journalist asked, 'Why do you always write about black women?' As I held my breath in disbelief, and embarrassment, Toni Morrison said, 'Who else is there for me to write about?'

Bhabha emphasises cultural difference instead of cultural diversity, because 'diversity' is a conservative concept; often simply comprises that spectacle of the exotic... Cultural difference on the other hand, incorporates and draws attention to incommensurabilities not only between cultures but also within cultures—in other worlds, to their essential intranslatability. (Gunew 1994:40)

The history of the concept of man is never questioned. Everything takes place as though the sign 'man' has no origin, no historical, cultural, linguistic limit, not even a metaphysical limit. (Derrida 1969:35)

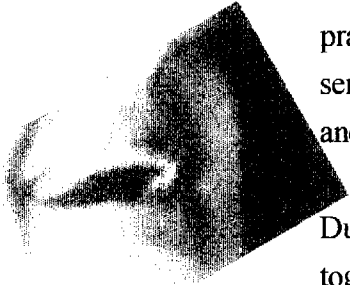
Sneja Gunew in her discussion of Australian migrant women's writing, in *Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?* (Gunew: 1985) develops the concept of 'Aust. Culture as the Object of the Migrant Gaze' to argue that the work of 'migrant women', positioned as marginal by the dominant culture reverses the direction of the 'gaze', and thereby disrupts the prevailing narratives. These writers place the migrant woman in the centre, their narratives work to fracture the sense of unity and homogeneity that characterise representation of 'migrant', 'black' and 'women' within the dominant narratives and to reveal the mainstream white culture as different, foreign, and *other*.

**Novelist:** Even as we speak I am revisiting the Mai sections, questioning myself, rethinking, and rewriting... Kate, Mai, Lynne, Tess and Leesa are all women, but very different. Each has the 'inalienable right' to be seen, and heard and to be recognised. I hope to generate ways in my writing that they can co-exist on a continuum, that does not position some in the *centre* and the others in the *margins*; or eliminate all traces of difference to make them the *same*. I write to create *woman* as subject and the dominant culture as the 'object' of her gaze thus disrupting the prevailing narratives and exposing the constructed nature of the dominant discourses. It is not that I have the answer in the novel, but this is my *intention*, what I am working towards; I want to say, look this is arbitrary, this fence does not have to be here, let's pull it down.

...migrant women's writing... speaks from positions which interrogate socio-cultural conventions, notions of linguistic competence and gender certainties. (Gunew: 1985: 178)

The ethical existence of the other as an other—the unalienable right to be recognized as a particular person whose very otherness refuses to be reduced to a mimicry of sameness. Beyond the mask there is a face. Beyond the anonymous system, however all-encompassing there is always... the resistant ethical relation of 'face to face'. (Kearney 1988:361-2)

## *Progress, resistance and laughter...*



**Novelist:** *Intention and vigilance*, asking the questions even when we don't know what the answers might be, this seems to go some way in describing my writing practice. However, it makes writing and theorising sound hard, heavy, and very serious, not much fun at all, but writing brings me joy, so I want to take a breather and add *laughter* to this discussion. Can this dialogue be both rigorous and joyful?

During the hundreds, maybe thousands of times, I saw my mother and my aunt together, they were never lost for words, and always their conversations overflowed with *laughter*. A loud deep laughter that bound them together. They laughed their way through the worst as well as the best of times. They told each other stories and laughed as they waited for the nurses to collect my aunt for surgery to remove her left breast. They laughed and cried at the airport as they farewelled another sister they knew they would never see again. I remember that my cousin and I often laughed with them at jokes we did not understand, infected by their joy, by their resistance. I remember too, my father's face, my uncles' faces remaining serious, annoyed, 'what are you laughing at? Are you laughing at us?' My mother and aunt would shake their heads unable (or unwilling) to stop laughing. Sometimes they were laughing at them, the men in their lives were often the butt of their jokes; sometimes they laughed at themselves but they never explained their laughter to my father or my uncles. I don't know whether they could have explained it even if they wanted to. But they avoided explanations. My cousin and I were infected by it. That laughter was resistance; it gave them a way to live that was more than just survival. That laughter was for my mother and aunt, Italian migrant women who were in many ways dominated by the men in their lives, a special joyful space, a space I long to create with my writing.

How much easier... not to awaken... Yet, we cannot will ourselves to go back to sleep. (Showalter, E 1979:39)

My aunt died a few years ago. My favourite aunt. My mother's dearest friend and much-loved sister. But the laughter has not died. My mother continues to laugh, and I take every opportunity I can to laugh with her, and when we laugh we remember my aunt.

Irigaray says together we can begin by laughing. I think sometimes we take it all too seriously, but when I share my experiences with women friends—lesbian and heterosexual, black and white, working class and middle class, mothers and nonmothers—and they share their experiences with me, there is joy and laughter as well as tears. Irigaray's laughter is contagious. In the joyful spirit of feminists like Cixous and Irigaray, and of the women like my mother and aunt who would not call themselves feminist, but have furthered the cause of feminism, we can together, by dancing and laughing all night, keep each other awake.

**Theorist:** This *laughter* is transgressive. It is the *laughter* sometimes called *play* that often acts as a metaphor for the 'poetical imagination', for creativity. Laughter opens up numerous possibilities.

*Laughter* now joins *intention* and *vigilance*, three notions that together form our feminist praxis of fiction-making and theorising; a powerful interplay of imagination, intellectual engagement and political commitment.

**Novelist:** Yes. *Intention*: what literature is to me and why I write, the possibilities it grants me; *vigilance*: the keeping awake, the watching over; and *laughter*: a joyful resistance. Writing that is always renaming.

Besides, women among themselves begin by laughing. To escape from a pure and simple reversal of the masculine position means in any case not to forget to laugh. (Irigaray 1977:163)

The imagination, no matter how ethical, needs to play. Indeed one might even say that it needs to play *because* it is ethical—to ensure it is ethical in a liberating way, in ways which animates and enlarges our response to the other rather than cloistering us off in a dour moralism of resentment and recrimination... The Other which laughter brings into play... is a catalyst for poetical imagining. (Kearney 1988:366-9)

Poetics is the carnival of possibilities where everything is permitted, nothing censored. It is the willingness to imagine oneself in the other person's skin to see things as if one were, momentarily, at least, another... the poetical imagination opposes the apartheid logic of black and white. (Kearney 1988:368-9)

## *Venturing into the interior... childlessness*

Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. (Winterson 1989:90)

The most imaginative part of language is metaphor. In my novels there is a lot of imagery, be it at the level of the word; imagery that will startle... I want to plunder through layers of meaning and then put it back in a different way... yes, there is a patriarchal language but you can use art to actually break through that... (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

**Novelist:** This is the nature of this dialogue, a kind of voyage; a journey venturing into the interior of writing; diving under its elusive surface to explore the text—not for its meaning—but to illuminate the process of its making, its production. To explore those very questions: How do I dispossess myself of what fiction writing has been and is, the way it reinforces the position of woman as *other* by its very nature, its structures and its language? How do I write the narrative of a *childless woman's* life?

The whole can never just be the sum of its parts but by focusing on the way I practise my writing, the way I employ fictional devices—language (words, syntax, metaphor), theme, character, structure and plot—to create the fictional narrative of the *childless woman*, we (novelist and theorist) may elucidate the process of feminist fiction-making; of producing a work of feminist fiction. This is not a formalist approach, as one might find in the how-to books on fiction writing, the focus, instead, is on the way politics and ideology impact on my fiction-making.

My practice, the practice of one feminist writer, the writing of one feminist novel cannot represent all feminist fiction-making. But my *intention* is not to be representative; it would be impossible to represent the diversity of voices and practices that might be termed *feminist fiction writing*. By articulating my particular writing practice in a dialogue, a collaboration with you, alongside the voices of other fiction writers and theorists (mainly but not exclusively feminist) who have theorised the practice of creative writing, my *intention/desire* is to 'construct' an alternative discourse of and about feminist fiction-making.

How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization... style itself makes claims, expresses its own sense of what matters... form is not separable from... but is, itself, a part of content, an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth. (Nussbaum 1998:201)

To learn to speak in a unique and authentic voice, women must 'jump outside' the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame... a way of knowing we called constructed knowledge... attempting to integrate [personally important] knowledge... with knowledge... learned from others... weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and integrating objective and subjective knowing. (Belenky et al. 1986:134-5)

I realised Poppy was [my mother's] story both particular and a bit off beam but also paradigmatic of so many women of that generation; in a way it did both things... I saw very soon that I could have something that was particular and something that was general and I worked with that... I read a huge amount and thought a lot about what was at stake for that generation and I tried to get some of those generalities in. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

My *intention*, then, in writing *Swimming* is to intervene in the negative discourses of the *childless woman*. To this I bring my own experience, and my research on childlessness, which has given me insights into the experience for other women, and helped me to understand what is/was at 'stake' for them. In writing *Swimming*, like Modjeska writing *Poppy*, I hope that the particular will say something about the general, in this case, the general experience for *childless* women.

Gayle: Fifteen years ago, when I was a married nursery nurse working with small children, my central aim was to be a mother and I felt that I was only half a woman without a child... (Letherby 1999b:720)

People act as if my life isn't valid because I'm not doing this thing, raising kids, as if nothing I could possibly do is as important as what parents are doing... And they accuse me of being selfish if I dare to ask why they should be put on a pedestal. (Burkett 2000:7)

I am already different, raw, humbled, manhandled, invaded. On the cusp of a fine loneliness. I am being redefined by my infertility. (Fleming 1994:18)

To have omitted to explore, let alone exploit my reproductive potential, is apparently some kind of dereliction in a society where pregnancy is a fashion statement, a baby an accessory, and parenting an imperative. Single mothers, surrogate mothers, gay and lesbian parents, all are increasingly accepted. Wilful non-parenting, by contrast, is just not on. (Shepherd & Van Den Nieuwenhof 2004:23)

Women have often chosen not to have children without it being any great tragedy. Jane Austen, for example, her womb was utterly unused but it didn't hurt her that much. (Jessica Anderson A:3)

To be born a woman with a woman's urge for creation—and to have nothing to give to life but sterility and death! You saw yourself before some fantastic judgement-seat, following women who had lived long and fruitfully... you saw yourself a figure of fun with your angular barren body. (Dark 1934:181)

And what is it and why? A desire for children, I suppose; for Nessa's life; for the sense of flowers breaking all round me involuntarily... never pretend that the things you haven't got are not worth having; good advice I think. At least it often comes back to me. Never pretend that children for instance can be replaced by other things. (Virginia Woolf cited in Smith 1999:47)

In the last three years I have gone through seventeen cycles - nine donor inseminations and eight full-blown IVF - more than half interstate. I have had sixteen negative pregnancy tests - twice that if you count the pee-on-the-stick you do at home even though you know you shouldn't. I have dealt with nine IVF specialists, five counsellors, and countless nurses and administrators. I've had thirteen general anaesthetics, five laparoscopes, two exploratory investigations, and one surgical procedure to remove an ectopic pregnancy. I have snorted endless nasal sprays, inserted pessaries and swallowed dozens of pills. I have had something like thirty internal scans, fifty blood tests and eighty hormone injections in my stomach. And I have lost one baby... I never imagined I would find myself in this place. I never imagined that my desire to bear a child would be so overwhelming. I'm not sure where it comes from, but I know it won't go away. (Tomlins 2002:163-4)

[The] absence of attention to women who do not mother reinforces the notion that motherhood is the critical experience, which both actualises and symbolizes normality and maturity for women. Women who do not mother become aberrant at best, tragic at worst. Non-mother's deviation from the statistical norm is stereotyped as misfortune or failure. (Morell 1994:12)

Nora [in *Tirra Lirra by the River*] doesn't think about having children... she is not as interested as they [her husband and family] are... I don't think she had a strong maternal instinct. I always think of her as a born artist. Had she been born somewhere where art was important she would have been an important artist. (Jessica Anderson A:3)

Konaki wa saru.  
(‘farewell to the barren’ in Japanese). (Jolivet 1997:108)

Chinese women... want children. It is the old concept by Confucius; one of the reasons in Confucius's book for divorcing is a wife's barrenness, among other things like jealousy. The main thing is barrenness if the woman is barren the husband can divorce her but if she was from a rich family they would not want to do that so they would take a second wife or concubine. (Lillian Ng A:5)

I'm not childless, I'm childfree... Childless implies something is missing that should be present. (Irene quoted in Burkett 2000:187)

Here I must make a qualification: most of my reading and research has been about childless women in the ‘Western’ world. I know that what it means to be a childless woman in the twentieth century varies cross-culturally; and that it is more than likely that what it means to be a woman without children is not the same in Australia as it is in Africa, Japan or even Italy and America. What it means to be a woman without children is undoubtedly different for an Australian of English descent and an Indigenous Australian.

Women who were sterile were said to bring the village bad luck. They were called ‘women of stone’ and it was believed that after their death they went to a special hell reserved for them. (Jolivet 1997:214)

Of course, not having children is a big problem. It's like having a cow and feeding it, and she doesn't give you anything, milk or calves. People think a woman has children, a man is feeding her for nothing. Egyptian woman. (Inhorn 1996:59)

But I have only found a couple of studies that look at women's experience of being childless in other cultures and it appears that nonmothers are always viewed in the negative. So limited by language and cultural understanding, and by the paucity of cross-cultural research in this area, I have to say I do not know what it means to be childless in any other culture, country or language.

Purportedly universal definitions of infertility have little relevance for individuals actually *experiencing* infertility at various sites around the globe. For example... in some societies bearing no sons may be the social equivalent of having no children at all, making the parents infertile under the terms of a classic patriarchal social systems... subjective meanings and experiences of infertility are culturally variable, pointing to the pitfalls of applying a standard Western, culturally constructed definition to the rest of the world... (Inhorn et al 2002:12-3)

[Though] infertility is, for most human beings everywhere, a distressing experience... in general [the] social and psychological consequences of infertility appear to be greater for women in the so-called developing societies of the non-Western world than for women in the West... although... the effects of infertility may vary greatly from one society to the next and among individuals in the same society, who may differ by virtue of gender, race, class, religion, age, sexual orientation, rural-urban location and so on... (Inhorn et al 2002: 7-8)

**Theorist:** The silencing and stereotyping of women and the resulting disempowerment is a recurrent theme in feminist writing. Even today, and even in Australia, with an unprecedented number of women writing and being published, the diversity of women's lives and experiences—including those of many mothers as well as nonmothers—are excluded from public discourses.

**Novelist:** In my darkest days of miscarriages and failed attempts to fall pregnant, I searched for the voices of *childless* women. I read novels with *childless* women characters but even in fiction, the *childless woman* is often represented as the outcast, in surplus, or the misfit. There are the numerous spinsters of Victorian novels, difficult women who we could never imagine as wives and mothers; the evil witches (almost always *childless*) that populate our fairytales. These representations support and reproduce the view of the *childless woman* as deviant, evil and selfish. Similar representations persist in contemporary texts like the film *Fatal Attraction*, where the *childless* career woman is as fearsome an anti-mother as Lady Macbeth.

Early Australian novels reflect the pressures on women to conform and these *childless* women often do not come to terms with their lives; and for many of them the narrative ends in madness or death. Or both as is the case in Eleanor Dark's *Prelude to Christopher*. Among the most disappointing contemporary Australian novels are those that end with the birth of the much-desired child against all odds. In Joy Dettaman's *Jacaranda Blue*, for instance, the sensible Stella has the child even though her pregnancy is the result of a rape, and she has murdered the rapist/father of her child. Jane Freeman in her novel, *Tick Tock*, one of very few Australian novels whose central theme is childlessness and infertility, after almost convincing this reader that Daisy has come to terms with her *childlessness*, that another kind of life may be possible, after spending the bulk of the novel on Daisy's unsuccessful

In the larger culture's debates... mother's voices continue to be ignored. Even in women's accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are largely absent. (Daly & Reddy 1991:1)

Certainly many of the nulliparas and nulligravidas whom I interviewed had never talked in depth about nonmotherhood before... (Lisle 1996: 8)

Fearsome anti-mothers in literature including Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, who calls on spirits to 'unsex' her and expresses her willingness to beat out the brains of a nursing baby'. (Lisle 1996:106)



Tom had actually opened the front door and was poised on the top step when he turned to Daisy and said, 'Haven't we forgotten something?' 'Forgotten something?' Daisy repeated.

'Yes. Maybe the most important thing for the day.'

'Oh my God,' Daisy said. 'The baby!' And then they both started to laugh and laugh.

(Last paragraph of *Tick Tock*. Freeman 2002:334)

The book is called *Happy Families* very deliberately, and in an ironic sense. If I had a plan or idea for the novel, it was to talk... about alternative concepts of family, and so having a childless woman at the centre of it was absolutely crucial to this book... it was crucial that she not be embittered or particularly worried about it. (Susan Varga A:6)

struggle to have a child, she cannot resist, it seems, the *happy ending* and in the very last paragraph of the novel she gives Daisy her miracle baby.

There are a number of rich and complex novels with strong *childless* characters—Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story*, Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard*, a number of Elizabeth Jolley's novels, Susan Varga's *Happy Families*, Stephanie Dowrick's *Tasting Salt*, Judith Fox's *Bracelet Honeymyrtle*, Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River*, and a number of Andrea Goldsmith's novels. In these novels the writers do not dwell on *lack*; they create powerful representations of nonmothers, women whose lives challenge the notions of: barren, selfish and incomplete. These novels, my literary models, are inspiring works that present *alternative figurations* of womanhood.

However, on the whole these characters do not discuss their feelings about not having children in any depth; they deal with other issues. While this reflects some women's experiences, it does not reflect mine. For me, the journey that ended in my being a woman without children was a significant part of my life and I longed for narratives that ventured into the depths of other *childless* women's journeys through that aspect of their lives, and explored the meaning of not having children.

**Theorist:** I understand this quest—mine was similar; not only did I look for novels but also for non-fiction books on childlessness and infertility. There are a number now—psychological, sociological, medical, historical, some feminist and some not—books based on interviews and case studies that include the voices of *childless* women. Books written by *childless* women themselves, both personal accounts or more general explorations of the issues of being a woman without a child. They

broadened my understanding of what it means to be a woman without children. I found my own experience echoed in some of these texts and to some extent they helped normalise my experience.

**Novelist:** I read some of these too but I found the categorising annoying. Most of the texts that focus on *childless* women divide the *childless* into two main groups. One group is concerned with the involuntary *childless*: the infertile women who desire children but are unable to reproduce (Hampson 1997; Klein 1989; Monach 1993; Pfeffer & Woollet 1983; Powell & Stagoll 1992). The second group focuses on those women who have chosen not to become mothers: the 'childfree' or voluntarily childless (Campbell 1985; Cannold 2000; Faux 1984; Lunneborg 1999; Marshall 1993; Morell 1994; Veevers).

The division of *childless* women into categories of 'voluntarily childless' and 'involuntarily childless' is misleading, it suggests that there is a clear boundary between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' childlessness even though some research shows that women's feelings about childbearing change and shift over time. The *childless*, like parents, are not a homogenous group. Not only do they come from a range of backgrounds—race, class, age, sexual preference—but their circumstances and feelings about being *childless* vary a great deal.

While there are women who have always known they want children and women who have always known they do not want children, many women are ambivalent about childbearing.

Mothers and nonmothers alike,... [are] deeply ambivalent about bearing children'. (Lisle 1996:225)

**Theorist:** Let us acknowledge too, that while we celebrate (and we should celebrate) the fact that *some* women have greater freedom and more choices now than

women ever had before, and many are exercising that freedom by choosing not to have children, an increasing number of women faced with the pressures involved in combining childcare and work, are forced to make a choice between their career and having children.

**Novelist:** There needs to be more discussion and a greater recognition of the ambivalence, the shifting feelings and altered circumstances that many women with and without children are experiencing and that impact on their childbearing choices.

I was fifteen the first time I had told anyone that I did not intend to have children. I had plans and ambitions. I was going to change the world—do important things. I saw motherhood as an obstacle to be avoided. In my thirties, I started to yearn for a child. All the fears I'd had about the time a baby would take up, about the loss of control, of independence, of self, did not disappear—but the desire to mother outweighed them. These days, after several years of trying to have a child and not being able to, I do not find myself regretting or mourning my *childlessness*. There are moments of grief but generally I find the 'reality' of my life 'liberating'.

**Theorist:** It may be more useful to talk about women's feelings and decisions about whether to have children or not and their actual circumstances as mothers or nonmothers as a continuum rather than a series of categories. As you say many women both fertile and infertile are ambivalent about having children. Some women go through periods of ambivalence before they decide to have or not have children. There is no fixed group of women who can be labelled *ambivalent* as if that says all there is to be said about their relationship to childbearing.

Leslie Cannold in her study divides the *childless* women she interviews into two

We thought—or we hoped—we were on track to achieve this justice for women but we have been derailed. We now face the end of equality—unless we stand up again and refuse to allow it to happen. (Summers 2000: 16-7)

Having children, after all, is hardly a pathbreaking act. The *news* is the number of women who are not following that road to the maternity ward. Baby-boomer women—the first women in world history to grow up with the ability to have sex without reproductive consequences—have opted out of motherhood in record numbers. (Burkett 2000: 180)

After fearing punishment for violating biological law, those of us without children find the reality of our lives liberating. (Lisle 1996:245)

The very existence of a range of sanctions and rewards designed to entice women into marriage and motherhood indicates, not that conformity is guaranteed, but that avoidance of motherhood (and autonomous motherhood) are genuine options, which efforts are made to constrain. (Stanworth 1987:17)

Slowly I started to voice my longing for a child. To admit I had actually changed my mind. (Gandolfo 2000)

broad groups—'childless by choice' and 'childless by circumstances'. The 'childless by circumstances' are further divided into 'three sub-categories... women childless by relationship, 'thwarted mothers,' [mostly single women] and women ambivalent or undecided about motherhood ('waiters and watchers'). Though these more descriptive categories go further to capture the range of feelings women have about childbearing, they too suggest women's feelings about childbearing remain consistent.

**Novelist:** If we place wanting children at one end of the spectrum and not wanting children at the other and understand that some women will move back and forth along your continuum during their lives while others will articulate their feelings about childbearing early and remain firm in their commitment to having or not having children, we will have a figurative representation of the variety of women's position on childbearing.

**Theorist:** Yes, and mothers and nonmothers alike may find themselves anywhere along the continuum. This continuum allows us to see 'more than one story at time.' There are women with children who never wanted children, who never planned to have children and believe themselves unsuited to motherhood, and there are nonmothers who desperately want children but are unable to have them. There are mothers and nonmothers indifferent to childbearing, and mothers and nonmothers who are ambivalent about having children.

By creating a way of speaking about women and childbearing that places all women on a continuum we, *childless* women, can work with women who are *mothers* to find ways of resisting pronatalist discourses, that equate womanhood with motherhood and don't do any of us any good.

All my respondents felt that the experience of 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness' in women (and men) is viewed by others one-dimensionally as an all-absorbing experience. People (particularly women) without children are not perceived as capable of ambivalence about their situation. (Letherby 1999b:363)

Even when women did experience making a clear decision, the stories they told to account for that decision were complex and inconclusive, open to shifts, revelations and reconstruction. Rather than a choice, remaining childless was described as an ongoing practice and/or an outcome determined by a variety of personal or social circumstances. (Morell 1994:48-49)

Most discussions of ambivalence treat ambivalence as a temporary, unfortunate, and remediable state of feeling. But perhaps that is the problem... if resistance is always a sign of a counter-story, ambivalence is perhaps the state of holding onto more than one story at a time. (Johnson 1998:2)

[We must find] ways to intercept and reconstruct the received meanings of the symbolic order which claim to describe [our] lives. (Morell 1994:72)

## *Venturing into the interior... writing*

One of the things I think about femininity is that we have to be able to change hats all the time. We have to be lover, mother, friend, writer, worker, neighbour. Whatever else we do in the world, even if we aren't mothers, we have a domestic hat and we keep thinking about everything. Men have to do it too, but women do it quite well. We can move between all of those different sorts of hats quite fast. That's what we have to do in this kind of writing. You have to tap into what's going on and trust. On good days there is some kind of grace and on bad days it's a struggle. Other days I have to come back and look at it with a completely different head, a more intellectual head and think, what are the implications of this and what am I actually saying here, what does it mean? For me it's a kind of moving, moving backwards and forwards. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

**Novelist:** The question is: can I write a narrative in which the woman without children can speak, can speak for herself, speak her truth—even when that truth is unstable and constantly shifting?

*Swimming* is written with the *intention* of finding a way to write the *childless woman* as the subject of her own narrative. In the process of writing remaining always awake—*vigilant*—and alert to the ways that the writing is shaping and forming; to what the text is *becoming*; and to the way the dominant discourses of childlessness and mothering, constantly there, sometimes whispering often mocking—*childless women are barren, abnormal, selfish*—impact on me, on the narrative and the language. This is a focus on the author's *intention* not as a reader looking for meaning but as a writer politically aware in the process of creating the text. The subject is always in process—*childless woman*, writer and text—and therefore always questioning, always self-conscious as she/it butts up against various social institutions—be they motherhood or the literary establishment.

I return to the idea of 'trespassing and transgressing' and to my mother's laughter. I am ready to climb over fences, or even to pull them down, to swim across boundaries into foreign waters. I am ready to contest the old maps that do not reflect my journey, though they sometimes claim to have mapped it.

Let me begin with language not only because it is at the essence of writing, like colour to the painter, like stone, clay and wood to the sculptor, like cotton and wool for my mother, but because theorists have had so much to say about language in their theorising of women's writing.

The subject in process is literally a social misfit unable to recognise itself in the various social institutions that demand its allegiances. (Boublous Walker 1998:12)

Like it or not—language has a normal dimension built into it: you can't say weed without making a negative judgement about botanical specimens you've just assigned to the weed category. (Atwood 2002)

There are signs and there are signifiers, and looking at the whole area of representation—now I am not willing to say that the symbol equals the meaning—I am very, very happy to see meaning more in a web, in a mesh... fiction is ideally suited to this. Fiction writing is... liberating and also a very powerful thing to do. (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

The English language is a joy for me. Why else would you write? Within it there are enormous flexibilities. (Susan Varga A:6)

*Most women are like this: they do someone else's—man's—writing, and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that's in effect masculine. Things are starting to be written, things that will constitute a feminine Imaginary, the site, that is, of identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine... but rather inventing forms of women on the march, as I prefer to fantasize, 'in flight'. (Cixous 1989b:488)*

I have a couple of female love scenes in [*Happy Families*] that aren't overly explicit and the words are not particularly different. Nonetheless, I am trying to create something different by putting those words in a different atmosphere that isn't so threatening or as loaded or as sexually charged from a male point of view, but still has some sexual charge. Those are small things you do. For me it's more the choice of what you write about and the care and love with which you write it that might end up making an over all difference. (Susan Varga A:7)

Words woven together into sentences, and paragraphs, into narrative. Words fashioned into metaphor and imaginary; they are the cloth and thread of my narrative. Without them the pages remain white, silent, empty. The novel, *Swimming*, begins forming in my mind and on the page as a series of images, ideas, emotions, bodily feelings and sensations, experiences and my interpretations of them. And of course *intention*. From those first moments of writing, as I search for words to capture those images, ideas, emotions... I am aware that each word is heavy and straining under the weight of history, of long attached meanings. Women writing have the same words as men writing, but if these words cannot be made to express what I as a woman, what Kate as a *childless woman* feels, we will both be silent or worse than silent, we will be speaking in words that impersonate man and collude with him to keep me, and Kate, and all of us who are not male, invisible.

Each word will be read as it has been read, and reproduce a reality that is not my reality, unless I can remake them, twist them round and round until they echo, not those long taken for granted meanings, not those long taken for granted ideas, emotions, feelings—but my ideas, emotions, feelings—or more precisely, those I am giving my characters in the world I am creating them into—so that I can 'repaint my half of the world' (Cixous 1975:348). Or to use your mapping metaphor—so that I can map this new terrain, and construct the landscape of one *childless woman's* life.

(Words are thinktanks loaded with second- and third-order memories that die hard despite their ever-changing meanings.) Thus, writing constantly refers to writing and no writing can ever claim to be 'free' of other writings. (Trinh 1989:21)

[Woman are] trapped within the webs of discourse, unable to speak... or to locate a place... beyond the constraining sentence of patriarchy. (Schaffer 1988:173)

Thousands and thousands of words are available here. We can bend them to fit the shape of our bodies and our stories, to encourage new kinds of questions and different kinds of answers. (Bartlett 1998b)

One of the things that interested me about Cordelia was that if you caught a glimpse of this woman in a cafe or your saw her at a Coles supermarket—not that she would have gone to Coles or any other supermarket; she would have gone to little shops—if you saw her, your stereotyped assumptions would not lead you anywhere towards the real richness or even the sexiness and the sensuality and the aliveness that was inside her... (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

Gap. Opening. Night. False night... What word will make my cunt exist? What word would express its inertness, simultaneously active and sombre? A hole. A well. A steamer. A sleeve... To explain the sweetness of its dampness. The depth of its abyss? Footpath. Gully. Vagina. Stem. To explain the carmine road of sexual pleasure, for the child. And the commonplace story of the blood? The bloody sex? (Cardinal 1997:78)?

'Childlessness'—I don't know that we use the language as creatively as we might. I think that metaphorical use of language is a way of expressing something that is 'a without' but not in those absent kind of terms or in terms of substitutes. (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

I never liked the word infertile until they're proven—until somebody said that this is the reason why. I don't think we are infertile. I think we are unlucky.... (A man quoted by Sandelowski 1993:61)

How do I write the narrative of any woman or for that matter of any man, so that they are not read as *woman* or as *man* with all that *woman* and *man* are believed to be?

How do I write the narrative of the Vietnamese woman, a refugee, who takes refuge in the home of a friend and then falls in love with the friend's husband so that she does not become the *other* of the *other*; the silent and despised mistress? How do I write the mother who longs for another life, more glamorous and free than the one she has without turning her into the *bad* mother? How do I write the *childless woman* who reaches into the cradle and steals another woman's baby or at least contemplates it, without her being dismissed as the mad, hysterical, barren woman?

There they are, those words—*childless, barren, and hysterical*—can they be reclaimed, can they be rewritten? We know that words can be, and are remade, but it takes power (and wealth). The computer industry has done it easily appropriating words and giving them new meaning; taking, for example, *surfing* from the ocean to cyberspace, and *chat* from friends talking over a cup of tea, to typed conversations with strangers in the virtual world.

I spend days when I first begin this project looking for a noun to replace *childless* for a word that does not begin and end with *lack*. The terms used to name the woman without children—*childless, nonmother, infecund, nonproducing, infertile* and *barren* all articulate this lack; they describe what is missing and 'emphasize absence' (Morell 1994:21). Why is there no noun in the English language to describe the woman who never has children?

Within language, women exist in the category 'not men' and then are produced as wives, mothers, lovers, daughters and sisters rather than subjects in their own right. (Schaffer 1988: 10)

The medical term for a woman without a child, nullipara comes from the Latin root for empty, void, zero, like the word for a female who has never been pregnant, nulligravida. (Lisle 1996: 5)

'Childfree' is gaining popularity and has been adopted by some people without children but it suggests a dislike and a desire to disassociate from children, which not only alienates people with children but also further perpetuates the negative stereotypes of the *childless* woman (Morell 1994:21; Lisle 1996:5). Childfree as in—'childfree zone' (Moore & Moore 2000)—is now also connected with a movement in America, and more recently in Australia, campaigning for tax reductions and other concessions for people who do not have children (Burkett 2000: 8-9).

I am not *childfree* as there are a number of children in my life, nor do I wish to be free of children, or even of the taxes that contribute to their education, health and welfare.

Outside of language and the historically and socially constructed contemporary discourses of childlessness that I am part of, what it means to be a woman without a child would be completely different. The *childless*, the *childfree*, the *infertile* woman has been historically and socially produced and then reproduced and these discourses have led to a fixation of particular identities.

Would I be *childless* in any other language?

When I write, I constantly feel myself pinched by narrow vocabulary, either because I don't have the words or because the French words are so invested with meaning by men that they betray me when I, a woman, use them. (Cardinal 1997:77)

In the novel, I decide to let the narrator, Kate, who is also the main protagonist, use the word, *childless*. After all there is no point denying its existence, its labeling. I use the word *childless* as a way of making visible, of revealing, by repetition, the societal view of the woman without children and then use the narrative, and Kate's telling and constructing of her own narrative to contest it. But every time I write the word *childless* it sticks in my throat.

Childlessness or child-free living may be more acceptable in the 1990s but, regardless of their real reasons, today's childless couples are often perceived as too selfish and materialistic to have children or, ironically, seen to harbour an active dislike of children. (Hampson 1997:3-4)

When I say that I am studying the "problematization" of madness, crime, or sexuality, it is not a way of denying the reality of such phenomena. On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world which was the target of social regulation at a given moment. (Foucault 2001:171)

Language constructs its meaning for us...subjectivity has no place outside language and the social practices for which language provides. (Weedon 1991:51)

I find myself in a characteristic post-modern dilemma: both wanting to affirm women's voices, the inscription of their hitherto marginalised subjectivities, and needing to show how these voices, these subjectivities have been culturally constructed by prevailing discourses and cultural practices. (Cosslett 1994:3)



I persist for my *intention* is to shift those paradigms so that their constructed nature becomes visible, and at least the possibility of other expressions and figurations of the *childless woman* become available.

For inspiration I turn to those women writers who have flown before me, who have written, who have made the language their own and created narratives, stories, characters that have made it possible for me to see myself, and to attempt, at least, to write. And I name them:

I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive 'othering' of people... but it is compelling the study of those writers who take responsibility for all of the values they bring to their art. How stunning is the achievement of those who have searched for and mined a shareable language for the words to say it. (Morrison 1992:xii-xv)

I do keep trying to write our history because you and I would not be sitting right here, this minute, having this conversation if not for the work, the struggle of women of a century ago. I think it's really important that be understood and kept alive. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

Toni Morrison

Isabelle Allende

Marguerite Duras

Drusilla Modjeska

Virginia Woolf

Kate Grenville

Andrea Goldsmith

Jeanette Winterson

Elizabeth Jolley

Jessica Andersen

Joyce Carol Oates

Sue Woolfe

Helen Garner

Jane Austen

Annie Dillard

Adrienne Rich

Alice Walker

Susan Varga...

Joyce Carol Oates is my friend: by speaking for me (when my own voice was not yet strong), her fiction has taught me to speak for myself... her fiction has taught me to insist on growth and change; and by continuing to insist on the value of a woman's perspective—despite often hostile criticism—her fiction has also taught me to persist, despite the sometimes harsh attacks on my own work. (Daly 1993:163)

They must be named again and again for they give me strength and possibility.

**Theorist:** And to these names we can add those of feminist theorists:

Hélène Cixous

Julia Kristeva

Luce Irigaray

Rosi Braidotti

Teresa de Lauretis

Michele Barrett

Judith Butler  
Catherine Belsey  
Nancy Mairs

Bonnie Zimmerman  
bell hooks  
Elaine Showalter...

Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are among the most prominent of a group of feminist theorists concerned with the question: what do women writers do when faced with their essential exclusion from language and the *Symbolic* (Watkins 2001:99)? This question arises from an understanding that it is by writing and speaking our experiences that women can destabilise patriarchal constructs that render us invisible.

The potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making is a way of stepping out of the political and intellectual stasis of these postmodern times. (Braidotti 1994:4)

*Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. It is by writing, from and toward women... that women will confirm women... in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence.*  
(Cixous 1975:351)

I am in a lesbian relationship that I came to late in life. It's not an autobiographical novel but it's something I understand... my thoughts were to write about it as just part of a larger story; not to make a big deal about it. In that sense it was a positive propaganda exercise but I was trying to do it in a fairly low-key way. In a fairly matter of fact way, taking into account that the families get shocked as they do... I hope that worked and set up an alternative model of connection and of family. (Susan Varga A:6)

I suggest, that we explore more closely Hélène Cixous, and her theory of *écriture féminine*. Cixous is a novelist as well as a theorist and thus brings to her theorising the experience of fiction writing. And *écriture féminine* is political. It is her exploration: a synthesis of critical questioning and experimentation to find a way of speaking/writing what is 'unthinkable' and 'unthought'. She is holding out her hand and saying, fly this way.

**Novelist:** The 'unthinkable' and the 'unthought' that is often what the imagination taps into—those words one never dared speak even to oneself, words whose whisper is the haunting song of the whale piercing the ocean, or the distant screech of a cat in the night. What better hand to take than that of Hélène Cixous whose Medusa is a woman that laughs, and whose very look can turn men to stone; the serpent

goddess; the wise goddess whose wisdom is kin to menstrual blood and comes from the same source.

**Theorist:** Hélène Cixous challenges women to *write the body* and therefore write ourselves as a way of moving outside the world constructed by men.

*She must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history... (Cixous 1975:350)*

*Écriture féminine* is writing to rupture. Rupture in the Derridean sense of rupture—exposing the system as a system or structure rather than as truth. Writing that disrupts logic and linearity; writing that is playful and fluid and that by challenging existing structures can over turn them; and writing that is not phallogentric in its logic, that does not set up binaries, that does not create the centre with its corresponding margin, that does not create the *other* and therefore can transform the dominance of the male. The white, the heterosexual.

For Cixous when women *write the body* we return to the pre-symbolic where we can reconnect with our mothers and our bodies and give voice to our experiences never before acknowledged; language itself will change, and women will be the subject, visible and in flight.

Barbara tells us The Rules. Every morning from nine till one, we will write without stopping, rereading or revising. We will follow wherever our minds lead, focussing on the sensory detail—sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste. We will write whatever occurs to us, and we will especially pursue those things that normally would make us want to get up from our desks... (Perry 2001)

**Novelist:** In the initial stages of writing *Swimming*, I sit at the computer every morning, with a cover over the screen so that I cannot read what I am writing, so that I can be free to just write, tapping into the imagination, into my bodily experience of *childlessness*, free from intellectual or critical self assessment. I develop this practice after reading Gina Perry's experience of attending a writing workshop run by an American teacher, Barbara Turner-Vesselago.

Constructivists seek to stretch the outer boundaries of their consciousness—by making the unconscious conscious, by consulting and listening to the self, by voicing the unsaid, by listening to others and staying alert to all the currents and undercurrents of life about them, by imagining themselves inside the new poem or person or idea that they want to come to know and understand. Constructivists become passionate knowers, knowers who enter into a union with that which is to be known. (Belenky et al. 1986:141)

*Let yourself go, let the writing flow, let yourself steep; bathe, relax, become the river, let everything go, open up, unwind, open the floodgate, let yourself roll.*  
(Cixous 1991:56-7)

I develop this practice in the hope that it will allow me to *write the body*, in the spirit of Cixous's *écriture féminine* and Julia Kristeva's semiotic—a way of disrupting the meaning of the sign *childless*.

What I tend to do is go with the characters. I write my characters, my characters don't run away with me—none of that stuff. I push the fiction. (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

I begin each morning with Kate who I called, Aggie, in those beginning stages. A name that comes into my head, in the often inexplicable way those things do when writing, and this daily writing becomes a kind of conversation with Aggie. I am asking her who she is and how she has come to be who she is, how she feels about her experience of being *childless*, about the miscarriages and the failed attempts to conceive, and I reach into my own bodily experiences and the narratives of other *childless* women that I am reading to find the answers. This process which is sometimes called, 'stream of consciousness' or 'automatic' writing, is the way that I start the narrative and after weeks of this practice I begin to know Aggie (as I have created her) and the strands of narrative begin to form.

*A note on the change of name...*

I didn't name either of the Aunts as a way of cliché busting because, I think, as soon as you name a character with a name from that era—Gladys or Muriel—you bring a whole set of associations that I didn't want to bring. (Delia Falconer A:2)

When I tell an English-born friend that I have named my main character, Aggie, she says, *that is so English, like a character out of Gosford Park*. But Aggie is not meant to be English at all. She is an Australian woman born in the 1950s to an Australian father and an Australian-born Italian mother. I do not want readers to imagine her as English so I decide, after the initial resistance, because I notice that even for me now she is beginning to turn English, to change her name. It takes weeks to find a new name; one that sits comfortably on the character that is now almost fully formed, one that she might choose herself—so Aggie becomes Kate.

H.C reinvents [in *Coming to Writing*], in describing the process of free-flowing writing that she associates with femininity, some of the vocabulary of early Surrealism. (Suleiman 1991:x)

The semiotic is fluid and plural, a kind of pleasurable creative excess over precise meaning, and it takes sadistic delight in destroying or negating such signs. (Eagleton, T. 1986:214)

Subjectivity is a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of 'outer world' and 'inner world', the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality. (Alcoff 1989)

In a novel names are never neutral. They always signify... (Lodge 1992:36)

The character of Cordelia came to me first. I wrote the novel to write about Cordelia and somehow that's who Cordelia was. It wasn't a very conscious choice. Sometimes the characters do write themselves but it is also right that characters are formed by the person writing. The intention is also there... but in *Tasting Salt* in particular the characters had a lot of self driven energy and it drives the writing a lot... that dynamic is extremely attractive in writing fiction. (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

There is a period of grieving for Aggie—even though this appears on the surface as just a change of name, even though by this stage I am no longer comfortable with *Aggie*. There is a sense of loss, which at first I can't articulate, it is only later that I notice Kate is a slightly different person/character, less working-class and less connected to her Italian background, more reserved. But also stronger, more reflective, and closer to the edge. These changes happen almost immediately when I rename her but by the time I can articulate them the narrative is completely Kate's as I have now created her. Soon I forget Aggie; she becomes a distant memory and I stop grieving for her.

*Back to the practice of writing...*

When I write, my body is always on the chair, at my desk with a pen in my *real* hand or at the computer my *real* fingers tapping on the keyboards, my *real* back and neck stiffening. I am always aware of my body. Of its physicality and its sensations, the quiver of skin caressed by a lover's hand, the bliss of plunging into cold sea water on a hot day, the vibration of the music, and the ecstasy of the dance. How can I escape it especially in the writing of this novel—the miscarriages, the infertility, these have been for me, and they are for Kate, bodily experiences, that I struggle to articulate in language. *Swimming* is at least in part an attempt to *write the body*, the *mis*functioning female body; an attempt to articulate that which is actively silenced in the dominant masculine realms of experience where miscarriage remains a 'taboo' subject even though at least one recent study has 'put the rate of miscarriage as high as one in [every] two' pregnancies (Ryan 2000:3).

The body may be forgotten in the creative process, or else reclaimed, or even exhibited... And the word pours out because the body is present, with all its 'embarrassing' differences—historical, social, cultural and biological. (Cutrufelli 2003)

I made the 'mistake' of speaking publicly about my last miscarriage and suddenly I found myself being criticised in a newspaper for openly discussing a subject that should 'be kept within the confines of the home'. I was incensed. It was exactly this sort of comment that encouraged and nurtured the taboo against miscarriage and stillbirth, exactly the sort of comment that encouraged women to feel ashamed or guilty about what is, in fact, a tragedy. (Ryan 2000 :4)

There is a difference between male and female experience and I tend to read women's writing more than men's because I am more interested in the experiences of women... (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

[Women] write from many different positions... of course our experience is embodied. Some women can write out of a sensibility that some men can relate to and other men can't bear it. And right at the moment a backlash is going on against the sensibility of women. There is a masculinisation of the world that's happening across the board. There are signs of it everywhere. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

As women we might see ourselves, and each other as fully people but I think there is still a cultural reluctance to see women as people. There was a period where men were forced towards it and now there is a backlash and it's easier for women to be seen as objects again. Objects that are sexualised when younger and not sexualised when older. I'm interested in the subjectivity of that experience. It's an old fashioned feminist position I had moved away from but have increasingly come back to it. It's what a lot of women's artistic expression has been about in the 20th century. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

**Theorist:** This is writing in the 'wild' zone. This is an exclusively female space outside the dominant visible culture (Showalter, E 1986:261-2). In the dominant culture, my miscarriages are barely visible; they are 'spontaneous abortions,' minor hitches on the road to becoming a mother. My experience of my miscarriages, the feelings, emotions, and sensations is in the 'wild zone'.

**Novelist:** *Wild* has all those connections to nature and to requiring taming and like *écriture féminine*, it is a little too essentialist for me. My body, its weight, its vulnerability, its *misfunctioning*, its exclusion from language and culture is socially constructed. How can I know my body outside of history and culture?

**Theorist:** There are a number of theorists who have argued that *écriture féminine* is 'essentialist' (Jones, R.A. 1985:367) in its insistence on the essential nature of feminine writing (even if some of Cixous's examples are of male writers). Cixous herself warns against essentialism; these contradictions in her writing are part of her strategy to subvert the patriarchal discourse.

**Novelist:** The 'wild zone' is a useful metaphor for what the dominant culture renders invisible; many 'wild zones' exist for all of us who are on the *margins* of the dominant culture, those of us whose difference is considered *less than* and *other* to the universal white, heterosexual male norm. As a woman living in a patriarchal society, my experiences are at least in part in the 'wild zone', or the unmediated space of Cixous's unconscious. But how do I access this (metaphorical) space Cixous promises will provide an escape from systems of culture and language so I can articulate my experience? How can I step beyond this or before this to speak in a new language? How can I discard the language at any rate—it is the only language I know—my language the one I have spoken in all of my life. Yet this is my *inten-*

[According to Shirley and Edwin Ardener] women constitute the muted group, the boundary of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group... In this sense, the 'wild' is always imaginary... women know what the [exclusively male space is] like, even if they have never seen it, because it becomes the subject of legend (like the wilderness). But men do not know what is in the [female] wild. (Showalter, E 1986:261-2)

[Cixous] tries to subvert the discourse of patriarchy, to open it up to contradiction and difference, while retaining the possibility of shared recognition which would make a political movement of and for women possible. (Shiach 1991:20)

Access to a 'pure', pre-cultural, pre-linguistic body is impossibility... There maybe a material body which exists 'outside' or 'before' language, we can never have access to it. And to name such 'a' body is always to shape it, to map it in the context of a pre-existing (though always changing) linguistic and cultural system. (Hansen 2000:17)

The imagination works through the skin. (Cutrufelli 2003:7)

tion as a feminist fiction writer, to articulate what has not been articulated. To give voice to what has been silenced, to use language to subvert its own construct. I work to renew and reclaim *my* language and thus transform the 'wild zone' into a space of resistance.

*To subscribe to anatomy as destiny one participates in condemning woman to death. (Cixous 1989a:109)*  
*Until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy. (Cixous 1975:350)*

**Theorist:** Cixous is pushing the boundaries, for her 'writing from and toward woman' (Cixous 1989a: 111) is more than a metaphorical move. She is not blind to cultural and historical contexts. Cixous adopts the imagery of war in her discussion of women's writing—women need to become militants, to use language that is explosive and destructive—for her this is a battle. For her *écriture féminine* is a way out of the binds of culture and the symbolic masculine language that position her as *other*. She is calling for writers to take up *écriture féminine* in the spirit of the poet Muriel Rukeyser's (*The Speed of Darkness*) words: *What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.*

As a woman, our culture is somehow not our home. I want to try to make it my home by writing... I feel a tremendous compulsion to write about a woman's life as meticulously and as truthfully as I can. (Sue Woolfe in Bartlett 1998a:236-7)

'Style' is not something to be consciously sought after: it arrives by itself... it has something to do, I think, with the proportion that exists between 'what the writer wishes to say, and the economy of language with which he or she manages to say it. (Weldon 1993:184)

**Novelist:** For the very beginning I write *Swimming* in a form that could be called 'realism'. By 'realism' I mean writing committed to illuminating 'the living conditions of real women [and related to] women's experience of their lives' (Lever 2000:134). Even when adopting the techniques of 'stream of consciousness' writing, I did not produce an experimental or avant-garde text in the tradition of those writers that Cixous focuses on—Genet, Joyce, Lispector, or even Woolf. However, my intention—like Cixous and Rukeyser—is to tell the truth about women's lives.

**Theorist:** While Cixous says, *écriture féminine* cannot be defined, it is often, as you say, articulated by her, and others with 'experimental' literature.

Why is 'realism' such a dirty word for these poststructuralist theorists? 'Cixous's fictions' stretch the limits of the novelistic. Character is uncertain, narrative point of view unstable, the apparent transparency of language challenged, and linear temporality is unsettled, or completely undone. (Shiach 1991:20)

*...defining a feminist practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorised, enclosed, coded which does not mean it does not exist. (Cixous 1989a: 109)*

Certainly, the pleasure of reading is that you want to turn the page, and you want to know what happens next, but that doesn't mean that everything has to be subservient to the plot. Everything has to be subservient to the integrity and coherence of the novel as a whole but within that... you can put in anything. You can get away with murder in fiction. I do want to be challenged by what I am reading but I don't understand why people want to make it hard for us. (Andrea Goldsmith. A:1)

If you write sparse, grey, boring, flat prose you're partaking in the history of the great novel; a masculine technique. Whereas there is a tendency with poetic language to assume it isn't necessarily a technique but romantic outpouring, a spilling over... There certainly is an element of that fetishisation of the grey, sparse subject/object... when men write lyrically it's an interesting experiment. (Delia Falconer A:2)

Rita Felski argues the term 'experimental' is 'so broad as to become meaningless' and does not assist the feminist scholarship committed to unpacking the historically and socially constructed discourses of *woman*. This articulation of feminine writing with experimental literature, works to dismiss the realist text 'as someone else's—man's—writing', and to exclude the work of women writers like those we mentioned earlier who I do not want to exclude, who's works have made a difference to me and to other women, and who have developed styles and structures that allow them to express *woman's* experience. It also results in a feminist canonising that like the traditional canon omits those that do not fit the particular definition of 'experimental'.

This is a view of the realist text as reflecting things the way they really are, 'passively consumed', to use Barthes' terms. It positions the realist text as a conservative form that reinforces dominant ideologies rather than contesting them (Felski 1989:135). Realist texts, according to this view, are ultimately reassuring and do not 'rupture' or challenge the 'prevailing order'.

Literature has a long history and all writing is built on the writing that has come before it. When realism emerged in the 19th century it was a subversive and radical form concerned with challenging the prevailing order. The modernists writers dissatisfied with realism's linear narrative and mimetic tone that gave the impression of an objective external view, ventured into the interior, into the inner individual consciousness and challenged notions of the stable, fixed identity. More recently postmodernists have taken this further by writing novels that expose the constructed

The problem with defining linguistic subversion as 'feminine' is that it renders the term so broad as to become meaningless—almost any example of experimental literature in the last hundred years can be seen as 'feminine'—and this conflation... literary style with an ideology of the feminine as quintessentially marginal and outside the symbolic 'order' is of little help in theorising the historically specific location of woman in culture and society. (Felski 1989:5-6)

[Cixous] ignore[s] the radical structures women have invented in the past to protest and to remake a patriarchal discourse their own. (Yeager 1988:24)

[Realism] assembles... juxtapositions and complexities out of what we already know... it is a predominantly conservative form... reading a realist text is ultimately reassuring... the world evoked... its patterns of cause and effect, of social relationships and moral values, largely confirm the patterns of the world we seem to know. (Belsey 1980:51)

The realist text, then is seen as 'legitimat[ing] the prevailing... order.' (Morton & Zavarzadah 1994:75)



nature of the text itself as well as the fluid nature of identity. In *Swimming*, it seems to me, you take from all three movements to write a realist novel with modernist and postmodernist tendencies.

**Novelist:** I want to take up first, the notion of 'reality' and ask whose reality are we talking about anyway? When the critics say realism is reassuring, I ask reassuring for whom? Surely a novel, call it realist, modernist or postmodernist, that aims to tell the story/s of aspects of particular women's lives previously 'erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealized' (Morris 1993:60) is by exposing the workings of ideology, in itself subversive. In *Swimming*, the *childless woman* has a speaking voice, therefore I contend it does reformulate and rupture the 'prevailing order' because in the *real* world the experience of being a woman without children is rarely articulated; the *childless woman* is rarely allowed to speak of those aspects of her life—infertility, miscarriage, ambivalence about motherhood or the absence of the desire to mother. My *real* world includes night and daydreams, bodily sensations, laughter... as well as identifiable roles, economic constraints, social mores...

If *Swimming*, then, reassures women readers that their experience is legitimate, by making public the experience of one woman (even if her experience is different to theirs) or by giving women readers the possibility of articulating their never before spoken experiences, is this not an appropriate aim for a feminist fiction writer? I believe my task is to do this, to 'move with and against the grain,' to expose and challenge the dominant discourses, and to add to *alternative figurations* of woman to public discourse.

When I read Cixous's writing, *Laugh of the Medusa* for example, I read not only

Don Anderson distinguishes between the experimental and the realistic story: for him, the former can be 'transgressive,' while the latter is conservative both formally and 'ideologically'. But this may be a false distinction, or at least the issue may be more problematic than this: women's writing, for example, may be both realist and ideologically 'transgressive'. The two categories, in other words, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. (Gelder 1989:23)

or even primarily as theory, but as poetics, a political poetics. It is joyful, optimistic writing, playful and well aware of the problems of using language to define that which has not yet been thought.

*women's imaginary is inexhaustible...  
write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery...  
laughs exude from our mouths...  
everything will change once woman gives woman to other woman...  
a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations...  
explosive... flying... let us... let us... (Cixous 1975:347-358)*

I very strongly resist severing the relationship between the text and the real, particularly at the moment, when there are such acute problems in the real, it's terribly important that they're addressed back to the text, and that there's a relationship that goes each way. Eventually it's through reading, imagination, thought, thinking, that we can engage, again, differently with the real... one severs them at one's peril. (Drusilla Modjeska interviewed by Rivers 1997:325)

When I write I search for the form and structure, for the language that will allow me to tell this particular story, of this particular woman. What I borrow from Cixous and her concept of *écriture féminine* is her insistence that women can write our diverse experiences, and the possibility of conceiving of a way of articulating the 'wild zone', a way of writing into 'bliss' of dispossessing and possessing my own writing practice; a way of writing women's lives and their experiences; a way of writing *from and toward women*.

Experimentation with form is an absolute necessity for a woman writer. For what has been done and how that was done neither says what she had to say nor provides the way of saying it. (Trinh 1991:6)

*It is by writing, from and toward women... Women will break out of the snare of silence. (Cixous 1975:351)*

I think because [*Happy Families*] is an easy read people were kind of lulled by it... You can't win as a woman if you write too lyrically you're sort of over the top and too female, too emotional, too whatever, and you shouldn't be aspiring to that level pretension as a woman. And if you write too simply then you can be placed in the sort of 'light woman's novel' kind of category. (Susan Varga A:6)

My aim in *Swimming* is to write Kate's experience into a *real* world in a way that exposes that world as socially and linguistically constructed and Kate's perspectives as positional, while revealing the constructed and positional nature of all representations of the *childless woman* and of the *real* world.

Self conscious about the relationship between feminism and representation... [these novels] attempt a form of realism in that they are all committed to the task of representing women's lives and speaking for their experiences. (Lever 2000:135)

Susan Lever describes Modjeska's writing of *Poppy* as a self-consciously feminist attempt at a 'form of realism' that is also experimental. Though Lever's (and my)

definition of 'experimental'—she calls them 'realist experimenters'—may be different to Cixous's, it is obvious I think, that Modjeska is a feminist writer experimenting (in this case with form and genre as well as language) in order to represent the life and experiences of a woman—Poppy. But, *Poppy* is also, a realist text—in the sense that women readers can identify and relate to aspects of the social reality of a woman's life. I position Modjeska alongside Cixous and other writers—Toni Morrison, Alice Walker...—writers who, to borrow another of Braidotti's terms, are 'polygots', challenging and interrogating our notions of identity as something that is fixed and stable; writers who challenge and confront our understanding of the *real*.

My novels are novels of characterisation, and of ideas, ideas without being polemic. Where else can you do that? When you look at the French theorists... they're hung up on the signs, it seems to me we have to have shifting, malleable meaning that is made up of accurate perceptions but also false starts and you as the fiction writer can manipulate the meaning. (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

Nora was thirty-five when she divorced. She becomes pregnant to that man on the ship. You have to know social history. To have a child in England in 1935 would have been difficult—what could you do with a child? She had no money. She had to have it adopted and it was not a pleasant prospect... She chooses to have an abortion... It didn't destroy her life. She had another kind of life. (Jessica Anderson A:3)

**Theorist:** *Real* is a problematic term in this postmodern, poststructuralist world. What is *real*? Is Cixous writing the *unreal* woman in an *unreal* world? What you are referring to may be more appropriately termed 'recognisable', a *recognisable world* that reflects women's social reality.

Here we are talking about a form of realism that does not simply mirror reality as if it is the 'truth' but redescribes it so that 'hidden patterns' and 'unexplored meanings' can unfold (Kearney 2002:12 & 132). Richard Kearney referring to Aristotle's discussion of mimesis in *Poetics* calls this *mimesis-mythos* a narrative with a double role to both discover what is there and create it anew.

Susan Lever's study of Australian women's novels, *Real Relations: The Feminist Politics of Form in Australian Fiction* is in part an argument for the political nature of 'realist' fiction. She contends that the feminist fiction writer's commitment to 'change the living conditions of real women' (134) continues to make 'forms of realism' attractive.

An experimental novel is one that ostentatiously deviates from the received ways of representing reality—either in narrative organization or in style, or in both—to heighten or change our perception of that reality. (Lodge 1992:105)

Writing is, for the polygot, a process of undoing the illusory stability of fixed identities, bursting open the bubble of ontological security that comes from familiarity with one linguistic site... disengaging the sedentary nature of words, destabilizing commonsensical meaning, deconstructing established forms of consciousness... Becoming a polygot in your own mother tongue: that is writing... (Braidotti 1994:15)

Mimesis is 'invention' in the original sense of that term: invenire means both to discover and to create, that is, to disclose what is already there in light of what is not yet (but is potentially). It is the power, in short, to recreate actual worlds as possible worlds. (Kearney 2002:132)

While it is often assumed that realist writing trusts in the power of language to represent reality, that assumption implies a naivety, which is not evident on reading the novels by Richardson or Stead, for example. (Lever 2000:134)

In *Silver Sister* I wanted to record a special sisterhood. I wrote it with the hope that one day my daughter would read it and understand the woman that was an important part of her life. (Lillian Ng A:3)

I have just read a really horrible article about Virginia Woolf in *The Guardian*. It was about her 'sensibility', which was seen as flooding her writing, even *being* her writing. According to the reviewer only women are interested in sensibility. He called her solipsistic and masturbatory and questioned the value of writing he caricatured as self scrutiny, looking at your emotions endlessly, endlessly. He called it 'feminine sensibility'. He asked, what does it amount to, how does it affect the world? ...I think it's important to keep standing the ground that the self-inquiry, and the examination of the interiority of the feminine is one of the ways into us understanding the 'space between' the relationships between people and discourses. It represents a way of being in relation to the world and we need to hold on to it. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

So the writer's fiction must be carefully monitored, and if necessary brought into line with agreed reality... But I said, Hang on, writing for me has always been rebellion, this feels too much like conforming... (Eagleton, M. 1986:176)

*I don't want to write that kind of sentence now, the sentence that begins 'Women have always...' we started rejecting the sentence that began 'Women have always had an instinct for mothering' or 'Women have always and everywhere been in subjugation to men'. If we have learned anything in these years of late twentieth century feminism it's that 'always' blots out what we really need to know; when, where and under what conditions has the statement been true? (Rich 1987:214)*

**Novelist:** A crucial point for me is that my writing be accessible to women, to my friends and neighbours, to as large as possible a group of women, which even if I write in the realist form is probably going to be limited to—middle-class, white, Australian women. Avant-garde and experimental writing has an even more limited audience—and therefore—a limited impact.

**Theorist:** Lever might agree with you and though I sympathise with your desire to reach the women who are your friends and neighbours, I have a few problems with this view of experimental and avant-garde writing. First of all, let me say that though education is more easily accessible to middle class white women, it is not true to say that working class and indigenous women do not read/write. You and I are prime examples here, daughters of working class migrants reading and writing. Secondly, this view presumes that *impact* and *worth* of a novel is primarily based on the reach of audience at a particular historical time. But as we see with Virginia Woolf, as one example, her writing has had a major impact on feminist thinking beyond her lifetime, beyond the middle class professional feminist readership her work may initially have attracted. And thirdly, I worry that we are just reinforcing those binaries—experimental versus realist—rather than celebrating the different imaginations, leanings, poetics, and the multiple *alternative figurations*.

Instead of asking whether women can write from within the symbolic language, it is more useful to look at ways that as feminist writers we can and do practise a writing that both presents *alternative figurations* of women's diverse experiences, and interrogates the historically and socially constructed discourses of *woman* without universalising them.

Is language, and above all avant-garde literary writing by men and women, really the primary site of revolutionary struggle... or do such texts by their very difficulty serve as an elitist function, preserving 'literature' for privileged, educated class and acting as intimidating, disempowering force on others? It has been important for many women to find their experiences... given meaning in literary texts and thereby recognized and authenticated. (Morris 1993:159)

The contemporary [feminist] writer who... accepts the call to disrupt fictional conventions... must recognise the possibility that her text may bear little relationship to the way women experience their lives, and she may find that her audience is limited to an elite of feminists familiar with theoretical concerns... [and] may contribute relatively little to political exchange. (Lever 2000:134)

I prefer to write on a smaller scale. I prefer to write with absolute simplicity. I prefer not to make grand gestures but have things implied. I prefer that style, at least for this book, it may not be in the next book. If you write a book about women with warmth and insight and from a female point of view that must affect your language. (Susan Varga A:6)

The conventional story-prose-narrative style doesn't fit correctly—i get bruised under the arms, have to keep my shoulders in a hunch, my chin forward and down—i have done it... It was difficult and painful, but i could walk out like that, meet the public eye. Meet the people on Lit Street, but forever in that society i do not want to be misunderstood as a hunchback, not by nature being a hunchback you understand. (Moorhead 1976:12)

It is less useful to say a feminist writer should write in this style or in that, or worse still a feminist writer can never write in this style or genre, and more useful to look at the making of each individual text, its language and form, and how that intervenes in the 'prevailing order'. I am not advocating a close reading of the text in the humanist tradition that isolates the text from its historical and social locations. This is a focus on the production of the text, on the feminist writer's employment of writing as a political tool as well as a creative act. On the exploration of strategies for producing a feminist text in both writing and reading. This is not a close reading without reference to the politics of location, without reference to theory; it is located in a material context that includes the writer. It is, however, a rejection of grand theorising that works to reduce the multiple, diverse nature of women's writing, that limits what women can do, that is critical of women's writing for not being 'different enough' (Felski 1989:43) and that can result in the establishment of a new convention based on the requirement of breaking convention itself (Felski 1989:159). Or that dismisses writing that is avant-garde and *too different* for being elitist. This will always need to be a self-conscious writing that is aware of the limitations of language and of the novel form and is willing to experiment.

This text can be grounded in a *recognisable* world while being actively critical of the prevailing order and therefore it can also be experimental and innovative; it can be realist and transgressive. It is always a vigilant writing, and it examines all of the fictional devices—words, syntax genres, form and structure—that are in themselves culturally and historically located, and can both limit and make possible women writing *from and toward women*.

**Novelist:** I do agree that avant-garde, experimental fiction and realist fiction all have a place within feminism, for at its best, feminist fiction provides important chal-

The cue is not to look for something in the text but to do something else with it. Rather than asking whether or not... authorial positions exist for women outside of (masculine) intellectual terrain, then, we might ask how they employ writing in ways that move both with and against the grain; in ways that simultaneously take part in and ask question of the available models of hermeneutic inquiry. (Kerr & Nettelbeck 1998:12)

Women's writing will be more accessible to writers and readers alike if we recognise it as a conscious response to socioliterary realities, rather than accept it as an overflow of one woman's unmediated communication with her body... But I risk... overstating the case against... *écriture féminine*, and that would mean a real loss. [We] can appropriate two important elements, at least... the critique of phallogentrism in all the material and ideological forms it has taken, and the call for new representations of women's consciousness... we need to examine the words, the syntax, the genres, the archaic and elitist attitudes towards language and representation that have limited women's self-knowledge and expression during the long centuries of patriarchy... (Jones, R.A. 1985:374-5)

lenges and new possibilities to all women. With that in mind I return then to my discussion of the writing of *Swimming*.

So where did I leave off? I had Kate, now a character well established in my mind and the first few pieces of writing, short, out of sequence scenes mainly.

The psychic structure of women without children isn't often looked at. How does it effect us that we haven't made the move of *then* becoming a mother and thereby re-enacting our experience as daughter through the role of mother? (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

I deliberately took people in the second half of their lives because as we all know women past forty are often forgotten and widows don't exist for people... there is a line there where Beth and Lyn kiss goodbye and they look to the outside world just like a pair of middle aged women kissing each other good-bye in a non-sexual way. So it was deliberate to create passion past forty when women are supposedly past their prime. (Susan Varga A:6)

A flood tide of grief surges through me. I did not use my life well. I have not passed it on. Once again I am a handmaid to life. (Fox 1995 :76)

There were two central questions I had at this early stage of writing: the first, what does it mean to live a *childless* life? Not only what it means at forty to be *childless* but also what it means for a woman in terms of the whole span of her life. What does it mean to be a woman without children living in a society that equates womanhood with motherhood that invests millions of tax dollars on reproductive technology? This is the central question I am exploring in the novel.

The second question: how do I write Kate, so that she is not from the very beginning tagged as *the childless woman* and dismissed, how do I narrate the *childless* life in a way that challenges preconceived notions of childlessness?

What does it mean to live a *childless* life? As I begin writing I don't know the answer to this question not for Kate in the novel I am writing, and not for myself in my own life. I write and read to answer that question: how do *childless* women 'forge [a] positive adult identity' that is not based on being a mother (Ireland 1994:152)?

Somebody just recently asked about my grandchildren and I said it was not possible because I didn't have any children. And they said, 'Oh, I'm so sorry.' I wondered about what. (Lee Henry, age 66 in Morell 1994:89)

Mardy Ireland's 1994 study of *childless* women, *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity*, is particularly pertinent here because her focus is principally on exploring how *childless* women go about developing 'a positive adult identity' that is not based on being a mother (Ireland 1994:152).

Very few of the studies of the childless explore the process of 'forg[ing] positive adult identity' that is not based on being a mother. (Ireland 1994:152)

I am trying to find a form that represents the inner power of women. I'm trying to find a way of speaking as honestly as possible about women, as a woman. (Drusilla Modjeska A:6)

In the writing of *Swimming*, Kate's narrative of a *childless* life, I am, like Ireland, exploring the means by which the *childless woman* can liberate herself from those negative discourses of childlessness—regret, grief, inadequacy, selfishness and deviance—to cultivate an alternative adult identity. This alternative identity, which is not based on being a mother, and may or may not involve some expression of the maternal, makes visible the possibility of living a full life without children.

**Theorist:** This process of forging an adult identity that is not based on the maternal requires the acceptance of difference: difference that is not an abnormality or deviance but on an expanded definition of *woman*; that acknowledges that our current definitions are too simplistic, limiting and no longer valid.

Ireland uses *object-relational theory* and what she refers to as *Lacanian theory* to transform the notion of absence experienced when a child is separated from their mother to provide a way of understanding the process of forging a new positive identity of the adult *childless woman*.

**Novelist:** Yes. For Ireland this transformation occurs when the woman starts to explore the meaning of *childlessness* for her in her life; this is a shift from experiencing *childlessness* as a 'concrete fact' to questioning its meaning.

When a woman shifts her attention from experiencing childlessness as a concrete fact to wondering about the meaning of her childlessness for her life, she is introducing that 'third term' of language between herself and her childless experience, making a psychic space where interpretation and elaboration of her own particular childlessness become possible. (Ireland 1994:125)

**Theorist:** This is a shift I have experienced myself. It was a shift away from being caught up in the relentless pursuit of a child; from experiencing *childlessness* as the end and ruin of my life—even though rationally I do/did not believe women need be mothers to be fulfilled—from feeling I would be forever incomplete, to distinguishing the constructed nature of these pronatalist discourses, of the negative discourses surrounding childlessness.

The grief and sadness attached to the miscarriages and failed attempts to have a child dissipated, though they did not completely dissolve, but the point of ‘knowing’, of revealing the constructed nature of these discourses in a society that has a vested interest in the articulation of womanhood with motherhood, lead to a shift, what Ireland refers to as a ‘psychic shift’. This psychic shift, according to Ireland, turns the ‘absence’ into a ‘potential space’ with generative and creative potential. In this redefinition the *childless woman* is able to develop an alternative identity that is equal to, rather than a compensation for, or less-than, being a mother, and by visibly living a creative life without children, breaks down the essentialist notion of woman = mother.

All this time that she remains in the story, in his-tory, she can earn her living only by disturbing the symbolic field. Modifying the first clause, the instrument of reproduction, her only tool. The dissolution of form... her uterus set beside her like a backpack... presupposes a reorganization of her body... potential touching two hemisphere... Maternal matrix and materialist. She reorganizes her material: private and political life. (Brossard 1983:27)

Nicole Brossard, a French Canadian lesbian poet, fiction writer and theorist, writes of the power of women’s desire (specifically lesbian) and of women’s writing to articulate women’s experiences and disrupt patriarchal constructs of woman that reduce woman to biological functions. Though not talking about childlessness specifically Brossard’s metaphorical transformation of the womb into a backpack like Ireland’s ‘generative space’ is the exploration of ways that woman can create an identity not dependent on the maternal.

With the universal social expectation that women should be mothers, regardless of their own personal experience of ‘absence,’ the idea of absence is always present in their lives as an emptiness, rather than a generative space. When there is a shift to childlessness as generative space the childless woman is on the threshold of expanding her female subjectivity... with this subjective shift from absence as something missing to absence as creative potential, female identity can feel integrated. The sense that something is amiss... missing... or lost is redefined. (Ireland 1994:126-127)

Brossard debunks that exclusionary and essentialist meaning by making the new world that is both round and flat like a backpack that can be empty or full. (Huffer 1998:11)



The woman in Brossard's writing needs access to both the 'round' and the 'flat' to have power in the world. The womb as backpack transforms the womb into a powerful tool that she can choose to use or not use—that does not equal who she is and that frees her 'from the internment of the womb' (Parker 1995:314).

It could be argued that it is only in the discursive space that Brossard can transform the womb into backpack or Ireland, the womb into a 'generative space with creative potential'; in the corporeal realm, in the material world, the womb is a reproductive organ and though it can be used or not used it cannot be 'put aside like a backpack'. However, the importance of developing and exploring ways that women can discursively and metaphorically transform the womb, is in the realm of a 'transdisciplinary' shift, and provides a strategy for challenging the essentialism of woman = mother that also only occurs in the discursive; in the real material world not all women embrace or desire motherhood and an increasing number of women are choosing to remain *childless*. But it is the discursive that posits *childlessness* as *less than* and so it must be addressed in the discursive realm.

It's impossible for any life, any life at all to be completely without issues, burdens, pains, griefs, losses and absences. Maybe it is the wrong question. On what terms are we prepared, as a culture to accept a life as lived deeply, faced up to, understood fully on its own terms, whatever that might be? The second question is whether we are more likely to grant that to the masculine life than the feminine life and the answer to that is, absolutely. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

**Novelist:** The womb is often symbolic of *life force* in broader terms than child-bearing, and is never, except in a narrow phallogentric view, *just* an organ, so in my mind Kate must reclaim her womb in order to generate *a full and deeply meaningful life*. It represents for me the essence of Kate's *being* and in that sense when it turns into the *killer* womb, more than just her reproductive ability is rendered infertile.

Throughout the writing of *Swimming* these questions are always present: how does Kate shift from being a woman who sees her *childlessness* as an absence to a woman who lives *a full and deeply meaningful life without children*? Partly it is

[Discourse]... is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment... Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But... since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect. (Foucault cited in Hall 1992:291)

through the development of her creativity, and this is one of the reasons why Kate is a writer. Writing allows her to develop, to shape her life. The genesis of her creativity occurs as the hysterical traitor womb transforms into a 'generative space'. Partly in *Swimming* it is the interweaving of voices, and the play with language especially metaphor, which like it has in this dialogue—with the use of knitting and dancing metaphors for example—allows me to shape ideas and write them via a language that is not necessarily *feminine* but that disrupts taken for granted meanings and reflects more closely my world, and my experience of it.

I suspect that even though there are so many women without children, increasing numbers of them that we are not in a culture that can understand that. We are either frightened of it, or it's invisible to us, or it's an irrelevance. It would take a powerful text, a powerful novel to make a childless woman fulfilled for the reader, strongly enough that it would not just be you and me who would read her as fulfilled. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

To the second question: how do I introduce Kate to the reader, so that she is not, from the very beginning read as the stereotypical *childless woman*. Given that part of what I want to contest are the discourses of childlessness and the way that *childless* women are seen by society, I decide it is important that the reader is introduced to Kate, develops a sense of her, before discovering that she is a woman with no children. These questions and concerns lead to an early structural decision to introduce the older Kate to the reader first, the Kate who has lived a long and full life; and to introduce her before any mention is made of her *childlessness*.

Kate is a writer partly in response to Cixous, and to the theoretical notion of language as masculine. The half-written manuscript, *Writing Sarah*, is Kate's attempt to make Sarah, the unborn/never-born child, real. She uses language as a way to liberate herself, to give voice to her experience of *childlessness*—infertility and miscarriage—while exposing the limitations of language, which is in essence, a limitation of culture not biology, to allow a space for that experience to be articulated. The first major literary problem arises from my decision to have the two voices—it is a problem of time and history. Kate is born in the 1950s, she is in her mid-thirties in the early nineties, just as IVF emerges from the laboratory, from the realm of the

extraordinary, and becomes an accepted and more routine practice. The pervasiveness of reproductive technologies over the last twenty-five years and the increasing medicalisation of infertility have altered the experience for 'infertile' women. On one hand it has improved their chances of having a child but on the other hand it has put these women under increasing pressure to submit to invasive procedures.

Self-identification is made more emphatic by the availability of these reproductive technologies; a woman is forced to identify as infertile, as ill and needing treatment if she is to avail herself of the technology. If she chooses not to use the technology, then she can be, and often is, accused of not really wanting a child. By default, it forces *infertile* women who refuse to avail themselves of the technology, to choose *childlessness* even though the technology cannot guarantee a child.

There are older *childless* women in Australian fiction, Jessica Anderson's Nora, Judith Fox's Annie, Stephanie Dowrick's Cordelia, Kate Grenville's Lillian, and all of these novels give shape to alternative representations of woman but these women are of a different generation. Born in the early 1900s they grew up in a different world.

The way that we view fertility and infertility is radically different to what it was in the sixties and seventies and vital to Kate's perception of her *childlessness*. In the initial drafts Kate is eighty, however, if Kate is born in the fifties then she will be eighty in or around 2030—in the future. This problem haunts me as I write and I write against, through it, alongside it. 'How will you know,' a fellow writer asks, 'what the world will be like in 2030?' I can imagine it—but I am not interested in writing a futuristic novel. In later drafts I bring her back to her sixties and I write on, still into the future (though not so far) because I believe it is important to explore the

Fifteen or twenty years ago, IVF was seen as a fringe technology. Today it is regarded as the most conservative of the new reproductive technologies. (Raymond 1993:8)

[Many women feel that] if you haven't tried IVF then you haven't really tried. (Hampson 1997:49-50)

Science exploits women's vulnerability when they feel that if they want to have a child, they cannot question any of the procedures offered. (Klein 1989:2)

Scientists publicized their first documented invitro fertilization (IVF) achievement in 1978. Baby Louise Brown became the world's first technological child and the planet was put on notice that the technological was made flesh. (Raymond 1993:vii)

Why did I want the gift of prophecy, come what may? To speak with my voice: the ultimate. (Wolf 1984:94)

Cassandra, the eldest and best-loved daughter of King Priam of Troy... she 'sees' the future because she has the courage to see things as they really are in the present. (Wolf 1984:238)

question I have posed: what does it mean to live a *childless* life? So I project into one possible future and hope that because the novel is concerned with interiority; with Kate's experience, I can avoid unnecessary prophesying.

The opening scene of the novel is set in a gallery, and we see, through Kate's eyes, a photograph of her taken by Tess. In the photograph Kate is naked, having agreed to take her clothes off for Tess and the camera because she supports Tess's desire to challenge notions of aging and especially constructions of the 'old woman'.

The first scene has its genesis in those two major questions. But the scene itself comes from somewhere else. From an early image of an old woman coming out of the ocean, followed by a later image of Kate looking at a photograph of herself naked and recognising her body as a metaphor for her life—marked, stained, imprinted—by the long life she has lived. This image, in which Kate is walking out of the water towards the beach, is the source of the connection I develop as I write between Kate and the ocean. I cannot trace the origin of that first image of Kate naked; it arrives as a gift, whole and perfectly formed in the early stages of writing old Kate. It emerges as I write to discover who the older Kate has become, it develops as I write and read and interrogate its meaning.

Kate's strong connection with the ocean comes in part from my own obsession and love of the stretch of beach between Aireys Inlet and Eastern View in Victoria's southwest, and of the beach and the ocean generally. This connection Kate has with the ocean precedes the miscarriages, it is a life-long connection. However, it is linked to the body and Kate finds relief from her *mis*functioning body when she is immersed in the ocean, in her body's weightlessness and the intense sensuality of

We need to create for ourselves cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves as we live into lives longer than we had imagined for ourselves. (Woodward 1999:155)

Ideas don't come in total—little bit here and there as you write. If they grew a little bit more you write and if they don't grow you abandon them. (Jessica Anderson A:3)

I came across an interesting story when I was teaching; whether you think writing is about content or about structure, [or] about language and I thought about it every week that I taught. It was from another teacher, she said she had a student who had been very badly sexually abused when they were a child and they had tried to write about it in a realist, 'I' centred way and they just couldn't do it. The student was really frustrated and then in one class they were studying the sonnet form and this person took the sonnet form and wrote their experience into it. It was something about the form itself and the capacity for genre and for literature to create another space rather than an absolute space. I thought that was a wonderful story and I found it so encouraging as a writer. (Delia Falconer A:2)

Your intention becomes clearer as you write. (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

being in contact with salt water, with the surf. For both Kate and I, the ocean's vastness, its majesty and power are soothing and comforting, displacing the pain of the miscarriages, of the failed attempts to become pregnant. This is how the ocean and swimming become conduits for the exploration of pain and grief and renewal. In literature and in psychoanalysis the ocean is often, of course, associated with women, and the unconscious but if the knowledge of this discourse influenced the development of this connection (and it must have to some degree), I was not consciously thinking about this during the initial writing. Though connections with the idea of descending into the 'dark' unconscious can be read into Kate's relationship with the ocean, her swimming is always for me a reflection of her desire and ability to transform the 'dark'/past/unconscious into knowledge, creativity and 'light' that supports her living *a full and deeply meaningful life*.

This opening scene also allows me to introduce Kate's relationship with Tess, her best friend's daughter that provides an opportunity to look at the way women support and nurture each other's creativity.

In the writing process itself the opening scene develops, slowly over several drafts. It is not until much later as I read it along side the rest of the novel, I, the reader/writer/feminist, see that the opening scene reflects the novel as a whole, and pre-empted some of the novel's major concerns. Kate in this first scene is both subject and object, she is in the 'in between' or liminal space and she willingly turns the gaze on herself, facing her life full on, looking straight at her aged physical self with all its stains and wrinkles as she will later look at her life with all of its disappointments and frustrations, the sadnesses and the joys, and just as she is able to reach up and pat her real face with affection, she is able to look, with sympathy and love at herself

and her life. As the subject of the narrative she gazes at herself, the object, and finds herself both familiar and unfamiliar.

This scene acts as a metaphor for the novel: Kate's willingness to stand up, speak out, challenge preconceived notions of womanhood, and reflect the fluid, shifting nature of her identity. The liminal space she occupies forces her to reflect, interrogate, and work towards creating some cohesion—impossible to achieve in many ways—this is a process of *becoming* rather than *being*—between the self she sees represented in the photograph and the self she thinks she knows there are many other selves. Kate's venture into this space is the journey of the novel.

Identity for me is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the 'other'; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in the genealogical process. Last, but not least, identity is made of successive identifications, that is to say unconscious internalised images that escape rational control. (Braidotti 1994:166)

*...writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and the other without which nothing can live... a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms... (Cixous 1975:353)*

Once I come to see what the scene is doing, which happens after the first few drafts, I work with that, to strengthen those key elements that are important in the opening pages of the novel.

#### *A hesitation*

I write in fragments, cutting and polishing until each one seems ready to be put in place... As the work fills out and the pattern begins to show, it becomes easier to judge the effect. I look for the illusion of depth and movement in time and space... Towards the end, it seems to be writing it, fulfilling its own demands. The whole should have the feel of a lived experience, and seem to come together naturally. (Farmer 1994)

I am concerned that in telling this narrative of the writing of *Swimming*, it will seem like such a linear process, as if questions arose and were answered, as if an experience or piece of research lead directly into a particular scene or trope. Writing the novel was hardly ever like this. I wrote most sections out of order, and each section, each image, each trope, altered in the several drafts I wrote towards the making of the final text. I hope that I can capture some of these circular, fluid practices in this description. And of course there are all the things I do not see, for mine is only one reading of the novel. Here we face the problem of mapping again.

[In *The Orchard*]-the child had to be there because I wanted a strong connection between the granddaughter and Ettie and the mother had to be accounted for so that was a plot problem. But then various people pointed out to me the incredible cruelty of Ettie in relation to her own daughter who she had given up, but I was thinking less about the child than about the woman who has to stand aside for the conventional marriage. It touches upon the tensions in the lives of creative women that can be seen over and over again. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

The second narrative strand—the story of Kate’s (and Tom’s) struggle with her inability to have a child—is told by Kate, as she remembers it and as she reads it, from the uncompleted *Writing Sarah* manuscript.

This is a narrative constructed within the narrative; a novel within a novel. It is Kate’s reconstruction of her past; it is memory and writing that reconnects her with her bodily and emotional experiences. I am attempting via Kate to *write the body*, and the sections that focus on Kate’s miscarriages are the closest to some of Cixous’s descriptions of feminine writing though still not in the avant-garde and experimental style that is associated with *écriture féminine*.

Here the aim is to give over to those experiences, to the intensity that I felt as a *real* woman struggling with the grief and anger that resulted from these experiences, that the *childless* women whose stories I read felt and that Kate feels.

*I wish that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. (Cixous 1975:348)*

**Theorist:** These sections are often overwhelming, as the experience was overwhelming for Kate. They ‘overflow’ (Cixous 1975: 348) or flow-over. These sections are all body and bring to mind Kristeva’s *object body*; the monstrous body—not only because it is *misfunctioning* but also because it disturbs identity and ignores borders—of the woman who is not mother. And the womb, the safe and nurturing space that gives life, is turned into a dangerous place: a killer womb. This is double edged in the novel for it is the contemporary medical view of infertility that occupies Kate and she gives over to it. It manifests in her view of her womb as the enemy and in her yearning for an ultrasound picture of her baby as proof that the child is real. The increasing prevalence of foetal imagery has been critiqued by feminists

[The object is that which] disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions and rules. (Kristeva 1982:4)

Pregnancy is represented as the natural state of the female body: to disrupt this in anyway is to risk irrevocable damage to the ‘natural’ order of things. (Stabile 1994:88)

Every experience shapes you so radically, so clearly. The person who doesn't have children might ask those questions differently. But at that point many many things may have fed in to shape the way in which they ask; not just children. However, the person who has not had children by choice and the person who has not had children because they couldn't will approach that time somewhat differently. For one person, there will be a relief that people have ceased to ask and for other people there will have to be a period of grief but I think that one of the things I show in *Tasting Salt*, reasonably successfully, is that in all of life there are some regrets, some compromises. In order to do some things, some other things can't be achieved. We can't be in all places at all times, doing all things with all people. Simply not possible in one lifetime. (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

More people like the first book [*Silver Sister*] it is even used as text in schools in China. No one dare to translate second book [*Swallowing Clouds*]... Some readers were disappointed, they thought it was too lyrical, and there was too much sex... Margaret Whitlam launched the book and Gough read it. He said, 'Have you no shame?' ...I wanted to write against stereotype and expectations of Chinese women's writing. (Lillian Ng A:5)

who argue it is a form of male surveillance, a political act that aims to separate the mother from the foetus and turns the foetus into a living human being with its own rights (Stabile 1994, Stanworth 1987). It highlights the 'alienating effects' of reproductive technology, and is reflected in the novel by Kate succumbing to the Heparin treatment and by the pressure to try IVF. In some ways this is dangerous ground in the novel, for Sarah is *real* to Kate, she is the unborn child and has an existence: can this be 'deployed by anti-feminist forces'? Such as the pro-life movement? This is risky writing from a feminist perspective, an attempt to articulate what Kate is thinking, feeling and dreaming, which is shaped and reflects the very patriarchal cultural constructs of pregnancy and motherhood that you are writing to challenge.

**Novelist:** I take your point and I do have concerns as to how what I write will be read.

Kate, as the writer, and I, as the writer, writing Kate's younger self, refuse to keep her/our experience hidden; or to soften the intensity of the experience of miscarriages, of the inability to fall pregnant; the body demands to be written. But you are right this is never a body experienced outside of social construction—my aim is always to make the reader aware of how Kate is perceived as *childless* (with all its negative connotations) and how her experience of the miscarriages and the failed attempts to conceive are constructed by the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood and nonmotherhood, fertility and infertility in which she is entrenched.

Not being able to conceive was bad enough. Being reduced to a cliché—one more whiny boomer who forgot to have a baby—was further indignity. (Fleming 1994:35)

Writing this section was difficult not because of my own emotional connection with the material but because of the constant struggle with literary convention, because I

It is not, as some feminists would argue, that technology alienates women from their bodies, but that technologies reflect the interests of institutions that depend upon such alienating effects. (Stabile 1994:71)

I want to ask: If this text or strategy takes an essentialist approach, how it, or can it be deployed by anti-feminist forces? (Stabile 1994:69)



did not want what I wrote to be 'deployed by anti-feminist forces' and because of the prevailing sense that I should not be writing this—that I should tone it down. There is a fear that it will be read as melodramatic? Hysterical? Will anyone ever want to read it? Will anyone ever want to publish it?

*You, write? But who do you think you are?*  
(Cixous 1991:16)

I wrote quite a lot about [Cordelia's] observation of her aging... How you get repulsed by your own aging and then you get over that and then maybe that cycle comes around again You feel dried out as if another idea will never arise in you... I had Cordelia in her early seventies and Laurie in her late thirties because Laurie was having a crisis of aging for the first time whereas Cordelia could more reflect that those came and went. The tidal wave, the tides, the seasons. When *Tasting Salt* came out, some people said, how could you write a novel about such an old woman? Some reviewers expressed surprise that a novel about an old woman could in fact be so engaging... the ageism and sexism combined was a little bit shocking. (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

The aesthetic of writing is very important to me. Both the aesthetics of what you write so people are seeing things in certain ways and the aesthetics of what you are actually putting on the page and the effect that it has on the person's rhythm as they are reading it. It is very very important to me and I spend huge amounts of time and effort on that. (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

**Theorist:** These are two questions really. First: Who am I to write? And second: connected but not the same: Will anyone publish my work? These are questions that many writers have asked themselves. For women especially, in addition to how dare you write, there is how dare you write about that; and the arguments of aesthetic value that posit men's writing as art and women's writing as autobiographical or too domestic to be significant.

**Novelist:** What we call good literature is dependant on our cultural values but I have to say, that with the writing of each word, each sentence, each image and metaphor I am thinking not just of what the word is saying but searching for a way of saying it that is striking, visual, beautiful. When I write that first scene, the description of Kate naked, my *intention* is to write the beauty I see in her sixty-six year old body but also, and at the same time, I want the writing to be rich and poetic.

**Theorist:** As you say what we find aesthetically pleasing is not apolitical. Paul Dawson argues in his article *Towards a New Poetic in Creative Writing Pedagogy* that all those creative writing givens, like 'show don't tell' taught in our writing classes as if they are just matters of craft, are in fact political aesthetic decisions based on our view of what good literature should do.

Who do you think you are [to be writing a book]? And who cares what you think about anything... (Trinh 1989:7)

Literature is a political and powerful term... the literary text at once reflects (often in a very indirect way) and creates the world in which it is written and read. The aesthetic is not, therefore as it is sometimes constructed, apolitical. (Robbins 2000:9)

A sociological poetics would thus require recognition that aesthetic or craft-based decisions of the writer are always a result of ideological or political choice. (Dawson 2003)

Women's novels are still considered to be light on, and you are in the danger of being put in the Mary Wesley class or seen as another Joanne Trollope...unless you take a on a Voss kind of theme. I meant this book to be about a social stratum. I was also thinking about the old and the new in Australia. Thinking about what it is like to live as a woman in this century all, of those sorts of things, and writing a readable book... that kind of book, because it is so female centred, can get sidelined. (Susan Varga A:6)

Nothing stinks like a pile of unpublished writing, which remark I guess shows I still don't have a pure motive... about writing... I still want to see it finally ritualised in print. (Plath cited in Trinh 1989:8)

My publisher wanted me to write the men up more. She couldn't quite cope with the men being in the background as they were. I went a bit more her way. I wrote more about men. I took her point because... it was meant to be woman centred but not anti male. (Susan Varga A:6)

**Novelist:** Pervasive, yes, I have heard myself say it many times to my students, without thinking until now, what is it that I am actually saying, what does it mean. Of course, the writing I consider aesthetically pleasing is situated historically, culturally and politically, and so a return to *vigilance*. We might imagine as feminist readers that no poem, no novel, no matter how beautiful the image, will be aesthetically pleasing to us, if it is sexist, racist, homophobic. The truth is we have often fallen in love with the works of the 'great' men of the canon despite their racism and sexism, their homophobia, because we have fallen for the 'beauty' or the rhetoric of beauty.

**Theorist:** We may have had little say in that canonising, but feminists do a version of their own. How can we avoid this, I find *Poppy* good writing, while I don't think *Tick Tock* is good writing—not at all. I make these judgments based on what I consider my own criteria—I think I am justified. But am I? *Poppy* is rich writing, layered, substantial. *Tick Tock* is simplistic, two-dimensional.

**Novelist:** Aesthetics can get the better of me, if I am not fully awake when I am reading and writing, because aesthetics are skilled lovers, and I too can be seduced with sweet words.

**Theorist:** All this has implications for publication of course. Sylvia Plath tells us that nothing stinks like unpublished writing, Susan Varga tells us the publishers asked her to write more about the male characters. A woman writer needs to earn a living too. Like any form of production writing is vulnerable to the desires of those with money and power. The woman writer has to weigh up economic imperatives against the telling of her story her way.

Even inside the academy, let alone outside its portals, the stereotypical association of the 'feminine' with inferiority persists in judgements of literary worth. (Cran 2002:8).

Only writing allows me to glimpse the quivering of my own consciousness. Only writing allows me the freedom to be shameless, to exist without reserve, oblivious to consequences. (Johnson 1999:xiv)

**Novelist:** Once published, if she has told her story her way there are other implications. In 2000, I wrote an article for a Melbourne paper, 'Woman without a Child' (Gandolfo 2000), about my experience of *childlessness*. It was commissioned by the then editor, Susan Johnson, who has in her own book *A Better Woman* (Johnson 1999) written of the silence that surrounds women's experience of childbirth. I wrote in the spirit of a dialogue with her and found that I was stripping myself bare. With each sentence the cloak of my constructed, public self—teacher, policy worker, and writer—fell away and there I was on the page, legs in stirrup, blood gushing. All body. And all eyes could see/read into my empty womb.

When the article was published I knew I had told a secret in public and I was chastised. One letter to the editor was particularly aggressive, this woman, a mother was angry at what she called my 'dreamy notions'. I could sympathise with her concern that the difficulties of motherhood—'children add physical and emotional pain and suffering, reduced experience and opportunity'—were being omitted or forgotten. I could also understand that she may have misinterpreted my descriptions of the child I fantasised as yet another *childless woman* not understanding motherhood, rather than my more ironical intentions. This is one of the risks of writing, that the reader's interpretation, influenced by their experience, is different to the writer's *intention*. However, in her letter, written I imagine to ensure that mythical notions of the magic of motherhood were not perpetuated, Chumas accused me of commodifying the 'child'. This is one of the recently emergent 'negative' views of the *childless* connected to the increasing use of reproductive technology, and illustrates the continued prevalence of the negative discourses of childlessness.

More confronting than these responses were the approach by men, acquaintances, colleagues, mostly supportive, to whom I would never have told my story. I felt as

I read 'Woman Without a Child'... Your view of children is that of the typically and sadly uninformed millennium woman... 'something' to add to the huge list of 'things' you already have. Professional woman in her 30s/40s, doing a PhD, writing a novel, travelled... What doesn't she have? Oh yes, she doesn't have a child—the last 'thing to do' on her... list. (Chumas 2000)

The image of infertile men and women has been discredited... as they have become the sort of people who equate children with carpets and microwave ovens, that is items to be purchased in the market. This mercenary image of the infertile, their alleged commodification of parenting is reinforced by the ways in which the cash nexus has infiltrated the alleviation of fertility. (Stanworth 1987:97)

if these men could see through me—the woman in the world, sane, reasonable had become, monstrous body, skin and flesh, hysterical.

*Oddly enough, says a friend who is a mother, the birth experience is similar. The body of the woman giving birth is monstrous and hysterical and open. But of course it's not so odd.*

What encouraged me was the women who cornered me and told me their stories and secrets, different to mine but also previously silenced; women who spoke for the first time of miscarriages, of their struggle to have a child or their guilt for not having one. My speaking/writing had made it possible for them to speak, just as Susan Johnson's writing the mother made it possible for me to write.

*The hysteric is, to my eyes the typical woman in all her force. It is a force that was turned back against Dora, but, if the scene changes and if woman begins to speak in other ways, it would be capable of demolishing those structures. (Cixous & Clément 1986)*

This is the power of writing—the rational/irrational, the body/mind split was in that instance dismantled at least between us, women, in all our differences. It was this truth telling that 'would split the world open' that inspired me to write *Swimming*, and especially the sections that deal most closely with Kate's infertility. This is truth telling to challenge both patriarchal and feminist discourses of infertility and childlessness.

*The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.—It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. (Cixous 1975:354)*

I think 'feminine literature' is an organic translated writing... translated from blackness, from darkness. Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don't know themselves. Or only poorly. And when women write they translate this darkness... The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language. (Duras 1980:174)

[Theodora], an old maid, they said, a scarecrow in a mushroom hat. She wore long shapeless dresses of striped voile, which made her look an oblong with head and legs. Fanny... looked at her fair plump face and wiped the sweat from a wrinkle with a pink puff. She made little grimaces for her figure, but only as a matter of course. Because her figure, like her self-importance, had momentarily swelled. (White 1948: 113)

Maybe Cixous is right, the dark continent is not so dark after all. Or to follow Duras, maybe we have found a way to translate the darkness. In a way my experience of writing these sections of the novel, which overflow with grief, provides a way out of the darkness. As I write the 'miscarriage' sections to carry the weight of the experience, I work hard to ensure I am not holding back. That I am not disguising the 'enigmas of the body, the dreams, the secret joys, shames' (Kristeva 1981:873). I write to translate the experience into language so that I can share it. For me this is a self-conscious writing. It is reflective, probing and illuminating; I discover both Kate and myself as I write. It is a rich, edifying and often joyful experience.

Kate's miscarriages and struggles with infertility are central to the novel, but having children is not always the central concern in Kate's life. Her relationship with Lynne is very important. This friendship that spans almost a whole lifetime sustains both of them—mother and nonmother. It works to contest the setting up of mother and nonmother against each other in the discourses of childlessness and in many fictional representations of *childless* women. But this is a complex relationship and there is a part of Kate and of Lynne that can easily fall into the trap of the binary, of setting each other up against each other; they have to struggle against societal mores in order to retain the friendship.

During the writing of this section, I read Sylvia Plath's poem, *Three Women*, set in a maternity ward. The poem is written in three voices: one is a woman giving birth, one a woman who has miscarried and the third, a woman who gives her child up for adoption.

Writers can be polygots within the same language. You can speak English and write many different Englishes... What else are Alice Walker and Toni Morrison doing but redesigning the boundaries of the citadel that was English. (Braidotti 1994:15)

I want to begin to define a counter-tradition within women's writing, a tradition that involves the reinvention and reclamation of a body of speech women have found exclusive and alienating, the goal... is not to dispute the discovery that language is dangerous for women, but to ask whether we can identify contexts in which women find language empowering, in which women speak their pleasure and find pleasure in speech. (Yeager 1988:2-3)

Fiction writers often dramatise attitudes to singleness and motherhood through contrasts between different characters. (Cosslett 1994:78)

All three women in [Plath's] poem, willing mother, unwilling mother, and unwilling childless woman, are the victims of the terrors visited upon them by 'nature' and the poem does not in the end make judgements as to who is right or wrong, happy or unhappy. (Cosslett 1994:85)

FIRST VOICE

...There is no miracle more cruel than this.  
I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves.  
I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work.

SECOND VOICE

...A dead sun stains the newsprints. It is red.  
I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them.

THIRD VOICE

...I am a wound that they are letting go.  
I leave my health behind. I leave someone  
Who would adhere to me; I undo her fingers like bandages: I go

Excerpts from 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices' by Sylvia Plath

It is quite normal... Why should they  
be seen selfish, they are keeping  
the population down. I didn't feel any  
more normal once I had a child. I liked  
it. I am pleased I did it but didn't make  
me feel any more normal. I am not  
normal because I am a writer; a writer  
is never normal. (Jessica Anderson  
A:3)

Plath does not in the end judge the women or their lives, she allows each to speak; each is the subject, the speaking voice of her own narrative and it is not only the 'terrors visited upon them by 'nature' that they articulate but an awareness of how each of them are constructed in the culture. The new mother who revels in her joy at the birth of her son is aware of the social expectations, and of her new vulnerability. The second woman articulates the grief of her loss and questions her womanhood, while the third woman thinks about how men would cope with an unwanted pregnancy—*they would go mad with it.*

FIRST VOICE

...It is a terrible thing  
To be so open: it is as if my heart  
Put on a face and walked into the world.

SECOND VOICE

...I see myself as a shadow, neither man nor woman...  
Blunt and flat enough to feel no lack. I feel a lack...  
I cannot contain it. I cannot contain my life.

THIRD VOICE

...They hug their flatness like a kind of health.  
And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did?  
They would go mad with it.

Excerpts from 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices' by Sylvia Plath

Jane is in there because I did not want to do anything so stark and obvious as saying there are no decent mothers. There is a degree of envy from Jane when she says, *Beth doesn't know the complications of my life*. She is envious of Beth's relative freedom but she is defensive because her decision has been to stay within the family structure and have the two children... the envy does not go back the other way too. Beth is angry with Jane because Jane never fulfilled her potential. (Susan Varga A:6)

I liked George [Cordelia's husband in *Tasting Salt*]... he is a man of character and we don't have so many men of character in our novels... when Cordelia discovers... that he had this love that he chose to keep secret—she couldn't go into stereotype response to it because she was passed that. She had learned something so significant about her own potential to love and so surprising to her... she might have been irritated but she couldn't go into self pity or blame routine because it wasn't appropriate... relationships are written about in a way that is starved of their complexity and what I was trying to show is what extraordinary complex people we are. (Stephanie Dowrick A:4)

I read this poem several times over the years I spend writing the novel. Both because Plath has given voice to all three women, brought them together in the maternity ward and refused to set them up against each other and because her language, her imaginary is rich with grief and with life. What is powerful for me in Plath's poem, as in Cixous's writing, is the possibility she creates—that women can write their experience, that it is possible; can be conceived of, that it has been done. That it can be done without universalising women's experience and without setting up oppositions.

Lynne does not have her own narrative in *Swimming*, but her experience of mothering, of being a mother and of being Kate's friend forms a major part of the narrative. But this is not only a device to contest the discourses of mother and nonmother, friendships between women are important for most women. Our friendships with other women are often what sustain us, and a novel about a woman would not be whole without reflecting those relationships.

**Theorist:** I am interested in why you created George and the relationship between Kate and George. The relationship between Lynne and Kate—the sustaining friendships between women, has a long tradition in feminist literature as it does in women's lives. However, as Felski maintains in her discussion of novels of 'self-discovery', which to some extent might describe *Swimming*, it is usually in the act of leaving the confines of a marriage that a woman is free to enter into her own life, toward greater self-knowledge. Narratives that centre on a woman's process of self-discovery subvert both the romance narrative that ends with marriage, and the failed romance narrative that often ends with the woman's death or her descent into madness. This 'act of separation' Felski contests frees a woman to have a social identity that is not attached to a man or to being a wife or a mother. Often women in these novels

The comfort and strength which the protagonist gains from the company of women... is a long-standing tradition... which emerges as an insistent theme in women's writing. (Felski 1989:139)

[Self-discovery] genre is used by women as a means of creating symbolic fictions of women's survival and resistance... The feminist self-discovery narrative... seeks to negate the cultural authority version of women's experience in order to put alternative versions in its place. (Felski 1989:151)

[Self-discovery genre traces] a process of separation as essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge. (Felski 1989:124)

remain single or more recently enter relationships with other women. Kate is single for several years after her separation from Tom, however, by the time we meet her in the novel she is in a relationship with George. In this relationship she maintains her autonomy. Is this possible? Or did you doze off?

**Novelist:** It is difficult to write and sleep, but sometimes I doze off and this does happen. Writing George—the imagination meets feminist *vigilance*—and there are also questions of disrupting feminist conventions.

In earlier drafts Anna in *Facing the Music*, had no child but I felt... I needed to show that this was a woman capable of love otherwise people would read it and they would think, oh god, she is so poisoned against everything because of the inadequate mother... and her father... by giving her Lily it showed she was capable of love. As soon as I bought Lily in I knew where the ending was going to be. I gave Anna a child... because that was what would work for this novel... The child had a function.

...I did not want Anna to be dismissed in the book as damaged as soon as you put that term damaged on a character... you take away their credibility... Every character, every event, everything has got to justify itself in the novel as a whole. I would give someone twins if I thought it would work and I'd kill off their kids if I thought it would work. It's the fiction. As a writer I guess I just see children as tools. (Andrea Goldsmith A:1)

George came first of all from the imagination. Sitting in a café in Brunswick, I watched as a group of 'old' bikers parked their Harleys, drank lattes, rolled cigarettes and laughed. They did remind me, as George reminded Kate, of some of the men who lived in my working class neighbourhood when I was a child (though there was no Pete in my life—the imagination doing its own thing once again).

George came onto the page. I liked him and I thought Kate would too—but like you, like Kate herself, I thought that Kate should be single in her sixties. I thought being married would compromise her personhood, her autonomy but then I questioned that too. After all Kate and I are both heterosexual women, sensual and sexual beings, is there no possibility of love and autonomy in a relationship with a man; not even once we are able to articulate our needs and desires. What is it that Germaine Greer calls herself—'incurably heterosexual' (Greer 1990:230)? Kate is aware of her body and her desires and after all George is a not only a devoted lover with a sense of humour but an intimate friend and partner. As a feminist is it imperative that I resist that? Is it so impossible to imagine? Is self-knowledge really more attainable for lesbians and single women? Is intimacy impossible between men and women?



**Theorist:** I can relate to Greer's 'incurable heterosexuality' too, and you are right to ask: where is the desire of the heterosexual woman in feminist theorising of feminist fiction writing? A number of feminist fiction writers and theorists have used 'lesbian' as a central metaphor for woman's desire and for woman's freedom from the signifier *woman*. There is a certain pleasure, even for me, a heterosexual woman, in the development of a theoretical position that marginalises heterosexuality, that subverts and brings into question its acculturation, but it is problematic. The universalising of 'lesbian' as the norm of *woman* excludes all of us who are and 'choose' to remain heterosexual (Braidotti 2002:35).

Witting... proposes we dismiss the signifier 'woman' as epistemologically and politically inadequate, and suggests that we replace it with the category 'lesbian'. The lesbian is not a woman because a lesbian has subtracted herself from identities based on the Phallus... Witting's position while attractive in that it aims to empower women is problematic in that it universalises the lesbian into a new model of normativity... Moreover it certainly excludes a priori the possibility of freely chosen or optional heterosexuality. (Braidotti 2002:35)

**Novelist:** We have both confessed to our own 'incurable heterosexuality' and an attraction to George. Is this frivolous?

**Theorist:** I love the sound of *frivolous*, its breathy dance in my mouth; it has a sense of delight, of laughter and brings back memories of a long-ago girlhood. But *frivolous* is too light and silly. Like fairyfloss. Your use of it in this context highlights, I think, a feminist discomfort with heterosexual desire. I understand it, I have often felt it myself.

**Novelist:** You have a point: *frivolous* is not appropriate here: it demeans George, the quality of their relationship, and the importance of intimacy in relationships between men and women. I think of us as feminists who know how to dance and laugh; *joyful* and *passionate* are more appropriate descriptors than *frivolous*.

The 'lesbian' like Cixous's metaphor of mother worries me as it does you. I don't want to replace one universalising signifier with another that also limits my possibili-

ties. Instead the aim must be to broaden our understanding of what it means to be a woman—that is multiple and diverse. I refuse to believe that my heterosexual desire is/will always and only going to lead me back to the position of the *other*, the lesser *other* to man. I refuse to suppress my heterosexual desire in this way. I refuse to identify as a lesbian to be finally free. I refuse to change Kate's sexuality or to suppress her desires.

George and Kate have 'romantic' moments and connections, but this is never a romance narrative—George is not the white knight, his motorcycle is not a horse and Kate does not need rescuing. I live with a man who, unlike my father, does not try to tear me away from my work. He brings me coffee and at the end of a long day on the computer he offers to massage my aching neck and shoulders, at night we cuddle up and have sex. He tells me over and over that my work is important. We have our moments, disagreements and disputes, of course, however I do not feel compromised here. In this relationship there is love and intimacy.

I am not 'a romantic'. I know I must be *vigilant* but if a heterosexual relationship in which a woman can be 'free' is not possible then maybe I am not as much of a 'realist' as I thought. While I have no desire to romanticise heterosexuality or marriage, I have no intention of annihilating it either.

**Theorist:** It is up to us, writer and theorist, as heterosexual feminists to imagine and write intimate heterosexual relationships in which a woman is 'free' to be herself. To bring them into being. And to do this while disrupting the prevailing order and the traditional romance plots in which the woman must always surrender herself to the man.

By an inevitable logic we are back with the sex war, and man, the enemy, is at the same time, for very many women writers and their readers, man, the woman's dearest friend. In an ideal world, the Free Woman meets the Free Man, the male strong enough not to be threatened by her hard-won autonomy, yet tender enough to course in her the kind of love that the old-style male never got anywhere near. (Miles 1990: 176)

I am reluctant to leave romance and desire behind but want to move on to ask a question about the structure of *Swimming*, a 'realist' narrative with modernist and postmodernist tendencies, and your use of structure to rupture and disrupt both the power structures and the negative discourses of childlessness that they construct.

Breaking the sequence is a rupture in habits of narrative order. (Du Plessis 1985:376)

**Novelist:** I wanted to bring in the voice of the older Kate, the Kate who could look back on her life and measure and assess the consequences of not having children. How would she narrate her life? This question drove the writing of the older Kate; I was not so concerned with what actually happened—if that could ever be written even in a nonfictional narrative—but how she chooses to construct her narrative, how she chooses to tell her own story. We come to understand who we are by the stories we tell ourselves about our past. The way we give our experiences shape and meaning. I won't go as far as Kearney goes in saying the unnarrated life is 'not worth living' but it is beyond our grasp; shapeless it dissolves. As individuals and as nations we construct particular historical narratives, which then give us our identity even though we know that who we are is never simple or fixed. Every narrative, like every landscape, is constructed from a particular perspective.

Writing not only records a life it generates it... (Grahame 2001:43)

Is the drama of Poppy's life to be found in the way she told it? Or in the way I tell it? Who speaks in whose name? Dimly I began to understand why my struggle with her is also a struggle with myself and my own attempt to speak. (Modjeska 1990:94)

I shall go so far as to argue, rephrasing Socrates that the unnarrated life is not worth living. (Kearney 2002:14)

Storytelling may be said to humanise time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a mythos. (Kearney 2002:4)

Kate writes her past, and this story within the story, acts to reveal the text as a construct, so that it is impossible to forget it is fiction. It acts to contest the truth, as Kate's story is contested by Tom and by Lynne and even by Kate herself. Kate distances herself from the past by writing in the third person, by writing her younger self as a semi-fictional character, but though she does not choose to claim the 'I' speaking position in these stories of her past, she is still able to write and make real a version of that past experience of her struggle to have a child. I chose the third person point of view for those sections to create a space between Kate the writer,

Identity for me is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self... it is retrospective in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process... identity is made of successive identification, that is to say unconscious internalised images that escape rational control. (Braidotti 1994:166)

and Kate, the protagonist, to bring into question the reliability of memory and to unconceal the art of constructing and fictionalising a narrative.



Gethsemene, Sunday's Doll, 1953  
Joy Hester (Bourke 1995)

Kate writes as way of making her experience real, of bringing Sarah, her unborn, never-born but much imagined child to life. Which is of course an attempt to make her experience of Sarah a *real* experience even as it exists at least in part outside of the *real* and the *rational* world. Sarah exists and continues to exist with each pregnancy, and beyond it. Sarah is the naming of Kate's desire. The character Sarah, in *Writing Sarah* like, Sunday Reed's doll, Gethsemene, is both real and an emblem of an experience that might otherwise be forgotten.

As Kate structures the narrative, works through memory and writing, she is forced to incorporate or at least entertain the memories others have of that time and it leads her to question what is true and what is real. The narrative she creates is not only the narrative of her *childlessness*, but of her separation from Tom, and the development of her own creativity and personhood.

I wanted Kate, the older Kate, the writer, to speak in the 'I' voice not because she has a stable and fixed identity, but precisely because she hasn't. What was important for me was that she claims the right to speak from a position that is not fixed; where there are no fixed answers; no resolutions.

The older Kate is the subject, the speaking subject and she is constructing the narrative of the younger Kate who is both the speaking subject and the object. I wanted these two strands to intertwine and contest the notion of 'fixed' identity and of *childless woman*. Here the woman is the mythmaker, the storyteller, creating her own alternative narratives, *figurations* and discourses of childlessness.

Gethsemene was Sunday's doll. Faceless, long-haired and stuffed with lavender from the Heide garden, it sat on her bed like a surrealist personage where it was duly greeted by visitors. For Sunday, it was an emblem of grieving, of her infertility. (Bourke 1995:22)



Me and My Doll 1937, Frida Kahlo  
(Herrera 1983)



Henry Ford Hospital 1932 Frida  
Kahlo (Herrera 1983)

The 'I' narrative combined with the *Writing Sarah* sections also provide an opportunity to hear Kate's reflections, her interior monologue as well as what she articulates to others about her *childlessness*. Those moments of sadness when she wants, prays that Lynne will miscarry or thinks about stealing a baby, when she is erratic and on edge. Contrasted with the times when she is not sure that having a child is what she wants at all, when she becomes angry with the suggestion that she use IVF, when she is searching for the stories of other *childless* women.

Like Frida Kahlo who drew and painted her experience of miscarriages and infertility, Kate writes *Writing Sarah*; to give her loss, her experience of loss, and her lost child a real material presence; writing provides the opportunity to manifest what is invisible.

My *intention* was to give voice to those aspects of women's lives that have no public presence, to the unspeakable, to give voice to the murderous feelings Kate has towards other women and to allow her to think the unthinkable. Kate's narrative is a narrative of revelation and disclosure—of letting herself be seen as she is, of risking being read as failed wife and barren woman, aware of these likely representations, of these possible interpretations, and constantly contesting them.

There is no real ending to Kate's narrative for her whole life as experience, memory and narrative construction could be rewritten over and over to create new and different landscapes.

**Theorist:** She is Kristeva's liberated woman existing between semiotic and symbolic, between reason and imaginary and refusing the binaries. And causing 'gender trouble' for the reader who is wondering, even expecting as they read that Kate

Frida wanted to draw her lost child, wanted to see him exactly as he should have looked at the moment when he was miscarried... (Herrera 1983:142)

Frida began work on a series of masterpieces which had no precedent in the history of art... Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time... (Herrera 1983:148)

To play with mimesis is this, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it... to make 'visible' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible. (Irigaray 1977:76)

might go mad, that the *childlessness* will drive her crazy or make her bitter. She does go over the edge once in a dream, the dream of stealing the baby and then again when she burns the sculptures, but she can never be categorised as insane, she is sane and sensible and a productive and contributing member of the community. I love Judith Butler's concept of 'gender trouble' and I borrow it here to consider the possibility that the repetition, the performance of these alternative identities may cause trouble for notions of gender, notions of what it is to be a woman. Your narrative of *childlessness*, our actual *childlessness* and consequent public declaration of it, causing trouble—it makes me smile, laugh, the same resisting laughter that I inherited from my mother and my aunt.

**Novelist:** My hope is that the reader is confronted by their own taken-for-granted meanings.

**Theorist:** This is one of the ways I measure the success of a novel: when the narrative exposes my reading position and confronts my taken for granted assumptions and values.

Kate's narrative of her younger self reflects the 'complex and multilayered' nature of identity. But I can see that as I read some sections, even though I know she remains *childless*, my desire is for her to have a child and my fear is that not having a child will drive her mad—after all I have seen this before in other novels, in films, on television.

**Novelist:** Like Kate in *Swimming*, I long to hear those other stories of women without children, who live 'meaningful lives'.

What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself. (Butler 1990:32)

By living meaningful lives, childless women challenge many of the popular, socially accrued meanings attributed to sexual differences; this makes us uncomfortable... [and] makes us rethink basic ideas about the meaning and interplay of gender and sexuality. We can no longer ignore the fact that female sexuality exists and expresses itself separately from its reproductive functions. (Ireland 1994:148)

There is in short, a politics and economics to the 'meaning' of the texts of culture, because meaning is produced by a culturally situated reader who reads/writes only by means of reading/writing strategies that are historically (in terms of class, race, gender, and other social factors) available to her. (Morton & Zavarzadah 1994 85)

But what about those other stories? The stories they censor, the stories of women who desperately want children; who pray to saints and angels; who endure miscarriage after miscarriage; those women who never get pregnant and remain childless forever. There are no stories, of course, of those women happy to be childless. Childless women don't exist in the world her mother and aunt live in—but Kate knows childless women, women like Penny who are happy not to have children, who find other ways through their lives. The stories her mother and her aunt tell her are the stories of the journey to motherhood, they involve struggle, grief and faith and in the end there is always a baby—inside those stories no other journey is imaginable. (Gandolfo 2004:187)

Jane is in there deliberately because I didn't want to write a book that was all about failed mothers or women that didn't have children. I thought that was unfair. Jane is the person I see in there as a relatively successful, relatively natural mother. (Susan Varga A:6)

**Theorist:** And so it seems even we feminists, desire the happy endings—even as we argue for no endings, for a focus on *becoming*, on process. In this context what constitutes a happy ending?

**Novelist:** Traditional happy endings give us marriage and the child but what are feminist happy endings—endings with no closure—are they possible?

**Theorist:** Braidotti distinguishes between identity and political subjectivity, connecting identity to the unconscious and political subjectivity to a more conscious will. This highlights the contradictions you are eluding to, the contradictions between our culturally constructed desires and our political commitments.

**Novelist:** This is my *intention* in allowing Kate to articulate her darkest thoughts and actions. This idea of 'difference within' each subject that Braidotti talks about (Braidotti 1994:166) seems crucial to me. Kate, like me, is a feminist whose desires are sometimes contrary to her beliefs and values. This is the nature isn't it of being a feminist who has grown up, been trained, taught to be a *woman* at a particular historical time, at a particular place as part of a particular culture—she desires happy endings even when she does not believe in them, when she knows they were never happy endings for her. Part of that training, is also the retraining we had that turned us into feminists. For Kate, these dark thoughts seem anti-feminist, politically incorrect, thoughts that she must bring her conscious political will too—they mirror that of the writer—a kind of *vigilance* within one's own life. A questioning. For Kate choosing not to participate in IVF is that exercising of her political will, against the desire to have child, the origin of which she suspects even as she gives over to it.

Identity bears a privileged bond to unconscious process, where a political subjectivity is a common and wilful position. Unconscious desire and wilful choice do not always coincide. (Braidotti 1994:166)

This writing caused constant conflicts and concerns I did not want Kate to be dismissed for being anti-mother, or to be seen as unsympathetic to other women's needs and desires. This is another of these struggles. Some of these struggles are with feminist discourse itself. But to pick up on your quote from Braidotti to deal with these contradictions with lightness and humour, which brings our discussion about George to mind again. And that old saying from the seventies, attributed to Emma Goldman: *If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution.*

Leesa's place in the novel is more difficult to articulate—right up until the last draft of the novel I was never sure whether Leesa should have her own separate narrative strand. In early drafts there were several sections from Leesa's point of view, though written in the third person, this narrative not only allowed for an intergenerational dialogue and an exterior view of Kate but also for the construction of Mai's story not in opposition to, but along side Kate's story. It ensured that Mai didn't remain the completely silent *other* woman. However, as I wrote further drafts and developed the structure of the novel, as Kate took on the role of narrator these sections did not fit.

Leesa is an important character in the novel, though we only see her through Kate's eyes, her work and her concerns, not only to create a space in the narrative for Mai, but also allow for the exploration of a woman's creative life. Leesa's development as an artist can be seen to be a result of Tom's influence, and obviously he did influence her, but I wanted to explore how both Kate and Mai enrich Leesa's life and art. Leesa sculpts images of her mother to make her mother visible—not as the object of desire, or the exotic *other* but as Mai—mother, refugee, mistress, social worker, cook, aunt, Buddhist, friend and exfriend; a complex woman and a never fully understood real woman with her own problematic relationship to the world.

Grace, Olive, Dorothy and Nora—a novel about four girls. Like *Pride and Prejudice*. It's a classic form. Grace stays home, she does her duty, she marries and she has an entirely conventional life. She's reliable. Dorothy was wild, deeply wild and untameable. She pretends to be tamed but the wildness sprung out of her in the end. Nora was deeply romantic and she was soon put in her place. Olive had a little money of her own which was very important... I didn't deliberately make that contrast. I wished to write of the times it just turned out like that. I saw it afterward. (Jessica Anderson A:3)

At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening... a young boy... whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance... with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference... I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy... [the] Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. 'I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things.' Anarchism meant that to me, and I would live it in spite of the whole world—prisons, persecution, everything. Yes, even in spite of the condemnation of my own comrades I would live my beautiful ideal. (Goldman 1934:56)



This exploration of her mother is in part a vehicle for self-exploration. Leesa and Mai both complex, multiple subjects. Leesa inherits from Mai the desire to narrate and shape her own life. Kate supports Leesa on that journey and by doing that links are created again between Kate and Mai.

*My intention* was to create the many aspects of Kate's life, of Mai, Leesa, and Lynne's lives; Threads that become knotted and tangled. That break. That can be twisted and tied. That in the right hands create doilies and tapestries that tell our stories. Many strands of coloured balls of wool knitted together, creating a new colour, giving texture and depth and calling colour itself into question.

Poppy had a habit... of plaiting scraps of wool, cotton, thin strips of material, hair ribbon, crepe paper and anything else at hand, into a thick multi-coloured twine... When I look closely at Poppy's braided twine, I fancy I can recognize scraps from dresses I wore more than thirty years ago... Sometimes I think I should have kept every ball of it, and then all I'd have to do would be to trace the twine back, thread by thread, unplait it into a perfect record of her life, laid out in an order I could follow, step by step, thread by thread, back to the first knot. (Modjeska 1990:15-6)

**Theorist:** Coloured threads that problematise the category *woman*.

**Novelist:** Yes and maybe even what it means to be a human being living one's life with all the paradoxes and contradictions. We are expected to know what we want. Do you want children? The answer must be, finally, (we are allowed a little indecisiveness in our teens and twenties) yes or no—well actually it must be *yes*—but if we say *no* we are required to defend it. Maybe some of us never know what we want. Awareness of the way culture and language is working on us; this awareness that what we want is constructed within and before us makes us wary of all our desires.

**Theorist:** I'd like to go back to the destruction of the sculptures, which, if I was trying to 'unmask' the secrets of art, I could interpret in a number of different ways. I found reading it quite painful, like watching someone burn books, how did you come to write it?

**Novelist:** I am sure there are many different readings and I have a couple myself but I will not get into that. Kate fell in love with Tom through his sculptures, and even, I would say, partly because of them. She was attracted to his creativity, which touched the core of her own creativity and inspired it. At least that's how I saw the genesis of that relationship. When I was writing that section, I knew as I looked at the sculptures through Kate's eyes, that she would want to destroy them. But also that I should stop her, that art is sacred. It was sacred to Kate; it is sacred to me. But at the same time I knew intuitively that she had to destroy them.

When I came back to that section to see what I had written, I was concerned that Kate might be read as mad or as the *hysterical woman*, as implied by *hell has no fury like a woman's scorned*. But overwhelming the writing was my own recognition of those desires. Kristeva 'enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames...'; to think the unthinkable, and then to do it. Kate has at that moment a need to destroy her dependence on Tom's creativity, on his art, on him. To destroy the sculptures is a sacrilegious act. Like Kate, most of us reading it will find her destruction of the sculptures a more offensive act, less forgivable than Tom's affair with Mai. It is an act that Kate finds almost impossible to forgive herself for; but it is something she has to face and admit to. This act of burning the sculptures, represented for me, Kate's frustration as she struggles to disentangle herself from patriarchal and feminist expectations so she can discover for herself the possibilities open to her in forging a *meaningful* life.

Where does the committed woman writer go? Finding a voice, searching for words and sentences: say some thing, one thing, or no thing: tie/untie, read/unread, discard their forms; scrutinize the grammatical habits of your writing and decide for yourself whether they free or repress. Again order(s). Shake syntax, smash myths, and if you lose, slide on, unearth some new linguistic paths. Do you surprise? Do you shock? Do you have a choice? (Trinh 1989:20)

## *What kind of map have we drawn? What kind of ending reflects no ending?*

**Novelist:** What kind of map have we drawn? Have we drawn a map at all? If we say here is a mountain someone else may find a hill, if we mark X the spot for whale watching and the whales—without consulting us—migrate, our map will not reflect our journey. Or will it? The journey though is also mapped on our bodies, and the memories are embedded in the folds of our flesh, that make us more robust than fits with popular taste.

There are many points, many features on the landscape but I want to follow up further: *intention* and *vigilance* that are bathing in an ocean of *laughter*, for they make the difference to me as a writer. They stand out across the territory of my writing like these magnificent rock formations in the Blue Mountains, the Three Sisters. Do you know them? I can look across at them and contemplate the landscape that they give shape to. This is where I situate myself.

They are a wondrous sight, full of the joy and the passion, that drives me to write. The echo the rhythm and music that drives the dance but also the power of the dance to drive the music.

**Theorist:** The Three Sisters is an interesting choice of symbol for those three aspects of your feminist fiction-making. I love the Blue Mountains and have on a number of occasions stood at Echo Point and looked out at the Three Sisters. One of the Aboriginal legends, that tells of their origin holds a strong message for women, when told in this context, and especially for us feminist writers and theorists.

Recently there has been some challenge to this story's authenticity, however, there's no final proof yet. As all stories are constructed, and truth is such a slippery thing I will tell it anyway. This is the version I wrote in one of my notebooks last time I was there—my version of the Dreamtime story:

*The Three Sisters, Meenhi, Wimlah and Gunedoo lived in the Blue Mountains with their father, Tyawan. They were afraid of the Bunyip, a monster who lived in a cave or deep hole close to their home. One day when Tyawan had to go away he left his daughters on a ledge to keep them safe. The daughters were playing in the sunshine when they saw a centipede; frightened they threw a rock at it. The rock fell into the valley; the sound of it hitting the ground woke the Bunyip.*

*The angry Bunyip raced towards the sisters. Tyawan heard them cry out and used his magic bone to turn them into stone so the Bunyip could not hurt them. The Bunyip chased Tyawan who turned himself into a lyrebird and escaped. But during his transformation he dropped his bone. Even today he is still looking for it. Without it he could not turn his daughters back and so they continue to stand, tall rock formations that dominate the valley.*

I am not going to attempt to read the meaning of this story for the Aboriginal people but for me it says a great deal about fear, about what can happen if we depend on the father to protect us, to set us free, if we are not able to or allowed to fight our own monsters.

**Novelist:** Also something about symbols, metaphors and words and how we use them. I had forgotten the legend of the Three Sisters. Though there is at least one

other version, in which the sisters, members of the Katoomba tribe fall in love with three brothers from the Nepean tribe. Tribal law says they cannot marry but the brothers decide to abduct the sisters and a tribal war breaks out. The witch-doctor father turns them into stone to protect them during the battle. He dies of course and they are never turned back into the human form.

Neither version does the girls much good, except of course that as rock formations they have survived the centuries and have a kind of immortality they would never have achieved in the human form.

Your point, I think, is that we must be take charge of our own destiny. After all centipedes are not that dangerous, and I imagine Bunyips are not that clever. If we let our fathers protect us we might end up immobilised.

Writing must have its own integrity, and the writer must give herself over to it. But I am always the feminist even when I am swept away by images and words into another world. So for me *intention* and *vigilance* are vital; they along with *laughter* are my three sisters strong enough to fight off Bunyips, centipedes and over protective fathers.

I must be awake in my writing. Sometimes I can hear the words of patriarchal domination coming out of my mouth. Without *intention*, without *vigilance*, without the passion that comes from and allows for the *laughter*, I can slip back, slip into domination, subordination, and exclusion.

Feminism... is a politics and its advance requires from its adherents not passive agreement but active intervention. (Belsey & Moore 1989:1157)

A feminist nomadic project that allows for internal contradictions and attempts to negotiate between unconscious structures of desire and conscious political choices. (Braidotti 1994:31)

*I do not any longer believe—my feelings do not allow me to believe—that the white eye sees from the center. Yet I often find myself thinking as if I still believed that were true. Or rather, my thinking stands still. I feel in a state of arrest, as if my brain and heart were refusing to speak to each other. My brain, a woman's brain, has exulted in breaking the taboo against women thinking, has taken off in the wind say, I am the woman who asks questions. My heart has been leaning in a much more humble and laborious way, learning that feelings are useless without facts, that all privilege is ignorant at the core. (Rich 1987:216)*

Always I bring *intention*, feminist *intention* with me to my desk along with pen and paper. And *vigilance*, active political reading of my own writing, of what I am saying, to what the words mean. At times I might doze off. Sometimes I will not see what is in front of me. I hold this contradiction, and as Adrienne Rich writes in her poem, *Implosions*, I search to find words that will affect change, wake up all readers, while knowing I cannot predict every interpretation.

*I wanted to choose words that even you  
would have to be changed by  
Implosions Adrienne Rich*

You have to tap into what's going on and trust. On good days there is some kind of grace and on bad days it's a struggle. Other days I have to come back and look at it with a completely different head, a more intellectual head and think, what are the implications of this and what am I actually saying here, what does it mean? For me it's a kind of moving, moving backwards and forwards. (Drusilla Modjeska A:7)

My writing always refers to other writing. It is locked in to its codes, its rules, open to multiple interpretations I can not control but this is what I do, I fashion and shape, and make meaning even as I know no meaning exists because besides me, above me, around me are all those meaning makers who are sure they know the meaning, who are sure their meaning is the truth.

And you are there, theorist, critic to read actively, analytically, with *vigilance* and with *intention* to highlight both the achievements and the slippages. The truth of this dialogue is in the journey—not the mapping—not how do you define feminist writing but how do you write *from and toward women*, how do you make women's lives (in their diversity) visible.

Contemporary cultural critics... must be ever vigilant in our work because it is all too easy to end up writing in an ethnographic self-serving manner.... (hooks 1999:41-2)

*If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life we are living at the moment.*  
(Rich 1978:43)

**Theorist:** A *vigilance* that does not make vigilantes of us. It is an important warning—the state of being awake versus a paternal protectiveness that does not allow any of us to 'fly' or laugh.

*When I write, it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. In one another we will never be lacking. (Cixous 1975:361)*

**Novelist:** During all this talking the ocean has kept rolling in, and now it's time for a swim.

**Theorist:** There is so much more talking to be done; Lynne's dementia and memory, the mother of the muses, Tom and Kate's relationship, and... but you have seduced me with mention of swimming and now I have my sights set on the sea.

**Novelist:** The salt water, and the waves will provide inspiration for later discussions. Time to take *vigilance* and *intention* into the sea. Time to shed our clothes, like Kate did, and swim in the ocean, time to dive into new depths. To move beyond the search for treasures among old wrecks and start building new ships that can cross all borders. To make room for the multiple voices, to tell many many stories. Time to give over to *laughter*.

This is a pause in the dialogue, not an ending.

*This is the end of these notes, but it is not an ending.  
(Rich 1987:231)*

*The Novelist and the Theorist rise and stretch, they walk towards the ocean removing their clothes, and then dive into the water. This is not an ending, it is a break in the sequence, a time for swimming...*

## *Appendix A: List of Interviews with Writers*

- 1     *Interview with Andrea Goldsmith (A:1)*  
Clifton Hill, Melbourne, 26th May, 2002
  
- 2     *Interview with Delia Falconer (A:2)*  
Potts Point, Sydney, 11th November 2002.
  
- 3     *Interview with Jessica Anderson (A:3)*  
Darling Point, Sydney, 12th November 2002.
  
- 4     *Interview with Stephanie Dowrick (A:4)*  
Sydney, 12th November 2002.
  
- 5     *Interview with Lillian Ng, (A:5)*  
Sydney, 13th November 2002.
  
- 6     *Interview with Susan Varga (A:6)*  
Elizabeth Bay, Sydney, 14th November, 2002.
  
- 7     *Interview with Drusilla Modjeska (A:7)*  
Darling Point, Sydney, 16th November 2002.



## *Appendix B:*

# *Australian Novels Exploring Childlessness*

This is a list of some Australian fiction, which explores some aspect of childlessness. This cannot profess to be a complete list as it is difficult to identify all novels exploring a particular theme. These novels were identified via:

- Library catalogues (though not all libraries note a novel's themes in their catalogues)
- Austlit database. This is the most extensive database of Australian fiction. Childlessness, infertility and reproductive technology are all listed as categories. However, many of the novels listed in this Appendix did not appear under these categories in the database.
- Frequent reading of fiction reviews in newspapers and journals
- Requests to family, friends, friends of friends, colleagues, and members of web based newsgroups such as Auslit
- General internet searches of online journals, review sites and newspapers

In a small group of the novels listed below childlessness and/or infertility could be said to one of the key themes (see\*). In the majority childlessness/infertility is a minor theme. For this purpose of selecting novels the 'childless woman' was deemed to be a woman without children close to or over childbearing age, and therefore included novels with these women as key characters even when their childlessness is not extensively explored

## Fiction List:

Anderson, J. 1978, *Tirra Lirra by the River*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Melbourne.

Astley, T. 1999, *Drylands*, Viking (Penguin), Melbourne.

Baranay, I. 1989, *Between Careers*, Collins Publishers, Sydney.

Calthorpe, M. 1982, *The Dyehouse*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney.

Carroll, J. 1996, *In the Quietness of My Aunt's House and Bad Blood*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

\*Dark, E. 1934, *Prelude to Christopher*, Halstead Classics, Rushcutters Bay, NSW.

\*Dettman, J. 1999, *Jacaranda Blue*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney.

Donovan, K. 2001, *Bush Oranges*, Viking (Penguin Books), Melbourne.

Dowrick, S. 1997, *Tasting Salt*, Viking (Penguin Books), Melbourne.

Dowse, S. 1996, *Digging*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.

\*Dugdale, J. 1996, *The Descendant*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

Falconer, D. 1997, *The Service of Clouds*, Picador, Sydney.

Farmer, B. 1992, *The Seal Woman*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

- Findlay, M. 1999, *Republic of Women*, Queensland University Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- Ford, C. 2000, *NYC*, Text, Melbourne.
- Fox, J. 1995, *Bracelet Honeymyrtle*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, Sydney.
- \*Freeman, J. 2002, *Tick Tock*, Bantam Books, Sydney.
- Garner, H. 1980, *Honour and Other People's Children*, McPhee Gribble (Penguin), Melbourne.
- Goldsmith, A. 1989, *Facing the Music*. Penguin Books, Melbourne.
- 1990, *Gracious Living*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.
- 1991, *Modern Interiors*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.
- 1998, *Under the Knife*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, Sydney.
- \*Goldsworthy, P. 1992, *Honk, if you are Jesus*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- 1996, *Keep it Simple Stupid*, Flamingo, Sydney.
- \*Gregory, R. 1986, *Novice Death*, Dykebooks, Melbourne.
- Grenville, K. 1985, *Lilian's Story*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- 1994, *Dark Palace*, Picador, Sydney.
- Gunn, K. 2002, *Featherstone*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- Jolley, E. 1981, *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle.

- 1983a, *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.
- 1983b, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.
- 1986, *The Well*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.
- \*—— 1988, *The Sugar Mother*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria.
- \*Karmel, P. 2000, *Me Myself I*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Langley, E. 1994, *The Pea Pickers*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Modjeska, D. 1994, *The Orchard*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney.
- Moorhead, F. 2000, *Darkness More Visible*, Spinifex, Melbourne.
- Moorhouse, F. 1993, *Grand Days*, Picador, Sydney.
- 2000, *Dark Palace*, Knopf (Random House), Sydney.
- \*Ng, L. 1994, *Silver Sister*, Mandarin Australia (Reed Books), Melbourne.
- 1997, *Swallowing Clouds*, Penguin Books, Melbourne.
- \*Page, G. 1999, *The Scarring*, Hale & Iremonger, Alexandria, NSW.
- \*Park, R. 1959, *One-A-Pecker Two-A-Pecker*, Reader's Book Club in association with The Companion Book Club, London.
- \*Scott, J. 1996, *Before I Wake*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Melbourne.
- Spence, H.C. 1994, *Clara Morison*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia.

- Spencer, B. 1996, *How to Conceive of a Girl*, Vintage, Sydney.
- St John, M. 1999, *A Stairway to Paradise*, Fourth Estate, London.
- Stead, C. 1970, *The Man Who Loved Children*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Tennant, K. 1990, *Ride on Stranger*, Collins/Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- \*Townsend, H. 1997, *Balancing Act*, HaperCollins, Sydney.
- \*Varga, S. 1999, *Happy Families*, Hodder Headline, Sydney.
- White, P. 1948, *The Aunt's Story*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England.
- Witting, A. 2001, *After Cynthia*, Penguin, Melbourne.

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