

“A Woman Writing Thinks Back Through Her Mothers:”

An Analysis of the Language Women Poets Employ

Through an Exploration of Poetry About Pregnancy and Childbirth

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By

Carla Atherton

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the relationship between the experiences particular to the female body, namely pregnancy and childbirth, and the language employed to voice these experiences. This thesis is set up to reflect the physical cycle of pregnancy and birth. It is divided into three chapters. The first chapter discusses the desire for and the conception of a new use of language, a language equipped to carry the messages, creations, and voices of women. The conception of an expansion of language and the physical conception of a child are paralleled. In this chapter, poetry about wanting to write, wanting to become pregnant, and conception are used as examples of the emergence of the expanded language. In Chapter Two, the incubation of this new language is discussed, its many components and characteristics are described, and the discussion of the possible existence of a women's language is continued, by again analyzing a selection of poetry written by women. In this chapter, poetry about pregnancy and childbirth are used to exemplify the use of this language. The discussion of the gestation and birth of the expanded language with the physical gestation and birth of a child are paralleled. In Chapter Three, this notion of a women's language is further discussed, using poetry about new motherhood to demonstrate the effectiveness and existence of new ways to employ our given language. The discussion of what comes after the birth of a new, expanded language is paralleled with the experiences of a mother after the birth of her child. The ultimate conclusion of this thesis is that there is no one language that women do or should employ when writing, but a movement toward writing *through* the body when writing *about* the body, about experiences solely experienced by women.

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Dedication

For my children.

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Introduction

Breaking the Taboo

Talking about birth in our society has largely been seen as distasteful, and motherhood as mundane; something private not public, belonging to women's sphere, unclean even. I have been given the distinct impression in literary circles that writing about it is a stage you go through before returning to "more important things." (Palmeira, *In the Gold of the Flesh* xvii)

In the past century, Western women and women in countries heavily influenced by Western thought have taken significant strides in representing their bodies in literature: "women are now taking part in the transgressive and subversive activity of writing the female body" (Tarter 31). Where the female body entered the 20th century in the background of the literary subject, it has been brought out of the shadows and, though not yet into the foreground, at least into the light.¹ Many social and medical factors contributed to this "unsilencing." After the 1930's, women's mortality in childbirth lessened as the field of medicine advanced (Shorter xi), thus diminishing the hold childbearing had on the lives of women. Being healthier, women began to have more energy to put toward things such as writing. In the decades following, women began to control their fertility increasingly through education about their bodies and contraceptive methods.

Second-Wave feminism brought with it to the Western world the notions of voice, equality, and choice, which gave women the inspiration, time, drive, and confidence to

Notes

¹ For example, Kate Wales writes about the image of the female body in society, Daphne Marlatt writes about the female body in literature; Trinh Minh-ha writes about the mind/body dichotomy; Iris Young writes about the pregnant body; Dale Spender writes about women and language; and Adrienne Rich writes about women and poetry.

speak from their experience.² Various feminist theorists such as Wales, Marlatt, Minh-ha, Young, and Rich have written about the image of the female body in society, the female body in literature, the mind/body dichotomy, the pregnant body, women and language,³ and women and poetry, but it is apparent through my research that scholarly writing about the combination of these topics taken all together is rare or non-existent. I intend not only to link these topics, but to show how they can become a tightly connected system in women's writing, specifically, women's poetry. Daphne Marlatt, Jeni Couzyn, Toi Derricotte, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, and Erica Jong are some of the poets I will study. I have chosen particular poems because they most readily employ the characteristics of what has been coined a “women’s language:” writing that is closely related to the themes of the body and to its rhythms. These characteristics will be explored in the three chapters to come.

This thesis will discuss the relationship between the experiences particular to the female body, namely pregnancy and childbirth, and the language employed to voice these experiences. Tess Cosslett says that "childbirth, as an experience belonging to the private sphere of womanhood, has long been marginalized as a subject for public representation" (Cosslett 1). Through writing about childbirth and pregnancy, women give voice to an act

² Second Wave Feminism is generally identified with a period beginning in the early nineteen sixties. Second Wave Feminism has existed continuously since then, and continues to coexist with what some people call Third Wave Feminism. Whereas first-wave feminism focused largely on de jure (officially mandated) inequalities, second wave feminism saw de jure and de facto (unofficial) inequalities as inextricably linked issues that had to be addressed in tandem. The movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicized, and reflective of a sexist structure of power. If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end to discrimination and oppression (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Wave_Feminism).

³ Throughout this essay, the word “language” is not used to mean an entirely new system of letters and word groups, but the *use* of the letters and words that already exist in the English language.

and a process previously rendered voiceless. In assessing the language in women's poetry about pregnancy and childbirth, I begin this thesis with certain assumptions – that female bodies have certain characteristics, that they may and do shape female experience. It is also important to explore technical components such as rhythm and structure, word usage, imagery, tone, and themes employed in these poems, as there are significant structural and thematic commonalities between the poems about pregnancy and childbirth that are worth our attention.

After analyzing the language used in poetry about pregnancy and childbirth, we can then ask these questions: is this language exclusive to the subjects of pregnancy and childbirth? Is the language employed only by women? What is this notion of a women's language? Is there a specific kind of language that is influenced by the body, that comes out of the body? Theorists Dale Spender, Tess Cosslett, and Daphne Marlatt tackle these questions. They advocate for a way to use language that is equipped to speak female experience. Dale Spender, in her book *Man Made Language*, states that language has been shaped by and tailored to speak for men who were historically the most vocal, powerful, and public of the two sexes. The way in which women speak, and therefore write, has been seen as neither legitimate nor valuable since it does not meet the traditional criteria for good and valuable speech and writing. No allowances have been made for the differences in the bodies, thought processes, and experiences of women and men. Thus, until recently (within the last half-century), women have been discouraged from writing about their experiences, and if they did so despite their rearing, they were openly and relentlessly scrutinized (Cosslett 1). So, how, in an environment where women's bodily experiences have been repressed, do women write about the realities of

female experience? In her collection of essays *Readings From the Labyrinth*, Daphne Marlatt argues that women must write from their bodies, that their experience is rooted in their bodies, and that their writing does not simply reflect the experience of the body but even its rhythms and movement; it "flows with the rhythm of our bodies" (Marlatt *Readings* 12). What happens when women try to write what is not only thought, but also felt? What does this poetry look like? What language is created, born? This thesis will try to answer these questions.

This exploration brings together several types of theories previously only loosely connected. Using body theory, language theory, and poetics together allows new insight into the notion of a women's language. By analyzing the language of women's poetry about childbirth and pregnancy through the lens of these theories, one can gather a more comprehensive and exact view of this intriguing notion. This analysis will also encourage the understanding and valuing of women's writing about pregnancy and childbirth by opening the shroud of taboo that once surrounded it and recognizing its unique place in the literary canon.

This thesis is set up to reflect the physical cycle of pregnancy and birth. First there is conception, then gestation and birth, and lastly after birth. The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter discusses the desire for and the conception of a new use of language, a language equipped to carry the messages, creations, and voices of women. The conception of an expansion of language (an extended vocabulary, an expansion of grammatical rules, and new ways to place words alongside one another) and the physical conception of a child are paralleled. In this chapter, I use poetry about wanting to write, wanting to become pregnant, and conception as examples of the emergence of the

expanded language. In Chapter Two, I discuss the incubation of this new language, describe its many components and characteristics, and further the discussion of the possible existence of a women's language, a language exclusive to women, by again analyzing a selection of poetry written by women. In this chapter, I use poetry about pregnancy and childbirth to exemplify the use of this language. I parallel the discussion of the gestation and birth of the expanded language with the physical gestation and birth of a child. In Chapter Three, I further discuss this notion of a women's language, using poetry about new motherhood to demonstrate the effectiveness and existence of new ways to employ a new language. I parallel the discussion of what comes after the birth of a new, expanded language with the experiences of a mother after the birth of her child. I ultimately come to the conclusion that there is no one language that women do or should employ when writing, but there is a movement toward writing through the body when writing about the body, about experiences solely experienced by women.

Throughout this discussion, I have placed several of my own creative pieces between chapters intending to demonstrate the act of writing the body through the body. This thesis will contain echoes of others' thoughts (the thoughts of those poets and theorists whose ideas have become wrapped up with my own), will repeat itself in a cyclical manner, and ultimately come full circle in an attempt to demonstrate the act of writing through the body.

As is the case with conversation, nothing I write or quote in this thesis is being presented as absolute fact or truth. This thesis is a discussion amongst poets, theorists, and myself – thoughts juxtaposed in such a way as to lead one through the labyrinth of language to the final revelation or discovery: that there is no universal, absolute women's

language, but a movement toward a style of writing expressly to give voice to experiences of the body previously rendered voiceless.

Here is a polylogue of thought, a conversation consisting of many voices, moving through topics of the orality, conversation, and the generational connectedness of women.⁴ Notions of origin, circles (in lives and in conversation and speech), collectivity of speech, stories, ideas, experience, collaboration, telling, embracing difference, history, commonality, and intertextuality combine to create this conversation about the deconstruction and reconstruction of an inherited, given language to the creation of a language equipped to speak maternity. Here is not a linear theory of writing in the feminine, but a more organic, sensory, poetic writing, the sort seen in creative work based in body, where the rules are expanded and possibilities are many to provide a writing environment essential for the expression of the maternal.

As a mother and a poet, I am very interested in language and birth stories. I am fascinated by how motherhood can change, challenge, and expand a woman from the very moment of conception. I have become exceedingly interested in looking further into how a woman then writes her story or experience once she emerges from a journey so common and seemingly connective, yet intensely isolating and removed from the world outside her body. Throughout this thesis, I will refer back to my own experience and the stories I have heard as it is imperative to connect to the physical experience the poetry and theories of language employed by women to write pregnancy and childbirth.

This thesis begins in the middle of a circle.

Notes

⁴ A conversation consisting of many voices.

During pregnancy...I believed from time to time that I understood the continuity of life and death, that my body was a city and a landscape, and that I had personally discovered the moral equivalent of war. During the final stage of labour I felt like a hero, an Olympic athlete, a figure out of Pindar, at whom a stadium should be heaving garlands. At times, again, I was overwhelmed with loathing for the ugliness of my flesh, the obscenity of life itself, all of this ooze, these fluids, the grossness of it. Trying to discover a poetic form which could express such opposite revelations simultaneously, and convey the extraordinary sensation of transformation from being a private individual self to being a portion of something else, I had the sense of being below the surface, where the islands are attached to each other. Other women knew what I knew. Of course they did, they always had. In that case, where were the poems? (Ostriker, *Writing Like a Woman* 127)

This thesis begins with that very question: "Where were the poems?"

The circle begins with the smallest drop of blood, absorbed into the fabric, a spreading ring uncontrollable, unstoppable, expected but always unexpected. It cannot be stopped any more than a girl can stop her push into womanhood.

Chapter one

Conception of a Language

Before a thought, a creation, a piece of writing can begin, there needs to be the conception of an idea, the seed of a beginning. Just as a woman can become pregnant with a child, she can also become pregnant with words, a story, a way to tell that story. In the middle of the 20th century, many women writers began to recognize the need to create a way to tell their stories. This is apparent by the cropping up of poetry and theoretical writing surrounding female bodily issues around this time. Thus, there was the conception of an expansion of language, the creation of a new way to speak about their physical creations.

First, they had to ask: “Where *were* the poems?” (Ostriker 127, my emphasis). Where was the writing about maternity, about birth and motherhood and babies and pregnancy and body? How did women feel about these things? What were their stories, and why were they not telling them, writing them down, giving voice to such a large part of their lives? Theorists, poets, academics, writers, mothers all give valid reasons for this lack, this hole in our written history, in our literary body. Sandra Gilbert, in her introduction to *Mothersongs: Poems For, by, and About Mothers*, says, “Perhaps...the subject was so often sentimentalized, serious writers rarely turned to it” (18). She goes on to say:

To many thinkers, the words ‘mother’ and ‘poet’ seemed to be contradictory terms: the Victorian ideology of maternity defined a mother as a selfless creature who lived entirely for her children while it was thought that a true poet had to

have what the age saw as “masculine” qualities of authority and assertiveness.

(18)

Therefore, how could one write a poem worth reading about the domestic, the topics close to the home and the heart and the body, when men (and a select few women) were producing poetry about romantic love, war, and high art?

In summation of the previous discussion, Western and European women did not write about pregnancy and childbirth because bodily topics were taboo to speak of and certainly to write about, social and health issues, the oral nature of women’s culture, and a lack of a language equipped to express such experiences.

Body Politic

The first of the barriers to women speaking about their bodies were their bodies, themselves. Prior to the 1930's, women's mortality in childbirth was high (Shorter xi); thus childbirth made a large impact on the lives and health of women. Women’s bodies were perceived as weak. However, medical advances and a greater knowledge of women’s health contributed to the beginnings of an “unsilencing” about the topic of the female body. Being healthier, women began to have more energy to put toward activities such as writing and putting onto the page what they had said amongst each other for centuries before. In the decades following the 1930s, women began to increasingly control their fertility through education about their bodies and contraceptive methods.

During the emergence of Second-Wave feminism, women moved beyond focusing on basic human rights such as suffrage, they were able to turn their attention to issues of discrimination, their lack of personal freedoms, patriarchal systems of power,

and oppression. During this time, women began to write about their bodies. One of the topics that arose in this writing was the experience of pregnancy and childbirth.

It needs to be explicitly noted here that the women who had the privilege of thinking about the body beyond every-day survival and who were beginning to gain an audience and find voice during this period of Second-Wave Feminism were predominantly middle-class white women. After the feminist accomplishments of the 60s and 70s, women of colour began to point out that the leaders of the feminist movement were nearly all white, middle-class, educated women and that other women had been excluded, their concerns not addressed, and their lives not improved. There has been an increasing push within the women's movement to try to deal with this issue. Therefore, not all women found voice or had the privilege of telling their stories. Although not all women held (or hold today) equal political power, this thesis follows the movement of Western women toward speaking the experiences of the female body and asserts that though not all women's voices have been listened to equally, it is imperative we attempt to make that so.

Although Western women of the mid-20th century were gaining new-found personal and political freedoms and their general health was improving, another significant debate was taking place. Closely tied to the issue of Western women's health, debated by writers and philosophers since the beginning of the human capacity to reason and deduce, "is the soul/body or mind/body distinction" (Spelman 33). Historically, theorists have argued that the mind and the body are separate entities, and many have placed more value on the mind over the body. There has been a prevalent belief in the modern Western world that "the body is base and the mind is exalted" and "one

transcends the body to achieve anything of spiritual or public worth” (Ostriker, “Body Language” 92-3). Plato wrote extensively about this issue: “According to Plato, the body, with its deceptive senses, keeps us from real knowledge; it rivets us in a world of material things which is far removed from the world of reality; and it tempts us away from the virtuous life” (Spelman 34). The body is seen as a distraction, an impediment, a cheap container for the soul, and talking is a distraction from the more noble act of thinking: “when one is released from the body one finally can get down to the real business of life, for this real business of life is the business of the soul” (Spelman 34). These sentiments are repeated over and over again in the writings and teachings of other philosophers such as Descartes (“I think, therefore I am”), handed down to the thinkers of the world and impressed on young, scholarly minds. A myriad of religions teach their congregations that the needs and desires of the body come second to the mind and spirit. In fact, many religions impress on us that the mind and spirit can be strengthened through the denial of the body, even its discomfort.

Is the body a detriment to our intellectual and spiritual growth? It is indisputable that all experience comes through the body, even thought. Thought is never disconnected or disembodied from bodily experience since we need to have experienced something in order to understand it. Even the thoughts we have while resting in a meditative state are about something we have experienced, or relate to something someone has said to us, or come in the form of images we have seen to give us some context, some kind of vocabulary, if you will, to think about those ideas or thoughts. What would thought be if we had no conversation or experience? Before we are even born we have bodily

experience. And it is from our bodies that comes the desire to think and communicate.

Why deny the body when it is our channel for experience?

Feminists began to question the denial of the body starting at the beginning of the 20th century. Discussions about the body/mind dichotomy by theorists such as Marlatt and Irigaray paved the way for the attempt by women writers to deem the body a positive subject capable of connecting to the mind, of enlightening the mind. With regards to the various feminist body theories surfacing, “If there is a unifying theme, it is simply that the body matters – and not just to women, though gender is a persistent theme, but to all forms of theory” (Shildrick and Price 2). Body matters. It matters as subject, as a legitimate topic of discussion, as an essential component of our very existence. Due to their experiences of maternity based in the body and their close ties to these experiences, women writers can bring this insight.

With this history of silence behind us, threatening to continue into a future of taboo around bodily subjects, it is not surprising that discussing and, of course, writing the body, the (leaky, unpredictable, uncontrollable, private) *female* body, was a subject far removed from the noble pursuits of the serious writer until the late 20th century. “Western philosophical tradition has not been noted for its celebration of the body, and...women’s nature and women’s lives have been associated with the body and bodily functions, then a question is suggested. What connection might there be between attitudes toward the body and attitudes toward women?” (Shildrick and Price, “Openings” 2). If the body is seen to be base and inferior, women are seen as base and inferior, as well. One must not speak about the body since it is not worth speaking of; one must not speak

about women and their experiences, and certainly not their bodily experiences. Lynda Birke in her essay “Bodies and Biology” comments that:

what is at issue for women specifically is that, supposedly, the female body is intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive...the ability to effect transcendence and exercise rationality has been gender marked as an attribute of men alone – and further of only some men...such that women remain rooted within their bodies, held back by their supposedly natural biological processes.

(44)

Others have seen women’s biological make-up and reproductive processes as negative. “even those who more closely contested the determinism of biology, saw the corporeal in a decidedly negative light” (Shildrick and Price, “Openings” 4). So, if women’s bodies are unpredictable and uncontrollable due to hormones, menstruation, and the possibility of pregnancy and childbirth, then women themselves are unpredictable and uncontrollable, as well. This notion that bodies are secondary to the mind and are not valid things worth writing about, coupled with the negative views surrounding the female body and female existence in general, has silenced generations of women. They have been discouraged from writing about such a large part of their lives – social, physical, ways of thinking, menstruation and fertility, maternity – in favour of more “noble” pursuits of the mind.

As stated above, Western societies have perpetuated the belief in gendered norms of bodies.

The effect for women has been highly deleterious, for in terms of our historical oppression and disempowerment, a series of justificatory strategies are founded in

the linking of the feminine to a body that is curiously and uniquely unreliable, most evidently in the female reproductive process. The very fact that women are able in general to menstruate, to develop another body unseen within their own, to give birth, and to lactate is enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason. (Shildrick and Price, “Openings” 3)

Therefore, these attributes have been affixed to women, themselves. Historically, the woman – centered by her womb – can be enveloped by uncontrollable fits of hysteria due to the movements of her womb. Her emotions carry her away, override her intellect, her ability to rationalize. She is a slave to the cycles of her body, and when upset she is questioned about what time of the month it is. She is seen as being out of control, cannot control herself, is controlled by her body.

My own experience as a woman and a mother has lead me to question these assumptions. Is the fear not that the body is out of control but *uncontrollable* by others, by even women themselves, that there is a kind of power in women’s bodies as awesome as life itself? Although reason is valuable sometimes, other times intuition needs to take over, or primal impulse needs to navigate for a while, or we need to simply respond emotionally to something. This is not unlike the first time a mother holds her newborn baby – there can be a quiet and peace, a time where everything else stops – nothing else need exist than those two bodies, than the smell of a newborn’s head, than the desire to bond and feed and keep the baby warm, the emotional need just to take it all in. To be overwhelmed is not to lack control, but to have a human response to a powerful physical and emotional experience. There are also women who are overwhelmed by the

experience in a negative way: those women who are affected by post-partum depression, who feel estranged from their babies, whose birthing experience was traumatic or violent, who are not happy about becoming a mother, whose children are ill or die. As explicitly evident in the literature and oral stories about pregnancy and childbirth, whether the experience is positive or negative, it is always, nonetheless, life-changing and profound. If nothing else, pregnancy and childbirth alters the woman's body, her physical appearance, and becomes an event to add to her consciousness and life experience. This is not a question of religion; it is nature, the unknown, the unexplainable and furiously powerful. Not everything can be known through intellect – some things can only be felt.

Let us take, for another example, menstruation. This bodily function necessary for the perpetuation of the human race is often seen as dirty, leaky, embarrassing, a plague (a “curse”) or chore to deal with, as opposed to being seen as a sign of fertility, a letting go, a stage in the cycle necessary for life, a time to reflect and withdraw from the world outside, an emptying, a release, a possibility. Through her poetry, Deborah Harding decides to portray menstruation positively, as a powerful life process:

small bud of my child,
my half-thumb, is it you?
Every half hour I've been checking
for blood, slipping my hand under the sheet,
quick touch at the velvet opening,
the place where the head would crown. (“Late” 3-8)

Here Harding is speaking about the possibility within her body, the potential of experience through her body. She recognizes that the process of menstruation is the

possibility of life. The reason she does not want her period to come is not that she does not value the process, but that she wants to become pregnant, to continue the cycle, to reach the potential her body promises month after month. She is opening herself up to her body's potential. The experience of menstruation is large and mysterious.

Furthermore, some feminists "seek...to emphasize the importance and inescapability of embodiment as a differential and fluid construct, the site of potential, rather than as a fixed given" (Birke 44). As a mother and a writer, my experience is that being rooted in the body is a positive thing; the body allows us to relate to the world in a certain way. Events pertaining to maternity, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood are spiritual, bodily, intellectual processes that potentially change every aspect of a woman. Primal processes are as important, if not more important, than exercises of the mind because they are essential to one's understanding of their world through experience. Experience adds to one's depth and knowledge, encouraging maturity, wisdom, and insight. The body is the site of human development, of fulfillment and understanding.

Without the ability or permission to write from the body, as "the body is the ground of human action" (Gatens 228), one cannot write the experiences of the female body; therefore, one cannot truly represent what women experience without recognizing the body since everything we experience in this world, this life, is through our bodies. At the very root of our experience is birth of other bodies, of selves, of thoughts, of traditions, of languages, of artistic creations, of each other. Many feminist theorists today now think that the answer is not to devalue these processes but to celebrate them.

Anne Sexton joins this movement to speak/write the experiences felt through the female body with her poem "Of My Uterus." She celebrates her woman's body,

specifically, her uterus, demonstrating the emergence of positive, open writing about the female body at a time when such poems were few and far between:

It took Anne Sexton to break the taboo [of writing about the female body] in the 1960s with her poem “In Celebration of My Uterus.” Not only did she write what was considered by many an outrageous poem on an unseemly subject, but she went on the poetry circuit and read this poem to mixed audiences...the first shock was felt ‘round the world. (Otten xxi)

Sexton speaks to her uterus in second person, as if it has its own identity:

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you.
I dare to live. (11-16)

Singing is a celebratory act. She is daring to live, to celebrate her female body boldly and fully. The poem is also full of positive metaphors for the uterus:

Hello spirit. Hello, cup.
Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain. Hello to the soil of the fields.
Welcome, roots. (17-19)

Cups hold things, contain things. Covers envelop. Soil is fertile and essential for growth and life. Roots ground, seek nutrients for its plants. She also celebrates that the uterus, the female body, is something women share, that it brings women together:

Many women are singing together of this...

one is dying but remembering a breakfast,
one is stretching on her mat in Thailand,
one is wiping the ass of her child,
one is staring out the window of a train
in the middle of Wyoming and one is
anywhere and some are everywhere and all
seem to be singing, although some can not
sing a note. (27-43)

Women can be identified by their bodies, are connected to other women, but in a positive way. There is a building of energy in this poem, a celebration of the everyday woman and what she does, how she lives in her individual life. She sees the uterus as an essential and central part of the female body:

For this thing the body needs
let me sing
for the supper,
for the kissing,
for the correct
yes. (60-65)

The uterus provides nourishment and nurturing. Sexton encourages the reader to see women's bodies, and therefore, women themselves, in a celebratory manner. She ends the poem with a full acceptance and embracing of her woman body, calls for the acceptance of its power, and encourages the reader to be open to its possibilities.

One of these possibilities is that the body is a conductor for knowledge. In her essay “Woman as Body,” Elisabeth Spelman says: “Instead of the body being positioned as a bar to knowledge, knowledge is produced through the body and embodied ways of being in the world” (Spelman 35). The kind of knowledge we are speaking of here is knowledge of experience and of self. The body is a valuable conductor for experience, knowledge, and understanding.

Women and Language

Women and language have a complicated history, a kind of secret relationship of whispers and quiet conversation. To be remembered, and therefore, valued, history is recorded on paper in words tangible and concrete, whereas a large part of the history of women’s thought and their stories has been orally passed on from woman to woman. “Women understood one another, though there was nothing but oral communication between them” (Otten xviii). Their stories were not inked down into the realm of the recorded, the valued, the immortalized (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Shakespeare, Sonnet 18); their words were not seen as the words worth writing down.

If this oral tradition was a prevalent practice in the passing on of women’s thoughts and was a defining factor of women’s culture, then the stories of the body and maternity were much more whispered than written in bold letters with exclamation marks. Although birth was not a topic for discussion in the public domain, when women wanted to communicate about such topics, these stories were still orally passed down from woman to woman, mother to daughter, sister to sister. Women passed on their stories of birth, collecting them “like spoons” (Krause 134).

Historically, it has not been writing, but this oral passing down of stories, of each woman's individual truth, that has enabled women to give voice to their experience. In her conversation with Erin Moure, "Correspondence 1985 to 1987," Bronwen Wallace states "The given, of *my* life, the starting point of my *poetry* has always been the stories of women, the voices of women discussing the world. From as early on as I can remember it was my grandmother, my mother, my aunts, my girlfriends, my women friends, female teachers and mentors who spoke the world for me" (34). Rosemary Sullivan expresses this notion of the orality of women's stories in her poem "Words:"

Aunt Mary used to warn me about words.

They never stay where you put them.

They're loose.

Any no-good can use them. (1-4)

Words are somewhat dangerous. They can change once they are set free, written down, spoken. Words can be used by anyone for any purpose. They can be used in a negative sense, as well. They can be used sexually, can be loose sexually, as in a loose woman, a seductress, a harlot. They are more powerful than even the speaker/writer can know or intend:

Like a woman, she tried

to keep them safe in the family. (5-6)

The traditional female role is often to protect or keep safe, to be the glue that binds the family.

From her I learned there were others

pacing inside me.

She said they made me up.

I was meant to love them.

But it terrified me to think I was lived in

by strangers I had never met

or knew only by name.

They made me alien fiction. (18-25)

It is the stories of others echoing within us that help us to define ourselves and make sense of our existence. This echoing can be invasive or possessive and make one alien to one's self, or can it be a valuable gift – such as in the passing on of birth stories, birth poetry? When a woman hears the stories of another woman, it can help her to define who she is, where she came from, where she is going. It can help her to put her own experience into perspective. While the speaker in this poem is uneasy about the strong presence others have within her and their power to help shape and define her, this unease demonstrates the power of stories and storytelling. Now that we have explored why stories are important, it is imperative to understand why writing those stories down is also important.

Naming: A Question of Definition

Language is an extension of our experiences in the world; it is sensory, a translation of the felt and sensed into the written and spoken. Theorist Dale Spender says that the language we use has been manipulated to speak for men, not women. There is also the prevailing thought among many feminist theorists that some things (like the body, maternity) cannot be fully written in the language we have been given or have

inherited, a language not equipped to speak the experiences and thoughts of women. Cora Kaplan has identified the problems our given language has and why it is ill-equipped to speak for women:

the insertion of female-centered subject-matter into a male literary tradition, the attendant problems of expressing this matter in a formal symbolic language, the contradictions between the romantic notion of the poet as the transcendent speaker of culture and the dependant and oppressed place of women within that culture...The difficulty women have in writing seems to me to be linked very closely to the rupture between childhood and adolescence, when, in western societies (and other cultures as well) public speech is a male privilege and women's speech is restricted by custom in mixed sex gatherings, or, if permitted, still characterized by its private nature, an extension of the trivial domestic discourse of women. (Kaplan 55)

Due to the historical oppression of women, the language we are given at birth does not necessarily reflect women's rhythms, bodies, or thought processes. The given language, the language we use in public, the language that is recorded and respected, is controlled by dominant groups. It has been created without the input of marginalized, oppressed. Language used by oppressed groups is seen as secondary and is not the language recorded, respected, or recognized as the representation of the culture and history of Western society. The stories told in the language of the oppressed groups are told in the private sphere and are largely ignored in the public sphere.

If language, itself, is controlled by dominant groups, then so must be the writing down of that language. This is an exceptional problem, as writing and recording is an

essential part of understanding our history, of understanding our human condition. Sartre said: “To write...is to have recourse to the consciousness of others in order to make oneself be recognized as essential to the totality of being” (quoted in Morrell 26). When women write, therefore, they add their individual voices, their selves, become part of the collective whole of humanity. Therefore, it is imperative that the experiences of women be written down, solidified in their consciousnesses. For a woman to write poetry is “[t]o put to words what this I sees, to soar on collective wings, find language that will lift us onto the page in a polylogue of our own making. But what language? And how do we write our way out of a tradition that tells us our actual experience is not the stuff of poetry?” (Marlatt, *Readings* 81). This may add to the discussion of why women did not/could not speak about their bodies – because not only was the private women’s sphere taboo and unimportant, women did not have the words, could not say what they wanted to say in an incomplete language; further, they also could not say it “well” with the language they inherited. Therefore, they were forced to stay silent. In the essay “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Luce Irigaray asks:

What hierarchy, what subordination lurks there, wanting to break our resistance?
What claim to raise ourselves up in a worthier discourse? Erection is no business of ours: we are at home on the flatlands. We have so much space to share. Our horizon will never stop expanding; we are always open. Stretching out, never ceasing to unfold ourselves, we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere, even in our gaps, that all the time there will not be enough. We can never complete the circuit, explore our periphery: we have so many dimensions. If you want to speak “well,” you pull yourself in, you become

narrower as you rise. Stretching upward, reaching higher, you pull yourself away from the limitless realm of your body. Don't make yourself erect, you'll leave us.

The sky isn't up there: it's between us. (85)

Irigaray is encouraging the embracing of the female body, of female experience. She asserts that the nature of our bodies is to be open, that there is no shame in womanhood, but power. She advocates the necessity for women to celebrate this expansiveness, this limitlessness, rather than deny it, to get to the root of these stories, the truth.

There is a prevalent idea in Western feminist thought that the personal is political. Since women have historically been associated with the home in Western societies, the home has been devalued, and since home is a private sphere, the stories and voices from that sphere have largely been ignored. To bring women's experiences and issues to the forefront to be debated, acknowledged, and added to our history and everyday consciousness, it must be asserted that the personal (private) is political. What happens to people as individuals is important to all people. Marna Mannes wisely says: "Women are repeatedly accused of taking things personally. I cannot see any other honest way of taking them" (69). In order to make sense of the world (the public sphere), one needs to understand women and their words on a personal level and explore their "truth."

Sharon Thesen touches on the idea that a poet is trying to say something 'true' in a poem: "The fundamental question is, how can women write out of, or into, her own truth when language and syntax support and reproduce the consciousness of patriarchy?" (Thesen, "Poetry" 380). This is the question. The answer is what these poets work toward. The vocabulary is incomplete, in need of both expansion and unraveling.

Therefore, to understand the truth of the female experience of the body, there needs to be an effective way to express these experiences.

Historically, there has been no language equipped to write pregnancy and childbirth. Women writers and theorists have begun to explore the language of the body and have grappled with the concept of deconstruction.⁵ This concept has been applied to the analysis of women's writing by various feminist theorists. In this thesis, the concept of deconstruction is interpreted and used in a simpler, more direct way. Here the emphasis of 'deconstruction' is on analyzing how language is *dismantled* by women writers who then, in turn, reconstruct it in a way equipped to speak their experience.

How does being a woman affect the text and the meaning the writer and reader affix to those texts? The concept of deconstruction has been taken further in the coining of the term, *écriture féminine*, by Helene Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," and has been since defined by various writers such as Julia Kristeva (in her work *Revolution in Poetic Language*) as the use of language where the female body and feminine difference is recognized. Naming, identifying the language, is an important step toward validating this act of writing the pregnant and birthing body. Part of that naming process is the identification and acknowledgement of a movement toward building a new language to speak the experiences of women. Language is attached to our history, is defined by our meanings and usage. Perhaps this language we have been discussing is named *écriture féminine*. But why do we need to name it at all? To legitimize it? To give it identity? To make it have a presence in our theoretical consciousness? Roo Borson

⁵ Deconstruction is a term used by theorists such as Jacques Derrida where "texts and languages of Western philosophy appear to shift and complicate in meaning when read in light of the assumptions and absences they reveal within themselves...Subjects relevant to deconstruction include the philosophy of meaning in Western thought, and the ways that meaning is constructed by Western writers, texts, and readers and understood by readers" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction>).

meditates on naming:

Wearing a name
because it was the first gift
I wait for it to fall away
As with the names of others,
To brush it from my shoulder
As a bird
That has no other song
By which to know the earth. ("Rain" 1-8)

Naming is thus important for the formation of identity. It makes an idea a reality, an entity, it makes it possible for one to hold it, understand it, define it.

Individuality and the Whole

There are many ways of expression and reasons to expand language. Addressing the questions of the female body is but one of them. Addressing the questions of writing, records, and history are more of them. And these things can change, be changed by the people living in that particular society or culture.

When I talk of disrupting or changing history, I begin with the assumption that people can change, that we are not totally determined by, bespoken by, the culture in which we live. I begin, always, with the power of the personal, the private, the unique in each of us, which resists, survives and can change the power that our culture has over us. This is what I have learned from the women's movement and what I try to explore in my poems. I believe that when we speak and write of our

lives in this way we also change language, if only because we say things that have never been said before. (Wallace “Correspondence 1985 to 1987” 73)

It is individual women who make up an “us.” Each woman is a dimension of the whole; therefore, each woman’s language and use of language expands what exists into a new, reformed discourse. Although there are differences in the political power each woman may have (Daphne Marlatt, for instance, may be more influential to a larger number of women, than, say, an unknown poet, due to her status and the fact that she is widely read amongst academics and poetry fans), nevertheless, each woman as an individual (on her own terms, in her own way, and in varying degrees) should be important in this process of making history, of defining culture or creating new language use.

In order to make these changes fully, Luce Irigaray says we must “find our body’s language” or we will have to fall back on our given language and miss so much of what we want to say/communicate, so much of what our bodies want to say/communicate. She says that the other’s truth is not our truth, that we will be “[d]eprived of our movements. Rigid, whereas we are made for endless change. Without leaps or falls, and without repetition” (86). Irigaray echoes Marlatt’s notion that the in-between is reciprocal, that what is shared among women is what is important, that individuals together make the whole. She asserts that women grow and learn from each other, that other women’s voices and experiences are echoed within each woman’s own and that women hear and share and place other women into their own consciousness. She is adamant when saying that women must be open and embrace the openness of their woman bodies, their woman spirits, their woman minds, and embrace the fact that they are part of a community, a collective, intertwined. Irigaray and Marlatt encourage women writers to look elsewhere,

not to try to use a language not large enough for them, to not pretend to be singular.

“There is room enough for everything to exist” (86).

Bronwen Wallace discusses this movement to change language. She says that change can be made by various people from all walks of life, especially women.

What matters to me in this whole language issue is that we remember that artists and intellectuals are not the only people who are going to change the language and that it is very important that we listen to and use the language of all sorts of people. Our language is being changed by women every day, by punks, by kids, by rock musicians, even by commercials, slang, and certainly gossip [by the internet, by computers, by mothers and grandmothers]. (Wallace 30)

The challenge is not to invent a new women’s language because there is no set language that would speak for every woman and all women, but there is a need to change and expand the existing language to make room for varying truths, varying stories. Therefore, if one is publicly⁶ discussing and writing things not publicly discussed and written about before, there needs to be an expansion of our vocabularies, our language. One needs to deconstruct the language to remake it.

Is it possible to define specific characteristics of the language women are beginning to use in order to speak maternity? As Hélène Cixous states in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing...this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (137). Perhaps this is so. Can it only be felt? Can it only be detected through body,

Notes

⁶ Publicly Discussed: openly discussed in the public realm, outside of homes and private conversation. Deemed worthy of discussion, where the subjects of the discussion are part and parcel to the discussion and the conclusions and decisions made. Deemed worthy of writing down, recorded, acknowledged, and validated.

subject matter? Is there a style? Can we identify some of its traits? These questions will be discussed as this thesis unfolds.

Here is another burning question: why assign gender to writing at all? The purpose of this naming or acknowledging of the existence of a new way to use our language is to assert the conscious movement of women writers toward an expansion of the given, to reflect the orality of women's interaction with each other and the cycles of their bodies, to speak the female body and break taboos. Writing legitimizes, gives voice, and changes hearts and minds. It reflects consciousness. Therefore, it is important that women write body, that they give voice to their experiences as they are, the truth of these experiences, the body in all its complexity and individual difference. It is important for women writers to contribute to the whole which is made up of individual parts. It is important that women writers are creating a vocabulary to express topics relating to the body, are becoming pregnant with possibility, with language – “[which] contains and sustains us, carries us along with it” (Marlatt *Readings* 53), allows us to use it, change it, add to it.

Margaret Atwood's poem, “Spelling,” explores the notions of naming and the use of language to place meaning, give context, and make sense of (define) the world.

My daughter plays on the floor
with plastic letters,
red, blue & hard yellow,
learning how to spell,
spelling,
how to make spells

and I wonder how many women
denied themselves daughters,
locked themselves in rooms,
drew the curtains
so they could mainline words.

A child is not a poem,
a poem is not a child.

There is no either
or. (1-15)

Life experience is essential to creating words, creating language, making speech or
“spells.” Words and life co-exist, are part of the same system.

However.

I return to the story
of the woman caught in the war
& in labour, her thighs tied
together by the enemy
so she could not give birth.

Ancestress: the burning witch,
her mouth covered by leather / to strangle words.

A word after a word
after a word is power.

At the point where language falls away
from the hot bones, at the point

where the rock breaks open and darkness
flows out of it like blood, at
the melting point of granite
when the bones know
they are hollow & the word
splits & doubles & speaks
the truth & the body itself becomes a mouth
This is a metaphor.
How do you learn to spell?
Blood, sky & the sun,
your own name first,
your first naming, your first name,
your first word. (16-41)

Here, Atwood makes parallels between words and body, between creation of a discourse and the creation of a child. There is pain, death, and power in words, in the use of words to empower or to dis-empower. The root of language is in the body, in the flesh and bone, both metaphorically and literally.

Let us rehash the conception of a new expansion of language. Luce Irigaray states in "This Sex Which Is Not One:"

one would have to dig down very deep indeed to discover beneath the traces of this civilization, of this history, the vestiges of a more archaic civilization that might give some clue to women's sexuality. That extremely ancient civilization would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language... Woman's

desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks. (381)

There has been a recent movement to uncover this knowledge and tell this experience. "Beginning especially with the generation that came of age in the fifties and sixties, women poets have combined literary creativity with biological procreativity, often using their art to describe their own physical and metaphysical experiences of motherhood...Poets have just in the last few decades begun to speak as mothers with unprecedented complexity, intensity, and subtlety" (Gilbert 17-19). And what they are saying, what they are creating, what is being born is beyond the boundaries that previously existed, that have limited our given language. They are adding their experience to the human experience, the recorded, the history, our collective history.

On the shore, the women softly converse, passing speech back and forth, sitting where the sand meets the waves, toes curled into the wet sand. They are sitting on the rocks by the water. The sun is slightly warm through the cool wind. The sky is blue, a hard blue softened by the hazy, glowing spring sun. It holds a promise.

The sky is filling, warming. Low berry-filled bushes line the shore, grow between the rocks higher up the beach. The berries lift themselves to meet the trickle of heat. They are full and waiting. They are full and waiting.

Chapter Two

Gestation and Birth

After the conception of a new use of language, after the seed for a new creation has been planted, this language must then incubate, gestate, and be born fully alive and functional, yet ready to be molded, nurtured, encouraged to grow.

Claiming Subjectivity

What comes first? The mother or the child? Do we begin the discussion at conception, at the time of gestation—is this the first time the notion of mother, language, body come into play? Or is it at the time of our own birth, when we, ourselves, are bodies, are born from our own mothers, is it when we are growing in the laps of our mothers being welcomed into the oral traditions of women, where the echoes are formed and re-formed for us playing and playing in our heads. Is it at the time of menstruation when the fluidity and openness of our bodies presents itself for the first time since our watery beginnings inside of our mothers? Does it begin before our own births, with the generations of women before, with the conversations and words these women spoke, resonating in our own bodies' memories, passed along passed along from woman to woman to woman, flowing without end? How do we write this language, this oral inheritance, how do we hold it, like holding water, to make it stick to the pages without making it stagnant, false? How do we represent it? The only way is to write the fluidity, the rhythms, the echoes, to let the flow carry us along, understand, accept we have no real control, be open.

In the beginning, when we are conceived, before our entrance into the outside world, before birth, before sight and colour and images, there is the warmth of our mothers' bodies, the motion and rocking, the pulsing beat of her heart, the sounds of her voice filtered through skin and muscle and fluid: "The first songs we hear are mothers' songs – lullabies and nursery rhymes teaching us about the world, the self, and the language" (Gilbert 17). It is in the womb where we first hear language, where we first listen to the stories of the world, the stories of our mothers. Daphne Marlatt adds to this by saying:

[H]idden in the etymology and usage of so much of our vocabulary for verbal communication (contact, sharing) is a link with the body's physicality: matter (the import of what you say) and matter and by extension mother; language and tongue; to utter and outer (give birth again); a part of speech and a part of the body; pregnant with meaning; to mouth (speak) and the mouth with which we also eat and make love; sense (meaning) and that with which we sense the world; to relate (a story) and to relate to somebody; related (carried back) with its connection with bearing (a child); intimate and to intimate; vulva and voluble; even sentence, which comes from a verb meaning to feel. (*Readings* 11)

The connection of the physical body and the body of language is strong and relevant to our understanding of the world, how we relate to the world around us, how we experience and perceive. "[L]ike the mother's body, language is larger than us and carries us along with it. it bears us, it births us, insofar as we bear with it" (Marlatt, *Readings* 11).

Language is based in body, and conversely, body is represented by language; body and language have a deep and intimate relationship stretching back through generations to the

beginnings of language, to the beginnings of human cognition. “[A] woman writing thinks back through her mothers” (Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* 96). Language is not only based in the body, but in the bodies of our mothers. The discourse that comes out is the result of the language that has come before and the starting point of what will follow in future generations.

As discussed earlier, women’s stories and means of communication have historically been oral, especially communication about their bodies, particularly maternity. In an interview conducted by Beverley Curran and Mitoko Hirabayashi, Marlatt expands on this idea:

[The] mother-daughter bond, is [also] very much an oral bond; we internalize that voice so much...And you know it was never considered ‘important,’ in terms of a value system in traditional literature with a big L, to be written down, so there’s a part of ourselves which exist in terms of our knowledge of life, of being, of relationships, of our body, that only exists orally for us. And then there’s the translation of that into the act of writing. (117)

In writing their experiences down, women have claimed their position as *subject* of writing, of conversation, of stories, of social interactions, rather than *object*, rather than something (mis)interpreted or ignored or acted upon. Marlatt goes on to say that “Women are writing in a new way in order to break away from a destiny script (written by someone else) in order to write their own stories” (Curran and Hirabayashi 119). Women are claiming their position as subject speaking for self, from self, about self.

The goal of this restructuring of language is to ensure that women writers have voice, recognition, and the tools with which to communicate their experience effectively.

In order to do this, the writing has to circulate:

It is this circulation grounded in the oral that characterizes women's culture, books handed on ("you must read this"), stories handed on ("that reminds me of something that happened to a friend"), phrases handed on ("that's what my mother used to say"). A peculiarly shared resonance we have been taught to overlook. But the trivial, we now learn, that which has been rendered invisible, like tree-air we breathe, is key to our own well-being. (Marlatt, *Readings* 115)

In order to capture the oral, the spoken, women poets dig deep for the palpating rhythm and word, since there has been no word, no sound, for women's intimate experience.

What do women poets do to claim their place as subject when pregnancy has been seen as a process where woman becomes vessel, container, with no importance or value other than as mother to the child? Iris Marion Young states, "Pregnancy does not belong to the woman herself. It is a state of the developing fetus, for which the woman is a container; or it is an objective, observable process coming under scientific scrutiny; or it becomes objectified by the woman herself as a 'condition' in which she must 'take care of herself'" (46). Yes, the pregnant body can certainly be represented in this way, but all over-theorized things become object rather than subject. The body is not a mere thing or instrument, but an entity, a living, changing, organic thing. When we no longer speak from our knowledge of our own experiences as beings who live in bodies, we lose our authority to speak on the subject, become alien scientists and doctors picking and cutting with tweezers and scalpels (tools of inspection without understanding), breaking it down

into dead parts, missing the point of the whole, missing what it is for the body to live, the blood and ooze and the miracle of it. There is a danger in analyzing the female body as opposed to listening to the woman discussing *her* body, each woman who has a story to tell, and that danger is to miss the entire point of the writing of those stories. And the multiple truths of each subject.

There are significant literary works (specifically poems, and a few books) that place the pregnant woman as subject and discuss this connection. Some of these poems will be analyzed further on in this chapter. Of course, women often feel like containers, vessels, feel ill and delicate, but this is emotion, doubt and fear. As in any significant life experience, these feelings are not only understandable, but unavoidable.

Let us come back to this idea of the female body as vessel. There exists a much more positive perspective on this subject: if the female body is a vessel, it is so as an origin for life and language, a beginning to both creation and words. Pregnancy is a time of sinking into the body, accessing the words within. Here Marlatt comments on the intimate connection between language and the body:

There's a lot that stands outside of language because it stands outside the systems of thought which allow us to recognize anything. And it's often written in the body; it's kept in the body, in the cells, in the neural sheets of the brain, and it's a kind of residue that language can't reach. Sometimes we're fortunate enough to have dreams that put things together in a way that allows us to recognize these. Or we go through great grief or trauma of some kind that flips us out of our habitual modes, so that we begin to recognize what these pieces are and can see them and

put them together...What I think of as ghosts are what haunt us, what lie outside the systems of thought that we've been trained in. (Curran and Hirabayashi 120)

Can we break through to the experiences based in the body, through to the "trauma," the intense physical and mental splitting open of pregnancy and childbirth. Maternity is "the only opportunity offered a human being to experience a bursting of the ego..." (Chester 2). Maternity gives women the opportunity to see from a new, open perspective, to relate better to the world. "Once you have become a mother, you are more keenly aware of the fragility of life and therefore of potential tragedy. Perhaps that is what humanizes the writing here [women's writing]" (Chester 4). Mothering actually gives us direct access to the greatest themes in literature – birth, death, loss, love. As Madeline Tiger shows in this short poem, these elements are often intertwined:

The distant birth is exquisite.
Pain and joy are one at this moment.
Even after, the dim recollection is
So sweet that we speak to our children
With a gratitude they never understand.
We speak to our parents with a sorrow
Unfamiliar until the day they are dying. (1-7)

Tiger expresses the intensity of birth and its ability to impact the mother forever. Here she is saying that birth connects us to life in a more full and intense way, as well as to death. Giving birth opens us up to feelings of awe when pondering the miracle of creating life while also reminding us that we die, that we are mortal and delicate yet amazingly powerful.

This poem brings to mind Anne Szumagalski's "Shrapnel." The subject of the poem is a man dying in the war field from a wound:

now at last he understands
why he loves the bodies of women
more than the bodies of men for pale skin covers
a man all over and only a wound can show his lining (49-52)

Women can see inside of themselves in a way that a man need not (but could if he so chose) write about or often think about until crisis (familial death, his own illness, his own imminent death), but not always even then. The dying soldier is feminized, made aware of female experience, by his wound. This wound was necessary for him to finally see into himself, to see the same "vermilion lining" a woman sees of herself every day. The vagina can be seen as a wound, as a way in, an entry point, a place of vulnerability; as Szumigalski says, men are covered head to toe in skin. This is both metaphorical and biological.

As Szumigalski's poem encourages the honest exploration of the vulnerability of women due to their bodies and the vulnerability of men in combat, other poets use their own versions of truth to explore a myriad of topics on the female body. Poetry has the capacity to carry truth, the capacity to carry the truth about women, their stories, their bodies, maternity. Kimberley M. Blaeser connects the notions of poetry and truth when recalling a revelation she had when watching a golden eagle fly overhead:

Linking the music of those two moments [of the sound of eagle flying and the sounds she made during labour], resulted, like fusion, in a new power, an understanding of the artistic light that pregnancy, birthing, and motherhood

wrought. If a certain leisure for lingering over language had disappeared, it was replaced with a larger vision. A new poetry had awakened in me. What is poetry if not awareness? (Blaeser 161)

What is this truth? What is this awareness?

Margaret Atwood's unflinching poem, "Christmas Carols," explores some of the dark aspects of maternity while criticizing the desire to romanticize the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood.

Children do not always mean
hope. To some they mean despair.
this woman with her hair cut off
so she could not hang herself
threw herself from a rooftop, thirty
times raped & pregnant by the enemy (1-6)

Children do not always mean hope. The mother is sometimes broken, abused, hurt, the child sometimes unwanted, unplanned, forced. A pregnancy can mean hardship, pain, death. The mother can be thrown away, "a ripped sack," devalued and forgotten.

...Think twice then
before you worship turned furrows, or pay
lip service to
some full belly
or other (21-25)

One should not romanticize birth and motherhood, but think about it. One should not idealize this experience by paying lip service to pregnant women since one cannot know

their experience. One should not forget that maternity can be messy, hard, painful, the beginning of the death of the mother.

It's a matter
of food & available blood. If mother-
hood is sacred, put
your money where your mouth is. Only
then can you expect the coming
down to the wrecked & shimmering earth
of that miracle you sing about, the day
when every child is a holy birth. (30-38)

Here Atwood is saying that mothering is primal, "a matter / of food & available blood;" meaning that it can come down to basic survival not only for the child but the mother, as well. Sometimes all the mother and child can do or focus on is survival, and being able to view birth as a miracle or revering the experience in some exalted way is a luxury. One should treat mothers with respect, make maternity a sacred journey (put one's money where one's mouth is). In one poem, one poet can shatter the myths surrounding the sentimentalized notions of maternity which make the mother an object, by making the mother *subject*, by putting her truth to the page.

Poetry and Truth, Honesty, Voice, Isolation

Due to its flexible structure and malleability, poetry has the power to carry truth. There are a myriad of truths about pregnancy and childbirth women poets have begun to convey through their poetry. One of these truths is that of the isolating nature of maternity. For example, Adrienne Rich discusses the life-changing nature of motherhood

in *Of Woman Born*. She explores the situation of mothers in society, arguing that mothers become less visible once they have children and step further into the private sphere of the home, that their time and energy is consumed by children, and that it is important for women to make their voices heard from this isolated place far removed from public connections. Jehanne Mehta's poem, "Seek Not to Hold Her," explores the isolation felt by pregnant women. "Seek not to hold her / for she will give birth / among the bees, alone / in the wilderness" (16-19). The speaker of this poem is alone in birth as in death. Although many women go through this experience and a birthing woman may be surrounded by others, birth is a solitary experience. The speaker is connecting to nature and the universe while alone in it. Before women began to write the experiences of maternity, there was a deafening silence around the solitude involved in maternity.

But one of the common themes among these poems is that each speaker experiences the same solitude, as Daphne Marlatt points out: "I think that we don't look enough at our relationship, the relationship between our bodies and everything that surrounds it" (Curran and Hirabayashi 121). Although we go through pregnancy and birth alone, must do so, we are not isolated beings. The pregnant body does tend to overwhelm and isolate the woman although the body is even more visible in the world. As the body grows, the woman retreats, changes, dies only to be born again in childbirth; she is wrapped in a kind of cocoon, undergoes a metamorphosis. Each woman experiences the same process, but has a different story, a unique result; each woman is isolated and not isolated at the same time.

In order to capture these experiences, "[w]omen must write through their bodies.' Must not let themselves be driven away from their bodies. Must thoroughly rethink the

body to re-appropriate femininity” (Minh-ha 258). Because “women [will then] begin to experience writing/the world differently” (258), with a greater understanding of their own and each other’s truths.

It is not only truth these poets attempt to uncover, but what is inside, behind the scenes, the background, the backbone, the stuff left behind, the marginalized aspects of women’s lives:

women’s writing...turns what has traditionally been considered background into foreground, what has been labeled trivial into the central, what has been belittled as personal and feminine into the largely human. (Marlatt, *Readings* 113)

And the “largely human” deals with those large topics of life and literature (love and death), the big questions the male philosophers and poets have been asking since humans have had the capacity for thought and deduction.

Having been immersed in experiences of the body, a woman can recognize the importance of living through the body. It is not a negative experience, not detrimental to the function of the writer or the artist or the enlightened human being, but is an asset, a gift, an awakening. Alicia Ostriker also sees motherhood as an advantage:

The advantage of motherhood for a woman artist is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth, corruption. If she is a theoretician it teaches her things she could not learn otherwise; if she is a moralist it engages her in serious and useful work; if she is a romantic it constitutes an adventure which cannot be duplicated by any other, and which is guaranteed to supply her with experiences of utter joy and utter misery; if she is a classicist it will nicely illustrate the vanity of human wishes. If the woman artist

has been trained to believe that the activities of motherhood are trivial, tangential to main issues of life, irrelevant to the great themes of literature, she should untrain herself. The training is misogynist, it protects and perpetuates systems of thought and feeling which prefer violence and death to love and birth, and it is a lie.” (Ostriker, “A Wild Surmise” 131)

The writer who is a mother should never believe that her life, her experience, is not the stuff of poetry. “The writer who is a mother should, I think, record everything she can...and remind herself that there is a subject of incalculably vast significance to humanity, about which virtually nothing is known because writers have not been mothers” (Ostriker, “A Wild Surmise” 131). She should understand that her experience is as grand and powerful and relevant as any essential life experience.

Women are seizing the position of subject: “Breaking the silence, breaking the taboo, women are now taking part in the new transgressive and subversive activity of writing the female body” (Haas-Howland 31). They are becoming the heroines of their own stories, the subjects of their own histories. Through doing so, many women writers have been changing their collective human history, becoming part of it, claiming their place in events, in the recorded narration of the human story.

Changing the Meaning of the Given Words

One movement toward expanding our given language is to change meaning. “For centuries, whatever has been valorized has been masculine in gender, whatever devalorized, feminine. So, the sun is masculine, and the moon feminine” (Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* 120). But are these meanings not for the user to decide, to use, to play

with? The moon can be seen as mysterious, calming, powerful, peaceful, maternal, wise, the force behind nature's rhythms. What matters is how one uses the language, what light one sheds on the subject, how one talks about it and writes about it. The power is in the hands of the users of the language to alter and shape her own meaning. Although conventionally associated with the intellect, the sun can be powerful in a negative way – too hot, overbearing, forceful, relentless, mindless (unwise), deadly, dangerous, frightening. Women can and are using language to create positive female meaning. And if one uses the language enough in a new way, it will change the meaning.

An example of the movement to change social meanings, initially disempowering for women, is given by Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King. They quote Sally McConnell-Ginet: ““meaning is a matter not only of individual will but of social relations embedded in political structures,”” and go on to say, “Because linguistic meanings are, to a large extent, determined by the dominant culture's social values and attitudes, terms initially introduced to be non-sexist and neutral may lose their neutrality in the ‘mouths’ of a sexist speech community and/or culture” (Ehrlich and King 164-5). Ehrlich and King use the example that when the “no means no” campaign was going on, violent messages appeared that said “no means harder,” “no means dyke,” “no means more beer,” “no means tie me up,” “stop means please.” These phrases on their own and out of context are neutral and benign but became violent, obscene, sexist, and misogynist when placed in the context they were placed.

To further this discussion of changing meaning, in order now to empower the disempowered, Ehrlich and King compare the names for sex: “fuck,” “screw,” “penetration,” “nail,” “lay,” “all...turn heterosexual sex into something men do to

women...[and] could be given more appropriate names such as *enclosure*, *surrounding*, *engulfing*...In a similar way, the absence of 'names' representing women's perceptions and experiences also reveals a male bias" (165). However, women poets have been finding ways to express the experiences rooted within their bodies, in a language where there are often no words available, by re-appropriating, reassigning, the meanings of negative words. Ehrlich and King quote Deborah Cameron: "In the mouths of sexists, language can always be sexist" (165). Conversely, in the hands of non-sexists, language can always be non-sexist. Although there is always potential for misinterpretation by others, it is possible for the users to make the language work in a non-sexist way, to use it as a tool to attempt to express what they want it to express. "[Emily] Martin suggests...that women can confront, challenge, and replace the medical models which desacralize birth and fragment women's bodies by creating new birth imagery, founded in their own experiences, their own language, their own stories of creation" (Tarter 31). Language has the power to change our perceptions, to make negative perceptions into positive perceptions. Language has the power to change society as well as individuals. Therefore, is it exceedingly important for women to use and change and equip language to speak their thoughts and experiences.

Importance of Definition and Meaning

Many feminist theorists do not see language as something we are stuck with and controlled by, but have placed the power to communicate effectively (and thereby make change and convey truth) back into the hands of the speaker/writer. Black and Coward

dispute the idea that “Meanings reflect the individual’s experience of reality and are simply expressed in language” (102), and say that:

language has a material existence and effectivity. To stress that language is not an instrument expressing the meanings of pre-existent groups is to argue, on the contrary, that meaning derives from the relationships between linguistic entities. This relationship is socially constrained but is not an expression of a social order that pre-exists language. Language participates in the social and has an active role in the construction of subject positions. (102)

It is how the words are put together and placed beside each other in the context of our experience – when the language is being used, and who is using the language and who is being spoken to – that determines meaning. There is a reciprocal relationship between language and society. While language exists as it is and has its own rules and consistencies, it can also be manipulated. Language has the power to change societal beliefs and practices. We can construct language and language can construct us. It is fluid, changing, flexible. Black and Coward go on to “argue that the relative success of attempts at gender-based language reform is dependent on the social context in which the language reform occurs” (165). It begins and ends with social beliefs, and more microscopically, individual beliefs. “[S]exist values also influence the meanings of terms that already exist in a language” (166). Black and Coward further state that while using non-sexist terms will not necessarily lead to non-sexist use,

First...even if gender-based language reform is not immediately and/or completely successful, it does sensitize individuals to ways in which language is discriminatory towards women...becoming aware of linguistic choices forces us

to monitor our thought processes and ‘will gradually enable us to unlearn patriarchal ways of thinking.’ Second, language reform can be a source of empowerment for members of disadvantaged groups. Finally, by considering ‘unsuccessful’ cases of language reform, we can better understand the social mechanisms at work in cases of successful language reform.” (170)

Women poets’ play with language in order to represent their experiences of the body – definitely *not* unsuccessful – is a form of language reform on a creative, personal, individual level.

Feminist writing keeps moving toward articulating another real, one which is almost unspeakable given the deeply entrenched terms of the conventional ‘man-made’ real that daily occupies us. But this intuition of another real is communal, responsive, spiraling between and beyond the lines of the entrenched as it tries to open up a space for the speaking out of what has been repressed, erased, demeaned and stripped of its meaning. Because this intuition flashes in the realm of the unadmitted, when it seeks to articulate itself it sometimes takes leaps of imagination, sometimes its syntax breaks down, often it freely associates as it collapses habitual meaning, finding kith and kin at the heart of a relating that is telling. (Marlatt, *Readings* 114)

Through expanding the language, women poets reapply meaning, solidify significance, free the repressed, and articulate the stories of women’s bodily experiences.

Identity – Why Deconstruct?

The given language that we inherit and learn from those who come before us, is the context for our thoughts and stories. Our language, “as at birth – [is] a given name a given world” (Marlatt, *Readings* 11). “[I]f we are women poets, writers, speakers, we also take issue with the given, hearing the discrepancy between what our patriarchally loaded language bears (can bear) of our experience and the difference from it our experience bears out – how it misrepresents, even miscarries, and so leaves unsaid what we actually experience” (Kristeva 238). The negativity in our language toward women has grown out of a large expanse of time when women have been undervalued; the problems with our language have grown out of a social sickness, patriarchy, where society has (traditionally) forgotten about female power and women’s importance in keeping our species alive. Word meanings have been created, changed, altered throughout centuries of social change. Our language changes along with us, represents what we understand and perceive and is always changing to represent our ever-changing selves, while all the while shaping us as well. Some feminist theorists say that we are capable of shifting the balance through our own voices and writing. Not only academics, but poets, essayists, women out for coffee with friends, women’s presses change the language as well. Lesley Jeffries states that “we tend to perceive the world through the structures of our language, but...we *can* perceive [it] in other ways (in other languages, for example) and...we *can* escape the straitjacket of our own language, though we often don’t” (22). Yes, we can. I do not know that it is so much an escape but an expansion. How can one totally escape one’s language? We can change it and shape it because, as stated above, our language has been shaped and changed and expanded throughout

history. This is the evolution of a language. Language is not a living thing in the sense that it has its own agenda and purpose and will; *people* shape language; *we* place meanings on the words we speak. We manipulate words, draw out meaning, create metaphor. Language is a *tool* human beings have created.

Thus, some women poets *use* language, our existing language, the given, to speak of and through the body, to voice identity, instead of being concerned with the question: is there a women's language? There cannot be talk of a separate language, but talk of how we use language, the given language, the language that exists. In the introduction to her book *The Feminist Critique of Language*, Deborah Cameron discusses her objections to the notion of a women's language:

A further objection to notions like "feminine writing" and "women's language," which is particularly salient for linguists, is their utopianism and ahistoricism: although the conventions of language-use change (indeed, feminism has to some extent changed them), there is no potential for "reinventing" language from scratch in the literal sense some feminists seem to be advocating. On the one hand, language depends on innate cognitive faculties which constrain the form a human language can take. On the other hand, and perhaps even more significantly from a feminist viewpoint, language-using is a *social* practice, grounded in history and in the conditions of its users' lives. Individual acts of will do not, on their own, change it, and where we do collectively succeed in changing it, it still bears the traces of what has gone before. One cannot speak "outside the structure," either of language or society. Feminists can, however, struggle, from

the inside, to speak *against* the structure, by contesting/critiquing the representation of women in language and discourse. (9)

The power lies with the speakers, the writers, to change their use of an existing language.

...*language* does not change (for language as such cannot 'do' anything, any more than birdsong or swimming can): it is *speakers* who change their behaviour...Change is not always, admittedly, the result of organized campaigns like the ones feminists have waged on the issue of sexist language. It can be unplanned, disorganized and patchy. But by acknowledging that conventions of representation have been historically and socially constructed, we are also suggesting they can be de- and re-constructed: organizing to bring about change is not a futile activity, whereas waiting for "the language" to change itself *is*.

(Cameron 13)

Women writers can use the given language in a new way, expand its boundaries and speak/write against the limitations of the existing language and speak/write toward its meaning's limitlessness.

This is not to say that the way women writers or speakers use the given language is singular or unitary in any way. As Cameron says,

Trinh [Minh-ha]...points out forcefully the dangers inherent in making the concept of difference a unitary one, polarizing masculine and feminine while glossing over the multiple differences that exist among women (or men). Since there are differences within the category "women", when "women" speak in one voice, the inevitable if paradoxical result is to silence many women, to speak for them and so prevent them speaking for themselves. (8-9)

To assume that one voice speaks for all women is false and misrepresents the individual. Every piece that is added, every bit of speech written down, gives women writers a context, an existing body from which to spring, from which to add their very different voices to the whole. In addition,

...not all talk of identity involves thinking of the self as unitary or contained; nor need boundaries be conceived in ways that make the identity closed, autonomous or impermeable. We need to think individuality differently, allowing the potentiality for otherness to exist within it, as well as alongside it. We need to theorize agency in terms of patterns of potentiality and flow. Our body-boundaries do not *contain* the self; they *are* the embodied self. And the new sciences give us topological models for imagining the self in these terms. (Battersby 15)

The same notion of potentiality for others to exist within the individual can be applied to women writer's use of language: there is room within that language, those stories, for other languages and stories to exist.

What Do Women Say? What Connects Them? New Uses of the Given Language

Now that women are experimenting with writing the body, and more specifically, the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, what are some of the things they are revealing? What are the recurrent topics and themes deemed worth the telling?

pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, power, emptying, mother/child – separate but inseparable – mortality, birth, newness, change, creation, echoes, generations, nature, return to the primal, baby spirit, filling, emptying, circles, separate but inseparable in birth, power...

Commonalities among poems by women about pregnancy and childbirth exist on several levels: subject matter, themes, structure, metaphors, tone, rhythm. There are particular kinds of writing, ways to write, some women writers employ in order to speak the body:

In a great deal of feminist poetry...there is a lack of activity, a stillness and a kind of timelessness evoked by many of the poems. These impressions are carried by techniques of writing which are far from being exclusive to feminist, or even women writers. However, there seems to be an unusually high concentration of such techniques in the work of some feminist poets, and this observation leads to a hypothesis that what feminists are doing in their effort to discover a woman's voice is focusing particularly on those linguistic features which reflect most closely the female experience. In terms of my earlier analogy, the tradition is not begun again from scratch, like a kind of haptic art, but is building on what is useful in the existing tradition. (Jeffries 26)

The words and rhythms emulate the rhythms of the female body – such as the cycle of menstruation – and, therefore, may constitute a female inflection of language.

Kristeva may have an explanation for this in formulating the “semiotic” as “an area of rhythmic pulsions in active opposition to the symbolic, the stable system of language” (Kristeva 69). The semiotic breaks through to the symbolic in poetry. “The semiotic is associated with the pre-Oedipal stage of unity with the mother, and is repressed into the unconscious on entering the symbolic order of the Father, the Law” (69). Women still have access to the semiotic and are more likely to exploit this in writing (69).

Another trait of this new use of language is the lack of punctuation. “The absence of punctuation in poetry is not new, although some feminist poets have seen the advantage of increasing uncertainty in the reader, sometimes leaving the reader with two or more equally possible structural interpretations” (Jeffries 26). Listen to this passage:

sometimes you can't tell where the bird's lungs / end & the sky begins (Moure 77)

crossing poetry with prose, the mundane with the mythic, trying to open up the unspoken, while the strictures of the lyric / huddle in the aether / fumbling with matches, trying / to do something with language. (Thesen, “Beginning” 43)

Thesen uses no quotation marks to separate her words from the words she is quoting, to alienate the echoes, the voices present in her own thoughts, and her own argument. They are set apart by italics, a variation of the text, yet are presented as a part of her own stream of thought. This interaction of words, of the other in the self, demonstrates that “the horizon line of language extends always beyond each individual speaker/writer, no matter how you turn” (Marlatt, *Readings* 54).

This effect is also attained by the creative, non-traditional use of punctuation and apposition in poetry. Diane Blakemore says that “one of the purposes of apposition is to highlight the differences between the words or phrases which are juxtaposed, giving the reader an idea of the range of interpretations that are possible” (29). This room for more than one interpretation expands the boundaries of the given language in order to open up the poetry to greater meaning, multiple meanings, multiple voices, and a kind of interaction with the reader impossible to attain without the possibility of many interpretations. This is where the reader-writer relationship comes in, the conversation.

These poets also turn heavily to particular metaphors and symbols: shell, container, planet, water, fish, egg, etc. As the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth are based in the body, women poets attempt to relate these experiences to the outside world, and this attempt manifests itself in metaphor and symbol, which flow freely from these poems as a raining down of images and associations, of meanings and connections.

Let us sit with these women for a while, listen to them, observe how they use conversation and metaphor and symbol to write themselves into being from before conception to the birth of what their bodies create, their children, their poetry, themselves. In the next section of this chapter, the poetry will be organized following the life cycle from pregnancy to childbirth. I will reveal and analyze the writing devices and prevalent themes used in this poetry.

Possibility and Conception

What are the characteristics of the language women poets use to write pregnancy and childbirth? They use a concentration of themes and writing devices. Let us begin this exploration with Lillian Allen's poem, "My Momma."

my Momma she says
any woman who can make a dot into a
child
inside of her
and bring it out to us
is a model for a revolution. (Allen 55-9)

The power of the female body is immense, should move women to act, to take note of themselves. Revolution instigates change, takes bravery, brings with it the possibility for failure, for pain, but also for victory and empowerment. The act of maternity is more powerful than it looks on the outside; it can change people and whole communities. “any woman who can make a dot into a child...is a model for revolution.” As many writers of poems about maternity do, Allen claims the power of women’s bodies. Not only are women poets like Allen (and Sexton) writing the female body, they are celebrating it.

Sharon Thesen writes about the very root of the female experience of pregnancy: fertility. In “The Fertility Specialist,” she calls the fertility specialist an “expert astronomer / charter of heavenly colonies,” (11-12), suggesting that part of our fate is tied up with the workings, the functioning or malfunctioning of our bodies. She speaks of the anguish of having a “malfunctioning” body that is unable to bear children, questioning our societal views of womanhood, recognizing her personal desire to procreate, to give life. “[A]nd it is / as if something with wings was crushing itself / to my heart, to comfort / or to be comforted I didn’t know which / or even what it was, some angel” (30-33). She speaks of this possible child, this child that will never be, as if it were a spirit, a presence, a soul waiting to come to her. In the elevator, she sees “a little girl / in a sundress, her delicate / golden shoulders stenciled from the lines / of her bathing suit: a perfect white X” (35-38). She portrays the sorrow she feels when a daughter will not come – the X marking what she will not have, symbolizing the chromosomal make-up of a daughter as well as the mark of failure, when she realizes she will never be a mother. The theme of sorrow and loss is prevalent in the poems about maternity. Just as the experience itself is

often a gamble where women take risks with life and death, gain and absolute loss, the poetry is filled with reflections about these immensely overpowering experiences.

Gestation (Pregnancy)

Pregnancy is slow, all encompassing, larger than the pregnant woman herself. In the poetry about pregnancy, this slowness is as obvious (reflective) as the pregnant woman's physical state of pregnancy. This poetry is full of slow and meticulous musings. It has a cocooning characteristic, a kind of pulling into the body, and the result is an intense internal self-reflection. This poetry reflects a metamorphosis of the speaker. There is much repeating; thoughts, time, themes are repeated, emulating the cyclical nature of the female body. These poems are also rich with metaphor. One of Sylvia Plath's speakers in "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices" describes herself as "slow as the world" (1). The world is more than just the earth. It is mother earth, the figure of nourishment and parental care. It moves in slow circles, takes time, marks time, takes days to turn. Things go on in, on, above the world, sometimes in a hurry, but the earth itself is steady, waiting, patient with everything she creates and allows to flourish through her body:

I am very patient,

Turning through my time (1-2)

Here Plath explores the themes of waiting and patience, two themes prevalent in writing about pregnancy. Audre Lorde also writes about pregnancy in her poem, "Now That I Am Forever With Child."

How the days went

while you were blooming within me (1-2)

Here is flower imagery, which is also very common as a metaphor for new life, for female reproduction and fertility. In this passage, the speaker is also speaking to her unborn child as if s/he existed already. In many poems about the gestation period, the potential child is spoken to, even when that child has been lost or was never conceived.

I remember

each upon each ---

the swelling changed planes of my body

and how you first fluttered then jumped

and I thought it was my heart (3-7)

It is her heart, will be her heart, as the child is so important, so precious, even before birth. She speaks to her child:

How the days wound down

And the turning of winter

I recall you

growing heavy against the wind

I thought now her hands

are formed her hair

has started to curl

now her teeth are done

now she sneezes. (8-16)

She is marking the time, the milestones, waiting while the child is forming, progressing slowly within her. The child is changing, growing within the cocoon that is the mother's body.

In her poem, "Tempo," Lauris Edmund skillfully uses rhythm, especially thought line breaks, to emulate the initial slowness of pregnancy and then the speed of a woman's journey into motherhood.

In the first month I think
it's a drop in a spider web's
necklace of dew (1-3)

Here she begins her accumulation and listing of metaphor, a device used heavily by women writing pregnancy, as if it is only through metaphor that she can convey the experience of pregnancy to someone outside herself. She must use the language and associations available to her and understandable to the world outside her body, her readers. The child is gently caught in the mother's body, the web, awakening the mother, the spider's "necklace of dew." Dew as morning moisture, refreshing, describes the newness, freshness of the experience.

at the second a hazel-nut; after,
a slim Black-eyed Susan demurely folded (4-5)

The child is a new bud, delicately closed, full of potential, "asleep on a cloudy day." The experience is slow, lazy, hazy.

then a bush-baby silent as sap
in a jacaranda tree, but blinking

with mischief
at five months it's an almost-caught
flounder flapping back
to the glorious water (6-11)

As the child grows it becomes more energetic, moves more, makes its presence known. It is free, floating, swimming, full of life and vigor as a flounder, as mischievous as a bush baby. It is closely connected to other animals and nature.

six, it's a song
with a chorus of basses...(12-13)

As a song, the child's power is building, is moving, affecting its mother more profoundly.

seven, five grapefruit
in a mesh bag that bounces on the hip
on a hot morning down at the shops (13-15)

Its presence is known to the world outside; the fruit, the outcome, is pink and fresh.

a water-melon next – green oval
of pink flesh and black seeds, ripe
waiting to be split by the knife (16-18)

It is ready, pushing out into the world, watery, sweet, ripe. It is full of seeds, potential, the possibility to continue the life cycle. As the slowness of early gestation heads toward the quickness of birth (“nine months it goes faster”), there is an accumulation of metaphors, which quickly take the reader along, image after image, mimicking the swiftness of this last stage, this last headlong sprint into motherhood. It is imperative to quote extensively the rest of the poem in order to demonstrate not only how Edmund uses metaphor,

symbol, and vivid imagery to tell this birth story, but also how she builds the rhythm of the poem in order to mimic the building rhythm of the body during the process of pregnancy and childbirth. Looking at a long passage is necessary to demonstrate this building:

it's a bicycle
pedaling for life over paddocks
of sun
no, a money-box filled with silver half-crowns
a sunflower following the clock
with its wide-open grin
a storm in the mountains, spinning rocks
down to the beech trees
three hundred feet below
– old outrageous Queen Bee's best dressed
starched ruff and opulent tent of skin
packed with ruffles and lace
no no, I've remembered, it's a map
of intricate distinctions
purples for high ground burnt umber
for foothills green for the plains
and the staggering blue beyond
waiting and waiting and
aching

with waiting
no more alternatives! Suddenly now
you can see my small bag of eternity
pattern of power
my ace of adventure
my sweet-smelling atom
my planet, my grain of miraculous dust
my green leaf, my feather
my lily, my lark
look at her, angels –
this is my daughter. (19-48)

The reader is taken along through the intensely revealing and profound experience of pregnancy. Through the tempo of the words swiftly flowing toward the end of the poem, the poet gives the reader insight into the headlong nature of the final stages before birth. Through her use of metaphor, Edmond gives the reader a glimpse of what the speaker is thinking, feeling, experiencing while making it clear how amazingly fast all of these changes and insights come upon the mother.

...cave, sea, empty and fill, food, greenness, milk, honey, sweet, warmth, roundness, egg, loam, waves, washing, floating, stillness, hunger, feeding, impulse, no turning back...

Rosemary Palmeira's poem, "Woman," also contains movement:

The whole of my cupped life

is streaming slowly through me
down the grass-green shaft;
all possibilities and impossibilities
array themselves before me –

I prepare myself to bear a mystery. (21-26)

Her life used to be contained (“cupped”), but pregnancy has put a hole in that cup. She also cups the fetus in her womb. Her life is no longer contained but is revealing itself to her, making her take note of everything she has done or experienced or thought of before; it is “streaming slowly through” her, inspiring revelations and the anticipation of what might come next “down the green shaft,” which is alive and thriving. As she bears her child, she bears her unknown future – an experience both frightening and calming at the same time.

Childbirth

When the poems are about childbirth, their tone and structures change from those of poems about gestation. They rely even more heavily on rhythm and tempo and deal with a new set of themes, metaphors, and revelations.

When we are stunned by something completely beautiful, the mind dilates in order to more fully perceive. The natural reaction to this is contraction, for to be opened up is to feel certain pain. The pupils of the eye have this knowledge; they dilate when beholding the beloved. But to love is to be vulnerable to loss. And so it is with childbirth. So it is with writers, who don’t turn away, but dare try to set it on the page. (Chester 1)

As poetry about pregnancy is full of metaphor and symbol, poetry about childbirth (although also rich with metaphor and symbol) relies heavily on structural ebbs and flows, formal disruptions, variations in line lengths, and punctuation play or lack of punctuation in order to convey or represent the process of pulling apart, the explosive and all-encompassing experience of childbirth.

In her poem, “Rings,” Daphne Marlatt uses commas to indicate the sharp, intensifying, disorienting pain of labour contractions. This use of punctuation represents all that is happening at once. Much of this poem consists of internal dialogue focused on the body’s workings, not much noticed on the outside or by the people on the outside, even her husband, Al: “Al, listen, Al’s still reading” (1). The man is removed from the experience, oblivious to what is going on within the woman’s body. The doctor comments on Marlatt’s inward focus, her solitary experience: “‘I beg your pardon,’ the doctor said. ‘I am perhaps a little jealous since you use your language to communicate with yourself and not with us...’” (1). This is the solitary experience of labour. Marlatt builds her paragraph to replicate the building of her contractions – her words follow the flow and rhythm, the waves, of her body. The experience is “grinding me to liquid” – here is the notion of a destruction of the self through intense physical pain. The childbirth experience is relentless and oblivious to what is in its path, a force the labourer has to deal with – not violent, but strong – an immense test of physical, emotional, and intuitive strength. In this poem, there is no need to speak in sentences – the thoughts are fragmented and outside the rules of punctuation and grammar, but remain coherent. This coherence is maintained through the thread of the story and by the way in which the words and placement of the words can instigate the reader’s interpretation. The language

still contains what the reader needs in order to be able to understand it, but is pared down to the essential elements. Marlatt expresses the urge to crawl up and be alone to birth, to be alone without distraction to focus on this huge, exhausting process. The intensity and urgency build and release with each phrase and stanza, climaxing, then releasing. The speaker can focus on what others are doing after the contraction, but during, there is only tightening and pain and that contraction gripping tighter. The rhythm of the childbirth experience, of the speaker's body, can be felt by the reader through the rhythm of the poem. We are swept along, pulled into its intensity.

Other poets use rhythm to convey their stories and the power of birthing, as well. In "A Serenade for Strings," Dorothy Livesay writes about a knocking.

The terrible knocking
God at the threshold!
Knocking down darkness
Battering daylight. (17-20)

This knocking reflects the rhythmic contractions of the body in labour. Not only is the baby knocking, but so is the frightening miracle of creation. Her body is a door opening to the awesome power of birth. In pregnancy and childbirth, "[w]e are opened up as at no other time" (Chester 4). In the poetry, there is talk of a revelation, an awakening so bright and immense, a "force beyond gravity" (Blaeser 159), it takes the rest of a lifetime to fully understand it. To write this is an amazing challenge. "Coming through the body we go way beyond it, making valid life experience through the control of the word" (Chester 4). Childbirth destroys the mother for her to be born again, to embody all she has become, all she has discovered, just as the mother poet deconstructs language in order to

rebuild it, in order to remake it in a way that can express her whole truth. This process of self and linguistic transformation is ongoing from that moment forward. The birth of her child is “[a] moment in which [she] will always be living, always be dying” (Carr 1).

Erica Jong writes about another aspect of the birthing process prevalent in poetry about childbirth: a coming apart of two bodies, two full people. This event is always exhilarating, exhausting, sorrowful, yet for her, led by a looking forward to the future and its possibilities, an embarking on a life-journey with another being, a child the speaker has birthed/created.

Here, under my heart

you’ll keep

till it’s time

for us to meet,

& we come apart
that we may come
together. (25-31)

The speaker has kept the child safe through gestation/incubation and is waiting for her child's arrival. They will become two bodies at birth, two people who will learn about each other, grow together.

& you are born
remembering
the wavesound
of my blood,
the thunder of my heart (26-30)

Her child's body has a memory, a connection to its mother. The mother will be part of the child always. The blood is the symbol of their bond as well as is their literal bond. The heartbeat, the first sound the child hears, represents the mother's life which she passes on to baby; it is a soothing sound, the sound of life. The short lines act like a list, pulsing as a heartbeat.

& like your mother
always dreaming
of the sea. (31-33)

The child will always be dreaming (unconsciously aware) of that time they were together, that bond, that beginning for both of them because now that they have experienced it together, they do not forget; this experience they have had together will always be a very large part of them. In this poem, pregnancy and childbirth are seen as a mystical time,

watery, magical, yet basic; it is origin, beginning, is true and simple, open. The mother and child are separated at birth, but are inseparable. In this poem, the mother is changed forever – her language, the way she looks at the world, the way she understands, what she understands. She has created another human being. She has given life.

The earth mother figure also has a strong presence in poems about pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. In the following poem, Diane di Prima's "The Loba Sings to Her Cub," the mother is an earth mother, a creator, intimately tied to nature and all that is new and budding. Then the child is born. The mother relies on a primal knowledge; both mother and child are burrowing animals:

O my mole, sudden & perfect

golden gopher tunneling

to light, o separate(d)

strands of our breath!

Bright silver

threads of spirit

O quicksilver

spurt of fist,

scansion of

unfocussed eyeball,

Grace of yr

cry, or song, my

cry or

you lie warm,

wet on the
soggy pelt of my
hollowed
belly, my
bones curve up
to embrace you. (1-18)

They are flesh and bone, warm mother and mewling child, still wanting to stay connected, still being connected. In this poem, childbirth is the return to the natural, the primal, the essence of mammalian life. The mother is a wolf: wild, solitary, strong.

After Birth

After the intensity of childbirth, there is a return to slowness, an attempt to reassess, reconstruct, and reflect after birth. Being a new mother can mean to slow down, to replace that desire to accomplish things with the need to do what needs to be done, to sit with the baby, to feed and clothe and hold. This slowing down is reflected in the poetry, as well – this stillness, this silence, this listening and watching. This is an ideal view, to be certain, as pressures of modern life such as the need to return to work, household responsibilities, and the care of older children can interfere with this process if there is not the support a new mother needs. However, this new mother can experience the slowing down with the new infant in snippets of time throughout the day, in those moments when she can take in the profound nature of her experience. It is these moments that these women poets are attempting to express. Madeline Tiger writes “For My Sons Who Had Mouths Like Rosebuds:”

whose fists made sugary
grooves on my flesh like
the steps of little bears
across moonscapes...
and plump bottoms and tribal
drum-bellies and all waiting
on the edge
of howl
on the edge
of sharp
crying
on the edge of nerve and need
and the mouths
groping for
my
nipple while
I helped you find
me find me find
this source... (14-18; 29-32)

The babies are portrayed as primal, animal. In these first months of life, both mother and child remain in the primal state of physical survival, of desire, hunger, exhaustion, and a knowledge based deep in the body. The child takes all from the mother, is “tribal,” insistent, unrelenting, unapologetic. The babies “take and take as much / milk as desire

requires” (49-50). The mother in this poem is giving, finds beauty in her demanding offspring, her precious babes, round and plump, nourished by her body. The babies give herself back to her, as well. She becomes whole again, after the physical, emotional, and mental tearing-down that is the childbirth process. The mother is under a spell – gives and gives without wanting – would still give without realizing she is used up, hands open, endlessly offering. The speaker is not condoning this self-sacrificing view of the mother or the social expectations of a mother to be so, but is offering her own feelings as a mother, as a woman who gave a great deal of herself to her children. She is recognizing the intensity and importance of her gifts to her children, thus valuing the sacrifices she makes. After she has given all that her child requires, the child’s “mouth softens again again it is a rose” (53). In this slowing down, this mother poet is forced to take note of the tiniest details, to find the extraordinary in the seemingly ordinary.

Mother poets are also forced to take note of their own power, their female power, the power of their female bodies. As a goddess might do, “[s]he touches her breast / let there be milk” (Hass-Howland 14). The poem, “Saffron Goddess,” is full of food and nourishment imagery, of spices and honey indicating richness and deep sensory satisfaction.

In her poem “M/Other,” Rishma Dunlop also demonstrates a reworking or expansion of language to convey her many meanings: “The f/act of m/other...” (1). With the use of two simple slashes, Dunlop says four things simultaneously: The fact of mother, the act of mother, the fact of other, the act of other. This play with language signifies the multiple voices within her poem and leaves the poem open to many interpretations so others can find their truths and multiple meanings within. Although

each mother is different, experiences different variations on the event of birth, Dunlop opens up her truth to the interpretation of others by bending and expanding the language she uses. “This f/act of m/other / contains us in differences” (1-2). This act or fact of mothering and being mothered contains us, can confine us, is a container, a vessel. She refers to both the act of becoming a mother and the state of motherhood.

yet we are pulled

by the heart’s tide (3-4)

Here is the ever-important and symbolic water imagery present in much writing about the female body and maternity. Like the tide, the body pulses and pulls. The heart is to the blood as the moon is to the tide; it changes its rhythms and intensity.

body memories

of blood and milk the necessities for life (7-8)

Body memories? The mothers’ and babies’ bodies are remembering, yet this is a different kind of memory, a different kind of knowledge stored in the body, not in the mind.

and everywhere

mothers will write stories

our sons and daughters will remember (9-11)

Their bodies will remember. They will record their stories. These mothers have a need to write their stories, to communicate them, in order to shape them, to make them their own.

Children are:

relentless magnets

anchoring us

to the earth. (15-17)

In this poem, children can keep mothers stable, make this life more meaningful, give more reason to be present in life and in the world.

In birth, the child must leave the mother who was once the world, was once everything to that child. Birthing is a letting go of the babe into the world, of the self to a new self, of the barriers of language, of the rational mind to the power of the body; hence the theme of loss is prevalent among poems about birth and pregnancy.

This letting go must be lived to be written, as writers such as Blaeser state: “This fall I began to reflect on childbirth, motherhood and the writing life. On how we must live poetry to write it. But also on how we must nurture it as we do children, with time and attention. And who am I in this new transformation, a poetmother or a motherpoet?” (Blaeser 160). Poetry by women about motherhood is full of this kind of reflection on the changes set in motion by the experience of becoming a mother. For instance, Erica Jong writes about a mother’s first night after the birth of her baby daughter:

On the first night
of the full moon,
the primeval sack of ocean
broke,
& I gave birth to you...
pushing you out of myself
as my mother
pushed
me out of herself
as her mother did,

and her mother's mother,
all of us born
of woman. (Jong 1-23)

In the act of giving birth, there is a connection to other women, to other generations.

They are carrying on the tradition of life, bringing forth the new generations. The moon is a symbol of cycle, of woman, of days passing, time passing, of calm and contemplation, time repeating itself. It is full, pregnant with possibility, at the height of its radiance and power.

Little lion, lioness,
yowling for my breasts,
growling at the moon...(42-44)

Again, we see the return to the animal impulse, the primal. She describes the child as a little beast, a little wild animal, intent on survival:

your screams, your cries
which all spell life
in large letters
the colour of blood. (48-51)

Blood is life. The child's primal desire equals life and survival; this roots human kind in basic meaning, into the beginnings of basic language.

Ripe with metaphor, swimming in the ebb and flow of the fluid body of language, these poems breathe, smell, speak the body. The poets sink into the body, gestate, only to emerge equipped with the words, the sounds to communicate, the tools to tell, connect, contribute, and change.

circles

*there is a knot right there in the middle pushed down low in my cradle bone pulling,
tightening tiny, heavy rock feel its presence the weight of it it is already snatching me
from the world, my life, myself*

*i spin, axis tilted, head to the side, i think i might cry but i smile instead i smile instead i
smile round it, hold it in my carefully buttoned purse my sealed envelope my clam shell
my nest of feathers and goose down*

*i am heavy already someone is speaking to me what are they saying what are they saying
so slow so muffled outside the yolk-brushed film there is cotton in my ears, my mouth
after sleeping fumble for the raisins the crackers the water get it for me, reach it for me,
i'm too tired can't they hear...me*

*and what are they saying, some other language, don't know if i care, all there is is the
tiny rock the pearl the egg the letter i carry careful careful careful not to jump or
crumple, not to drop it walk slow, round and round, wind round it round me until all
they can see are my eyes and they are closed, they are closed, turned in and down.
there is a knot right there.*

Chapter Three

After Birth

After the conception of a language, the stillness and reflection of its gestation, the forcefulness and inevitability of its birth, are the moments after its creation. Here, in this chapter, we return to the stillness of reflection and explore what has come of women poets' expansion of language. Here we explore the question: what comes after the birth?

A Turning Inside Out of Both Language and Mother

In addition to commonalities in the poems women write about pregnancy and childbirth in this new expansion of language, similarities in metaphors, rhythm, tone, and subject matter, there also exist deeper connections in areas such as deconstruction (of language and mother/poet), transformation (of language and mother/poet), difference (between poets and writers), and reciprocation (between writers, between writer and reader). The poetry also places value on the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth by its affirmation of both the poetry's and the experience itself's essential importance.

In such poetry, the maternal body, as well as the maternal body of language, distances itself from "cultural constructions" of the female body, mind, and language (Dunlop 107), from a society where bodily experience has not historically been valued nor discussed, from a language that fails them, from a physical and linguistic space where they exist in a kind of "exile" (Dunlop 107). That pulling away from the world is twofold: the above-mentioned exile and the death of self, the cocooning, the readying for metamorphosis.

Here we have the expansion of our given language now equipped to speak female experience and the experience of the female body. The expansion of the language in the act of writing the body reflects the expansion of the self in the act of pregnancy and childbirth. The self is virtually destroyed through childbirth due to the experience's intensity and life-changing nature. Birth can change every aspect of the mother – her lifestyle, her perspective on the world, her values and priorities – and force her to grow in ways she had not even considered before the birth of her child. This process is not slow and gentle, but abrupt and relentless. Just as the mother is deconstructed through the birth of a flesh-and-bone child, so is the language some women use to tell their birth stories. The language is pulled apart in order to broaden its borders, its scope. Trinh Minh-ha writes about the deconstruction of the given language:

“Women must write through their bodies.” Must not let themselves be driven away from their bodies. Must thoroughly rethink the body to re-appropriate femininity... Must perceive it in its integrity. Must and must-nots, their absolution and power. When armors and defense mechanisms are removed, when new awareness of life is brought into previously deadened areas of the body women begin to experience writing/the world differently. (258)

Many women writers have taken on the challenge of adding meaning, new writing techniques, vocabulary, and word use to the given; of deconstructing to reconstruct, of creating new words; of creating new ways to use existing words, new syntax and rhythm and listening; of giving room for the reader to engage and relate to words through interpretation, in order to relay the echoes of the voices they have heard. Daphne Marlatt's long prose poem, "Rings," demonstrates the above:

(oh, there's

the sheet, the, Beginning to tighten now, lie still, Relax
everything but that, now, A breathing, climb, higher, B,
breathe higher, C, it's all turning to, liquid, hot, spasm

(smother), OH, very deep in, all, it is grinding me to liquid... (1)

Her words follow the rhythm of her body, contractions interrupt both her thoughts and her words. Her thoughts come out fragmented, dismantled, as she tries to hang on to the pieces of her language. She is being destroyed by the intensity of the childbirth experience, and her words reflect that destruction: she is being "ground to liquid."

Throughout the poem, Marlatt quotes people who are present at the birth and what they say to her throughout the event. Further on, her quotation marks fall away, and the words of others become tangled in her own, without quotation marks to separate her words from theirs: "But it's so hard to tell when it begins & when it's here & I'm left behind, push, no block & push, too late, the tail end" (5). The words of others echo in her mind and poem, reflect her thoughts and the interruption of and addition to those thoughts. This deconstruction and reconstruction of language requires an unlearning, an awareness of meaning, an expansion of new and existing meaning, and the process of reconstruction.

Birthing is like drowning. There is no control but to lose yourself to it, to resist panic, to not fight it. The ocean spits the mother out, reborn. Words are a sea "where we learn to swim or we drown...when the World is born/she transforms" (Smyth 81). The woman poet is giving birth to the world with her words, and in doing so, she, the creator, is also transformed. Women poets write themselves into being, decide what they are going to be. They dismantle themselves over and over again, dismantle their world, create

and re-create themselves by showing the contradictions and impasses of the present language and their present selves. Jeni Couzyn writes about this dismantling of the self brought on by the birth of her child:

With my eyes I behold you

In the flesh I behold you

So a holy man walking into death

from a life of devotion or

martyrdom in flames

might look into the shining face of god

and see at once he had never believed. (Couzyn 7-11)

She likens herself to a holy man “walking into death,” performing an act of the utmost devotion and sacrifice, only to discover something greater than she had ever thought. This act of birthing produces a larger miracle than she could have imagined, and the experience changes her or kills her, broadens her perspective and understanding, forever. Just as the female body can create and give birth to a new life, it can create and give life to a new language – a language equipped to tell these powerful stories of birth. It has the potential, the power, to transform.

Polylogue

In order to understand more fully the notion of echoes and the polylogue that exists in a flood of writing by women, I will discuss Daphne Marlatt’s extensive work on

the notion of “difference embracing.” “Difference is where the words turn depending on who reads them and how we bring who we are to that reading. When we each bring our differences into that reading, the multiple nature of the real begins to be heard” (*Readings* 133). Each reader brings something to the writing; each writer brings something to the language:

This dialogue that our writing enters is a singularly (as in deviating from the norm) complex one because it includes, it must include, voices from so many fringes...becoming aware of dialogue on the (many) fringes, listening to other women’s words, realities, is to engage in a delicate balance between recognition of difference and recognition of shared ground. The balance between i and we – and neither capitalized nor capitalizing on the other. (*Readings* 137)

This can be applied to the experience of maternity, of writing it. There is a collective voice, others voices and experiences, of those who are doing it now, who have come before, who have come from mothers. One experience is unique yet connects to the experiences of others. The woman writer must focus on “[a] listening way back in the body. And is this memory? Or fiction? How to put together a narrative of brightly coloured bits turned, turning as if to focus, and the falling patterns then” (Marlatt, *Taken* 25-6). Writers and readers need to understand, share, read each other’s experiences to validate their own unique experiences.

Marlatt furthers this vein of thought to discuss collaboration between writers, readers, friends and acquaintances whose thoughts, stories, and ideas echo throughout one’s life through language. In “The In-Between is Reciprocal,” she says of collaboration that

while working closely with others, you internalize part of that other mind, because it becomes another way of looking at what your own mind is generating. Of course, your own mind is never your own, anyway: it is full of other people's phrases, echoes of other people's work. And all of that comes to play in the act of writing so that working with somebody, collaborating with somebody, makes the process itself clearer – because you embed that in this “other” sitting beside you, but really it's happening all the time internally: the words themselves, divorced and sometimes not divorced, of people's personalities; the phrases that we carry around from childhood that are our mother's internalized voice are very much attached to our personality...and then all those other voices become internalized and become another strand in your head. (112-113)

This closeness is not just in mind, but in experience and in body. Women writers can potentially anticipate the reader's experience, the other's body, learn about the self, change and incorporate other's experience, and vice versa.

This very thesis is a gathering of thought, where I join the discussion, the collective, the tradition, where my thoughts and ideas are as important and valid as the next woman's. The purpose of this thesis has been to continue the flow, demonstrate the flow, be with it, learn from it, and make something new of it.

A friend once explained to me one manifestation that circles take in Aboriginal culture. The children are in the middle, elders are a circle outside of the children, women encircle the elders, and men encircle all. But in studying the work of women poets, what they write and how they write, it is apparent that the women's position in this system is flexible, that they can expand to encompass all, or tighten (during pregnancy, childbirth,

motherhood) to encompass only the child; their circle can widen or shrink, fluctuate, dilate, pulsate. The speed of the circle's rotation even changes: fast and slow. Pregnancy is small and slow; the sinking in, building a cocoon around the child, tight and safe, a hot ball of energy, the centre of the planet, fusing, demanding all of the attention the woman poet has. Birth is fast and small circles; after birth is slow, small circles, yet women must widen to come back into the world, to be able to communicate and engage with the world outside their bodies. Women's lives can be circular in practice, in thought and conversation, in writing, in life cycle.

Our poems often circle us, years before we consider them. They are inside us in a similar way to how our grandmothers carry us in their bodies the last five months of their pregnancy. Our egg rests secretly within her daughter who dreams in *utero*. In the fourth month of fetal development, a female is given all of the eggs she'll ever have, showing the vast creativity and fertility that cycles throughout generations. From grandmother to mother to daughter, we circle, spinning wonderful lines from inside our bodies as we hang from the highest branch, suspended above everything we've ever desired. (Haas-Howland 9)

Like ripening pears, "We widen when we write" (9). Women writers become larger in the sense that their perceptions, fields of view, and capacities for understanding grow.

Some theorists disagree with the notion of collectivity or sameness between women. In her essay, "Bodies and Biology," Lynda Birke states that "There is no deep natural collectivity of women's bodies which precedes some subsequent arrangement of them through history or biopolitics" (47). It is indeed dangerous to claim that women are the same in essence, and there exists the risk of setting up an argument full of binary

assumptions (man versus woman, valid versus invalid). However, I do disagree with Birke's statement. There is a deep collectivity beyond history or biopolitics; there is a difference in how women think, how they experience the world, and this is not only a difference in perspective (which is mostly constructed by place and time and knowledge) but how they process, filter, deduce, analyze through the sensory lens of their bodies. It is reductionist to overlook the distinguishable nature of life in the female body, and to view those who notice this distinguishable nature and the collectivity as subscribing to a notion of splitting or divisiveness. Of course all bodies share experiences and characteristics (the ability to feel pain, the experience of the world), but there is grouping beyond the basic human body sameness. The biological processes for men and women differ from one another, as well as their experiences and their attitudes toward their experiences. So, it is not a splitting between the sexes I am noticing, it is the existence of two states of existence that overlap in parts.

There is nothing wrong with difference. Human beings are not all the same and have individual traits. Yet, there is collectivity between people, echoes of each other in themselves. Therefore, women are wholes that contain bits and parts of others. There is conversation, presence, sharing. An androgynous world that denies fundamental difference neglects to celebrate human individuality and what we all bring to the collective. Not labels, but identities need to be affixed so women writers can speak of what they are, so they can track their changes, their fluid motions, their movements, to know where they are even though they may be somewhere else tomorrow. But are there places where they cannot go, things they cannot be? The truth is that I will never be Asian, male, virgin, because one cannot go back, because one cannot naturally change

their physical make-up, their processes, their biology. The goal is not to have *no* boundaries, but to *expand* them, become more aware and less ignorant about the world.

A true independence here would only be possible when all existing ideas of sexual difference had been laid to rest; but then ‘woman’, too, would be buried. Such reflections undo the ambition to retrieve women’s bodies from their immersions beneath ‘male categories, values and norms’. The body circulates inexorably among the other categories which sometimes arrange it in sexed ranks, sometimes not. For the concept ‘women’s bodies’ is opaque, and like ‘women’ it is always in some juxtaposition to ‘human’ and to ‘men’. If this is envisaged as a triangle of identifications, then it is rarely an equilateral triangle in which both sexes are pitched at matching distances from the apex of the human. (Birke 47)

Categorization is how one processes, how one sorts information into meaning. This is not to say that how ‘woman’ is presently categorized and compared to ‘man’ ignores reality and truth. It does not, as some of the stereotypical traits placed on women can be true; potentially, some women can give birth, can be the backbone of the family, can multi-task, can handle emotional burdens, can carry others through rough times, can be emotional, can take care of most of the domestic duties (traits typically tied to femininity) but it is the belief that this is *all* a woman can potentially be that is the argument feminists have with essentialism. Potentially, women can also be strong, emotionally level, not nurturing, the breadwinner (traits typically tied to masculinity). Western society has typically viewed “feminine” traits and roles as weak or subordinate. In response to this misrepresentation of the feminine, our language is evolving (through women writers, and men writers, as well) to include a widening of the boundaries of definition in order to

speaking multiple female experiences. It is the experience of this very dilemma that encouraged the movement of women to write the female body, *from* the female body. History, social context, and individual experience play a large role in this language reform.

To push the boundaries of language requires a kind of openness, an opening of language and minds, of bodies. Passing judgment, claiming divisions, ignoring difference, seeing difference as negative, seeking assimilation, stripping meaning makes finding the truth impossible.

It is not accurate to claim that these women poets are speaking in a pure women's language, that there is a true, consistent, identifiable women's language because this notion is slippery, changing, and always in relation to the present circumstances, the present understandings, the present movements of individual, society, and culture. One cannot pinpoint the definition of a "female language;" this is impossible given the nature of language, the nature of human evolution. It *is* possible, however, to take note that there are ways in which some women speak with a language unique to their bodies and experience and that this language, although it is relative and may change (will change), is valuable and has unique characteristics (that are always changing, never fixed), is relevant. Such a language will be valuable as a significant addition to our human history and evolution.

One cannot dispute that this movement to write the female body is happening. However, there is not of a fixed set of rules and parameters, but potential, what *can* happen. The focus then is not whether or not women writers create their own boundaries, but rather it is how they can expand them to embody what they are moving toward – an

equipped, expanded language. It is circular, and with each revolution, it widens. In

“Rain,” Sarah Harasym writes about this new language:

‘sometimes I realize I am speaking
suddenly from the core of my body
but in another language
the one learned in grade school
the one in which histories
are written (1-6)

Sometimes she is speaking from a more primal place, from an old place that existed before adulthood, before the rules of language were internalized in “grade school,” a language outside of the language of men but from the body.

there are two ways of speaking
one is from what you have been taught
and the other
is from your life and is muddled. (18-21)

There are two languages: one has rules and guidelines and clear direction and is taught, and the other, like life and birth and experience and the body itself, is messy, with blurred rules and thoughts and words that can sometimes bleed into one another.

There are certain prevalent traits in women’s writing from the body. However, language can also be expanded when other marginalized groups attempt to write their stories, as well. Other groups attempting to expand language have also had to work with our inherited language, have also had to expand boundaries. For example, poet George Elliot Clarke uses rhythm and blues-like lyricism in order to set the tone of his poems.

This can be seen in his poem, “Blues for X,” in which the speaker is talking to her lover or potential lovers:

My bones are guitar strings

And blues the chords you strum.

My bones are slender flutes

And blues the bars you hum.

You wanna stay my man,

Serve me whisky when I come. (13-18)

The poems read as if the speaker is reciting them to you in the very way they may say it in person. In doing so, he successfully sets and communicates the bluesy mood and feel of the poem, the music of the people, how they relate to one another. By letting his speaker’s voice come through this poem with one story to tell, Clarke draws his reader into the rich past of African-Canadian people. When we read these attempts at playing with language in order for it to tell the stories of marginalized people, we can then experience the way the people spoke, their mannerisms, and interactions. In another of Clarke’s poems, the speaker, who is a man who grew up in poverty and has just murdered a white taxi driver, tells his story in his own words:

I ain't dressed this story up. I am enough

disgraced. I swear to the truths I know.

I wanted to uphold my wife and child.

Hang me and I'll not hold them again. (“Ballad of a Hanged Man” 37-40)

Clarke expands conventional rules of speech in order to more fully communicate the truth of his stories. He allows his speakers to use the language they might have used in real

life. In this manner, by allowing individuals to expand the language to include their own voices, many marginalized groups of people are expanding the given language.

The “rules” of our given language are used so we can understand each other, but language itself is actually fluid and can be manipulated and played with in order to create certain effects and meanings. There is no women’s language nor does there need to be because women writers can make the given language into a tool equipped to carry their stories. Women poets can have language reflect the rhythms of their bodies, and when they do this, the language a pregnant poet uses can have certain characteristics.

It is not that all poems about pregnancy and childbirth take on the characteristics of a women’s language, it is that *some* do. Among some women poets there is a washing in of this kind of exploration, this kind of writing rooted within experience and body. There is a conscious effort to expand the language, and poems take on certain characteristics when an attempt is made to write the female body.

If poetry is to convey the woman poet's experiences as felt *through* the body, if the poet is to convey accurately the experiences *of* the body, the language used in such poetry will display unique characteristics:

language thus speaking (i.e., inhabited) relates to us, takes us back to where we are, as it relates to the world in a living body of verbal relations. articulation: seeing the connections (and the thighbone, and the hipbone, etc.). putting the living body of language together means outing the world together, the world we live in: an act of composition, an act of birthing, us, uttered and outered there in it.

(Marlatt, *Readings* 14)

In celebrating difference, these writers work toward the same things: self-expression, connection, truth, validation.

Childbirth and Rebirth

In the experience of childbirth, “the grand event, the one that will challenge us unlike any other” (Hass-Howland 10), for the woman poet there is a birth of the child and of an expansion of language, a metamorphosis of both self and sentence. She is completely preoccupied with the imminent event. “When I enter the cave of labor, I want to be comfortable with the dark, dripping horror. I want to dip my hand in my own blood and draw on the wall the totem of a mother bear” (10). The speaker returns to the primal, identifies with other animals, becomes animal, returns to a time before language: “I will listen to my rhythm for it will never again feel this primal. This visceral understanding of how rhythm really works within poetry won’t come easy” (10). This birth is poetry, and poetry is birth. “I will feel the rhythm between older than words, as I become rhythm, a moan, a moon, remembering the woman I am within this Logos, this Loba, this Love, this effervescence called daughter that leaves the cave. A new world will be born wild and howling” (11). Hass-Howland also goes on to say about her experience that “...I...run naked to my bedroom. Hiding behind the door, I try to recognize myself in the mirror...Soon, I will become completely new as I disappear into this domestic sky. If I look long enough, I remember that this is just one cycle. I will reappear, rising in full form” (13-14). In this passage, she is asserting that she will be reborn. The cycle will continue, the circle will widen, her power will increase not despite but *because of* her body.

Sharon Olds, in her poem “Language of the Brag,” voices the power of the female body as well as the word while simultaneously questioning the devaluation of women’s bodily processes. She announces the power of giving birth as the most excellent feat of the body. She places her achievement up with those of famous and powerful men (writers) who wanted to do something remarkable with words. By giving birth, Olds has done that and more.

I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,
I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and

accurate arms

And my straight posture and quick electric

Muscles

to achieve something at the center of a crowd,
the blade piercing the bark deep,
the shaft slowly and heavily vibrating like the

cock. (1-9)

She once saw typical manly feats of bodily strength as powerful: “I have stood by the sandlot / and watched the boys play” (14-15). She has watched men perform their feats, never doing it herself, but thinking she could, knowing she could and wanting to.

However, in pregnancy, she finds that there is a power in a woman far greater. She

“brags” that:

I have lain down and sweated and shaken
and passed blood and feces and water and
slowly alone in the center of a circle I have

passed the new person out
and they have lifted the new person free of the
act
and wiped the new person free of that
language of blood like praise all over the body. (28-35)

She makes the parallel between language and creation – she has truly created something from her own body, through the power of her own body. This is something (both the act and the body) to be praised.

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,
Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,
I and the other women this exceptional act with the exceptional heroic body,
This giving birth, this glistening verb,
And I am putting my proud American boast
Right here with the others. (36-41)

Olds reclaims the importance and power of childbirth by openly and forcefully giving the female body and the female body praise. She claims her position alongside famous writers such as Whitman and Ginsberg, the revered men of the male literary tradition, as creator, visionary, and poet. She has earned her right to brag about her achievements through the *acts* (“this glistening verb”) of giving birth and writing.

And this birth, this powerful event, is part of something larger, links mothers together:

We are part of the circle. When we paint, when we weave, when we write, when we give birth, when we organize, when we heal, when we run through the park,

while the redwoods sweat mist, when we do what we were afraid to do, we are not separate. We are of the world and of each other, and the power within us is great, if not an invincible, power. Though we can be hurt, we can heal, though each of us can be destroyed, within us is the power of renewal. (Starhawk xi)

Childbirth is a destruction of the self, a reformation and transformation. Many women poets, while attempting to put this deeply powerful experience into words, the given language, are reforming and transforming language to speak their stories, their truths. Both language and women are destroyed to emerge anew and whole, yet both remain flexible, malleable, evolving, and ever changing.

At dawn, our spirit is extravagant and wanders into forbidden zones we have no choice but to explore. (Brossard 48)

After the pulling, after the waves tossed her, threatened to tear her apart, after she surrendered herself to their pulling, to their rhythm, let herself sink deep into the depths of the churning water, let herself drown, pulled into the darkness. After she thinks she will die, that there is no light, forgets about the light, that there ever was any, she surfaces, is carried by the waves under the moon, a soft light to be born into. Her first breath is not a gasp but a sigh. There are no words.

The night is pulling its black sheet from the sky. They are already changed. They are preparing to depart, to splinter, no, defuse (break away, unravel), from each other. It is time for sleep. It has been a long day. The new babes are bundled, arms wrapped tight to tiny bodies. It is good this way, like it was before, inside of mother. But she finds herself alone amidst the mothers sleepily moving along the beach. All moving in their own circles, crossing paths, sometimes moving parallel. She stops at the book, turns the pages alone, the last of the salt water dripping from her hair. She reads the writing, reads and reads, and writes her own words with ink in the margins, circles passages, adds check marks, fastens her own pages with tree sap. She draws little pictures of fish and shapes like circles or eggs, o-shaped mouths for speech or pain. All, except for the slow pull and push, pull and push of the water, the other mothers' quiet humming and low talking, is quiet. Her babe is asleep in the crook of her arm. It is the beginning. The very first light smears the sky coral and tangerine, rolls along the water, a shimmering carpet, is met by

the softest puff of breath from the babe's sleeping lips. The mother finally lies down in the sand between the rocks, places her babe in the C of her body. It is time to sleep now, to dream, to slip away into tomorrow.

She is already changed. Her body an empty sack, loose and stitched and damaged. It will heal, it will heal, but it will never be the same, she will never be the same. No one told her that, no one, no one, tha-thump, tha-thump. It is slow here, time is slow, it is repeating, everything repeats like her heart's muffled thump, everything repeats like her heart squeezed and squeezed and squeezed with a tiny fist (long fingers, gonna play the piano someday). She wants to sit with it, with her creation, hold it so light and delicate as a single snowflake. It is as if she holds her own heart, no, her soul, a little bird with fine bird bones. And she is a mother as if she has always been a mother, as if there was no self before this birth. This birth of the babe, of herself wet and shivering, spit onto the shore by the belly of the ocean. Spit onto the shore inside out. She is healing, though, from the unforgiving birth process, from the speed at which it consumed her, turned her eyes inward. For the first time she is gentle and delicate with herself. Takes time to clean and wash and slowly dress, yes, even to feed herself. And she is hungry, very hungry, wants milk and thick warm cereal. She wants water, more water, water so cool ice floats in little slivers on the top. She eats all the other mothers bring to her, wants more. They bring more. For the first time, for the only time, for the last time she is kind to herself. For the last time she is slow and patient with herself. The other mothers tell her always to take these moments, even when the babe is growing, even when the babe needs more. But they know. They know she will not. She will give everything. With an open hand. Her

heart on the outside. Didn't they all? Even the ones whose babies were lost to the sea, even the ones who floated out, were washed away.

She is new, as well. Her babe has given her herself, inside out, but whole. Inside out, soft, sensitive to the tiniest breeze. She is listening to sounds she never listened for before.

Time is repeating. As it always is in the beginning, all is still and quiet, quiet still. Her heart on the outside, the mother listens.

Conclusion

Making Our Way Through the Labyrinth

labyrinth: a structure consisting of a number of intercommunicating passages arranged in a bewildering complexity. labyrinth: 'not a maze to get lost in; it had only one path, traversing all parts of the figure'. labyrinth: a continuous walking that folds back on itself and in folding back moves forward. labyrinth: earth-womb, underground, a journeying to the underworld and back. House of the Double Axe, scepter of the Cretan Moon Goddess ... intercommunicating passages circling back. (Marlatt, *Readings* 33)

...that's where language is so wonderful to work with, because it is always larger than our intentions. It's always larger than our aims. (Curran and Hirabayashi 114)

First, there was the breaking of a silence, this emergence of women writers finally openly addressing the taboo subjects related to the female body. And with anything new, they had to try and try again to put something into words that had not been put into words before. They had to find the right language, the most effective language with which to communicate such a personal, internal, yet broad-sweeping, overwhelming, female body-connected experience as pregnancy and childbirth. Therefore, they needed to speak with language closely related to the female body, the female experience, constructed and expanded by women's bodies. This may be why this notion of a reconstructed language did not exist in earlier women's writing, because the topics of the body relating to the female body (lesbianism & maternity) were not openly discussed (if at all). Compounding this was the lack of time women poets had to write. But when they began to do so, when the words began to push forth, they wrote with "an expanded vocabulary, a wider range of metaphor" (Blaeser 160).

In using this discourse, these women began to embrace the idea of the slippage of the reader's response and interpretation in order to connect the writers to each other, to the world. The poets began to let the words "leak meaning" (Marlatt, *Readings* 117) and began to allow ample room for many interpretations and meanings, for the reader and other writers to bring their own meaning to the poems, for them to relate to the stories therein:

...on that double edge where she has always lived, between the already spoken and the unspeakable, sense and non-sense. only now she writes it, risking nonsense, chaotic language leafings, unspeakable breaches of usage, intuitive leaps. inside language she leaps for joy, shoving out the walls of taboo and propriety, kicking syntax, discovering life in old roots. (Marlatt, *Readings* 133)

The language was pulled apart and reconstructed to speak the seemingly unspeakable.

The language began to celebrate difference, to recognize the importance of difference in contributing to the whole. "Difference is where the words turn depending on who reads them and how we bring who we are to that reading. When we each bring our differences into that reading, the multiple nature of the real begins to be heard" (Marlatt, *Readings* 133). Each reader brings something to the writing, each writer brings something to the nexus of thought of ideas and stories.

This dialogue that our writing enters is a singularly (as in deviating from the norm) complex one because it includes, it must include, voices from so many fringes...becoming aware of dialogue on the (many) fringes, listening to other women's words, realities, is to engage in a delicate balance between recognition

of difference and recognition of shared ground. The balance between i and we – and neither capitalized nor capitalizing on the other.” (Marlatt, *Readings* 137)

In this use of language, the words circle as they do in a woman’s mind, multi-task (contain double meanings). Just as a mother’s mind is always on several things at once, must be flexible and fluid, this language circles to reflect maternal minds, their ways of being. Language absolutely has to be expanded to reflect, at the very least, the things known only to (experienced only by) women.

This expansion of language is simply a searching for the right words, the right language, for which any poet who seeks to write the truth might search. Through this searching,

woman’s writing becomes ‘organic writing’, ‘nurturing-writing’ ..., resisting separation. It becomes a ‘connoting material’, a ‘kneading dough’, a ‘linguistic flesh’, and it draws its corporeal fluidity from images of water... This keeping alive and life-giving water exists simultaneously as the writer’s ink, the mother’s milk, the woman’s blood and menstruation. (Minh-ha 260)

This creation of an organic kind of writing closely related to the body is parallel to the ability of the female body to create and sustain life.

Due to its flexibility, poetry is an attractive genre of writing to use when wanting to write the body. “Taking issue (yes, and exit-ing tradition) with language, genre and symbol, women are coming to poetry not to be made in it but to make it, remake it in light of our own vision – *because in the small womb / lies all the lightning* (Marlatt, *Readings* 81, quoting Dorothy Livesay). Women are playing, reinterpreting, unraveling, reconstructing. They are creating “bodies (of work) that record” (Marlatt, *Readings* 81).

They are reading their own embodied lives in between the lines/lives of other women.

“This in-between space is not merely empty space between two definitive lines of print. It is also the space of what is indefinite, intermingled, shared, like the air we share with trees” (Marlatt, *Readings* 115). There exists the relationship between women, an echoing, a collective story, *and* there exists the intimate conversation between the I and the you, the reader (no matter what sex they are) and the writer.

These thoughts are not mine, are not mine alone.

the beginning: language, a living body we enter at birth, sustains and contains us... placental, our flat land, our sea, it is both place (where we are situated) and body (that contain us), that body of language we speak, our mothertongue. it bears us as we are born into it, into cognition. (Marlatt, *Readings* 10)

Like any evolution, it had to come into its own, first as a radical feminist construction, a movement toward, then as a valid form of communication, of writing – a necessary evolution, an inspired gushing forth, a creation, a birth, a voluminous voice.

The woman picks up the small wet thing, not sure what to say, not sure she wants to say anything. Her silence soft against the backdrop of the ocean's music. The moon watching quietly, blowing her soft light on the scene before her. In her mind she thought to name it, but nothing she knew before would do. Everything is different now. This small wet thing is so much more than she could have imagined. "Baby," she says, the word exploding with soft, round, delicate tones, as if she spoke the revelation for the first time. As if the word was as wet and new and alive as what she cradled to her skin, held to her breast. As if she finally understood what it meant.

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