

THEORETICAL PLAY IN A FIELD OF DESIRE

A road map for negotiating a space of lesbian/feminist subjectivity,

complete with:

- key to explain signposts**
- glossary of local terms and phrases**
- recommendations for the best places to dine**
- annotated directions**
- and, allowance for the unexpected**

by

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical Play in a Field of Desire has a dual focus: it is both an attempt to produce a theoretical field which can support lesbian/feminist visual art and it is also an example of this theory. I discuss the work of four artists, Shauna Beharry, Margot Butler, Shani Mootoo and Susan Stewart, who all are developing strategies to produce active lesbian/feminist subjectivities as the effect of their representation. This is not an exhaustive survey. Rather, it is the beginning of an intervention in white, patriarchal, heterosexist art theory and criticism. I use the term 'lesbian/feminist' specifically to mean from the perspective of lesbian and/or feminist identity. This term also means in support of the political needs of this identity, including deconstructing compulsory heterosexuality, and thus I have included artists who are not lesbian, but who work against heterosexism. All four of these artists, like myself, work within the context of feminist theory and theories of 'Otherness'.

I examine diverse theories which can support my goal as an art critic and theorist: Feminist film theories, french and other feminist literary theories, psychoanalytic theory (especially feminist work from Lacan), and queer and race theories which address representation. As well, I discuss the current ideologies which exclude, oppress and contain lesbian/feminist subjectivity and art practice in Canada. I focus on the specific problem of the patriarchal disavowal of women's active agency (as critics, artists, speaking subjects), the complete denial of lesbians, and the

patriarchal, capitalist emphasis on a separated, distanced individual as the only 'proper' model of subjectivity.

My thesis argues for art criticism and theory which acknowledges art as a source of ideas and does not treat representation as an object to be studied. It also recognises the limits of the critical text, that there is always visual information in excess of the written, and does not attempt to fix or contain the meaning produced by representation. Instead, I argue that criticism should support, contextualize, expand that meaning, and connect visual works with each other and with viewers, by creating a space which allows diverse 'Other' subjectivities to flourish.

For Josephine Wood, whose name I am proud to have inherited.

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Speak and I will listen
listen and I will speak

you and I will swim together in this void
dive and come up dripping wet
dine and smell sweet with satisfaction

Speak all wet and close
dine on fruits of love and labour
listen through finger tips
taste velvet heat
when you orient
your ear and your eye
yourself

INTRODUCTION: TRANSLATION OF SIGNPOSTS

1) Preliminary Directions

The critical and artistic territory that has been staked out according to the terms of the dominant ideology is a daunting, difficult space for artists and critics who are 'Others'. In an attempt to map a field which invites and includes 'Others', my aim here is to develop a new, complex theory of lesbian/feminist art criticism that can address lesbian and feminist visual art and support lesbian and feminist art critics in their work. To demonstrate the applications of this theoretical practice, I will discuss in detail the work of four lesbian and/or feminist visual artists: Susan Stewart, Shauna Beharry, Margot Butler, and Shani Mootoo. I write this thesis in the hope that it will serve as both an explanation of the proposed theory and as an example of its practice. The poetic texts that are on separate pages are my own writing and I explain the theory behind their inclusion later in the Introduction.

My thesis focuses on 'lesbian' and 'feminist' subjectivities simultaneously because I want to situate my thesis within feminist theory and practice, I do not want to marginalize my work as 'only lesbian', and I want to address multiple identity.¹ My study is limited to Western Canada where I and these artists reside, and where an ongoing, in depth contact with these artists is possible. This is not an exhaustive study, it is a starting point; I do not pretend to write on behalf of every lesbian of

¹I recognize that being an 'out' lesbian is a political space but I also recognize that 'lesbian' functions as 'Other' to the 'norm' and thus can be used as a means of dismissal by dominant individuals and institutions.

every race and class. Rather, I speak from the specifics of my identity to develop a theory that applies in this context while including points of connection with 'Others' so that my theory can be shifted to apply to other work.

There are several terms and concepts that are core to this thesis. First, 'art', which, following Louis Althusser, I define as an ideological institution² and which, in Canada, includes galleries (public, artist-run, and private/commercial), funding agencies, schools, universities, critics, theorists, journals, consumers and viewers as well as artists and art works. Contemporary art practice is based on the late nineteenth century's development of the system of the independent artist, private gallery, art critic and bourgeois buyer. In this period, art became a discreet commodity aimed at the new bourgeoisie and produced for sale/viewing in galleries or homes.³ According to this contemporary practice, the meaning of the art work is presumed to stand alone no matter the environment or the viewer. In other words, art appears to be 'universal' when in fact it works for white, patriarchal, bourgeois ideology. Other, 'non-dominant' subjectivity is evacuated if it manages to make it to the gallery or museum environment.⁴

Despite changes over the past century this system, based in consumer capitalism, remains the overriding paradigm of art practice with which artists, critics

²cf. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John Hanhardt (New York: Gibbs M. Smith Inc., 1986).

³cf. T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴cf. Parker and Pollock.

and viewers must engage. Contemporary 'alternative' artists and writers now discuss art work in terms of 'strategies' because we recognize the power structure of art as an ideological institution. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is most useful for understanding how this institution maintains its dominance and marginalizes opposition.⁵ Hegemony removes a 'conspiracy theory' where agency is necessary to explain the dominance of certain groups. Instead, one can focus on hegemonic mechanisms that perpetuate dominance of the 'norm': diffusion and defusion, trivialisation, exoticisation, domestication. Gramsci's theory provides a means to determine strategies that we 'Others' need in order to produce empowered images within the political realm of representation.

The feminist methodology that structures my thesis uses the above concepts to address the social, along with psychoanalytic concepts from the work of Jacques Lacan⁶ to address individual subjectivity.⁷ Lacan's theories combine Freudian psychoanalysis with semiotics to provide an analysis of subjectivity imbricated with visual and verbal representation. Elizabeth Grosz explains that this combination shifts discussion from the limiting notion of a 'subject position' to a concept of "the subject as the effect of discourse" (1990 98) or 'representation'.

⁵Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, [1971] 1972).

⁶Although much of my work draws on psychoanalytic theories, I also have strong criticism of this area. I will develop both my approaches throughout the thesis.

⁷Teresa de Lauretis is a prime example here. Feminist film theory, in which de Lauretis's work maybe categorised, is integral to my work on visual art.

The definition of 'patriarchy' or 'masculine culture' that I use comes from feminist methodology that applies Marxist theories of power relations to gender power relations. As well, my use of these terms follows feminist Lacanian theories which focus on gender in relation to the Symbolic and the Imaginary orders⁸, language and representation.⁹ As well, I use the terms 'dominant' and the 'norm' to refer to the reigning subjectivities, ideologies and practices in Canadian and other European-based contemporary societies. I use white, male, middle-class and heterosexual as the defining aspects of these societies for the purposes of my discussion.

My feminist methodology is based in diverse theories of 'Other' subjectivity; it is specifically based *upon* the combination of lesbian and feminist theories of subjectivity as well as derived *from* this combination. I use the term 'Other' because I want to connect analyses of race and cultural identity in order to address commonalities between different marginalised subjectivities as well as to explore my specific interests. However, I am aware of the tension involved in this term: by posing a generalised 'Other', I run the risk of conflating significant differences and maintaining the linear polarity of 'Other' in opposition to the 'norm'. Yet, I do not want to give up on the effort to allow for coalition amongst those who, in Canada and other European-based societies, have historically been excluded from the 'norm'; thus, I will continue to use this term until a better option is available, but I will use it in single quotation marks throughout the thesis to include a level of self-reflexivity.

⁸cf. Bowie, chapter 4, for an explanation of these Lacanian terms.

⁹The works of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous are my main sources. cf. Bibliography.

For my particular focus, I want to stress my belief that lesbian and feminist concerns are imbricated and this combined focus can shift the heterosexist assumptions in feminist visual theory.¹⁰ I will therefore use the term "lesbian/feminist" for my general focus unless the discussion is exclusive to one or the other of these areas.

Jan Zita Grover remarks that one central problem in writing about lesbian (or other minority) art work is defining what makes the work 'lesbian'. This problem extends as well to defining what makes a theoretical or critical text a lesbian text. Is it simply work that discusses lesbian art? Grover resolves this dilemma by recalling Rosalind Coward's discussion of the difference between feminist and women's novels: feminist, according to Coward, means aligning with "women in a political movement" as well as being written by a woman. Extending from this, Grover argues that lesbian art work, more than just 'being' work by lesbians, must also be aligned with the "political interests" of lesbians. (1992 168-170)

In applying my theory, I chose to address the work of Shauna Beharry, Susan Stewart, Margot Butler and Shani Mootoo because I am excited by the developments that each is making in relation to the above ideas.¹¹ Shauna Beharry produces performance, installations and videos that allow "her flesh to sing".¹² She works from language as physically connected with body as a way to negotiate diasporic identity,

¹⁰I develop this criticism of feminism in general in section II.

¹¹Due to the limitations of working within the space of a thesis, while trying to develop my theoretical base, I cannot give a thoroughly detailed analysis of the art works which I have included in my study. I plan to develop more specific discussion in future published articles.

¹²Conversation with Beharry, January 26, 1993.

specifically a Canadian-based, South Asian mixed heritage, and to speak about the interaction of race and gender. She seeks 'Other' routes of communication and 'Other' means of connecting with viewers such as encouraging physical interaction with her work and including stimulation of senses other than vision.

Susan Stewart, with her photographic series *Lovers and Warriors: aural/photographic collaborations*, works to produce strong, loving, exciting lesbian subjectivity as the effect of her images of lesbians. She addresses the invisibility of white dominance in discussions of sexuality and she develops strategy that allow her to negotiate the containment of difference within current gallery and reception practices.

Margot Butler, in her installation *Their feet fell cleanly on either side, and she, between them?*, uses metaphor and multiple points of access to address a complex notion of her relation as a woman to story telling and making meaning. In *Their feet fell cleanly on either side, and she, between them?*, Butler tells a story indirectly; readers must infer connections or 'conclusions' through physical interaction with the work whereby they are made aware of their body in relation to viewing the work and to producing meaning from the piece.

Shani Mootoo states that she wants to "go beyond identity,"¹³ to avoid being trapped in the definition of Other, and yet to speak of her identity in order to make more space for this discussion, and for this existence. In videos, paintings and collages she describes the experiences and effects of 'Other' identities -- lesbian,

¹³Conversation with Mootoo, June 29, 1993.

women, South Asian, Trinidadian -- in relation to discourses and structures that affect these subjectivities, specifically within Canada.

These artists identify visual representation as a powerful area for making social change. bell hooks defines the terms of this struggle in relation to race, but her remarks apply to 'Otherness' in general:

For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing ... ourselves, the issue of ... representation is not just a question of critiquing the *status quo*. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our world views and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking. (1992 4)

In developing a theory that works with artists such as these four, I am attempting to produce "ways of looking" and understanding that empower lesbian/feminist subjectivity. This theory hopefully will form the base for my future work as an art writer/curator as well as an academic. I have already published some of these ideas as essays¹⁴ and plan to publish more as well as to curate from my research.

The work of all four artists parallels my interest in working from the specifics of one's own identity, but also in making connections for larger analysis. I define my use of 'personal voice' similarly to Meaghan Morris's position on this subject. She

¹⁴"'Queering' the Image: Creating A Lesbian Subjectivity," catalogue essay for *100 Years of Homosexuality*, The Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon (1992), 7-11; and "100 Years of Homosexuality," *Blackflash*, vol. 10, no. 3, (1992), 5-6, 12-14.

describes her writing as "critical speaking", a practice that is not about "the production of a speaking-position understood as a matter of inventing a 'personal voice' for 'me'" (1988 7). Rather, "producing a 'position' is a problem of ... developing enunciative strategies ... precisely in relation to the cultural and social conventions that make speaking difficult or impossible for *women*" (1988 7). My attention to subjectivity, thus, is situated in a context of feminist work to affect social change, specifically in the production, dissemination, and reception of visual representation, and is not limited to textual analysis of the representations.

My self-definition as a lesbian/feminist writer partly derives from Teresa de Lauretis's article "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness" in which she argues that the lesbian subject, like other "eccentric subjects", is not "a truer or essential or unifying identity, but ... [a] critical vantage point, [a] crucial stake" (136). De Lauretis uses Monique Wittig's writing to form her thesis, arguing that:

Wittig's lesbian is not simply an individual with a personal 'sexual preference' or a social subject with a simply 'political' priority, but an eccentric subject constituted in a process of struggle and interpretation, a rewriting of self ... in relation to a new understanding of community, of history, of culture. (1990 144)

My critical position combines de Lauretis's ideas with Kobena Mercer's theory concerning queer artists of colour. He states:

... I would argue that black gay and lesbian artists are producing exciting and important work not because they happen to be black lesbians and gay men but because they have made cultural and political choices out of their experiences of marginality that situate them at the

interface between different traditions. Insofar as they speak *from* the specificity of such experiences, they overturn the assumption that minority artists speak *for* the entire community from which they come. (1991 204)

De Lauretis and Mercer indicate that current cultural practice by 'Others' is not an 'inevitable' product of 'Other' subjectivity or desire. They make clear that such work is an historically specific, constructed critical position arising from lived, physical experience, from discourses that produce and reproduce those experiences, from politically motivated decisions to negotiate and shift those discourses, and from the combination of all these factors.

Mercer's quotation also addresses the problem for 'Others' of finding effective ways to speak from the margins while breaking down the dominance of the centre. Gloria Anzaldúa provides a strong model of this in "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" in which she mixes latin dialects and English, with no English translation of the Spanish. Her strategy is to refuse to translate for the 'norm', thereby disrupting dominant expectation of easy access to 'Other' languages, and simultaneously shifting the favoured subject of the text because this mixed language is easily recognisable to latina/latinos.

In this thesis, I develop strategies for effecting similar kinds of connections and textual space for lesbian/feminist subjectivity. These strategies take into account dominant society's practice of containment but also specific problems that lesbian critics/theorists identify. Sally Munt, in her introduction to *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*, states that because so little has been done, a tremendous amount is expected of lesbian critics. Discussing her severe procrastination

when trying to write her introduction, Munt explains that "Lesbian Theory is ... rife with its own insecurities" because "its balancing act of celebration and self-criticism, of construction and deconstruction, requires of its practitioners, always already working under censure, a dexterity exhausting in its exactitude." She goes on to argue that "the compulsion to represent the entirety of Lesbian Criticism for all time and throughout all cultures, was a recipe for a universal ulcer." I agree with her decision to "stick" to "things I've personally observed." (1992 xi)

Munt's concern informs the question of what is the role of a critic who wants to support a marginalised subject or political position and what areas should be the focus of this critic. Bonnie Zimmerman points to one route that appeals to me. She writes that she is "personally interested in ways of theorising how lesbians in different historical and cultural contexts develop a sense of themselves as lesbians ... in each specific situation" (1992 8). Zimmerman indicates that each writer need not cover wide ground, but rather that a general picture can be gleaned from the combination of many specialised works. In this manner, by focussing on the relatively limited goal of understanding lesbian/feminist subjectivities in relation to the work of Susan Stewart, Shauna Beharry, Shani Mootoo and Margot Butler, I want my theory finally to serve to open more theoretical space which can address 'Other' subjectivities in visual representation in general.

2) Glossary of Strategies

My critique of dominant critical practices is a necessary aspect of my thesis because, by indicating the obstacles lesbian/feminists must deal with, I demonstrate the necessity for my project to support lesbian/feminist art work and to increase the space for lesbian/feminist subjectivities. Hopefully, my charting of new theoretical territory will simultaneously challenge, and defy, academic and art institutions, specifically dominant writing practices for theory and art criticism. The following is a map of my strategies to negotiate these areas.¹⁵

¹⁵In section I, I explain in detail the theory behind these strategies.

Pass me a plum I will listen
For I listen best
with sweet golden juice
running between my fingers
with cool flesh
between my teeth
resting on my tongue

I speak best
with plum juice
trickling down your palm

Listen with your skin
my touch your lips
I can speak because you listen.

The Personal is Political

Implicating the specifics of my identity in this thesis is one strategy I employ as a writer in order to produce alternative theoretical space. This method is also a refusal to fake objectivity. I will use the first person throughout my thesis in order to remind the reader that I, like all critics, speak from a specific ideological position. As well, I will include pieces of my creative writing. This personal, vulnerable writing will "mark" the text with my desire -- what is at stake for me -- and hopefully provide specific points of connection for lesbian/feminist readers (i.e., an alternative to depersonalised academic writing). Text, such as the preceding piece, conveys 'information' and responses that academic writing cannot achieve and that are essential in the production of my theoretical space.

Bypassing False Objectivity

Another strategy relates to my concerns about what should be the focus and method for a marginalised critic. My approach is to refuse the prevailing notion of the critic as the holder of an outside, objective perspective. Instead, I acknowledge that my criticism extends from what artists have produced and is directed back to communities which support this same art. I discuss my observations about their work with the four artists I have chosen to study so that there is an on-going relationship between my work as critic and theirs as producer.

This approach goes against proper critical practice whereby the critic should have 'outside', separate opinions on the art and the artists. Such 'objectivity' in

critical writing is founded on Western patriarchal, capitalism's glorification of autonomous, separated individuals. To subvert and contradict both of these ideas simultaneously, I base my critical writing on the recognition of the connections between the people involved in the debate. The following Jeanette Winterson quote gives inspiration for this method:

She wades into the water with me, deep enough to wet the bottom of her hair, and takes my face in both her hands and kisses me on the mouth. Then she turns away and I watch her walk back across the sand and up over the rocks. I begin to row, using her body as a marker. I always will. (1989 103)

Instead of foregoing reference to the artists's affect on critical work, as in 'proper' critical practice, I prefer to acknowledge that their work plays a key role in producing the parameters of a critical piece. I know that I must use their "bodies" and ideas as "markers" to orient the direction of my writing just as I imagine readers whom my work will engage.

In relation to the notion of writing based on connections between subjects, Nicole Brossard suggests why lesbian/feminists need this different method of critical and theoretical practice to support our subjectivities:

We have no markers but ourselves. We are surrounded by signs that invalidate our presence. (1990 126)

Fiction such as Brossard's and Winterson's form part of an "imagined community"¹⁶

¹⁶Reina Lewis explains that this phrase is from Benedict Anderson's title, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London, 1983. The term and idea are also in general use. For example, Valerie Miner's "An Imaginative Collectivity of Writers and Readers."

that enables me to write despite the difficulties of inhabiting a marginalised position. I need their work as "markers" to support my own production and the visual production that I discuss. Reina Lewis identifies the contradiction of lesbian theorists trying to "write themselves into [a] study as an anchor point" (1992 18) while also wanting to critique the structure of that study. She states that she manages to write despite this paradox because she has strategies such as using a lesbian 'we' as "an appeal to the imagined community of shared opinion (lesbian or otherwise) who may visualise a ... reconceptualised ... [lesbian] reading practice" (1992 18). Imagining a community who will enjoy, listen to, and benefit from a text is a strategy to help 'Other' writers overcome the daunting knowledge that dominant institutions will ignore or dismiss much of what one writes because it is written in 'queer' ways and because it voices ideas that are dangerous to dominant comfort. By including quotations from both theoretical and literary sources which relate to my process, I can "mark" the presence of that imagined support as well as provide solace for myself.

Plotting Connections Between Representation and Theory

There is a long and varied tradition of both lesbian/feminist creative writing and literary theory which can support and inform my discussion of visual practice. Aligning literary and visual representations provides a means to help shift critical practice's hierarchy of text over visual image. The strategies for effecting 'Other' subjectivities within writing are more readily understood, and discussed, because text is easily compatible with other text whereas it is harder to use writing to discuss visual

representation. I attempt to use literary works as sources of knowledge that elaborate my theoretical process, rather than as objects to be studied (as traditionally practices in literary theory). By creating associations via the fiction pieces, I hope to support my goal of showing that the visual work I discuss is both the source, and the focus, of my theory.

This literary deployment, like my personal writing, will hopefully highlight the pleasurable, creative aspects of theoretical writing, provide a passionate connection between theoretical writing and representation, hopefully decrease the distance between the two. Literary quotes will provide spaces of 'Other' pleasure that defy containment and leak extra lesbian/feminist subjectivity and desire into the text -- both directly, by the quotation itself, and indirectly, by mimicking the process of reading for fissures that allow 'Otherness' into dominant representation, and by encouraging imaginative expansion from these gaps. Roland Barthes describes this process in "Writing Reading" as "that text which we write in our head when we look up" from the page (1986 30). He expands upon this point:

... to read is to make our *body* work (psychoanalysis has taught us that this body greatly exceeds our memory and our consciousness) at the invitation of the text's signs, of all the languages which traverse it and form something like the shimmering depth of the sentence. (1986 31)

It is exceedingly difficult to write theory in a way that "invites" the reader's "body to work" because proper theory is structured to ignore the potential of theory to provide nourishment and pleasure for readers. I will use literary quotations and my own creative writing to encourage these invitations and to hopefully produce a greater depth and breadth in the theoretical space that I construct in the following sections.

My hand brushes across my thigh
 along your back
 fingers trail the lines of her neck
touch the verb
to be.
I am at stake
 which I?
I caress her cunt
Savour her salt lick
and fail to speak of this woman whom I love.
 That I.

I would speak
 speak but from lips alone
 words cross my teeth
I am at stake
 flow down my body
 trail across my thigh.

The distance between our bodies
is fertile ground for desire,
irrigated by the sweet scent of ripening fruit,
bathed in the velvet heat of attraction,
sustained by the snap crackle of
 imagined touch.

I am at stake

I want to traverse this space

dive into her welcome wet

pause behind her knees

trail fingers the length and breadth

of arteries, capillaries, veins.

Feel her voice against my breast

would I be at stake

kiss the verb *to be* and celebrate out loud

in the space between our bodies.

I. CHARTING ACADEMIC AND CRITICAL TERRITORY: A LESBIAN CRITIC'S GUIDE TO HER THESIS

1) Aerial View

There are three main theoretical obstacles defining the territory that I am trying to negotiate in this thesis: the limitations as to appropriate role, scope and sources for theorists and critics; the presumed necessity that subjects be distanced and autonomous to be able to engage in representation; and the related structures of Modernism and postmodernism as dominant paradigms specific to art. In the following pages, I will briefly outline these obstacles.

A Guide to Local Conventions

The first obstacle is so pervasive that it becomes invisible. A woman is not supposed to write, speak, or perform any act of authority especially if she speaks from her subject position as a woman. Academic writing fits this general description and has the specific results of objectifying and excluding lesbian/feminist subjectivity as both 'deviant' from the proper voice and from the proper range of topics for a study. At best, lesbians and other women should only appear as the object to be studied, within a patriarchal framework, but never as the subject who speaks. We should not assert our subjectivity as the writer of a text nor be present as factors that determine the parameters of academic discourses.

Marilyn Frye, in the *Politics of Reality*, argues that the particular problem for lesbians is that lesbians simply do not exist within the "dominant conceptual scheme." Frye devotes a chapter of this book to a futile chase through dictionaries in an attempt to find a definition which includes her intentions and experiences. The results are nonsensical; she is unable to combine definitions of "women" and "sex" and ends by concluding that "Speaking of women who have sex with other women is like speaking of ducks who engage in arm wrestling" (157). She sums up the problem as, "If a conceptual scheme excludes something, the standard vocabulary of those whose scheme it is will not be adequate to the defining of a term which denotes it" (154). In other words, one must necessarily fail to speak of, or as a lesbian, if one stays within the structures of patriarchal language and institutions such as academe.

Frye's analysis of the containment of lesbians connects to the patriarchal disallowal of any (active) subjectivity for women which structures art theory and criticism (like any other discipline). As well, this area has specific limitations, in particular the hierarchy of text over image which is rationalized with the argument that theoretical work is more objective and better equipped to discuss ideas than is visual work. Because of this 'superiority', a primary function of art criticism is to 'fix' meaning in relation to visual images; to provide the definitive reading, or to provide the meaning within historical and cultural specifics, depending on the type of criticism. The result? Comforting reassurance for those invested in dominant ideology and practice because meaning is limited to that which the prevailing structure already

allows; incredible frustration for 'Others' who wish to discuss possibilities for change or to challenge critics' control.

Of course, there is variation between critical practices. The methods, assumptions and functions of reviews and articles differs among 'popular' publications, such as newspapers; conservative magazines oriented towards a mainstream audience, such as *Canadian Art*; and art magazines oriented towards the art industry such as *C Magazine* and *Parachute*. Traditional practice, exemplified by John Bentley Mayes' art reviews¹⁷ in *The Globe and Mail* or the majority of writers in *Canadian Art*, validates the critic's prerogative to assess visual art pieces based solely on 'his' discerning taste. *C Magazine* or *Parachute* are relatively challenging toward traditional practice when compared to the above examples. They tend to publish writers who are more critical of the assumption that an individual's opinion is the sole requirement for art criticism. These journals allow a wider scope than the former establishment publications as to who and what is worth discussing; they look more to context and supporting ideas than to merely formal aspects in their discussion of art.

¹⁷John Bentley Mayes is a complex example both because he produces a variety of styles of criticism and because he does not fit the 'norm'. He expresses 'non-heterosexual' subjectivity in his reviews, but overall he supports and maintains 'traditional' critical approaches - i.e. those in keeping with dominant ideology and hegemonic mechanisms rather than subverting or challenging them. As well, *C Magazine* publishes Bentley Mayes's creative art reviews which are alternative to his more conservative offerings in *The Globe and Mail*.

Certainly magazines such as *C Magazine* and *Parachute*, publish writers who try to produce responsible¹⁸, effective, exciting criticism.¹⁹ However, the differences between these 'alternative' magazines and the more conservative, establishment ones are not that great and there are certain key commonalities among them. *C Magazine* and *Parachute* are the two main Canadian national art magazines for artists, curators and other members of the art community. As such, they constitute the main space for critical debate with the result that they wield a great deal of power and influence.²⁰ The difference shrinks when considering this last point because on the whole, neither 'establishment' nor 'alternative' critical practice is open about the social and discursive politics of their practice. These areas tend to exclude and erase lesbian/feminist and 'Other' subjectivity, experience, and concerns despite variations in their styles, scope and goals.

Furthermore, none of these publications significantly shifts the framework of art criticism whereby the reviewer's ideas are placed above the artist's and the art work. Art criticism in general treats art work as an object to be studied and not as a source of knowledge in the way that academics, for example, regard their sources. In

¹⁸I discuss this notion in detail later in this section.

¹⁹For example: Laura Marks, "Sexual Hybrids," *Parachute*, 70 (1993). As well, publications such as *Parallelogramme* and *Harbour* are attempting to change the narrow range of options for art/culture magazines. These include artist pages and other work by artists as well as politically open and various experimental writing. I am not discussing these journals because they create 'Other' spaces rather than changing the parameters of criticism which is my focus here.

²⁰*Canadian Art* essentially does not engage with 'theory' and 'critical debate'.

all of the above critical practices, the text is usually valued higher than the visual image. In the traditional, 'apolitical' form of criticism, the reviewer's opinions are disguised as 'objective assessment', based on his/her 'superior knowledge' and beyond the reproach of his/her 'lessers' - including artists. Or, this practice can take the form of empowering the reviewer's "gut reaction"²¹ -- the response of the expert (his/her credentials guaranteed by the publication) is purely personal, not political, and out of reach of debate because it is mere opinion.

In alternative work, the critic makes connections with theory and discusses context but this too can lean towards giving the critic superior stature and knowledge because it is the critic who makes the connections without crediting the artist or art work for informing or directing that critic's search and conclusions. While criticism could be a give and take between the review/theory and the image/context, a practice that credits the importance of the art work in the process of criticism, art critics have vested interests in maintaining the status quo which secures a professional niche beyond intervention by those whom they study (and those whom they exclude) and which motivates resistance to changing critical practice.

The false separation between critical text and image, between reviewer and artist/art work, and between critic and the text s/he writes, covers up uncomfortable facts such as the key role of reviews/reviewers in the art system -- within both mainstream markets and alternative exhibition and granting practices. Current critical

²¹Morris, chapter four, "Indigestion: A Rhetoric of Reviewing," discusses this metaphor and its implications.

practice also "conveniently elides" political issues, as Meaghan Morris identifies in relation to British and Australian film criticism. She focusses on the category of "Gut Reaction" to discuss what criticism leaves out:

One [element] is cultural *politics*: and in ignoring this, the Gut Reaction is always a defence of the current regime, even if it takes the form of a burp from the margins. The other is the politics of *discourse* (critics write and/or speak): and in ignoring this ... Gut Reactors exempt us from ever examining what critics actually do, or what criticism does. (1988 110)

Although she refers to "Gut Reactors", her points relate to 'highbrow' or scholarly styles of criticism as well because, although the strategies of elision are different, both refuse to concede the interaction of political, social and discursive factors in the production and reception of visual representation. I would add to Morris's list that criticism ignores the impact of the artwork on the critic both within a single article and over the course of the critic's life, career, experiences. I know that certain cultural products and conversations with artists about art work have radically altered my ability to see, understand, speak, and feel and that to leave this out of my writing is to ignore substantial information. The context of production and reception of a critical or theoretical article, including 'personal' interaction and responses, should be essential components of any article. Yet, traditional critical practice denigrates writing that makes such connections claiming that this work is political advocacy rather than objective discussion, or that it lacks critical distance and is incapable, therefore, of providing 'insight'.

A basic tenet of dominant critical practice is that written reviews can adequately discuss visual representation, but why should we assume this? As Morris discusses, the practice of criticism is seldom examined in any significant way. During my research for this thesis, I encountered texts that engaged with the role of the critic (which I discuss later in this section) but not texts that questioned the prevailing assumptions concerning the role, scope or ability of criticism. What would happen if the practice is debated? As I have already discussed, Morris focusses on the politics of discourse; another approach is to question what criticism can and cannot encompass. In "Leaving the Movie Theatre," Roland Barthes writes about viewing a film as an interaction *with* visual images and he admits to enjoying the excess of visual meaning that text cannot describe. His focus in this article is the fascination and pleasure of viewing:

But there is another way of going to the movies (besides being armed by the discourse of counter-ideology); by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings - as if I had two bodies at the same time. ... What I use to distance myself from the image - that, ultimately, is what fascinates me: I am hypnotised by a distance; and this distance is not critical (intellectual); it is, one might say, an amorous distance... (1986 349)

Barthes is not arguing for the same thing that I am - the above text was written in 1975 and his idea of "surroundings" is limited to the theatre itself rather than including the wider cultural context - but he does point in an interesting direction and suggests possibilities that most criticism works hard to avoid. He is not giving up the ability to be a critic or to discuss imagery just because he admits to being engulfed, hypnotised or otherwise lost in enjoying the image or the process of interacting with

that image. What he is doing is relinquishing absolute control of his position as writer and of the superiority of his text over the image. As well, he allows passion to enter his work. I think that his idea of "an amorous distance," to replace or supplement critical distance, is most appealing.

In several articles, Barthes focusses directly on the relation of text to visual image and again indicates interesting areas to pursue. In "The Third Meaning," Barthes discusses stills from Sergei Eisenstein's films as a means to discuss "a third meaning" which is neither at an "informational level" nor at a "symbolic level". This "third meaning" relates to "significance" and to the signifier, it is "evident, erratic, obstinate", but he is "unable to give it a name" even though he can "clearly see the traits" (1982 318). Barthes is trying to find a suitable way to address meaning that an image produces but that one cannot describe with verbal or written language. He argues that this meaning should not be ignored or devalued because it escapes: on the contrary, it deserves critical attention and is a pleasurable, exciting part of the process of viewing and discussing that viewing. He settles on calling it the "obtuse meaning", borrowed from the term "obtuse angle", and describes it as:

The supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive. ... The third meaning ... seems to me greater than the pure, upright, secant, legal perpendicular of the narrative, it seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely. I even accept for the obtuse meaning the word's pejorative connotation: the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason (1982 320)

Bearing in mind Marilyn Frye's description of lesbians as structured outside proper,

reasoned discussion, Barthes's idea is most appealing to a lesbian art critic. What could be better than something which cannot be "absorbed", which is 'Other' than "pure narrative" and which opens up "the field of meaning"? This is worth exploring - at the least, it might lead somewhere more interesting than Gut Reactors. Combining Barthes's ideas with political analysis could help to shift the focus and the scope of criticism.

Increments of Distance

The above discussion of 'critical distance' reflects the larger idea that distance is required to understand/produce representation. There are a number of different developments of this idea but I will focus on Lacanian theory because it is the main source for current theories of representation. In the Lacanian theory of human development, individuals are assumed to achieve a sense of self through differentiation from others around them (during the mirror stage), and this separation, especially from one's mother, is supposedly necessary for the individual to produce and make sense of representation or language. Women, according to this theory, are 'outside of language' because we lack the ability to fully differentiate ourselves from other individuals and we lack the ability to aspire to phallic power; the best we can do is become mothers to a male child and live vicariously through him.

In addition to excluding a differentiated, i.e., independent, female subjectivity, the faith in distance and separation marginalises 'Other' routes of communication and

reception that operate through connection.²² This theory's description of the role for women has received a great deal of attention from feminists as we try to negotiate ourselves out of the impossible situation to which it designates us. Hélène Cixous describes our options as "castration or decapitation" in the article by that name. A women can either accept her place as "castrated", lacking phallic power and therefore hopelessly unseparated, hysterical and irrelevant or she can try to fit within patriarchal rules, differentiate herself from other women and become "decapitated", thereby ceasing to exist as a woman.

Women exist within patriarchal discourse as an interesting problem, a sort of 'cute' conundrum. As such, women at least have a place compared to the 'no place' of patriarchal representation of lesbians, excluded from everything including the trials of 'castration or decapitation' because lesbians are not women. Julia Kristeva, working from Lacanian theory, claims that lesbian identity works as follows:

Obliteration of the pre-Oedipal stage, identification with the father and then: 'I'm looking, as a man would, for a woman'; or else, 'I submit myself, as if I were a man who thought he was a woman, to a woman who thinks she is a man.' Such are the double or triple twists of what is commonly called female homosexuality or lesbianism. (1986 149)

Closer to the truth, such are the convoluted "twists" through which homophobic theorists contort themselves in an effort to 'spice-up' what Teresa de Lauretis calls the

²²Lacanian feminists state that, furthermore, lesbian and female-to-female exchange is "impossible" because we are "too close" to achieve differentiation and because, without the castrating presence of the male, we lack the necessary opposition or comparison of sexual difference. Lacan's theory thus oppresses and excludes both autonomous women's subjectivity and lesbian subjectivity.

"bland pre-oedipal soup" that Kristeva and her ilk think describes lesbian existence. De Lauretis demonstrates that Kristeva believes there are only two paths open for lesbians: the constant torture of trying to be something that is impossible, or "death - loss of identity, psychosis, suicide" (1991 254). It is extremely hard to take Kristeva's thinking seriously, but nonetheless, her work exemplifies a prevailing theory of lesbians' relation to subjectivity and representation. In short, lesbians are hopeless, or impossible, because we never accept ourselves as Women -- which means 'different from men'. Of course, the efforts to structure lesbians as absent is part of phallogocentric and misogynist repudiation of women's subjectivity in general.

Negotiating the Terrain of Contemporary Art Practice

Modernism and postmodernism are the two main axes determining the boundaries of contemporary art institutions and critical practices. I will discuss only the prevalence of these theories in art practices as ideological institutions (i.e., the 'popular' invocations of Modernism and postmodernism by artists, critics, curators, et cetera).²³ I address these two areas together because they are inter-related, especially as they determine the structures of art institutions, the possibilities for establishing subjectivities and the suppression of lesbian/feminist art.

²³Postmodernism is especially large and complex to define. I will discuss this area only in terms of commonalities between the various aspects of postmodernism as they relate to art practice. I am not attempting to tackle postmodernism and Modernism as theoretical areas - this is far too large a task. Cf. Morris, Nicholson, and Waugh for detailed feminist work on postmodernism.

Modernism as an art institution²⁴ may be past its peak, but it is alive and well, continuing to evacuate political meanings and recognize only the experiences and values of the white, male, middle-class, heterosexual 'norm'. Exhibition practices and the critical reception of art work still follow the Modernist model of separating art from other art production and from everything else.²⁵ It is a Modernist conceit that art should 'stand alone', producing meaning against a blank wall. This belief disguises the context of production and reception along with the meaning produced or erased when images are read in the gallery context. In such situations, that which is dominant will remain so and will structure the reading without appearing 'to do' anything.

As well, the Modernist myth of the 'avant-garde' and of the 'bohemian artist' still operate.²⁶ These myths are based on the unstated Enlightenment model of the subject: supposedly universal but really a white, male, middle-class heterosexual individual who expresses his 'inner essence' in his work. Women are absent from this construction, but Woman is essential as the object who carries the artist's message: the sign, the image, the muse, but never the subject. Of course, discussions of gender, sexuality, identity or other political ideas are excluded; such concerns are not part of Art.

²⁴I am differentiating between Modernism as a practice and Modernism as an institution and am only addressing the latter. There have been significant moments of subversion within Modernist practice, such as much of the work by the Russian Constructivists or by women Surrealists such as Claude Cahun. These aspects are down-played within Modernism as an institution, i.e., Modernism as a hegemonic paradigm. It is this aesthetic and theoretical domination which I discuss as most problematic for lesbians and feminists.

²⁵cf. Parker and Pollock.

²⁶cf. Parker and Pollock.

Postmodernism, the other dominant practice, aims to critique the Modernist myth, but Modernism is still strong and the two areas often work together. As well, postmodern practices are not necessarily better for lesbian/feminists just because we share Modernism as a common enemy. There are significant aspects of postmodernism that present real problems for lesbian/feminists, and, as importantly, some of what is positive about this field is not exclusive to it or has been appropriated from other areas.²⁷

Primary among its problematic aspects, the common interpretation of how postmodernist theories conceive of the subject is antithetical to a lesbian/feminist project such as mine which aims to support specific identities and 'Other' social possibilities.²⁸ Postmodernists reject posing a coherent sense of self because this is based on the Modernist 'myth' which presumes a 'true inner essence' that defines each individual person. In general, postmodernism proposes that the subject is fractured and constantly in flux. One cannot have authorial or artistic control over a text or image because, without a coherent self, who would be the author? Additionally, the denial of authorial control is based on a critique of Modernist *auteur* theories wherein the author is posited as the source of the text's meaning. Instead, postmodernism

²⁷cf. Morris, Introduction and chapter two, and Waugh, chapter one, for detailed discussions.

²⁸cf. Waugh, chapter one for an in depth discussion of feminist concerns with postmodernism.

emphasizes the structures of the text itself as 'self-written' - as the product of culture.²⁹

The problem these theories pose is that they close off engagement with the politics of identity by refusing the issue. Nancy K. Miller argues that women are not subjects or authors by Modernist standards in the first place and to agree with postmodernist trends is to abandon our work to increase our subjectivity by improving our access to active agency. She points out that "Only those who have it can play with not having it" (1982 53). Patricia Waugh reminds us that the experience of self as autonomous, universal and essential is the exclusive "historical experience of white middle-class males" (1989 42) and that 'Others' have quite a different experience as subjects and therefore as authors. Postmodernist theorists tend to focus on texts and discourses without considering the differences between modes of authorship and categories of authors.

The introduction of 'fractured' subjectivity is one main area where postmodernist debates exclude 'Others' just as much as Modernism because this notion implies that the subject was once whole and now it is 'broken'. However, 'Others' have never felt whole in the first place. More difficult to identify, and therefore to address, this 'fractured' subjectivity has become the new 'norm' in some areas, replacing the Modernist transcendental, whole subject. Yet, 'fractured' subjectivity is the experience of dominant subjects in Western societies. Once again, dominant

²⁹Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1986) and Foucault's "What is an Author?" are two key articles in this debate.

experience is rationalised as the common experience, projected onto 'Others', and we are found lacking if we do not profess, or engage with, this subject position.

If each subject is fractured and constantly shifting, as postmodernism theorizes, then one cannot pose commonalities between subjects because to do so involves ignoring their differences. If one accepts this notion then there is no coherent ground on which to base commonality, then there can be no group coherence or action, no movements for social change and no general assessment of problems and solutions. There can be momentary and constantly shifting allegiances, but this is not a politically effective model. Postmodern concepts work fine if one is already assumed to have subjectivity, a valid voice, a history, and a functioning process for writing or producing images. If not, from what base does postmodernism permit the critique of those in dominance?³⁰

As a movement based on commonality of body and identity across differences, feminism is a primary target of postmodernism's critique. One trend of postmodernism is to claim that feminism is passé; it is time for 'postfeminism', yet Budweiser beer ads still declare "I'm a Bud man" while showing an image of a woman. Such ads are but one small example of the continuation, and resilience, of misogynist ideology. Despite postmodern refutation, the normative subject position is still white, heterosexual, middle-class and male, erasing of any 'Other' subjectivity. As long as such ideology is functioning, feminists cannot afford the luxury of retiring.

³⁰Lynne Hissey, CMNS 421 lectures, February 7, 1993.

A key mechanism that maintains and expands the territory known as postmodernism is that this field lays exclusive claim to certain concepts and methods that in fact are located in several disciplines and have distinct specifics dependent on their location.³¹ For instance, theorists are labelled 'postmodern' if they combine theories from different disciplines, but postmodernism is certainly not the only area that is interdisciplinary. Feminist theories, such as feminist film theory which draws on the diverse sources of Marxism, psychoanalysis and semiotics, are given superficial attention even though they antedate, and co-exist with, postmodernism. As well, feminist interdisciplinary work maintains historical specificity, works for concrete political goals such as addressing structural gender inequality, and is thus hardly the same as the free-floating, asocial 'pastiche' that characterises postmodern methods of combining sources and ideas. While postmodernism raises interesting debates and points, it is hardly fair to give it credit for all interdisciplinary methodologies or for all work on diversity.

As dangerous for 'Other' subjects, many postmodernist theorists appropriate feminist and 'Other' work on gender, sexuality and race, deny its sources, and then claim it is the only area that addresses diversity of subjectivities.³² Chris Weedon's widely read and accepted text *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* is a prime example. Her main thesis is that the problems with feminism are so great that

³¹cf. Morris, Introduction; Waugh, chapter one; and Hissey, CMNS 421 lectures, February 26, 1993.

³²cf. Morris, Introduction and Hissey, lectures CMNS 421, April 2, 1993.

this area should be abandoned and replaced by poststructuralism. She critiques feminism for not accounting for discursive relations and for being essentialist and not accounting for diversity of subjects. Her argument is not believable because she erases the source of her ideas and analysis if it is outside of her focus on poststructuralism and leaves out aspects of the work she critiques that would blur the lines of her argument. For example, she uses Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony when she states that

most discourses work on the basis of consent by offering 'obvious' or 'natural' ways of being and forms of pleasure which go with them. Where existing power relations are under threat, however, intially consensual forms of discourse often employ coercion to govern the subjects in question should consent fail. (100-101)

However, she never credits Gramsci as the source of this analysis nor does she acknowledge that this analysis is Marxist based and quite outside poststructuralism. Furthermore, she does not address how "power relations" manage to "coerce" subjects or how this relates to discourse relations: this passage is tossed in late into the section on "Language and Subjectivity" but is not connected with her main points. Another example, she castigates Irigaray and Cixous for being essentialist (131), among other things, but she does not address that these two identify themselves as poststructuralist and clearly fit this area given their roots in lacanian theory.

It is important that lesbian/feminists reconsider the boundaries and claims of postmodernism because it often works to discount feminism and other socially-connected theories. While there are strengths to postmodern attention to diversity, it did not take postmodernism to make feminists reconsider the narrow focus of early feminism. The plethora of feminist articles and books on the essentialism/anti-

essentialism debate attests to the range of this work. And, there is a distinct field of feminism already working from the assumption of diverse identity. In the *Pirate's Fiancée*, Meaghan Morris follows her Introduction with a bibliography of feminist writing that rebuts the postmodernist 'boy's club' approach whereby initiates quote each others' work and express shock at the lack of feminist engagement with their area without ever bothering to find out what is out there (11-16).

Furthermore, many postmodern approaches play right into hegemonic mechanisms by diffusing or defusing important political and social positions. For instance, the work by lesbian/feminists and 'Others' to assert identity is political work because these artists are emphasising subjectivity which dominant ideologies attempt to erase and ignore. Shauna Beharry's interest in Hindu dance and rituals³³ is part of her overall interest in claiming a space for herself through discussing histories of oppression and of resistance that relate to her identity. Attention to details from South Asian life has quite a different meaning when Jeff Wall uses these in his large scale, colour photographs. In 1992, his exhibition at the Banff Centre consisted of a myriad of portraits of people from diverse racial histories all posing and gesturing in culturally evocative ways (i.e., their gestures and poses derived from social, spiritual, and artistic practices.)

One could praise this work for showing an admirable interest in the diversity of lives and bodies in the world. Or, in contrast, one could see in this work both the continuance of the Modernist author/subject as white, male western for whom all

³³I discuss Beharry's work in detail in section III.

'Others' exist as superficial signs. Various, one could see this work as an example of the new universality of white, male experience as a fragmented subject. Given that the gestures of the models do not fit their specific racial identity, the second argument becomes stronger. Instead of the use of specific cultural signs to reinforce claims by an artist who is 'Other' that s/he communicates a particular voice, subjectivity, or critical position, in Wall's exhibition, such signs are reduced to the single signified 'multi-culturalism' or just 'Otherness'. As I will argue later, it really does matter who speaks. One can talk about 'Otherness' in such a way that maintains the binary 'norm'/ 'Other' or one can speak from, about, and challenge the structures of this process.

Wall's work is supported by postmodern critics who see here nothing more than circulation of signs, the detachment of signified from signifier, and the impossibility of any one true position. They do not see or understand how 'Others' might analyze this work. Shauna Beharry was at Banff during Wall's exhibition and was appalled, infuriated and disgusted by it. For her, deeply spiritual, contextually important gestures were defused and had become decorative, free-floating signs for white, male western subjects. Wall's work in this exhibit is an example of the hegemonic mechanisms of trivialisation and diffusion: the full import is stripped from these poses and details are 'spread thin', losing their depth and significance. Beharry recognised that this work is accessible only if one adopts the white, male fragmented position and/or the Modernist voyeur position of gazing at 'Others' for one's own

pleasure or edification. She responded by 'borrowing' a large, authoritative national park sign which said "NO PUBLIC ACCESS" and stuck this to the entrance of the gallery with copious amounts of honey. Personally, I could not think of a more suitable response.

The warm hum of your words
brush across my chest
flow down my thigh
when I sit beside you and
tell you about my ambitions.

Did I ever frighten you

The soft velvet of my reply
strokes the side of your face.
When I'm near you ever so faintly
I smell sweet ripe plums.

I can't write by myself
You irrigate my imagination
with the hot tang of your cum
the salt lick of your skin.

I'll wear your shirt when I want to write
and roll my tongue to help
stir the taste of ripe fruit.

I've been told that there is no /
after all
but so many stories leave you and I out
I cannot expect to read about the taste of plums.
Perhaps together we can write

I know all too well what is at stake
why it is hard to write and speak
with my flesh.
My tongue wants to
linger on your skin and
speak out loud.

When I feel your breath and your words
your dreams
traverse the length of my body
no one can stop us.

2) Regional Dialects: A Guide to Theorising Differently

The preceding section charted three obstacles that this thesis must negotiate in order to chart 'Other' courses. In the following section, I will outline areas that provide the tools to succeed in this project: addressing the subject/object split, referencing 'Other' critics concerning their practice and diverse theories of 'Otherness', and putting pressure on the divisions between literature and theory.

Border Languages and Customs

I do not try to 'transcend' the subject/object split, to get away from this division. To do so would entail replicating false objectivity. Rather, I write from that position because it is a main characteristic of lesbian/feminist experience. Teresa de Lauretis (1990) discusses this "paradox of woman" that Simone de Beauvoir early on identified: "humanity is male" and woman is "Other" or, subjects are male and women are objects. De Lauretis argues that feminists cannot "dispense" with this paradox of woman because it is not "a seeming contradiction but a real one" (1990 118), and thus the "constant turn of subject into object into subject is what grounds a different relation, for women, to the erotic, to consciousness, and to knowing" (1990 119).

This focus on women's subject/object split has particular importance for the critique of compulsory heterosexuality, especially in the construction of, and discussion about, representation. Marilyn R. Farwell argues that:

Confusing the boundaries between subject/object and lover/beloved undercuts the heterosexuality which is based on this dualism. The point in the narrative where this deconstruction begins is what I would call lesbian narrative space. It happens most often when two women seek another kind of relationship than that which is prescribed in the patriarchal structures ... (1990 98)

De Beauvoir's "Other" describes a heterosexual structure as well as a patriarchal one, because the rigid binary of patriarchal gender is based in fixed sexual difference where biological sex, gender and sexuality are conflated. The subject/object and male/female split produces a limited sexual identity in which the active lover is only male. This structure encompasses the patriarchal view that lesbians are impossible. By Farwell's argument, confusing the terms of this split is the point where representations can begin to speak about subjectivities other than the male heterosexual 'norm'.

Elizabeth Meese focuses on sexual identity in relation to lesbians producing representation. She states that lesbians "exchange our bodies ... in an economy where woman places woman (herself) in circulation" thereby producing "a double subject" constantly turning from active agent to object. Meese's lesbian "double subject" has the potential to break open "phallogically constructed 'woman'" (1990 83) because her concept is radically different from the patriarchal model that puts woman into exchange and restricts 'her' to passive object. Working from Meese's attention to lesbian sexuality is one way to produce more space for lesbian subjectivity. Meese gives an example of her 'double subject' as part of 'lesbian writing':

When I write "I love you," I act as though I know who I am and what it means to love. And who you are, and that you will understand what it means to me to tell you. I have to write as though we are together in this. (1990 77)

Meese's position -- putting pressure on the subject/object split, but not denying it -- works to challenge the exclusivity of the proper masculine subject and his objective voice. As well, writing "as though we are together in this" works from the basis of the "constant turn" of subject into object that de Lauretis identifies, quoted above, thus providing a passionately connected approach to subjectivity and to being a writer.

Local Writing and Beliefs

Amongst feminists and 'Others', there is a range of discussion on what it means to be an 'Other' critic/theorist and what an 'Other' critic/theorist should do. I am interested in theorists who find alternative routes of theorising that are positive and productive (as opposed to revisionary or simply 'against the norm'), and which are also subversive and aware of the context of dominant theory.

In my introduction, I quoted Teresa de Lauretis's and Kobena Mercer's position that 'Other' critics' and artists' analyses derive from cultural choices made from a marginal position. Simultaneous attention to margin and centre is a basic concept in contemporary feminist work.³⁴ It provides insight into both dominant and 'Other' relations, challenges the process of constructing boundaries between them, and avoids the problem of posing the 'norm' as monolithically powerful. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that "pointing an accusing finger" from the "outside" is not an effective way to critique the centre. Instead, she suggests "implicating [herself] in the center" (through her connection with academic institutions) so that she can use

³⁴cf. bell hooks (1984).

herself "as a shuttle between the center and the margin and thus narrate a displacement" (1990 381).

In addition, because there is variation among the margins, it is necessary to work from connections among 'Others' rather than isolating only one aspect of marginality. bell hooks' work is an excellent example of this project because her critical position is based in the specifics of being both black and a woman within theories of race and feminism, and within the interaction of these ideas. In my Introduction, I quoted bell hooks on the importance of creating a "context for transformation." This context includes working to shift paradigms, perspectives and ways of looking (1992 4). A simultaneous focus on/from margin and centre as well as on/from diversity of marginality is a key part of this shift.

Including personal experience and focussing on the interaction between practice and theory are other strategies to produce a context that changes ways of looking. The contradictions (actual and supposed) between theory and practice are another set of paradoxes that structures lesbian/feminist work on subjectivity and with which we need to engage. Bonnie Zimmerman argues that interesting work will come out of the debate between the discourses of 'common sense' and contemporary theory. She marks this area as a key discussion for lesbians because:

Most [literary] theorists today are anti-essentialist, suspicious of 'experience' and 'truth' as categories, and enamoured of disruption and fragmentation; most lesbians in everyday life believe they always have been lesbians, rely on their experience and sense of what's real to make literary judgements, and seek the condition of wholeness and normality. (1992 13)

Neighbourhood Markers

The gap between theory and experience structures lesbian and 'Others''s work as critics and emphasizes our need to ask "what is the responsibility of the critic to the writer, to the text, and to the community of readers" (Zimmerman,1992 13)? Lesbian/feminist critics have to address our experiences of lesbian/feminist identity in relation to our work as critics.³⁵ This focus involves not only considering for whom and for what purpose one works but also what methods will best convey that purpose to the targeted audience.

Working in traditional academic forms alienates 'Other' subjects. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes discusses one way this alienation is produced:

I am offered a text. This text bores me. It might be said to *prattle*. ... You address yourself to me so that I may read you, but I am nothing to you except this address; in your eyes, I am the substitute for nothing, for no figure ... for you I am neither a body nor even an object ... but merely a ... vessel for expansion. It can be said that after all you have written this text quite apart from bliss; and this prattling text is then a frigid text, as any demand is frigid until desire ... forms in it. (1982 404)

It is necessary to ask how effective is a text which treats the reader as not a "body" and which bores the reader. Responding to this question, lesbian/feminists need to include pleasurable and personal markers. Avoiding false objectivity and combining the exclusion of lesbian/feminist subjectivity with creative, passionate writing can increase the political impact of 'Other' criticism and theory.

³⁵These questions are equally important to producers of representation, both writers of fiction and artists.

In another article, "The Rustle of Language" (1986), Barthes indicates a related area for focus. Although he is again arguing for a very different goal from mine,³⁶ his approach and focus bring up points that support my interest in increasing the context for transformation. 'Others' can become so focussed on the struggle to speak, amidst the confusion of the demands of different contexts, that we forget to aim for a space of pleasurable, empowered subjectivity. In addition to fighting containment by the 'norm' in order to increase and expand our subjectivity, we need also to assume that we 'Others' do have a space in which to speak and be listened to. Barthes discusses the utopian possibility of language "rustling" and working beautifully, thereby attaining new levels of meaning. He compares this to a common problem with language:

Stammering is a message spoiled twice over: it is difficult to understand but with an effort it can be understood all the same; it is really neither *in* language nor *outside* it: it is a noise of language comparable to the knocks by which a motor lets it be known that it is not working properly; such is precisely the meaning of the *misfire*, the auditory sign of a failure which appears in the functioning of the object. Stammering (of the motor or of the subject) is, in short, a fear: I am afraid the motor is going to stop. (1986 76)

Barthes does not address that "stammering" is a relative term: if one does not speak in the expected, cohesive way, then one appears to 'stammer' from the perspective of the 'norm'. As well, there are contexts and moments when speaking in uncomfortable/discomforting ways can be politically and emotionally effective because

³⁶Barthes talks about "Nature" as a good and real thing - quite different from the feminist deconstruction of this concept.

this speech act can demonstrate 'not fitting' or can support 'Others' who feel the same pain, fear and foreboding about attempting to negotiate the dominant symbolic and societies. On the other hand, Barthes's attention to "stammering" language describes some problems with 'Other' writing/representation. We must not assume that our only option is counter-directed, pain-based language. The fear that "the motor" will "stop" is definitely real for 'Others', but we should work together to help reduce this disabling aspect of fear. Pleasurable, "rustling", well-running language of 'Others' is an act of political resistance as well as an encouragement to ourselves and an invitation for more to join in. Barthes supports that one should "write reading" and so I reach my own conclusion from this 1975 text: "And I - it is the shudder of meaning I interrogate, listening to the rustle of language, that language which for me" (1986 79), is my inspiration and my political method.

Visiting 'Other' Districts

My method is rooted in feminist theory but also in the context of addressing diverse 'Otherness': race, class, sexuality, region. I could also argue that my work is situated as part of 'queer theory' which is a combined lesbian and gay development from many identity politics, especially feminism. Recent work by gay artists and theorists questions their male privilege and acknowledges the simultaneous exclusion by patriarchy of women and gays. They focus on femininity and masculinity but not necessarily as attached to biological sex: queer theory emphasizes that sex, gender, and sexuality are separate but imbricated. Patriarchal ideology conflates the three into

one package in which 'proper' heterosexual masculinity or femininity is the 'natural' human state. This construct excludes gays in ways connected to misogyny. For example, the denigration of effeminate men or the fear of sexually-objectified men are major components of homophobia. Thus, feminist methodology is useful for gay male investigation of representations of gay male bodies, sexuality, masculinity, et cetera.

In an article on Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men, Kobena Mercer, a main figure of queer theory, states that he

emphasizes [his theory's] dependence on the framework of feminist theory initially developed in relation to cinematic representation by Laura Mulvey. ... What is important about this framework of analysis is the way it reveals the symbolic relations of power and subordination at work in the binary relations that structure dominant codes and conventions of visual representations of the body. The field of visibility is thus organized by the subject-object dichotomy that associates masculinity with the activity of looking and femininity with the subordinate, passive role of being that which is looked at. (1991 174)

Mercer examines what happens when subject and model are of the same gender, both male in his case, to argue that the tension produced when there is no gender difference transfers to racial polarity. His insights have application for lesbians addressing gender similarity, for theorists addressing race and for the feminist framework from which he works because he expands its scope while maintaining its relevance. Working with 'queer theorists' such as Mercer supports lesbian feminist 'queering' of heterosexist assumptions within feminism and gives straight feminism new perspectives for addressing gender, sex and sexuality.

This kind of building and connecting around mutual critical discussion, instead of around shared experience exclusively, is also my model for reading, discussing and

applying work by people of colour. bell hooks in *Black Looks* argues that solidarity between races and across difference of privilege "... can be based on one's political and ethical understanding of racism and one's rejection of domination" (1992 14).

This approach prevents white theorists from 'consuming' otherness, tacking on 'race issues' without altering the core structures of their discussion, and assuming that only people of colour 'have race'. hooks's approach makes space for productive work by white writers, especially in the area of questioning whiteness as sign and privilege, and relating this to work by people of colour without appropriating their position.

To give an example of this approach, Teresa de Lauretis argues for one position that women have in common across race and sexuality. Discussing Minnie Bruce Pratt's autobiography, which is "a nonlinear passage through the writer's several identities (white, middle-class, Christian-raised, southern [U.S.], lesbian)," de Lauretis remarks that "a tension between 'being home' and 'not being home' becomes apparent in each ... location" (1990 135). De Lauretis goes on to argue that this tension is a commonality for women negotiating aspects of identity. Her discussion relates to the general contradiction for women of the subject/object split; it also includes discussion of diversity because the shift between "home" and "not being home" occurs within the subject position of women but in relation to the specifics of identity (race, sexuality, class) and to context. Tension comes from the variable nature of this position which is different from the fairly consistent experience of negotiating the subject/object split. As well, this "not being home" provides a point of critical

commonality that can connect various women's ideas, critiques, or representations. It goes beyond common experience yet it also includes such a discussion.

Main Junctions and Crossroads

Breaking down boundaries between fiction and theory is an area of interest for 'Others' because questioning this division helps to point out the pleasurable spaces within academic/theoretical texts and allow detours from the rigid zoning conventions of this area. Introducing literature as sources of knowledge equivalent to theory, and combined with theory, breaks-up the 'cohesion' of a theoretical text and demonstrates that the academic, 'objective' voice is just another author function. Elizabeth Meese argues that lesbian writing which incorporates literary techniques and topics

turns on the Father as phallus, the big prick who regulates the construction of woman. It turns him into the figure that he is - a linguistic site in which substitutions can occur, a rhetorical trope which is subject to revision (1990 75)

Juxtaposing dominant 'proper' writing and 'unacceptable' 'Other' writing shows that the dominant is not universal but is a device like any other, and that it is possible to force it to change.

The inclusion of literary work contests the signs of what is proper theory and who is a proper theorist. This strategy follows Roland Barthes argument that:

... it is no longer the myths which must be unmasked ... but the sign itself which must be perturbed: not to reveal the (latent) meaning of a statement, of a feature, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning; not to change or to purify symbols, but to contest the symbolic itself. ("Mythology Today," 1986 66)

Problematizing the division between academic texts and literature is one way to "perturb" the academic system and create space for change. It is also a way to challenge definitions of subjectivity and of what constitutes a valid, intellectual voice. Theorists should no longer dismiss insights from literature simply because this writing is not the same as theoretical texts nor should theorists get the credit for these insights because they 'found' them in the text and 'explained' their importance.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes traditional (patriarchal) cultural theory as a "rage for order" that is demonstrated in this area's "marginalization between metaphor and concept" or between "poetics" and proper theory (1990 389). She wants to see 'Other' theory that emphasizes "the conceptuality of poetic language and the metaphoricality of historical language *to similar ... ends*" (1990 391). In other words, she wants 'Other' theory to challenge the division between poetic language and academic language and to challenge the 'appropriate' scope and abilities of each. Patriarchal cultural theory demands "coherence" and "obedience" as part of proper "order" and thus precludes or devalues variation, unpredictability and other aspects in excess of control that could lead to new possibilities of understanding, looking, and speaking. Elizabeth Grosz's discussion of metaphor and metonymy as processes of language clarifies why this area has great potential for theorists who want to shift current discourses.

[Metaphor and metonymy] are the two major means by which new meanings, ambiguities, and extended usages occur. They account for the productivity of language and its capacity to change, develop, alter within the closely guarded constraints of *langue*. (1990 98)

Metaphoric and metonymic devices within theoretical writing can alter the dominant structure of academic discourses as well as provide the awareness that this dominance is not monolithic.

Another result of Spivak's interaction between domains is to not only allow the play of poetics into academic work but also to acknowledge the serious, 'coherence' in creative writing that is ignored by the rigid binary division between literature and theory. Toni Morrison comes from a different direction than Spivak but she holds a similar opinion. Morrison argues against the limited evaluation of literature:

When I hear someone say, "Truth is stranger than fiction," I think that old chestnut is truer than we know, because it doesn't say that truth is truer than fiction; just that it's stranger, meaning that it's odd. It may be excessive, it may be more interesting, but the important thing is that it's random - and fiction is not random. (1990 303)

Morrison's novels may be fiction but they are also an 'Other' way of telling history. Dominant white, patriarchal histories are structured to exclude subjectivity such as hers and so she deploys a different method to convey what is important to her. Her novels provide insight and understanding into Afro-American subjectivity as well as provide pleasure. Drawing on Spivak's and Morrison's ideas produces the double strategy of using literary devices as part of academic writing and also including literature as sources of knowledge on par with academic references.

Shani Mootoo, Shauna Beharry, Susan Stewart and Margot Butler are all developing and applying these strategies in their art work. To the same ends, I use these methods in my thesis, and will continue to do so in my future work as a writer and curator.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BEST PLACES TO DINE: THEORIES OF 'OTHERNESS' IN RELATION TO THE CREATIVE FIELD

The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious. Rather it's the beginning, or beginnings, the manner of beginning, not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus, but starting on all sides at once, that makes a feminine writing. A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over. The question a woman's text asks is the question of giving - "What does this writing give?" "How does it give?" And talking about nonorigin and beginnings, you might say it "gives a send-off." (Cixous, 1990 354)

[She] had let herself be seduced, *sucked in* by her reading. It is not always possible to dream without having to follow through on the images. (Brossard, 1990 55)

As I try to voice a response to the work of Shani Mootoo, Margot Butler, Shauna Beharry and Susan Stewart, certain texts and discussions provided "send-off's" and the means to "follow through" on their images. These examples fall into two general areas: 1) theorising about, and putting into practice, communicating 'Otherness' and 2) addressing representation and subjectivity as they are produced together.

1) Communicating 'Otherness'

As explained in section I, specific to my thesis is the problem that, according to the dominant, Lacanian models of subjectivity and language, 'women' do not participate in the Symbolic or count as subjects. 'Females' are only present as

'Woman', the sign that facilitates patriarchal exchange, or as 'non-male', the binary opposite of the only subject (male).³⁷ The corollary to this position is that if there are no 'women', then of course there are no lesbians.³⁸ Furthermore, only men (who fit or aspire to the 'norm') can be creative because creativity is defined solely in terms of stereotypically, heterosexual male subjectivity. This ideology constructs a similarity between dominant male sexuality, which is the only active sexuality, and creativity.³⁹ Diverse responses to communicating 'Otherness' arise in the attempt to deal with this basic problem. If language is structured so that only white, middle-class, heterosexual males are supposed to be speaking subjects, then what do the rest of us do?

Two French Feminists

Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous try to describe what strategies women actually do employ to write, speak and otherwise escape from our supposed absence from the Symbolic. Both theorists attempt to show that women's subjectivity does not necessarily follow the patriarchal, linear model of communication, and that this different subjectivity cannot be understood by the dominant scheme. Cixous explains:

At the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be *theorised*, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist. But it will always exceed the discourse governing the

³⁷cf. Irigaray, "Women on the Market," (1985), and Grosz (1990), p. 124.

³⁸I discussed Kristeva's argument and de Lauretis's analysis in the preceding section.

³⁹ cf. Farwell, pp. 100-110, for an elaboration of this point.

phallogocentric system: it takes place ... somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination. ... But one can begin to speak. Begin to point out some effects, some elements of unconscious drives, some relations of the feminine imaginary to the real, to writing. (1989 109)

Through a focus on women-centred ways of speaking/writing, Cixous and Irigaray attempt to describe 'feminine writing', and thereby to increase women's potential as subjects. Both theorists identify that patriarchal language is about controlling, defining, closing off language and meaning, and that its reference is singular, "gravitated" around the phallus (Cixous, 1989 108). 'Feminine writing', they indicate, is plural, uncontrollable, and without interest in fixing a beginning or closure, preferring instead to pay attention to the process and the multiplicity of meaning. Cixous states:

She lets the other tongue of a thousand tongues speak - the tongue, sound without barrier or death. ... Her tongue doesn't hold back but holds forth, doesn't keep in but keeps on enabling. (1989 108)

For Irigaray and Cixous, communication based on a mind/body connection and on the specifics of women's experience of body is key to 'feminine writing'. These writers focus attention on that which masculine culture fears - 'Woman as lack', undefined language, emotion and logic intertwined, and subjects located within their bodies. They use Freudian and Lacanian terms and theories as their base and then challenge these concepts by demonstrating that there is a place for women as subjects and that these subjects do not fit patriarchal models of sexuality, language and subjectivity. In "This Sex Which Is Not One" (1985), Irigaray discusses the specifics

of women's bodies and autonomous sexuality and the relation of this to women's subjectivity. Irigaray writes:

This organ which has nothing to show for itself also lacks a form of its own. And if woman takes pleasure precisely from this incompleteness of form which allows her organ to touch itself over and over again, indefinitely, by itself, that pleasure is denied by a civilization that privileges phallogormorphism. ... The *one* of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning ... supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched. (1985 26)

Cixous and Irigaray both argue that 'feminine' language may be difficult to describe but it does exist and is already practiced. In the novel *People in Trouble*, Sarah Schulman invokes a connection between lesbian/female sexuality and creativity that I believe relates to Irigaray's plurality of women's sexuality. The character Kate is an artist having her first affair with a woman, Molly.

Kate had never painted Molly. ... But the first time she had seen Molly's vulva in the light she'd realized it was a color whose name she did not know. It was the meat of a green-gage plum, dusted. She had gone home to her studio that day and mixed it. Then she painted one side of her studio that color and ended up thinking of it as starlight. Normally she painted with her head turned away from the wall, but whenever she wanted to be in starlight Kate only had to look up. (1991 50)

Molly, in this description, is not muse or sign to facilitate Kate's creativity, as in the masculine, heterosexual model, nor does Kate attempt to pin down a single image of her lover by painting a portrait. Kate and Molly's affair provides an impossible-to-name assistance to Kate's creative process that is specific to Molly's female body, but

is not limited to this. Schulman's description of a vulva as "the meat of a green-gage plum, dusted" provides a passionate metaphor that helps demonstrate Irigaray's point and helps sustain other writers who wish to "follow through" on Irigaray's analysis.

Primarily because of their attention to body, Irigaray's and Cixous's approaches have been criticised by feminists, and dismissed by anti-feminists, for being essentialist. There is common criticism that French feminism is not aware of social context, nor does it include women as diverse subjects (i.e., differentiated by race, class, and sexuality). A related critique is that Irigaray and Cixous remove the possibility that women's subjectivity could be part of the Symbolic. Instead, they repeat patriarchal constructs, such as Lacan's theories, that maintain the definition of women as mired in the unconscious and the Imaginary.⁴⁰

I do not agree with these criticisms because they ignore the positive strategies within Cixous's and Irigaray's work and misread the goal of these theorists' projects. Irigaray and Cixous deploy the strategy of 'reverse discourse'. If women cannot avoid our position as lack within the patriarchal structure of language and subjectivity, we can, Cixous and Irigaray maintain, turn phallogentrism on its 'head' and explore what possibilities there are to amorphous, uncontrollable subjectivity. Instead of wasting too much time on proving the obvious -- women are not what patriarchy constructs us as - - Irigaray and Cixous discuss 'Other' subjectivities and strategies in the very terms used to denigrate women. If feminists embrace and benefit from these terms, then it becomes more difficult to use them as simply a means of dismissal. They point out the

⁴⁰cf. Moi, chapter 6 on Cixous, chapter 7 on Irigaray.

limitations of singular, phallic-focussed language, thereby freeing up, and validating, discussion based in the multiple, physically connected subjectivity that women experience in contradiction to the dominant structures.

As well, the critique of 'essentialism' ignores the aspects of Cixous's and Irigaray's work that is grounded in material reality. For instance, Irigaray uses a Marxist paradigm in "Women on the Market" in which she develops the analysis that masculine culture is based on "hom(m)o-sexual monopoly" (1985 171). The strategies Irigaray describes in her work on feminine writing derive from the social analysis aspect of her work:

The law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men's needs/desires, of exchanges among men. ... [Thus] wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men. ... [This] hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign ... The economy - in both the narrow and the broad sense - that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities. (1985 171-172)

The language and topic in the above quotation is markedly different from articles such as "This Sex Which Is Not One." A thorough analysis of Irigaray would require considering all her works and their interaction, rather than attacking only a segment of her work.

Several feminists support Irigaray and rebut the criticism of her. Meaghan Morris argues that Irigaray is "very far from" essentialist in her attention to body because she does not confuse "the anatomical and the social, but works with a deadly

deliberation *on* the point (the site and the purpose) of the confusion of anatomical and *cultural*" (1988 64). Criticism of Irigaray misreads the analysis of this confusion as a replication of it. Margaret Whitford demonstrates that Irigaray shifts the focus to "woman-as-subject" and away from the more generic *parler-femme* which has been appropriated by male theorists who continue to ignore *women* (*Philosophy*, 1991 50).

Whitford asserts that Irigaray emphasizes that

... occupying the subject-position [of woman] is not simply a question of the position of enunciation, it must be rooted in social practices too - part of the definition of woman-as-subject is that women must be involved in the construction of the world and the making of culture and sociopolitical reality. One definition of *parler-femme* should therefore be that speaking as a woman should be language (*langue*) or discourse which contributes to making it possible for women to occupy the social and symbolic space as woman-subjects, epistemological subjects, producers of truth and culture. (*Philosophy*, 1991 50-51)

Irigaray and Cixous address the culturally specific discourses of European-based, post-enlightenment societies, particularly philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis. Whitford (*Philosophy* , 1991 51) argues that they analyze questions of "'real-life' women" and of "the feminine" as these relate to these discourses.

Irigaray's and Cixous's strategies should not be seen as 'answers' or prescriptive descriptions for creative practice by women, but rather as important areas for attention. Whitford addresses Irigaray's deployment of women's relationship to the Imaginary and argues that this theorist's project is optimistic rather than descriptive. Discussing Irigaray's ideas on the association between love and knowledge, Whitford states that her "critique of the western cultural imaginary" tends towards an ideal and

... its precondition is the possibility of a specific female imaginary which would not simply be the scraps or debris of the masculine. This creative and loving imaginary relationship is the new (as yet non-existent) base which Irigaray proposes for the renewal of thought and rationality. (*Philosophy*, 1991 61-62)

In other words, Irigaray is trying to bring about change in the current status of women by discussing possibilities and expanding the definition of what women can hope for. Such idealising can be an effective political strategy to avoid the trap of always reacting to patriarchal models and the consequence of never being able to work from a truly 'Other' perspective. All of what Irigaray and Cixous discuss may not be true right now, but talking about the potential for women's increased subjectivity could make more happen. As a character in Nicole Brossard's *Mauve Desert* says, "I was leaning into my thoughts to make them slant reality toward the light" (92). Irigaray and Cixous attempt to negotiate that which is difficult to write because language is structured to refuse women access. But they do not give in. Nicole Brossard has also written, "A lesbian who does not reinvent the word/world is a lesbian in the process of disappearing" (1988 134). This statement applies to feminists and to all 'Others' as well as to lesbians.

I do agree with criticism that Irigaray and Cixous do not address race when they discuss women. However, this does not mean that women of colour cannot make connections with their work or adapt it to including a diverse analysis of women's experience and practices. Trinh T. Minh-ha quotes Cixous and Irigaray to support her discussion of the inability of Western thought to understand Eastern subjectivity and the specifics of women of colour negotiating proper European language (1990). In her

discussion of language, Trinh T. Minh-ha describes a situation similar to French feminist work:

In undoing established models and codes, plurality adds up to no total. ... This non-totalness never fails either to baffle or to awaken profound intolerance and anxieties. Every reaching out that remains non-totalizable is a "horizontal vertigo" in which the exploring explored subject can only advance through moments of blindness. (1990 329)

As well as enriching French feminist analysis to include diverse 'Other' language, Trinh T. Minh-ha's points about inscribed white assumptions compliment Irigaray's description of "hom(m)o-sexual monopoly" and further the project of deconstructing dominant culture:

They extol the concept of decolonization and continuously invite into their fold "the challenge of the Third World." Yet, they do not seem to realize the difference when they find themselves face to face with it - a difference which does not announce itself, which they do not quite anticipate and cannot fit into any single varying compartment of their catalogued world; a difference they keep on measuring with inadequate sticks designed for their own morbid purpose. (1990 330)

Combining analysis by women of colour, such as Trinh T. Minh-ha's, that addresses similar ideas and strategies to Irigaray's and Cixous's work, provides a diverse base from which to address questions of women's subjectivity and negotiation of language.

Along the same lines as the above discussion, I agree with the criticism that Cixous and Irigaray do not address sexual difference among women. Irigaray is especially problematic because she evokes 'lesbian' as a falsely sweet, utopian concept of autonomous women, living together in harmony, devoid of the problems heterosexual women face in interacting with men. As well, she ignores the different

set of relations that actual lesbians face and the specifics of lesbian subjectivity within a masculine, heterosexual Symbolic. However, as with women of colour, Irigaray's work can be adapted to address sexual diversity among women and can be combined with lesbian theories on comparable topics.

Monique Wittig comes from a similar base to Irigaray's and Cixous's, but directly addresses lesbian relations to patriarchal and heterosexual subjectivity and language. In the article "The Straight Mind" (1992), Wittig poses the contentious argument that lesbians are not women. She first demonstrates that

[t]he discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those which take for granted that which founds society, any society, is heterosexuality. These discourses speak about us and claim to say the truth in an apolitical field.... These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. (1992 24-25)

This inevitable, necessary heterosexuality is what constitutes "the straight mind."

Wittig argues that heterosexual women do not engage with this structure in their challenges to patriarchy and do not recognize this factor in the construction and containment of Woman.⁴¹ Wittig concludes that, in fact, 'Woman' means 'heterosexual woman', and thus straight feminists' work on this concept inevitably deals with an issue separate from lesbians' reality:

What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate,

⁴¹This article was first published in 1980. Hopefully, there have been some changes in the scope of heterosexual feminists' work.

make love, live with women, for "woman" has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women. (1992 32)

Wittig's analysis need not be seen as the end of discussion, but rather, as a response to Irigaray's and other feminists' 'straight-minded' conception of women and of lesbians. Wittig raises a good point for debate because her article reinforces the idea that lesbians and heterosexual women are significantly different subjects, and not merely women who 'happen' to desire different sexual practices. Wittig stresses that heterosexuality is key to patriarchal gender relations and is not just incidental.⁴²

While addressing lesbian specifics, Wittig's overall project is situated within feminism in general. Combined with her other work, "The Straight Mind" helps produce a viable model both for speaking as a lesbian and also for speaking as a woman within feminism. From Wittig's article "One Is Not Born a Woman" (1992), Teresa de Lauretis develops a notion of "both/and" subjectivity: one is both an individual and a part of a class. Wittig, she says,

insists on both class consciousness and individual subjectivity at once: without the latter "there can be no real fight or transformation. But the opposite is also true; without class and class consciousness there are no real subjects, only alienated individuals." (1990 142)

De Lauretis combines feminist analysis of sexuality as a major site for oppression and

⁴²It is true that for some feminists's work, and as far as the patriarchal definition of Woman is concerned, lesbians are not women. However, in many ways lesbians are women and there is much feminist work that does address lesbians's concerns. I believe that it is in the best interests of both lesbians and straight women that we work together within the framework of feminist ideas and practice.

resistance (1990 140) with Wittig's development of a way to address the diversity of women that is neither trapped by the "paradox of woman" nor sucked into the movement towards the "disappearance of women" [postfeminism] (1990 141-142).

The link between Wittig's two positions is the feminist analysis of oppression and the lesbian refusal of the "heterosexual contract". De Lauretis states that this refusal is "not only in one's practice of living but also in one's practice of knowing" (1990 143). De Lauretis works from the second point to substantiate her concept of an "eccentric subject" as a critical position useful to not only lesbians, but to heterosexual feminists because they can apply a lesbian shift in knowing as part of feminist struggle with oppression. This model is far preferable to sugar-coated myths of lesbian relations, such as Irigaray's construct of 'lesbian'. As well, from Wittig and De Lauretis, it is possible to understand lesbians both as women, i.e., part of this 'class' and of the struggle with "ideological apparatuses and socioeconomic institutions of women's oppression" (1990 143), and as 'not women', i.e., outside of the definition of Woman and involved in a struggle with heterosexual institutions and discourses.

Theorising Lesbian Writing

In addition to French feminist work on women's writing, and lesbian responses to this, there is also a body of theory on specifically lesbian writing. I am interested in the aspects of these theories which address how lesbian writers psychologically support ourselves in being able to write, speak, and assume to have active, creative subjectivity. In the introduction, I touched on the concept of an "imagined

community" and how this enables lesbians to overcome our structured absence from patriarchal language, institutions, discourses, et cetera. The specific definition of this idea that I use comes from de Lauretis's description of Wittig's use of 'lesbian' and 'lesbian society':

Wittig's ... "lesbian society" [does not] refer to some collectivity of gay women, any more than "lesbian" refers to an individual woman with a particular "sexual preference." They are, rather, the theoretical terms of a form of feminist consciousness that can only exist historically, in the here and now, as the consciousness of a "something else." (1990 145)

Rather than trying to take on the wide diversity of possible discussions relating to lesbian existence, concerns, debates, I focus on a "form of feminist consciousness" and of subjectivity that is part of this larger field and grounded in lesbian desires and experiences. As well, rather than drawing support from, and aiming my work towards, the largest meaning or constituency of lesbians, I work within the 'community' I "mark" with theorists, writers, and artists who address similar issues to mine. I am following the example of Reina Lewis, Sally Munt, Elizabeth Meese, Marilyn R. Farwell, Adrienne Rich and Sarah Schulman, to name a few, who have written about lesbian "community" in ways specific to their time of writing and to their needs. It is important to construct or illuminate those signs which validate my work given Nicole Brossard's observation that "We have no markers but ourselves. We are surrounded by signs that invalidate our presence." (1990 126)

Theorising Sameness: The Love Letter

Another aspect of theories found in lesbian writing that is useful to my work is the re-thinking of letters, especially love letters, as a mode of women's writing.

Because it has long been an acceptable and accessible venue, there is a varied tradition of women and lesbians writing letters which provides a rich source for women/lesbian-specific ways of communicating, in particular, relations of sameness. Both Elizabeth Meese and Reina Lewis discuss the fruitful possibilities of writing theory that draws on the passionately connected tropes of a letter. Such a strategy is one way out of, or a respite from, the constant struggle with the dominant modes of fiction or theory.

As well, letter writing is one area where women have firm ground and acceptance as authors, and thus, it provides a strong base from which to expand lesbian/feminist subjectivity. However, letters, and other writing based on passion and desire, are not considered 'serious communication' by dominant standards. On the other hand, any devalued area also has the potential to subvert the dominant. As discussed earlier, relations of similarity are outlawed from patriarchal representation and are considered outside the realm of 'rational', 'intellectual' discourse.

Lesbian/feminists, therefore, can deploy tropes from love letters *within* 'proper' theory as a means to include passionate, close subjectivity within a territory which normally allows only distanced, separated subjects. Connected subjectivity must be devalued to maintain the patriarchal myth that distance/separation is required to enter the Symbolic and to speak or understand representation. One product of including letters is to show

up exactly which subjectivity really is "too close" and cannot withstand close communication.

Given the incredible emphasis put on separation as the foundation of the ego and access to representation, one could think that perhaps "They doth protest too much." According to Elizabeth Grosz, binary oppositions are really a comparison about one term: "'A' versus 'not-A'", instead of a comparison based on true difference: "'A' versus 'B'" (1990 124)⁴³. Thus the straight, white male is constructed to perceive all identities totally in terms of himself. All "Others" are really about him, defined in relation to him, extensions that facilitate his subjectivity -- all of which leads to the question who is really dependent upon whom? I am beginning to suspect that the theories and myths of the patriarchal 'norm' make such a fuss about separation to disguise the fact that it is the 'normal' subjectivity which is so totally unautonomous. It is only all of us "Others" who should separate from each other making it is easier to slot us into the binary definitions constructed as mirrors to the 'norm'.

Many 'Others' refuse to believe this patriarchal stricture and insist on exploring a complex understanding of relations of sameness.⁴⁴ Gay theorist Stuart Marshall sums up the reason for this focus:

It would be naive to suggest that an effective political movement could be based entirely upon the recognition of difference. A passionate identification of similarity is an absolute necessity. This political

⁴³Grosz uses Nancy Jay's work to make this point.

⁴⁴For example, Zimmerman and Farwell.

identification does not and cannot exhaust our subjectivities. Although our reverse discourse of political struggle necessarily proceeds from the need to contest the dominant social construction of our identity as pathologically diseased, we cannot and do not fall for the lie that this historically constructed identity exhausts our subjectivities as gay people. (1991 86)

In "Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter with Vermeer," Jane Gallop elaborates Leclerc's ideas from the article "*La lettre d'amour*" and from an article by Hélène Cixous. Both of these were written for *La venue à l'écriture*, a collection of articles which theorize about the process of writing women-centred texts and, at the same time, provide examples of this alternative practice. Gallop focusses on Cixous and, especially, Leclerc because they use loving connections as the link between these two projects. In response to Cixous, Gallop writes:

Not only as a reader, but as a writer does she affirm the model of writing as oral love: "To write: to love, inseparable. Writing is a gesture of love....Read-me, lick-me, write-me love." (1985 107)

To put it mildly, this view of writing is quite different from the patriarchal concept that total separation and objective distance are required to produce representation.

Gallop explains that Leclerc takes this concept further, and makes her published essay into a love letter because she addresses a second person, her lover, and describes how this woman motivates her writing. At the same time, Leclerc discusses the theoretical problems that lesbians and women must negotiate to become writers. Her main issue is the lack of alternative approaches to patriarchal thinking and writing. Jane Gallop explains that Leclerc's solution is that she "brings the love letter out of the closet and into the public domain" when she writes a letter to her

lover that is also "'real text, literature, science of/from love,' philosophy from the body" (1985 108). Gallop goes on to say:

Love letters have always been written from the body, in connection with love. Leclerc wants all writing to have that connection; she wants love to enter into general circulation, inscribed knowledge, rather than remaining private and secret We women must continue to write from our loving bodies, but we must break "discretion" and "intimacy" and "risk that subversion" in public, in print, in general circulation. (108)

In the article, Leclerc also writes to the maid in Vermeer's painting *The Letter*.

Leclerc aligns herself with the bourgeois woman who writes the letter and aligns the maid with her lover. She identifies with the bourgeois woman partly because she too is the writer, but more importantly to take on the difference between the implications of the author-function as bourgeois, which Leclerc must adopt when writing 'proper' theory, and Leclerc's desire to include working-class women as part of her work.

Leclerc asks, "How also to want this difference between us and which hurts me so?"⁴⁵

Leclerc desires to negotiate class difference in a way other than patriarchal modes which either privilege class over gender or which ignore any difference between women.

Gallop sees this double address, maid and real lover, as a product of Leclerc striving for "an acceptance of the distance as well as the proximity between women" (117). Gallop continues, saying that Leclerc is not trying to close the gap and reach a "space of pure and simple feminine being," such as simplistic notions of female

⁴⁵Gallop's translation, 117.

closeness describe. Instead, Leclerc wants to enjoy and examine this difference in order to ask "not merely who am I? But who is the other woman" (117)?⁴⁶

I find Leclerc's love letter/theory particularly valuable because it offers a different model for critical writing, not only because she addresses women as differentiated by class, but because she writes her addressee(s) into the text as source of her writing and ideas. Gallop translates Leclerc as follows:

Come ... my tongue will die if yours doesn't come and bring its warm saliva. Come, I would like so much to tell you the secret that I have from the lady writing, who has it from her maidservant. (112)

I also want to include the preceding lines, in Leclerc's words⁴⁷, to this passage that Gallop translates because it is Leclerc's rhythm and language -- just as much as her framework -- that gives inspiration to my work:

Amour, mon brûlant vouloir dire. Amour veut ma langue féconde, mes dents précis, bien ajustées, ni trop acerbes, ni trop prudentes. ... Viens, approche-toi, corps de mon corps, douceur de ma peau, acuité de mon regarde, espace de mon oreille; ma langue mourra si la tienne n'y vient apporter sa tiède salive. (Leclerc, *venue* 119)

What better source could I have than this? Leclerc arouses lesbian desire as the effect of her writing, and she also lays a path to subvert the 'rational' discourses that would exclude such desire. Her passionate, sensual approach to theory combines well with my goal to decrease the distance between theory and representation, as does her double address to a visual image and to a person. Leclerc demonstrates that, first, it is

⁴⁶Gallop is quoting Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

⁴⁷This article has not been translated to English.

possible to take an image, Vermeer's painting, as a source and an anchoring point that interacts with her overall discussion, and that, second, she can write critically and complexly from, and about, a loving connection with women. By succeeding in this, Leclerc stimulates my ability to understand and to express my own goals as an art theorist and critic. Jeannette Winterson best expresses my excitement in finding a writer who affirms passionate communication as 'real' theory:

I say I'm in love with her. What does that mean?

It means I review my future and my past in the light of this feeling. It is as though I wrote in a foreign language that I am suddenly able to read. (1987 122)

The Issue of 'Labelling'

Underlying all discussion of lesbian representation is the issue of 'labelling', or of attempting to fix meaning or identity. Elizabeth Meese states that work on lesbian subjectivity "exhibits a 'tension between, on the one hand, *claiming a category* (by giving it another meaning) and, on the other hand, *subverting the whole system of categorisation*'" (1990 76).⁴⁸ It is not simple to assert a lesbian or any 'Other' identity when the process of labelling itself is a mechanism to contain 'Other' subjectivity and to construct the 'norm' as the only 'transcendent' subjectivity (i.e., relevant to all and not restricted to a 'narrow' position).

Labelling is an issue of paramount importance to 'Other' artists and writers who are trying to produce complex, expanding, yet specific, subjectivities as the effect of their work. Artists and critics alike must engage with the impact of labelling on the

⁴⁸Meese works from Claudie Lesselier's ideas here.

process of producing and receiving representation. The four artists whom I discuss in the next section all develop strategies to manoeuvre around the pitfalls of labels. I discuss these strategies in detail in section III, but here I will outline the theoretical terrain. It is not a clear cut argument, despite the obvious problems with labelling, because there are times when representation that has a limited meaning, and avoids contradiction or ambiguity, has its appropriate uses. For instance, such images are more likely to be understood because it is hard to miss a single, reinforced message. This approach is successful for public works where a wide audience and a quick viewing time is expected, such as billboards, posters, mall or store-front displays. ACT UP t-shirts, for example, with George Bush's slogan "Read my lips" printed beneath a photograph of two male sailors, or of two fashionable women kissing, do effectively challenge the pressure to silence queers. These representations succeed in producing the message that, yes, queers do walk among 'normal' society, and no, we will not shut up.

However, the relatively simple method does not work as well in gallery and viewing spaces where more complex reading is expected and where the context controls the reception of images and produces certain responses to representation. The simple fact of being visible is not enough if the meaning and impact of the images are contained, defused and trivialised by their context. De Lauretis argues that

films that portray or are about lesbian and gay subjects may provide sympathetic accounts, "positive images," of those subjects without necessarily producing new ways of seeing or a new inscription of the social subject in representation. (1991 224)

In representation-specific spaces, one must challenge the process of dominant reception, which includes labelling as a containing mechanism, in order to produce 'Other' subjectivities.

This debate is especially important to lesbians/feminists because, since the 1970s, portraits and self-portraits have been integral to lesbian representation work.⁴⁹ Much of this work makes the mistake of assuming that an individual 'possesses' lesbian desire, and therefore, can demonstrate it in a portrait. De Lauretis describes the focus that is needed to go beyond this work, to expand and strengthen lesbian representation:⁵⁰

... it is precisely that "lesbian desire" that constitutes the kind of subjectivity and sexuality we experience as lesbian and want to claim as lesbians; and which therefore we need to theorize, articulate, and find ways of representing, not only in its difference from heterosexual norms, its ab-normality, but also and more importantly in its own constitutive processes, its specific modalities and conditions of existence. (1991 256)

Lesbian desire can be the effect produced by a representation, but such a project differs from images that simply assert lesbians exist or that only argue with the dominant exclusion of lesbians. This latter strategy is effective in public work with the limited goal of making the presence of lesbian/feminists recognized. Such work runs less of a risk of failing in this goal -- a risk that complex, contradictory work faces - but it also has limited potential and can exclude diverse understandings of lesbian identity.

⁴⁹cf. Boffin and Fraser, Grover, and Kelley.

⁵⁰De Lauretis is discussing film here, specifically pornography, but her points apply to representation in general.

2) Representation and Subjectivity

Another main base for my thesis is theories that combine psychoanalytic and semiotic notions of subjectivity with a focus on visual representation. This combination provides the tools to discuss 'Other' subjectivities as effects of representations and to address the potential for political agency in art production. Such a focus views art as a process of communication, of establishing subjectivity, and demands a cultural and historical specificity that the abstracted, asocial framework of Modernist and postmodernist criticism lacks.

In "Lesbians Like This and That," Bonnie Zimmerman argues that lesbian critics need to remain socially grounded to continue developing our area of theory (1992 8). Such an approach works against the patriarchal labels which ignore the specific realities of lesbian identities and restrict our discussion to lesbian as Other. Zimmerman also discusses how lesbian theory has moved from an interest in what is known to an interest in the process of knowing (1992 3). These two trends have been shown to be contradictory though this need not necessarily be so. Queer theorists such as Judith Butler have focussed attention solely on the process of knowing while disconnecting their work from social realities. This results in depoliticization of the discourses on the process of knowing and an inability to account for diversity of women in a historically, culturally specific way or to direct that theory towards making changes for lesbians/feminists as social subjects.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* focuses on the process of constructing selves as part of her attention to the process of knowing and specifically on how gender and

other aspects of identity are produced and maintained through "performance". Her points are interesting, but they are politically naive because her debate is restricted to the realm of discourse,⁵¹ and not connected to material power relations. Following Butler's argument, if gender and identity is completely performative, then it can easily be changed. This has frightening consequences for queers who do not have 'equal power' to heterosexuality in our society. If queerness is only performance, on what grounds do we base an argument that it is wrong for Alberta's Deputy Premier to claim that public art funding should be terminated because it funds 'degenerate art' such as Kiss 'n' Tell's performance *True Inversions*?⁵² Butler does not address the social context or implications of performing queerness, and thus she does not deal with the argument that if we do not like lack of funding or other oppression, then we should stop performing queerness or only perform it at home with the shades drawn.

I think that writing about visual work is a way to address the process of knowing, and more general issues of subjectivity, while also being specific and materially connected. By situating my discussion of subjectivity within a discussion of cultural production, I can address specific discourses and institutions which structure subjectivity in representation, focus on specific examples of representations and responses to them, and define a more localised site for my intervention.

⁵¹Lynne Hissey, CMNS 421, February 7, 1993, critiques Chris Weedon's thesis in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* along these lines. I have applied this critique to Butler.

⁵²Ken Kowalski, "Tax Funded Gay Sex Play God Awful," *The Edmonton Sun* (January 15, 1993). Kowalski was the Deputy Premier of Alberta at the time he wrote this. Kiss 'n' Tell are a Vancouver lesbian art collective.

Relevant Aspects from Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory is the area that has gone the furthest in connecting theories of the individual to theories of the social at the level of representation. By combining psychoanalytic, semiotic and Marxist theories, this area of feminism recognises that "the constitution of the social subject depends on the nexus language/subjectivity/consciousness" (de Lauretis, 1990 115). It provides a solid framework that simultaneously addresses the experiences and politics of women, as well as 'Otherness' and the diversity of women. De Lauretis identifies that the current stage of understanding involves:

(1) a reconceptualization of the subject as shifting and multiply organized across variable axes of difference; (2) a rethinking of the relations between forms of oppression and modes of formal understanding - of doing theory; (3) an emerging redefinition of marginality as location, of identity as dis-identification; and (4) the hypothesis of self-displacement as the term of a movement that is concurrently social and subjective, internal and external, indeed political and personal. (1990 116)

De Lauretis goes on to explain how the above four strands focus on dealing with the "paradox of woman", and how this current stage dispels the view that feminism is singular or unified. This is a theory of difference that addresses the specific social experiences and politics of difference, that accounts for larger social analysis and attention to individual subjectivity, and that does not marginalise women and feminism in the process.

With development, feminist film theory can be extended to other visual representation. For instance, Laura Mulvey's ideas from her 1973 article "Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" have been applied to a myriad of visual topics. Her analysis of how a gendered gaze is structured into Hollywood film provides the tools to examine the assumed gaze in art or to discuss the structures of other dominant gazes (class, race, sexual orientation). In the area of visual art practice, Barbara Kruger attacks the straight male subject position that Mulvey examines in her essay. She points out who is the assumed spectator/speaking subject with her poster piece in which she writes over a stylised woman's profile "Your gaze hits the side of my face." Richard Fung also adapts Mulvey's ideas in his article "Looking for my Penis" in which he discusses the problems of trying to inscribe an empowered Asian, gay male gaze within the assumed white subjectivity of gay male pornography.

Feminist film theory moved the discussion of representation of women away from the simplistic 'mirroring society' or the 'positive versus negative images' approach, to a complex analysis of processes of signification, of hegemony, of systems of representation as part of social institutions, and of the relation between the subject and the production/reception of visual representation. Feminist film theorists gave serious attention to women as spectators by examining questions such as how women negotiate active viewing when structured as object or as absent, what is involved in women's viewing pleasure, and what is the historical reality of women as spectators.⁵³

⁵³Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey, Elizabeth Cowie, Teresa de Lauretis, Constance Penley, Jacqueline Rose, Mary Ann Doane, Tania Modleski, Annette Kuhn, and Judith Mayne are key figures in this area.

Psychoanalytic theories provide the tools to discuss women's subjectivity.

Theorists such as Judith Mayne, Jacqueline Rose and Teresa de Lauretis work from Mulvey's and others' analysis of patriarchal dominance and mechanisms of containment to look at what women do in order to survive, subvert or "disbelieve".⁵⁴ Rose emphasises the role of the unconscious, both as a functioning resistance that empowers women and as a theoretical pressure-point that supports feminist criticism of patriarchal ideology. In *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, Rose argues that contrary to the patriarchal emphasis on *achieving* full identification, psychoanalytic theory can point to an intrinsic, on-going failure to achieve a single or complete identity:

Psychoanalysis becomes one of the few places in our culture where it is recognised as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip in to their roles as women, if indeed they do at all. (1986 91)

Her ideas produce a model of identification, and of patriarchal containment of subjectivity, as an on-going, repeating process, that constantly adjusts and is therefore significantly different from the traditional model of a more static and monolithic process. By demonstrating the failure of patriarchal hegemony in any one instance, her model shows potential for changing dominant structures and accounts for what women really do.

Teresa de Lauretis takes Rose's work on the unconscious, and on the failure of unified subjectivity and develops it further:

⁵⁴bell hooks (1984) uses this term to describe one of the powers that oppressed groups/individuals do have -- one can "disbelieve" or refuse to accept dominant constructions of oneself.

... in order for that resistance of the unconscious to be more than pure negativity, for it to be effectively agency rather than simply unachieved or incomplete femininity, one must be able to think beyond the conceptual constraint imposed by the term "femininity" and its binary opposite - its significant other - "masculinity." That is precisely where, in my opinion, the notion of the unconscious as excess(ive) may be most productive. Could one think, for instance, of excess as a *resistance to identification* rather than unachieved identification? Or of a *dis-identification* with femininity that does not necessarily revert or result in an identification with masculinity but, say, transfers to a form of female subjectivity that exceeds phallic definition? (1990 126)

De Lauretis argues that feminists need to discuss areas in which women actively work against oppression in order to develop strategies to support this resistance. She herself now focusses on lesbian identity, obviously a "subjectivity that exceeds phallic definition," and participates in 'queer theory' debates. This is one politically supportive area because it breaks down the binary of femininity/masculinity, and works from diverse positions of resisting oppression.

'Queering' Feminist Film Theory

Queer visual theory is very much based in feminist film theory, and is part of expanding debates that address multiplicity and difference, but which are also grounded in feminism and attention to gender politics. Queer theory has recognisable stages where certain ideas and strategies are common. Important to my thesis are the areas of lesbian/feminist questioning of heterosexism in film theory, lesbian/feminist attention to the specifics of lesbian subjectivity, and lesbian and gay work that addresses multiple subjectivities (specifically, the interaction of gender/race/sexuality and the support between gay and lesbian theorists).

Lesbian work of the 1980s questioned the heterosexism of feminist film theory concurrent with the expansion of this field.⁵⁵ Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan's 1986 article, "The Same Difference: On Lesbian Representation" put pressure on heterosexist privileging of sexual difference as the only difference. They applied Monique Wittig's analysis in "The Straight Mind" to discuss assumptions operating in feminist film theory. For their example, they look at Kate Linker's exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, and the accompanying article "Representation and Sexuality"⁵⁶ and identify a rather obvious fact that had managed to go unnoticed or uncontested in Linker's project:

Representation ... was framed as reproduction - of ideology and images. Two notable sexual differences not represented were female and male homosexuality. This absence, of course, is not exceptional: in the proliferating texts on psychoanalysis and feminism, difference is decidedly singular - masculine or feminine - the same difference. (1986 32)

Their point is that Linker is not atypical but exemplifies the norm at the time. Linker, like other feminist film theorists, had too narrow a focus on issues of femininity or gender and sexuality. She works from heterosexist, male, psychoanalytic ideas and reverses the patriarchal discourse in order to address women. However, she does not see the need to tackle compulsory heterosexuality as part of the same problem.

⁵⁵cf. Traub and Stacey for other examples.

⁵⁶Exhibition at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1985. Essay published in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

Judith Mayne supports Gever and Magnan in her article "Lesbian Looks."

Mayne states that "the preferred term *sexual difference* in feminist film theory slides from the tension between masculinity and femininity into a crude determinism whereby there is no representation without heterosexuality" (126). She continues, echoing de Lauretis' point, that "lesbianism raises some crucial questions concerning identification and desire in the cinema" (126), but also, I would add, in other areas of visual work and subjectivity. Mayne connects her work on heterosexism and lesbian concerns with expanding the focus of feminist film theory. Neither her nor Gever and Magnan's critique is about discrediting existing feminist work, but rather, about developing its scope and abilities.

Mayne's is part of lesbian work that built from the initial project to point out lesbian absences and the role of compulsory heterosexuality in framing feminist film theory, and which now explores the specifics of lesbian subjectivity and the strategies to increase our possibilities as subjects. This work maintains feminist film theory as a viable area by drawing on and adapting its core ideas.⁵⁷

In "Lesbian Looks," Mayne presents a theory that accommodates Dorothy Arzner's (presumed) lesbian authorship in her films.⁵⁸ Mayne explains that Arzner's image as lesbian has been used and supported by lesbians only at the level of image:

⁵⁷Some of these theorists were part of earlier feminist work and have since 'come out' as lesbians and expanded their focus but maintained their original framework. E.g., de Lauretis and Judith Mayne.

⁵⁸cf. Gaines who elaborates points from Mayne concerning Arzner's lesbian authorship. As well, it must be noted that Arzner never 'came out' (publicly) during her life but this would have been impossible during that time period.

her films have been discussed only as 'female' within feminist film theory without considering the specifics of her as a lesbian. Whether Arzner wanted to depict 'lesbians' in the 1930s and 1940s is not Mayne's interest. Rather, she looks to representational aspects that support or increase lesbian concerns, desires, experiences.

The concept of "lesbian irony" is key to Mayne's argument. She points to a "both/and" system operating in Arzner's films, especially *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940), as an example of marginal female subjectivity negotiating patriarchal cinema. Arzner's films are *both* compatible with Hollywood patriarchal, compulsory heterosexual norms at the level of the plot, *and* at the same time, contradict those 'norms' by producing active female self-representation at the level of the image. The depth and importance of female characters, their interactions, and their communities is Arzner's main resistance to the norm. Mayne identifies Arzner's use of a series of "exchanges of looks between women" (115) to mark female-centred subjectivity and communication, in this way including far more complex "relations between women and communities of women" (118) than other Hollywood cinema. Mayne argues that this exchange of looks, and focus on women's concerns and identities independent of men or masculine concerns, is a form of lesbian subjectivity that was compatible with the requirements of film and society during the period of Arzner's career.

Arzner's films produce the subject effect of a 'lesbian irony' as one kind of lesbian experience, rather than depicting overt images of lesbians. By maintaining the tension between presenting appropriate patriarchal narratives and subverting them through her female characters, Arzner effects the critical and marginal subjectivity of

her lesbian contemporaries, and it is this quality which makes her films pleasurable to lesbians and feminists (perhaps then and certainly now).

Mayne also argues that Arzner's attention to women's autonomous communication is quite different from, and independent of, heterosexist emphasis on the feminine/masculine binary opposition which is supposed to structure representation:

Cinema offers simultaneous affirmation and dissolution of the binary oppositions upon which our most fundamental notions of self and other are based. In feminist film theory, one of the most basic working assumptions has been that in the classical cinema, at least, there is an unproblematic fit between the hierarchies of masculinity and femininity on the one hand, and activity and passivity on the other. If disrupting and disturbing that fit is a major task for filmmakers and theorists, then lesbianism would seem to have a strategically important function. For one of the "problems" that lesbianism poses, insofar as representation is concerned, is precisely the fit between the paradigms of sex and agency, the alignment of masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity. (126-127)

Mayne's analysis of Arzner has wide implications for lesbian/feminist subjectivity.

Her article supports the ideas that I raise in my essay for the exhibition *100 Years of Homosexuality* in which I discuss the model of exchange and communication that some lesbian photographers are developing.⁵⁹ I claim that they base their approach to representing subjectivity on the lesbian sexual experience of relating as active female subject to active female subject. Extending from this experience of an exchange founded on mutual recognition of the other woman's subjectivity and of one's own in

⁵⁹"Queering the Image: Creating a Lesbian Subjectivity," catalogue essay for *100 Years of Homosexuality*, The Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon (1992), 7-11.

relation to her, these artists are able to produce complex, active lesbian subjectivity as the effect of their work. Communication can exist based on the connection between 'two of the same', between two who are not defined in asymmetrical opposition to each other, but rather, by each on her own terms, with a constant shifting of variations of active subjectivity. In this lesbian model, the subject does not use an 'Other' to facilitate exchange. This is radically different from the hom(m)o-sexual system based on binary comparison and hierarchy.

As Mayne notes, the experience of being lesbian, of "following through" on lesbian desire, leads us to "disbelieve" patriarchal constructs of lesbian impossibility, or of women's passivity and inability to achieve independent agency. Jeanette Winterson describes this resistance to silence:

Love demands expression. It will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no. It will break out in tongues of praise, the high note that smashes the glass and spills the liquid. It is no conservationist love. It is a big game hunter and you are the game. (1992 9-10)

Winterson uses the general term 'love' but is describing a lesbian relationship in a novel that very much produces lesbian subjectivity as the effect of the text. This is not to say that this type of subject position is exclusive to lesbians. While Mayne stresses that the irony and different communication she identifies in Arzner's films comes from the specifics of lesbian experience, she also opens paths for straight women because this subject position can relate to *both* marginalised women's experience generally *and* to lesbians' identity specifically. In fact, Mayne insists on maintaining this particular "both/and" awareness throughout her work because, she argues, "it seems ... that if

you don't keep these two dynamics of sameness and difference in some kind of tension, either you end up affirming some notion of a wishy-washy bisexual human subject ... or you are accused of essentialism" (1991 137).

Another aspect that Mayne touches on, but does not explore, is the implications of race in her analysis of *Dance, Girl, Dance* and in recent lesbian/feminist films. She states that more work needs to be done on the "fit between sexual and racial codes of performance, between different modes of irony" (1991 134), but admits that she does not have any theories beyond this. Queer theory is not only just beginning to seriously engage with the exclusion of sexual orientation from "the same difference", but with diversity of race as well. Discussions of lesbian and gay identity have tended not to question the assumption of whiteness as the queer 'norm', nor to investigate the interaction of race with gender and sexuality.

Mayne is certainly not alone in focussing on "both/and" subjectivity: I have already discussed Teresa de Lauretis's and Monique Wittig's interest in the combination of class, women and lesbians and this is also a current topic for writers who deal with the interaction of race and other identities. In the article "Skin Head Sex Thing,"⁶⁰ Kobena Mercer reworks the concept of fetish to address queer people of colour. Mercer uses the 'double movement' of the concept of fetish to explain his ambivalent response to Robert Mapplethorpe's images of black men. In an earlier article he had used 'fetish' as a negative term to outright condemn these images

⁶⁰I discussed this article in relation to gay use of feminist theory in section I.

because they objectified black men and maintained the subject position as white.⁶¹

Mercer believes that he emphasised Mapplethorpe's objectification of the models "because I felt identified with the black males in the field of vision" (1991 179), but he now indicates that he wants to move away from the "moralistic connotation" of fetish to address his "both/and" experience of occupying two contradictory identities at the same time. In the second article, he addresses aspects of his identity and response that he had previously ignored. He admits that

more difficult to disclose, I was also implicated in the fantasy scenario as a gay subject. That is to say, I was identified with the author insofar as the objectified black male was also an image of the object chosen by my own fantasies and erotic investments. Thus, sharing the same desire to look as the author-agent of the gaze, I would actually occupy the position that I said was that of the "white male subject." (1991 180)

Mercer realises that he had replicated the dominant use of fetish as a function which 'deals' with difference by pretending that it is not there and by substituting something that is acceptable.⁶² The dominant scope of subjectivities and representation accepts separated, contained, singular identities, as in Mercer's first article in which he ignored his gay identity and discussed blackness as separate from gayness. In his second article, he works from a dangerously subversive base of mutually conflicting,

⁶¹Kobena Mercer, "Imagining the Black Man's Sex," *Photography/Politics: Two*, eds. Pat Holland, Jo Spence, and Simon Watney (London: Comedia/Methuen, 1987).

⁶²In the classic, Freudian use of fetish, men deal with the knowledge (fear) of female sexual difference ('lack' of penis) by substituting an acceptable object for the 'missing' male genitals - i.e., in its dominant use, it is a mechanism to say "I know that person is different, but nevertheless ..."

imbricated, complex identities that contest the whole system of 'Otherness', as well as each aspect of 'Other' identity that he discusses.

In the article "The Other Question," Homi K. Bhabha addresses the kind of mistake that Mercer made in his first article. Independent of each other, Mercer and Bhabha discuss the possibilities of pressuring the concept "fetish" as one way to discuss race in relation to other identities, and to representation, and as a means to accommodate "both/and" identities that does not erase the complex tension of this position. Bhabha contests the meaning and response to the category of stereotypes by looking at the relationship between the functions of stereotypes and fetishism in colonial discourse. Bhabha argues that stereotypes of race function along the lines of fetishistic disavowal. They contain a subversive element in that stereotypes attempt to resolve contradictions that are dangerous to colonial discourse. The stereotype functions to disguise oxymorons in linear language and to assuage white fears through combining that which is frightening with that which is reassuring. (The contradictory myths of Africans as cannibals but also as bearers of food is one of his examples.) Bhabha argues that instead of rejecting engagement with the problem of stereotypes, because they are obviously simplistic, one should closely examine how they work. He states that

[t]he stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference ..., constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (80)

Drawing on Franz Fanon's work, Bhabha explains what is at stake in racial fetishism and disavowal:

What is denied the colonial subject, both as colonizer and colonized, is that form of negation which gives access to the recognition of difference in the symbolic. It is that possibility of difference and circulation which would liberate the signifier of skin/culture from the signifieds of racial typology, the analytics of blood, ideologies of racial and cultural dominance or degeneration. "Wherever he goes," Fanon despairs, "the negro remains a negro" - his race becomes the ineradicable sign of negative difference in colonial discourse. For the stereotype impedes the circulation and articulation of the signifier of "race" as anything other than its *fixity* as racism. (80)

One can apply Bhabha's arguments to the example of Mercer's first article and see that, in deploying the notion of fetish to condemn Mapplethorpe's images, Mercer had fixed the photographic models as only black and disallowed the subversive impact of the image as gay -- as subverting the proper white, male norm. In this way, Mercer's focus on stereotypes and the evils of fetishism had "impeded" the "articulation" of gay male desire as including men of colour or racial difference in gay fantasy and experience.

In the second article, Mercer argues that "it really *does* matter who is speaking" (1991 181). Mapplethorpe, as author-function, is not just white, he is also gay and the combination of these subject positions affects the production and reception of the work because his images cannot be reduced to being only about queer subjectivity or only about racial subjectivity. Because the difference between subject and object is not so great when both are male, Mercer did not see the contradiction in his earlier article. He now supports Mapplethorpe's subversion of the model as

objectified and argues that Mapplethorpe's "aesthetic irony" disrupts the stability of binary oppositions, rather than propping up whiteness as the only subject who speaks. Mercer argues that by imaging black males in the High Art tropes of the nude, Mapplethorpe ironically substitutes black gay men as the pinnacle of aesthetic beauty, and thus deconstructs "the hidden racial and gendered axioms of the nude in dominant traditions of representation" (1991 181).

Mercer's and Bhabha's ideas can be helpful when dealing with multiple, conflicted subjectivities. This work connects with lesbian/feminist attention to the paradox of woman, to the "both/and" position of lesbians in conflict with being "women", and to Mayne's interest in lesbian irony, in speaking about/as lesbians within dominant schemes. By combining Bhabha's and Mercer's ideas with Mayne's, it becomes possible to engage with the problematic use of racial difference in recent lesbian and feminist films by white filmmakers that Mayne points out. By looking at stereotypes as a problem of representation and signification, and by looking at the implications of applying the term 'fetish' with stereotypes, the path is opened to pressure the use of stereotypes as a mechanism for containing multiple, shifting identities. The combination of these three theorists' ideas produces a method to address lesbian and gay strategies for effecting subjectivity and, simultaneously, for deconstructing the assumed whiteness of queer identities and accounting for the diversity of race within 'communities of women'.⁶³

⁶³I discuss the specifics of this in section III when I address the four artists work.

Mercer's article also provides another connection with lesbian/feminist work. He mentions his relation to Mapplethorpe's images in terms of "fantasy scenarios", an idea that Teresa de Lauretis addresses in greater detail in her article "Film and the Visible."⁶⁴ In it, she explains that she likes Sheila McLaughlin's film *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) because it

both addresses and questions spectatorial desire by disallowing a univocal spectatorial identification with any one character or role or object-choice and by foregrounding instead the relations of desire to fantasy, and desire's mobility within the fantasy scenario. (1991 263)

De Lauretis argues for a representational strategy that creates a space for 'Other' subjects, rather than attempting to foster individual identity development. The former strategy, she says, has a greater ability to support diverse, shifting subjectivities and to avoid labelling or closing off identity options. If this space is based on 'Other' desires and experiences, then it can still be specific and socially grounded. As well, this strategy can represent "the lesbian subject as a double one" (1991 264), a desiring subject who both looks and is looked at. Such an approach avoids the pitfall of oversimplification that Mercer fell into in his early assessment of Mapplethorpe, or the trap of attempting to represent 'a woman who possesses lesbian desire' instead of the complex effects of lesbian desire, experience and understanding that make for diverse lesbian subjectivities.

This interest in 'spaces for Other subjects' is also already present in lesbian/feminist writing. Discussing strategies and tropes of literary criticism, Bonnie

⁶⁴Published in the same book as Mayne and Mercer.

Zimmerman notes that:

[m]etaphors of position and space now dominate in the way those of sight did a decade ago. Lesbian critics seem less interested in what we see than in the act of seeing itself; less concerned with the product (the text) than with the process (critical reading). (1992 3)

The implications of this shift in practice and in critical discussion has striking implications for visual art as well as for fiction. Although I find the movement away from the product problematic for criticism, (because engaging with processes and ideas divorced from the image or representation can lead in dangerously abstracted directions such as talking about the art work becomes more important than the piece), the shift to spatial metaphors has nevertheless provided me with a theoretical framework. This shift has also lead to my goal of attempting to produce a theoretical space which can address and support lesbian/feminist practice. Attention to fantasy or representational space is an effective approach when these are combined with the specifics of production and reception of cultural products. Otherwise, the 'space' a critic produces will be abstract, possibly irrelevant to the image or cultural product discussed, and politically ineffective.

To prevent my thesis from becoming overly abstract, I chose the dual focus of addressing the specifics of four artists while defining the framework of a theory that can accommodate these artists and simultaneously challenge current critical/theoretical practice in the visual arts. Having explained the basis of my theoretical position, I can now move on to discuss the work of these four artists using the terms I have elaborated.

I hope that the preceding sections provide sufficient support to enable a truly 'Other' approach to the artists I discuss and to their work. In *Written on the Body*, Jeanette Winterson's description of her protagonist's approach to Louise, her lover, sums up my, and the other critics' I have noted, process of working against dominant, containing methods of criticism/theory and my process of striving to express knowledge based on a passionate connection with those who are the source and the address of my work.

I can't enter you in clothes that won't show the stains, my hands full of tools to record and analyze. If I come to you with a torch and a notebook, a medical diagram and a cloth to mop up the mess, I'll have you bagged neat and tidy. I'll store you in plastic like chicken livers. Womb, gut, brain, neatly labelled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?

...

'Explore me,' you said and I collected my ropes, flasks and maps, expecting to be back home soon. I dropped into the mass of you and I cannot find the way out. Sometimes I think I'm free, coughed up like Jonah from the whale, but then I turn a corner and recognize myself again. Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones, myself floating in the cavities that decorate every surgeon's wall. That is how I know you. You are what I know. (1992 120)

There is much to be said for scopophilic pleasure.

drinking in the visuals

looking at the heat

source

basking and imagining

read one thing

see another

make your choice?

based on what stirs

shifts caresses

Turn down this velvet heat?

when I can see a place for myself

right there

basking and imagining some more.

III. CONSTRUCTING A PRESENCE: THE WORK OF SHAUNA BEHARRY, MARGOT BUTLER, SHANI MOOTOO AND SUSAN STEWART

I chose to discuss Margot Butler's, Shani Mootoo's, Shauna Beharry's, and Susan Stewart's work because we share an interest in producing complex lesbian/feminist subjectivity through representation.⁶⁵ In their work, they each attempt to break down the disembodied approach to viewing, and the isolation of visual communication, that dominates current art practice. Their work supports and produces 'Other' subjectivity by encouraging a mind/body connected approach to viewing, affirming interaction not only by looking but through other senses, and by producing alternatives to the dominant, linear routes of communication.

All four artists begin from the belief that if people start seeing differently, then they can begin to understand their experiences differently. Both dominant and marginalised viewers need to understand the limitations of dominant modes and the potential for 'Other' options, but for different reasons. 'Others' need to affirm and develop our specific visions, while those who fit the 'norm' need to recognize the assumptions of normative structures and practices. Beharry, Butler, Stewart and Mootoo all challenge structures of constructing meaning, simultaneous with their shift of attention to 'Other' subjectivities. There is great variation between their work, but

⁶⁵I want to remind the reader that the term 'lesbian/feminist' does not just include 'actual' lesbians but refers to those who support the political interests of lesbians and feminists, including creating space for lesbian and/or feminist subjectivities and subverting heterosexism and patriarchy. Thus, I include Butler and Beharry under this term though they are not lesbians.

they all share the development of successful strategies to produce political work based on lesbian/feminist bodies and passions connected to 'Other' ways of thinking and communicating.

1) Strategies to Defy Containment

In order to increase the space for contained identities, Mootoo, Stewart, Beharry and Butler each focus on the political and strategic ramifications of representation based on active lesbian/feminist subjectivity. Significantly, each artist engages both Modernist and postmodernist problems at the same time. As well as refuting the Modernist myth that art is a neutral form of individual 'expression,' their work is based on refusing to believe that postmodernism's rejection of 'coherent self' or of authorial agency is an effective basis from which to work. In diverse ways, these artists demonstrate that 'Other' conceptions of 'self' and uses of 'I' are not the same as dominant Modernist constructs of 'self'. Simultaneous with this, they negotiate an understanding of authorship that is neither the simplistic Modernist *auteur*, nor the postmodernist rejection of agency. Kobena Mercer describes this position:

The question of enunciation - who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share to communicate? - implies a whole range of important political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference. ... To be marginalized is to have no place from which to speak, since the subject positioned in the margins is silenced and invisible. The contestation of marginality in black, gay, and feminist politics thus inevitably brings the issue of authorship back into play, not as the centred origin that determines or guarantees the aesthetic and political value of a text, but as a question about agency in cultural struggle to "find a voice" and "give voice" to subordinate experiences, identities, and subjectivities. (1991 181)

Mootoo, Butler, Stewart and Beharry all work from a recognition of the material specifics of lesbian/feminist subjectivity and of the potential of art to make changes for people and in institutions. I want to focus on the approaches to using and effecting 'self' which they share because dominant academic and artistic theories cannot account for these methods. Their strategy of 'self' is an ideal that functions as a model to facilitate discussion and to help guide 'Others'; a political act of resisting the erasure by patriarchal society; a relational, interactive self, not the separated, autonomous individual of the Enlightenment; and an embodied self where body is a site of cohesion for identity.

For lesbians/feminists, posing an identity is a political act.⁶⁶ Our subjectivities are denied, erased, marginalised in this society and to claim to be a dyke or a feminist is to resist this oppression. Deploying a lesbian/feminist 'I' can also serve to encourage more lesbian/feminists to do the same thing. We need ways to support our claims to subjectivity and respect. An effective strategy is to assert that we have identities which are socially constructed, or to deploy 'I' as an ideal which does not 'actually' exist: such a 'self' is not so much about describing what currently exists, but is more about trying to make something else happen. This strategic use of self could help make a place for that which is not yet, but might be, for something else lesbian or feminist which cannot currently exist because of the predominance of homophobic, misogynist ideologies and structures. We need to assume that it is

⁶⁶One of many queer theorists, Zimmerman discusses this, p. 9.

possible to experience a sense of self as strong and coherent, and *at the same time*, be aware of the extent to which identities are socially constructed and represented (Waugh 13).

Shani Mootoo's multi-media work *Memory and Desire/On Looking Back ...*⁶⁷ is a powerful example of a self-consciously political act of using 'I' and deploying agency in an art work. The piece consists of a richly coloured photocopy of Mootoo kissing another South Asian woman. In front of the image is a shelf with scales. In one pan, there are weights, and in the other pan, the words "Autonomy," "Self-determination," and "Freedom" are printed on a piece of paper. The 'weights' which balance these high ideals are symbols of materialism and heterosexuality -- a toy BMW, a tiny country-style house, a wedding band and a hope chest. Above the image:

On looking back I find that I have thought, said and
done whatever I pleased.
At great expense.

And below:

No greater however, than to have thought, said and done.
To discover, uncover, and know.

In this piece, Mootoo uses 'I' as a means of resisting erasure. She must make the assumption that she can use 'I', and claim to have made decisions based around an experience of selfhood and of agency. This assumption provides necessary support to believing in her lesbian desires and to discussing racial, sexual, and gender identity as

⁶⁷Shown in the exhibition "Memory and Desire", Vancouver Art Gallery, 1992.

imbricated. It is definitely a political act for a lesbian of colour to make a stake for her identity in a piece produced for exhibition in a high profile institution such as the Vancouver Art Gallery. The V.A.G. attracts mainly educated middle-class, white, heterosexual visitors whose field of understanding excludes self-hood for lesbians and for people of colour. Speaking up as lesbian/feminist is an act of resistance and courage for 'Others' who see this work. Whether or not a coherent self is a myth or an ideal, Mootoo has experienced oppression that is based on labelling her as 'non-white' and 'non-heterosexual'. Mootoo needs to discuss her specific experience of self in order to change that exclusion and in order to discuss the affirmation and connection that is so difficult for 'Others' to express. Mootoo's deployment of 'I' is nowhere near the same as the white, straight, male myth of the self because a lesbian and a woman of colour does not fit the current definitions of art practice determined by the straight, white, patriarchal, capitalist art market. In short, discussions of political, social, cultural and economic context have to be considered as part of theories of subjectivity and of authorship.

When Mootoo first moved to Canada, she attempted to be a 'Canadian Painter' and so she painted 'realistic' landscapes in colours and styles in the manner of the Group of Seven. In a move to introduce her own identity, she next painted landscapes in a similar style but used strong, bright colours and the flora from Trinidad where she grew-up. Curators and reviewers responded by calling her work "delightfully naive", full of "tropical" colour, and by claiming that Mootoo possessed

"folksy crudeness,"⁶⁸ all of which are highly pejorative labels in the dominant art vocabulary.⁶⁹

These terms also function to limit and contain difference by marking or stereotyping work as 'exotic Other' to the 'norm'. As Homi K. Bhabha discusses, stereotypes work against 'Others' not because they are simplistic, but more importantly, because they "fix" the position or meaning of 'Others' and impede our representation from circulating with dominant debates. Mootoo's work was not being understood as about a new Canadian trying to negotiate her 'both/and' identity or trying to produce images from/about Canadian identities other than the 'norm'.

In her recent collage work (illustrations 1,2), Mootoo side-steps this containment at the same time that she challenges the process of stereotyping. Instead of the more subtle, integrating approach of her earlier landscapes, Mootoo tackles the issue directly by including imagery that is instantly recognisable as 'South Asian' -- religious figures, animals, landscape, architecture, fruit and vegetables, styles. In her collages, Mootoo composes these signs in styles reminiscent of South Asian designs which are excluded from the Western art canon, such as her repetition of 'decorative borders' consisting of these meaningful images. In the body of the collage, she also combines these images with signifiers for other aspects of her identity, such as

⁶⁸Ina Lee, "Real Expression," *The Courier* (April 10, 1985).

⁶⁹While it is a compliment to white male artists to be called "primitive" (e.g., Paul Gauguin) because they maintain their original status as proper subject and the label "primitive" adds 'spice' to them, for women or people of colour, always already not a subject, "primitive" is another hegemonic trap because it affirms their status as Other.

Trinidad and Canada (the regions specific to her experience), and with signifiers for issues she wants to address such as lesbian subjectivity and sexuality, consumer culture, and family. As well, Mootoo often incorporates fragments of self-portraits. Over these constructions, she writes text which speaks from, and informs, the image combinations. The specific composition of issues and images varies from collage to collage, and in relation to the intended exhibition site, and with her intentions for the piece.

For example, in *It is a crime*, Mootoo lays snap-shots of Carnival in Trinidad over an appropriated drawing of a scene of Hindu gods and goddesses. The scene thus provides a frame to the smaller panel of photographs with the result that the deities look out from behind the central collage. Broken into four lines that horizontally divide the photographs, a type-written text reads, "It is a crime that I should / have to use your language / to tell you how I feel that / you have taken mine from me." The visual images mark her piece as from, and about, a "both/and" identity of South Asian heritage in Trinidad, or on a larger scale, diasporic identities in general. The text speaks directly to this latter idea, talking about the effects of colonialism on contemporary subjects.

Mootoo is aware of the containing force of stereotypes, but is not afraid to engage with and put pressure on this process. She tries to make a new context, and to avoid the fixed circulation of stereotypes, by attempting to 'reverse the discourse' of exoticisation. Mootoo emphasizes the politics of the "folksy" styles which she copies by using images which strongly evoke certain identities, locations, and experiences.

Her 'patterns' or borders become contentious because of the combination of traditional South Asian images with Euro-based conceptual, political art methods such as collage and image/text work. This tension is increased by her focus on hybrid Indo-trinidadian identity and her personalised attention to lesbian sexuality.

Mootoo's juxtaposition of imagery from various sources, addressing diverse issues, provides a context which can question the stereotypes she evokes and the process of labelling. Mootoo turns the tables on the speaking-position⁷⁰; she recognises that she must use language that usually works to produce dominant subjectivity at the expense of 'Others'. Rather than allowing this to defeat her, she makes clear her ambivalence to English and to dominant artistic language, as she works to make a place for herself within those languages. In short, Mootoo combines the potentially contradictory strategies of being specific to her identity and experience *and* contesting the process of labelling.

The text in *It is a crime* follows the style of an authoritative, 'voice of god' speech-act. There is no reference, outside the collaged images, to indicate who is the speaker of this direct statement. A tension arises because usually this speaking position is antithetical to 'Other' subjectivities; it is the voice of the transcendental 'norm' which is based on excluding others. Mootoo's combination of style of enunciation, content of the text, and interaction of text with images, both questions this universal voice and lends credence to the outsider opinion expressed by the text. As well, there

⁷⁰Barbara Kruger's work, discussed in the previous section, produces a similar reversal of positions, but Mootoo takes this process in a more complex direction because she also challenges dominant language itself.

is a tension between the "I" as an individual position and the group position produced by the imagery along with the non-specificity of the enunciative style. This contradiction points to the "I" as a social effect that is not restricted to one person, nor speaks for the individual artist and 'his essence'. This is not a transcendental "I" because the snap-shot style of the images of Trinidad, and the specific combination of Caribbean and South Asian images, produces a historically specific identity and subject position.

The preceding discussion of Mootoo's work indicates that one can discuss artists in terms of their methods of shifting or arranging signifiers in order to increase the likelihood of producing certain subjectivities as the effect of their images or to produce intended meanings and viewing responses. Such a discussion is not the same as an *auteurist* approach which places the author as the source of all meaning. One can posit that an artist has some control while also considering the role of the semiotic and the socially constructed nature of subjectivities.

Margot Butler, for example, discusses the careful consideration she gives to constructing precisely where a viewer will stand in relation to her installations.⁷¹ In this way, she can increase the possibility of viewers embracing a physical understanding of how they read and understand visual representations. In her installation, *Their feet fell cleanly on either side, and she, between them?* (1992 - see illustrations 3-5), embodied viewing is one key 'message' or skill that she wishes to communicate. The starting point for the piece is the story of Butler's great-

⁷¹Conversation with Butler, February 16, 1993.

grandmother which takes place in London during the time of Jack the Ripper. Her great-grandmother was walking between her husband and brother for safety, but she fell into an open coal hole despite their protection. Viewers must piece this story together, and Butler's expansion from it, as they move through the installation. Hopefully, among possible meanings, they will be lead by their placement within the installation to physically experience the paradox of turning to men for protection from male violence against women.

Butler states that it is this message that she wants people to understand. I and other viewers have reached this idea from seeing the work, independent of knowing the story or Butler's goals. This supports an argument that artists do have some sort of control as active agents in the production of representation. Butler takes into account socially specific factors such as the process of viewing, likely audience expectations, and understandings of certain signifiers.

Kobena Mercer's statement that it really does matter who speaks supports the kind of work that Butler is trying to produce because this statement argues against an abstract approach to discussing the process of producing signification. Butler reproduces the feminist experience of viewing in patriarchal culture whereby feminist subjects piece together meaning by reading into gaps, combining fragments, using signs as "send-offs", and renouncing closure.⁷² In her installation it is not just the story or the content which is feminist, but more importantly, it is the way Butler tells

⁷²This is a combination of 'reading against the grain', of French feminist reading, of "eccentric subjectivity", of 'disbelieving' dominant interpellation.

it which is feminist. This strategy empowers viewers because they are invited to produce meaning from the parts, as they physically move through the work.

Their feet fell cleanly on either side, and she, between them? consists of three black-and-white photographs on mylar (a transparent plastic), suspended from cast-iron rods and arranged in a circle cut-off by one wall on which hangs a text and image panel also suspended from a rod. The image is a colour portrait of a woman, in contemporary dress, in front of a mirror, looking over her shoulder back towards the viewers and the circle of mylar images (it is thus a double portrait because she is in front of a mirror - illustration 5). The text is hand-written and provides information parallel to the images, but it is not descriptive or explanatory. The mylar images are all life-size back views of the same scene: a woman between two men, all wearing nineteenth-century English dress, walking on a cobble-stone street. The middle image is of their full bodies (with the men cropped on either side), while the two flanking images are close-ups of their feet passing an open coal hole in the cobbled street (illustration 4).

Each of the images suggests certain meanings, which compound as the viewer passes between the mylar photographs to reach the wall, read the text, and see the detail of the woman (Butler's self-portrait) looking back at the room. The process of producing meaning is shifted to another level after reading the text because viewers have a different perspective on the circle of black-and-white images. The text gives a more specific understanding of the content of the installation and, when viewers exit the circle, they see the images in reverse, with the gallery room visible through the

mylar. This process of constructing meaning from Butler's installation replicates the reading process which Roland Barthes describes as "writing reading" (1986 30).

Looking at each detail to find the purpose of Butler's work is not sufficient. One must mentally combine and elaborate from this combination, as one circulates through the piece, in order to negotiate the gaps between the information Butler provides.

Jeanette Winterson uses much the same approach in telling the stories of the twelve dancing princesses in her novel *Sexing the Cherry*. Each of these stories is brief (less than a page), but the effect of their telling shifts the readers' perspective on a number of levels. Of one princess, Winterson writes:

You may have heard of Rapunzel.
Against the wishes of her family, who can best be described by
their passion for collecting miniature dolls, she went to live in a tower
with an older woman. (52)

Using very little information, Winterson radically shifts the perspective, the moral, and the range of subjectivity in the Rapunzel fairy tale. Like Butler's piece, it is not so much the story that is important, but Winterson's process of leading us through a lesbian/feminist story in order to negotiate new ways of seeing, understanding or speaking, and new ways of supporting lesbian/feminist subjectivity.

Because the mylar images are back views and life-size, one gets a small shock on turning after reading the wall panel and still seeing a back view of the woman and two men. In this way, the viewer is made aware of expectations in terms of images, and of conventions of perception: one knows that the image will only be one view, but nevertheless one 'automatically' imagines the rest of the scene and half expects to

see the figures' faces. The awareness of perspective, and the shifts as one circulates, replicates a lesbian/feminist critical position where one is repeatedly made aware of the relativity of meaning, identity or safety, and of ideology. This position is at odds with the dominant construction of fixed positions, of a one-point perspective capable of making or reading representation, and of a transcendent, universal subjectivity. Butler's work produces the lesbian/feminist subjectivity of "not being home" -- of identity as relational, dependent on others and environment, and constantly shifting around one's body and related discourses or social relations.

The above discussion is a demonstration of some ways that an artist can socially anchor signification and produce a certain meaning, including that which is outside dominant thinking. Butler and I both understand that language is constantly shifting but that this does not mean that a meaning cannot last long enough to be communicated to other people, or that certain meanings are not effectively reproduced. If language randomly and constantly shifts, then why, for example, have misogynist beliefs lasted so long in so many places? I would hope that it is possible to momentarily fix, to repeat, and to expand upon women-positive and 'Other' values; Butler's and the other art works I discuss are proof that with careful, appropriate strategies, this can happen.

Shauna Beharry's work is also a powerful example of the potential to change our ability to address and express marginalised subjectivity. She has a radically 'Other' approach to speaking, to self-definition and to authorship. She states that she wants her "flesh to sing" because "her body is already in the shape of the word she

wants to name."⁷³ It has taken Beharry years of attempting to negotiate dominant language (verbal, written or artistic) before she was able to reach this understanding. When she tried to speak like the 'norm', she was repeatedly labelled, trapped, fixed as either a source of pleasure to the 'norm' (exotic) or as a failure by their standards. After one performance, for example, a white male magazine writer/editor was kind enough to tell her that her work *could be* really interesting, but she needed a "good editor" to help her "strengthen her work" because he had lost interest in many parts of the performance and had been confused by it. This vague criticism lets Beharry know that she is transgressing the boundaries of dominant art practice, but the editor does not take the responsibility of specifically addressing what it is that he would rather not see or hear. Beharry has all too often encountered this sort of response. It is difficult to negotiate because it evokes the cover and authority of traditional criticism by addressing 'universal' concepts of success/failure at maintaining the audience's interest and simultaneously refuses to engage with Beharry's address of 'Otherness'.

Although he may not have stated it, it is clear that this editor wanted to remove the political force of Beharry's performances. She openly talks about racism and oppression and about the specifics of which sorts of people benefit from the status quo. However, she refuses to constitute herself as 'victim' or as 'powerless' when working with these structures and discourses in her performances or installations. Instead, she explores what powers marginalised people do have and she attempts to both outline possibilities for communication alternative to dominant options and to put

⁷³Conversation with Beharry, January 26, 1993.

into play this physical communication. Throughout her performances, Beharry develops the political, social, and pleasurable potential of 'silences' or moments when she produces physical and non-linear language both as a means to critique oppression and as a means to make space for women, people of colour, and diverse sexuality. These aspects of her performance are beyond dominant schemes and control and thus are threatening to those whose identity depends on them.

Beharry's strategies are seemingly simple, but their effect is complex and subversive. Virginia Woolf, in her fictional biography *Orlando*, expresses a similar approach to language to that which Beharry attempts to express in her performances. In one passage, Woolf refuses to describe a conversation between Orlando and 'her' lover, explaining that:

the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. For which reasons we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that the space is filled to repletion.

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Beharry also believes in the 'fullness' and depth of 'silences', rather than seeing such moments as a lack of communication or of meaning. In a description of her work for a grant application, Beharry explains that

The figures of my aji and nani, hidden behind barriers of language, culture, and time remain mysterious to me. Yet when I trace my body, I touch their features, their bodies ... and I am nourished. Even if I cannot name their histories my body knows and feels them moving

inside. Silence fills my belly. Not the silence of absence, but a silent knowing that what I am struggling to name, will continue to live, unnamed or not, inside of me. My body is full. My history oozes out of my pores like sweet sticky juice.⁷⁴

Beharry's response to the dominant system's containment and oppression has been many faceted: she diverts communication and understanding to physical means, investigates the potential of 'silences' (the refusal of dominant communication), works in multi-disciplinary ways, to side-step any simple or quick answers that are expected by the existing art practice, and creates alternative venues to the 'established' system of performance art. An example of this last strategy, Beharry does not wait to be invited, nor does she ask permission to stage some of her performances. She produced *ashes to flowers: the breathing* at SFU without asking authorization to use the grounds.⁷⁵ And, like Virginia Woolf, she refuses to give easy answers. In her artist statement in the "Race and the Body Politic" issue of *Harbour*, instead of a brief biography, Beharry writes, "My work is small, simple and travels by word of mouth. I trust in it" (68). In a newspaper interview she states:

I work with everything from live spiders to flute synthesizers. My work oozes, smells, gets mouldy and, upon occasion, runs away.⁷⁶

Beharry refuses to be contained by dominant definitions of her racial and gender

⁷⁴Correspondence with Beharry, September 17, 1993.

⁷⁵I discuss this work in detail later in this section.

⁷⁶Shauna Beharry interview with Paul Hanley, *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, January 14, 1993.

identity at the same time as she finds ways to communicate from the specifics of her body politics, experiences, and subjectivity.

Women, queers, and people of colour cannot forget our bodies or fit the mind/body split in a misogynist, homophobic, racist society. Even if we try, other people and social structures will always remind us of our physical identities. Beharry's is the work of a subject revelling in the unpredictability of her body. Beharry knows she cannot pretend to control her body or how others perceive her. Instead, she uses this understanding to facilitate 'Others'' means of communication and connection. Her work speaks to people who feel a physical basis to their identity and who recognize their exclusion from dominant language and institutions.

And do we want to ignore our bodies anyway? Lesbian and gay identity is based on paying attention to and believing in one's sexual desires no matter how they were formed (innately or socially); feminism is based on connecting around experiences of oppression that focus on sexed body differences; and people of colour describe the politics of racially differentiated bodies, of lived cultural and geographic location, and propose resistance and expansion from this understanding. Patricia Waugh argues that the basis of subjectivity as feminine or masculine is formed out of real needs and desires which are constructed outside of one's consciousness (37). Those needs and desires vary depending on one's corporeal reality -- depending on one's body and depending on the discourses constructing understanding of bodies, experiences, identities. Following Waugh's point, it is clear that one can consider

physical feelings and experiences without adopting an essentialist position that the body is a transcendental holder of meaning for identity.

In her performances and installations, Beharry develops strategies that by-pass dominant language and enable a physical communication between herself and the audience, as well as amongst the audience. In her performance *ashes to flowers: the breathing at SFU*⁷ which I attended, she passed out thick locks of long black hair and instructed the audience to braid them. Before beginning, she rubbed jasmine oil into our hands and promised that "sometimes your fingers will know what your tongue will never be able to say." As we all braided, Beharry talked about "hair as history;" it grows from you, but yet is detached from your body, or rather, it is "detachable" if one chooses. In the same way, you can cut off your history from your self, but if you do this, it will take time to "grow" it back, to re-connect.

Beharry works in a variety of media, but her goals and ideas are similar throughout. She produced the video *Seeing is Believing* as part of her process of connecting with her family history, and specifically, with her mother who died a few years ago. Her memory of her mother, and Beharry's South Asian and Canadian family history, give Beharry a context of support. This is not an external context, a place that is "home", but an internal context that she carries with her body and can

⁷*ashes to flowers: the breathing* is a performance series, each specific to location and building from the previous events, that Beharry has been performing across Canada during 1993. She produced the first part on the grounds of Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., March 1993. The rest of the series schedule is: Gallerie Burning, Montreal, May 1993; Artspeak, Vancouver, October 1993; and the Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, November 1993.

draw on in different situations. While the western patriarchal "home" is an illusory place based on the exclusion of histories of oppression and dominance; for Beharry, "home" is a process of coming to consciousness. She attempts to deal with her histories of oppression in combination with her histories of resistance, braiding them together like the locks of hair she gave out in *ashes to flowers*, and thereby forming a strong, tangible connection that she can carry away with her. Beharry's performances are as much rituals for healing, growing, supporting herself, and those present, as they are 'performance art'. Beharry intends these events to be part of the process of learning to live, and to speak about that living, in the face of structures and individuals who would exclude her racially multiple, non-fixed identity.

Susan Stewart also recognises the containing mechanisms of dominant art practice, specifically portrait photography. In her exhibition *Lovers and Warriors: aural/photographic collaborations* (1992/93), she 'problematizes' the rules of address for this photographic tradition by developing a collaboration with each of the models, by basing her work on the structure of communication amongst multiple subjects, and by producing identity as relationally defined. Stewart rejects the traditional linear address from the 'Artist' to the viewer which uses the model as object to facilitate this communication (similar to "hom(m)osexual" exchange⁷⁸). Instead, she disperses the power of authority by speaking with, and listening to, this 'other woman' in order to facilitate discourse between subjects, and construct a loving, respecting exchange. The exhibition consists of a series of portraits, each of these consisting of two or three

⁷⁸This term is discussed in the preceding section.

photographs, and a audio cassette of the models and Stewart discussing sexuality, art practice, representation, identity and various topics related to the work. Stewart uses individual tape players, the kind used for tours, so that each viewer can listen at their own pace and have a closer interaction with the women on tape. This tape allows the models to assume a greater portion of the authority of the speaking position within the exhibition, and through their intelligent, concerned responses, demonstrate their level of involvement in *Lovers and Warriors*. The models, along with Stewart, create the scene for their portrait and decide how they will be represented. This collaboration ranges from choosing an existing site, introducing props, wearing a 'costume' for the portrait, and/or performing an event (see illustrations 6-8 for examples) as well as discussing which images will be used in the exhibition.

Stewart chooses to focus on producing an entire exhibition of portraits, rather than single works, because she realises that in order for an image to be subversive or lesbian/feminist, it must be seen in, and address, a context. She refuses the Modernist conceit that art is able to produce meaning alone, separated from other work and from context, and instead recognises that galleries, and the process of art reception, are ideologically charged in favour of the 'norm'. Stewart develops two main strategies to deal with this and to effect her intervention. First, she will not show individual portraits, but only the exhibition as a whole so that the complete body of work provides a context for each individual image. Alternatively, she will also include a selection of portraits as part of an exhibition that is capable of providing a supporting

reference for her photographs, such as queer or feminist group exhibitions.⁷⁹ Second, the audio recordings of conversation with the models produces another level of context and information about the issues Stewart and the models are attempting to address.

Lovers and Warriors serves to validate marginal subjects within the realm of portrait photography at the same time that it subverts this photographic tradition and current art practice in general. Stewart uses the established form of portrait photography (high-quality print, no text⁸⁰), but undermines this form by developing the collaborative potential of portrait photography and emphasizing the interaction, and differences, among subjects within a field of similar concerns about subjectivity. This strategy is similar to feminist film and video work, predominantly of the 1970s, which developed the 'talking heads' approach. In this work, feminist artists used the 'documentary' style to enable women to tell stories and discuss the diversity of women's experiences which were not acceptable subject matter within patriarchal film and art systems.

As lesbians, all of Stewart's models do not fit normative standards of subjectivity, and additionally some of her models are further marginalised by race, and/or by the specific ideas which they address through the scene that they create for their portrait. For examples, the series "Leatherface" (illustration 6) is powerful and

⁷⁹She has exhibited selections from *Lovers and Warriors* in *100 Years of Homosexuality*, The Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon, 1992 and in *Queer Collaborations*, an exhibition of cross-cultural collaboration when the subject is women of colour, Basic Inquiry, 1993.

⁸⁰The audio component also subverts this form but does not reference contemporary text/image combination. As well, the audio does not relate a certain statement to a given image and thus has a different interaction with the work.

frightening because these images are far beyond the range of subjectivity that dominant society wants to recognize or allow 'within' its boundaries. The model is a masculine, muscular figure who appears in one image with her arms folded in a strong, self-contained, aggressive stance. She wears a close fitting leather mask that covers her face and a black cloth stretched over her mouth. "Leatherface's" presence alongside a range of images of women in *Lovers and Warriors* disturbs the comfort and assumptions of many viewers, and variously is a supporting and encouraging image to those viewers who understand the lover and protector aspect of this identity or this portrait as a daunting image that shifts expectations and assumptions about pride and identity. Both "Leatherface's" body and subjectivity are outside of, and threatening to, dominant society and ideology. These images do not try to squeeze "Leatherface" into that which can never acknowledge her; rather, they 'flaunt' and produce space for her difference, and her power as dangerous and transgressive.

Stewart could have avoided "Leatherface" because this identity might seem to fit prevailing myths that lesbians are transsexual, ugly, scary non-women. Instead of a squeaky clean approach to lesbian diversity (eg. young, 'good-looking', non-threatening women), Stewart takes on the difficult task of challenging stereotypes by photographing women who are close to certain stereotypes -- images that run the risk of being appropriated by the discourses and expectations that Stewart and the models want to change with the portrait. Stewart can succeed in this difficult approach because the images, in combination with the other portraits, show up the limits of labels and put the stereotypes into circulation with the other images. Similar to Shani

Mootoo, Stewart does not allow the process of stereotyping to fix or impede the production of meaning within her work; she challenges this process at the same time as she images marginal identities that the 'norm' attempts to contain with labels and stereotypes.

In addition to developing strategies to shift the process of stereotyping, Stewart works to shift meaning at other levels of signification. In "Beth" (illustration 7), Stewart and the models reform the well known scene/signifier of the crucifixion by depicting a female Christ with another woman mourning (or about to sexually satisfy) her. By supplanting the expected male, this image both makes visible the absence of active, self-defined women's subjectivity in Christianity and implies which gender, and which kind of love, really suffers in this religion. Stewart and the model shift the signifier to a loving, respecting frame of meaning and, in the process, they also highlight the possibility of reforming a sign and the impossibility of claiming fixed meaning. Even the long established symbolism of the Christian crucifixion scene can be changed to include lesbian subjects.

As well as the figure on the cross, the figure of the traditional woman mourner is also radically altered in this shift. Suddenly, she is not an object within male exchange, a two-dimensional symbol functioning in terms of male meaning, but potentially another subject inter-acting (sexually) with the woman crucified. She addresses something more relevant to her spirit and subjectivity than exhibited in the straight, white, male traditional role of self-sacrifice for the universal good of others;

she mourns the torture of women by this religion and, at the same time, she shows her love for another woman.

Stewart also has a complex and subversive approach to representing women of colour and to combining these images with portraits of white lesbians. She is aware of the politics of this project especially in relation to the dominance of whiteness in the construction of lesbian identity and the signs of our identity. On the audio tape, one of the models sums up this problem. She says that even if two lesbians of colour are walking down the street holding hands, neither most heterosexuals nor most white lesbians will recognize them as dykes because the markers of lesbian-ness are overwhelmingly white. A woman of colour must take on these signs (styles of dress, hair, posture, et cetera) if she is to make visible her sexuality.

The issue of the white-ness of lesbian identity and image is a specific obstacle for an artist who wants to represent lesbians of colour and who wants to challenge white dominance in culture and representation. Stewart's strategy of creating the entire exhibition as the context for each portrait, and of shifting the assumption that each image needs to stand alone, provides the means for negotiating the problems of complexly addressing race and sexuality together. For any one portrait of a lesbian of colour, Stewart does not attempt to 'prove' that this model is lesbian, by including white-dyke signs, anymore than for a portrait of a white woman. Rather, it is their role as components of *Lovers and Warriors* that provides a lesbian context for these images. However, this is not to say that Stewart takes a wishy-washy, apolitical approach where one pretends that race does not matter or that if only we treat

everyone 'the same' then racism will go away. Like Shani Mootoo, Stewart puts pressure on stereotypes and labels by changing the context of their location and putting them into circulation with 'Other' discourses.

In the series "Shanti" (illustration 8), the model creates a scene specific to her own racial identity. She wears veils and a head-dress that evokes South Asian style of clothing and the cloth back-drop has a South Asian design. Stewart has framed the model in erotic, sensual close-ups that are not necessarily specific to lesbian sexuality, and the veils are transparent to sensually reveal the model's body. Without the context of the exhibition, this image could easily be read as produced for the traditional heterosexual male gaze at an exoticised woman and not by/for lesbians. Stewart and the model take a risk by flirting so closely with this dominant mode of representing and objectifying women. However, it is a risk that must be taken as a way of allowing lesbians and women of colour to challenge the way that women and diverse races are constructed within dominant culture. The existing modes of containing and stereotyping women and exotictising women of colour must be addressed. To avoid these approaches both gives them too much power by assuming that they cannot be shifted and leaves them intact whereby these representational strategies will continue to contain images of women and construct dominant readings of us. In the context of the exhibition, while listening to audio tapes of engaged, thoughtful women discuss representation, sexuality, lesbian identity, contemporary art practice, et cetera, dominant meaning is both challenged and replaced by complex, lesbian-centred perspectives.

"Shanti" not only benefits from the exhibition as context; this series along with Stewart's other portraits of lesbians of colour also subverts and opens up the potential subjectivity for the representations of white women. The combination of diverse images of lesbians pushes the process of questioning labels far further than Stewart could achieve if she had only photographed white models. Stewart refuses to make the all too common mistake, which Kobena Mercer identified, whereby the dominant requirement of 'difference' or 'distance' that is usually fulfilled by gender polarity is transferred to racial opposition, i.e, between white and any other race. This tactic maintains white as the 'norm' and precludes complex discussion and also maintains an unsophisticated approach to relations of similarity, denigrating closeness and missing the powerful, erotic potential of representation based on passionate connection.

2) Strategies to Communicate 'Other' Subjectivities

There are two specific areas that these four artists are developing to communicate lesbian/feminist subjectivities. First, Beharry, Stewart and Mootoo each work from a position that recognises the possibilities of love and passion as a basis for connected interaction between women/lesbians as active subjects. While each of these three focusses on different, specific valences of this idea, they share the recognition that passionate lesbian/feminist subjectivity is a powerful subversion of the dominant separated, individualistic approach to language and representation. Second, all four of these artists, including Butler, work from a simultaneous attention to their own specifics of identity and to multiple, diverse interaction between 'Other' identities.

This dual focus supports and expands particular subjectivity, but also resists the process of labelling and the compartmentalisation of aspects of 'Otherness'. This second strategy redefines the terms of discussion about lesbian/feminist subjects and resists appropriation by the 'norm' because the work is complex, addressing several points at once, and therefore, not easily contained, trivialised, or consumed in dominant terms. Butler, Mootoo, Beharry and Stewart all deliberately avoid the trap of simply fixing the uncontested labels "lesbian" or "feminist" to their work, and instead, work from lesbian and/or feminist subjectivities to produce these subjectivities as the effect of their representation.

Love, Passion and Increments of Closeness

Stewart, Beharry and Mootoo each tackle the oppressive patriarchal belief that distance/separation is required to enter the Symbolic and to speak or understand representation. In different ways, these three artists explore relations of sameness in visual or performance art, and develop 'serious communication' based on love and passion among women.

Stewart focusses on lesbian communication, particularly relations of 'proximity' and the diversity of 'sameness', within lesbian experience. As discussed above, she does not transfer binary difference from gender to race in order to fit the dominant practice that distance is required to speak or to negotiate representation. *Lovers and Warriors* is based on a shifting, proliferating, multiple approach to imaging lesbian subjects. The portraits give viewers a "send-off" rather than a closed

representation of the models and their identities. In the exhibition as a whole, Stewart manages to contest simplistic labelling, create potential for increasing space for lesbian/feminist subjectivity, generate complex responses, and satisfy image-starved lesbian/feminist viewers.

Stewart succeeds at all of this partly because she does not assume that merely by photographing a lesbian she can make an image that is lesbian or that will speak to lesbian viewers. She is aware that the discourses and institutions of art, and specifically portraits, actively exclude lesbian/feminist subjectivity and, as a result, she needs to find multiple routes of communication in both the production and the reception of her work. Significantly, Stewart does not assume that lesbian desires, experiences or subjectivities are 'objects' which one photographs, but rather, that these are 'positions' from which she works and are the intended effects of her portrait series.

Stewart's strategy is based on a model of 'loving' lesbian interaction amongst active subjects, and not on dominant structures of binary comparisons and grades of hierarchy between subject and 'Others'. As discussed in the preceding section, lesbians already recognize other lesbians as active subjects through our sexual experience with each other. This understanding and foundation of active agency can provide a critical foundation from which to change all women's relation to language and to subjectivity. Stewart's collaboration with her models provides an example that this is possible. Together, they produce the images and produce multiple routes of address between artist and model, viewer and collaborators, and viewer as observer of

this exchange. The viewer enters into a 'give and take' of shifting active subjects that is quite different from the established constructions for receptions whereby the viewer is a passive receptor to the artist's message, the sole agent who determines meaning, or the second point in a linear communication between artist and viewer that uses the model as a facilitating object.⁸¹

Stewart supports and expands the collaboration with each model through her additional strategy of constructing the exhibition as an entire project, consisting of localised series of photographs of lesbians. *Lovers and Warriors* sets up a viewing relation that is more like that of installation work than that of traditional portrait photography. In the latter, the cohesive element of the show is the 'mind' and 'skill' of the artist who made the images. In *Lovers and Warriors*, the organising principle is a social, interactive approach to identity, where no one image is singly defined, but instead, is set in relation to each other. Viewers build a sense of overall meaning first, by the process of looking at each image; second, by listening to the tapes which accompany them; and finally, by starting to see connections and differences between the various portraits in the show. This approach is similar to installation work where the entire project is one piece. The aspects which form that piece have a level of self-contained content, but they produce meaning through interaction with the other elements of that installation and each aspect is not expected to be read in isolation.

⁸¹These describe three different common approaches to theories of reception or of routes of meaning.

Similar to Stewart's strategy to show a group of images as an entire work, thereby producing a context from the connections between the photographs, Shauna Beharry eschews contained performances, and instead, conceives of each of her pieces as parts of her overall work. In her earlier performances, Beharry wrote a core script and theme that she adapted for each event. In contrast, for 1993, Beharry structured the entire year as a series of aspects of the overall piece called *ashes to flowers: the breathing*. Each performance of *ashes to flowers* builds from the previous events, but the last performance is not a culmination or end point; rather, it is one aspect like all the others. Beharry will develop her ideas during the course of the performance series and she will also develop the installation that is part of *ashes to flowers*.

For example, the braids of hair from the SFU performance (discussed earlier) will be incorporated with 'bodies' that Beharry started making in Montreal at Gallerie Burning (May 1993) and will finish during her residency at Artspeak (October 1993). These 'bodies' are made of burlap sacking filled with, among other things, soil, seeds and spices. They will grow and die, and grow again, over the course of the year, in relation to the various sites and events performed, and will form a focus for Beharry's performance at Artspeak. The title of the performance refers to a Hindu burial ritual. The remains after cremation are called 'flowers' and they are spread over water as a ritual to affirm new life after death. The flowers become part of the water which provides life for others. This ritual supports Beharry's approach to cyclical identity and life, with no fixed beginning or end. She started *ashes to flowers* with a private

ritual on the beach at Ucluelet on Vancouver Island -- this was her personal "send-off" to the performance series.

The 'bodies' also relate to Beharry's strategy to spend time in the space and location of each performance, interacting with that space and with some of the people who will be the audience. She prepares the area where she will perform much in the same way as one produces an installation. She paints the walls, hangs images and objects that relate to her ideas, burns incense and places other aromatics to stimulate smell and taste, as well as sight. Her installations are always time-based. As she commented in the newspaper interview, quoted earlier, things rot, mould, run away, fade, and grow during her installations and they are added to/taken away by visitors to the space. Visitors, and staff or gallery members, are invited to participate in the installation by sharing a meal with Beharry in the space, by working with her during the painting or arranging of objects in the space, by bringing or moving objects, and by discussing the issues involved or that arise during the process of this installation. Beharry does not believe that objects alone or a single performance can carry the ideas and critiques which she wants to convey. She believes that through a series of interactions, her work changes and she also hopes that her work affects visitors as they reach an understanding of her ideas and critiques and as they develop their own ideas from the work.

By spending time with the people in each location, Beharry can direct the general ideas she has already prepared for her piece to the specific interests, debates, needs of that particular audience, and she can respond to conversations or experiences

which relate to her piece that she has had in that location. As well, the audience will have a background to Beharry's ideas and work, and a connection to her personally, which helps facilitate her interactive style of performance.

Beharry developed this approach in order to prevent readings of her work as a self-contained spectacle for a passive audience, with the performance as the sole source of meaning. Instead, the interaction between and among the audience and Beharry's space, objects, images, ideas, and actions during the performance produces the meaning of that event. Beharry's strategy functions to shift ways of seeing at the same time that it enables a space in which feminist, racially diverse subjects can speak and be listened to. She develops connections, proximity, "both/and" understandings of difference and similarity through her preparation of the space and of a relationship with the people attending her piece.

Beharry's closely connected artist-audience relationship facilitates her ability to gain the audience's trust when she presents difficult, 'norm'-challenging ideas or when she offers ways to bond around experiences of 'Otherness'. Viewers have a better idea of her overall intentions, both from the space she creates and from the warm interaction between Beharry and those who have talked with her. It is hard to sit back and attempt to maintain a 'proper' spectator distance after the artist has shared coconut with everyone present, rubbed jasmine into their hands, got everyone to help braid hair for her work, and described how difficult it has been for her to find a way to speak when her only language is English, she is trained in classical theatre, and she is so often treated as a "double Other" -- 'Non-white Woman'. Through a mixture of

different ways of communicating, Beharry explains that she fails to fit Euro-based, male cultural structures -- their "measuring sticks" do not include her subjectivity.

Shani Mootoo is also developing strategies to produce loving, interactive identity as the effect of her work. She favours an indirect approach whereby meaning is produced via stories, events, emotions from the perspective of lesbians, women and/or people of colour, depending on the piece, rather than the direct or linear approach of describing, explaining or examining these subjectivities. The linear method produces the 'norm' as the subject-effect because the speaking position is distanced from, and 'studies', the identities discussed. Mootoo's indirect approach produces the specific 'Other' subjectivities speaking in the work as the effect of her representation. As well, this method allows shifting relations between the subjects involved, whereas the other option fixes 'Other' identities in binary opposition to the 'norm'.

Mootoo's video, *The Wild Woman in the Woods* (1993), is a strong example of her indirect approach. The narrative of this video is the search by one woman, Pria (Shani Mootoo), for a strong lesbian, Indo-trinidadian subjectivity. Mootoo develops the identity of the main character through her interaction with other characters and through the inclusion of images and signs which evoke specific locations and identities. The most powerful combination of these signs is the scene of a spiritual ceremony in which Pria is engaged. This scene begins the video and is then inter-cut throughout the main narrative. Pria burns an offering in a candle-filled room following a specifically Indo-caribbean Hindu ritual. However, the photographs and

images with which she surrounds herself for this ceremony are distinctly lesbian as well as South Asian: the photographs include a white female runner, a South Asian woman canoeing in the Rockies, and an older, strong-looking South Asian woman in a sari. There is nothing 'actively' lesbian in these images, such as erotic photographs, but the combination of them plus the bowls of ripe, tropical fruit, and the candle-lit ceremony all add up to a warm, spiritual space that can support the lesbian protagonist (as well as the artist and lesbian viewers). This 'fantasy' effect is furthered by the response of a female deity to Pria's ritual - as the narrative begins, there are cuts to a South Asian goddess who seems to be listening to Pria's call for help. This figure is an appropriation of the Hindu mountain goddess Durga: Mootoo adapts the image of this goddess to suit Pria's needs and to suit her contemporary Canadian environment: 'Durga' wears hiking boots along with her sari and gold jewellery and 'Durga' knows the way to a space of lesbian subjectivity.

The plot aspect of the video provides the information to interpret or to expand from the scene of the ceremony. Beginning her search for lesbian connection, Pria takes flowers with her to visit a South Asian woman, Tara, in whom she is romantically interested, but demonstrates her shyness by throwing them away before Tara answers the door. Sitting down to talk with her, Pria discovers that Tara is marrying a man Pria believes Tara does not love. (This is never called an arranged marriage, it could be read as such or as capitulating to the pressure of compulsory heterosexuality.) Later, wandering along a snowy road, Pria meets a white lesbian on her way back from a winter camping/skiing expedition. This woman offers to take

Pria along on her next trip, but Pria reluctantly declines, not because she does not want the same freedom to camp in wilderness as this white lesbian, but because she cannot ski and does not know how to be active and independent like this woman. Pria fails in romance with both the South Asian woman, who has capitulated to heterosexual conventions, and with the outdoorsy white lesbian, who has more freedom than Pria.

As Pria continues to walk, she hears bells, and finally catches glimpses among the trees of the goddess who has been watching her interactions. This figure appears, and then vanishes, just as Pria tries to see her. She snatches Pria's hat which causes a hilarious, arduous chase up hill, through the woods, including a portion on skis, with the goddess, in a flowing red and gold sari, showing excellent cross-country form - until she falls over on a turn. The deity stays just out of Pria's reach, beckoning and encouraging Pria as she struggles to reach her. Eventually, the goddess takes Pria to a path of candles, set in the snow amongst the trees, leading to a glen in which several South Asian lesbians are dancing and singing to Indo-trinidadian festive music (Indian film music set to a calypso beat)²². These women visibly demonstrate their multiple identities, their simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from different identities, by wearing saris as well as leather jackets, South Asian jewellery and 'dykey' hair cuts. These women are revelling in the combination of their racial identity, their sexuality and gender, and in their connection with each other as similarly multiple and transgressive. They flock to Pria, giving her inviting looks, caresses and warm

²²This music is specific to, and popular party music in, Indo-caribbean communities.

greetings; finally, Pria has found lesbians with whom she can connect and a space which can support her.

Over the closing scene, Mootoo reads an extract from "Molla Ramayanam," a sixteenth century South Asian poem by the woman writer Atakuri Molla:

Are they lotuses
or the arrows of Cupid?
 Difficult to say
 of her eyes.

Are they sweet chirpings of birds
or of celestial women?
 Difficult to say
 of her words.

Is it the moon
or the looking glass?
 Difficult to say
 of her face.

Are they golden pots
or a pair of *chakravaka* birds?
 Difficult to say
 of her breasts.

Is it a flow of sapphires
or a flock of bees?
 Difficult to say
 of her hair.

Is it a sand dune
or a dais for Love God's wedding?
 Difficult to say
 of her thighs.

People got confused
as they watched
elegant her. (Tharu 98)

The line referring to "celestial women" has particular resonance in the context of *The Wild Woman in the Woods* both because of the deity who leads Pria to the space of Indo-trinidadian lesbian acceptance and because the entire video constructs a fantasy space of lesbian desire. As well, both Mootoo and the poet adopt a similar strategy of effecting lesbian subjectivity through indirect means. They each describe attributes or details which build to an overall sense of the subjectivity involved in their respective representations.

Subjectivities: Multiple and Specific

The subversive power of Mootoo's, Beharry's, Stewart's and Butler's work comes from their foundation in multiple subjectivities. Yet each artist is specific to her identity and to the context of the production and reception of her work. As Mootoo says of her own approach, which applies to all four, they go 'beyond' their 'identity', they escape and challenge the containing mechanism of dominant constructions of 'Otherness', whereby only women have a sex, only people of colour have race, and only queers have 'sexual orientation'.⁴³ At the same time they are politically effective because they produce specific lesbian/feminist subjectivities as the effect of their representations and because they expand the space in which these 'Other' subjectivities can flourish.

Beharry states that she got frustrated with being a "tour guide" stuck on an "island" showing white people around, but she was never able to leave: she was

⁴³ Wittig (1992) discusses this point re: gender in "The Mark of Gender."

continually explaining what she was about, helping white and/or male individuals advance their comprehension, yet never getting to develop herself.⁴⁴ Beharry believes very much that her work should leave room for the dominant to learn and to change since it is futile to heap guilt or to 'trap' the 'norm' in an effort to prove they are wrong. She also believes that she should not spend all her effort on this process at the expense of herself and 'Others' whom she wants to support.

Since making this realization, Beharry has focussed her attention on her own history, as discussed above, and on differences amongst South Asians, specifically in terms of gender and class. Like Stewart's refusal to pose lesbian diversity as squeaky clean and 'intrinsically better' than the 'norm', Beharry looks at working class artistic traditions and the classism that has been excluded from diasporic South Asian discussions, and the mainstream understanding of these identities. She also looks at the politics of gender and the marginalisation of South Asian women's areas of artistic practice.

In *ashes to flowers* performed at SFU, Beharry explained that she made the sari she was wearing by tearing strips from Western-style dresses and sewing them in the *Kantha* style, a quilt-making process in Bihar (a poor region of India). This clothing is both part of her own healing ritual, connecting with her history, and a way to make visible her multiple, "hybrid" identity -- a way to "show support" for others like her and to "show herself" to those who do not yet understand. Beharry claims her

⁴⁴Conversation with Beharry, January 26, 1993.

multiple identity, makes sense for herself out of this conflicted position, and expands from a marginalised aspect of her already marginalised heritage.

Adding to the significance of her sari, for her performance of *ashes to flowers* in Regina, Beharry will work with women in the South Asian community there to produce a *Kantha* style 'skin' for an already-existing life-size public sculpture of an elephant by Russell Yuristy. This sculpture, made of unprotected thick wire, now corroded, is called "Rusty". He was named by the children in a public arts project that helped install this sculpture. Beharry's performance, involving installing the 'skin' that the South Asian women produce, will rename the elephant *Ganesh*, a Hindu deity, to give public visibility to South Asian identity, highlighting working class women's traditions within this culture and within Canada.

Ganesh is the elephant-headed son of the goddess *Parvathi* who made *Ganesh* from her sari. He is significant for Beharry's work both because he is the deity who removes obstacles from one's path and who blesses journey and because he is a playful, round-bellied deity who loves candy - definitely in keeping with "Rusty's" origins in a children's project. Beharry wants to draw attention to *Ganesh* not just because he relates to her work on journeying across geographic regions and across time, but also because he will make a public symbol of the "joy, play and pleasure" of South Asian experience and culture instead of the all too common emphasis on the "fear, pain, loathing and rejection" in discussions of racial and gender politics.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Conversation with Beharry, September 1, 1993.

As well, Beharry will cook chappatis during her performance at Artspeak, then she will burn these during her performance at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, and finally she will take these ashes to Regina for her performance with *Ganesh*. Beharry chose to use the simple, ordinary act of cooking common South Asian food during the Vancouver performance as a way to make visible, to continue, and to connect herself with a basic act performed daily by South Asian women. By making this the central action in her Vancouver performance, she places South Asian women's everyday experience and existence into a gallery space, at the front of the audience's awareness, and as integral to her art work. She will add further significance to the chappatis by cutting the chappatis into the shape of hands thereby turning them into objects for use in ritual. As well, during the cooking, she will discuss issues relating to gender and race that her act of cooking and cutting the chappatis brings up and situate this discussion within current art discourses. She particularly wants to play with the connection between the word 'discourse' and the word 'course' as in 'a three-course meal' (illustration 9). She will also tell the audience about the *Ganesh* who she found living on the street in Regina, Saskatchewan and that she is making the chappati hands as an offering to burn for him (illustration 10).

As I discussed earlier, Shani Mootoo also combines South Asian and Trinidadian imagery with Canadian, Euro-based art practice. Her most recent paintings are a further development of this method. She describes this work in

"Shushila's Bhakti"⁸⁶, a short story about an artist, Shushila, and her thoughts during the process of making her first painting in an experimental style (which is actually Mootoo's own process). Mootoo first wrote this text to describe her work for a Canada Council application. She chose to explain her work in a fictional story, told in the second person, to give herself some distance from the application form and to facilitate giving the background to her work without having to sound like an accused criminal trying to provide an alibi -- so much explanation is required before this work and her subjectivity can be understood by dominant institutions and perceptions.

In these paintings, Mootoo uses burlap from bags of basmati rice as the canvas and uses mendhi (powdered henna), a dye for painting skin during rituals (including decorating a bride for marriage), as the paint which she mixes by hand with painter's linseed oil. The smell and colour of the mendhi, as well as its spiritual use, provides Mootoo with a feeling of connection to her painting that is not possible for her with the accepted western approach. Each piece is a healing, an engagement with memory, a connection with heritage that she only has through her skin or through stories from relatives. However, it is also 'art', and Mootoo wants to combine her process with "actually making a painting that was as valid as any shown by the major cultural institutions of [Canada]." Thus, she adds Poly-fix, alien to the preceding process, but which will prevent the mendhi from cracking. Mootoo paints these works by hand, making "decorative squiggles and patterns and borders over the surface," all the things that dominant critics and viewers label 'exotic' or 'primitive'. She adds South Asian

⁸⁶All quotations concerning these paintings are from this text.

food colouring for other pigment and fills the grooves with these brighter colours.

Mootoo writes about these paintings, describing Shushila's reaction:

It was full of who she was. She could recognize in the painting, in herself, an identity being excavated and for a brief moment, brief but empowering, she was one with her past. Her fingers and hand imprints practically squealed with delight.

Mootoo's paintings cross many boundaries and challenge traditional art in multiple ways. The colours and materials are culturally specific to South Asia, but Mootoo's use of them is certainly neither traditional to India nor to Euro-based practices. These paintings combine art and food, art and spiritual practice, art with non-precious material. They are the result of a culturally and historically specific identity, of physical connection with the painting, and of politically motivated subjectivity and they produce a radically Other subjectivity as the effect.

Mootoo realizes that these works will not easily be read because both an art education and an awareness of the specific racial and gender issues involved are necessary to connect with this art. These paintings are not intended to speak to the 'norm' or to improve their understanding. Much like the untranslated sections of latina/latino dialect which Gloria Anzaldua includes in her writing, Mootoo's pieces are aimed at a specific group who already understands but who needs affirmation and who is starved for imagery. As well, these paintings are a ritual to support Mootoo as an artist. She can easily predict the response from dominant curators or critics and does not need the rejection and trivialisation they are sure to heap on work that is beyond their comprehension. Therefore, Mootoo is not showing the work publicly at

this point and will not until she can devise a strategy that will support these paintings or have a supporting space for their exhibition.

Susan Stewart has developed a strategy that can support her photographs. She does not attempt to encapsulate multiple, broad lesbian subjectivity with each portrait. She and the model focus on a few specific details for the scene they construct and the images Stewart makes of them. The experience of the exhibition as a whole produces a shifting, multiple effect of lesbian subjectivity. As already discussed, viewers make meaning by making connections within and between the portrait series and Stewart does not expect each portrait to stand alone. Stewart is free to use an open definition of 'lesbian' when finding her models. She can, for example, include women who transgress the boundaries of 'lesbian', such as women who are transsexual. The exhibition as a whole provides a context which creates/supports lesbian identity and shifts subjectivity that might be seen/constructed as not-lesbian when read in dominant contexts. As well, Stewart contests the process of labelling by demonstrating the diversity that is lesbian. However, she does not give up on the specifics of lesbian desire because this is the central effect of the exhibition. Her work is a both/and confirmation of the variety of lesbians and a subversion of the process of labelling lesbians that restricts lesbian potential, subjectivity, and self-representation.

A primary strategy that supports this 'both/and' approach is Stewart's use of metonymy to produce lesbian subjectivity as the effect of the work. With both metonymy and metaphor one can shift signifiers towards diverse meanings and away from society's attempt to fix meanings. At the same time, metonymy directs attention

to the process of shifting meanings within language, which can undermine the process of maintaining patriarchal 'norms'.

Stewart's strategy is similar to lesbian author Sarah Schulman's method of character and subjectivity development. In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Schulman describes the relationship between two characters by describing their selection of plums at a fruit stand:

On the way home Lila and Emily stopped for plums.

"I'll buy you a plum," Emily said, as each woman picked out her own. Their plums rested on the counter. Lila's was dark, round with a tone of soft, rich purple. Emily's was tighter, not as ripe, in a shiny reddish skin. When Lila bit into her plum, it split and the inside was warm and sweet as she sucked it out of its bitter shell. It was red, it was golden, it filled every corner of her mouth and oozed its sweetness between her teeth. Then, Emily put her arm around Lila's waist and they walked along. (171)

Schulman's approach produces lesbian desire as the effect of text, rather than through direct description. Dominant myths limit lesbian identity to 'only sex', making it difficult to discuss lesbian sexual interaction without being trapped or appropriated by dominant mechanisms. Yet, on the other hand, it is lesbians' autonomous sexuality that is so dangerous to patriarchal comfort and control. Schulman maintains lesbian sexual power at the same time as she escapes from dominant traps and from the view of lesbians as objects to be studied, explained by the speaking subject. Her lesbian characters live, interact, have complex relations and do not need background explanation.

Similarly, Stewart arranges signs to convey what the model likes, what she does, as a means to imply a complex lesbian subject as the effect of her

representation. She images autonomous, self-defined, sexually-powerful women in her work without trying to 'prove' they are lesbian by including a second woman or including markers (text, signs, actions) that make this clear. Viewers build from the fragments in each portrait to reach larger meaning, and piece together a multiple conception of lesbian subjectivity from the interaction of all of these women. Shani Mootoo applies a similar strategy in *The Wild Woman in the Woods*, in which she cuts to scenes, such as spiritual ceremony, or to images, such as lush tropical fruit, which provide a metonymic construction of the subjectivity of the protagonist and the producer of the video.

Margot Butler also strategically foregrounds metonym to indirectly convey larger meanings concerning women's negotiation of patriarchal power relations in *Their feet fell cleanly on either side, and she, between them?*. Her choice of attention to the coal hole, both in the story and in the mylar images, is obviously about much more than a single piece of family history. It stands for potential public dangers to women but also, in the second image "Hole, Flagstone, Doorstep", suggests escape, entrance, and beginnings as well as threat. Butler specifically addresses public male violence against women, but she does not close the discussion at this point; she leaves the response to the installation open so that women are not trapped as passive viewer or victim but can be empowered to find ways out of this situation.

Similarly, the nineteenth-century dress of the models in Butler's piece suggests much more than just faithful detail to a family story. The setting makes a historical link which places male violence in a larger perspective: it is not new. The dark, heavy

clothing has ominous associations for contemporary viewers, partly from the repetition of Victorian gothic details as signs for horror stories, and this setting also produces associations with fantasy, due to the romantic connotations of the nineteenth-century. Developing from the multiple meanings of these signs, Butler's fictional recreation of a story creates an imaginative space in which women, as active subjects, can consider issues of importance to us, such as our connection with our female ancestors, and our relation to the men in our lives, and ways we can productively consider male violence and patriarchal social relations.

Butler's strategic use of metonym produces feminist subjectivity as the effect of this installation in much the same way as this strategy works for Sarah Schulman or Susan Stewart. The work is not just *about* lesbian/feminist ideas, it is also told/read *from* the perspective of a lesbian/feminist subject. All at once, this strategy can shift dominant ideas, demonstrate the non-fixity of language or signification, and accommodate lesbian/feminist active subjects. Because this strategy includes a diversity of responses, yet is specific to certain lesbian/feminist meanings, there are multiple potential points of connecting or interacting with Stewart's or Butler's work. With *Lovers and Warriors*, viewers can connect more with certain portraits, scenes, and details than others in the exhibition, thereby producing a specific meaning from the combination of points that person features. With Butler's installation, different interpretations of the images and of the signs are possible, but these are located as feminist by her text and by the centrality of the woman in the photographs and the double self-portrait in relation to the installation as a whole.

Butler, Beharry, Stewart, and Mootoo achieve several difficult goals. Their work is politically motivated and directed, and yet it is also pleasurable, warm and supportive for lesbian/feminist viewers. All four of these artists are able to take on many problems and obstacles at one time because they work from the strong foundation of their individual experiences, connecting their identity through interaction with others and with their contexts, and including multiple, shifting conceptions of subjectivity. They develop strategies that allow love and passion to enter dominant language and that allow this subversion to defy dominant containment. I can only hope that my text has enabled the power and importance of their work to be understood within academic art theory and art criticism.

CONCLUSION

And she heaved a sigh of relief, as, indeed, well she might, for the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole fortune of [her] works depends. Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote. (Woolf 253-254)

The above quote seemed most fitting for my conclusion not just because Orlando heaves a sigh of relief, but more because her relief is the turning point which allows her finally to write in the way she had not previously been able to achieve. I could not end this text with closure and summation because this would go against what I have discussed and attempted to do and also because this would not accurately reflect my location at the end of my process of producing this thesis. I do not feel that I have finished something; I feel that I have just begun. I have wandered into a complex field of theories, of goals, of practices, of politics, of identities, of hopes and dreams and plans: I too am in "an extremely happy position."

I said in the Introduction that I wanted this thesis to be a starting point. I hope that this work is both part of the beginning of an ever expanding field which supports lesbian/feminist and Other subjectivity and also of the beginning of the next phase of my career as a writer and curator. I want to follow Orlando's lead and, upon finishing this text, write and write and write some more. I want to take the theories I have

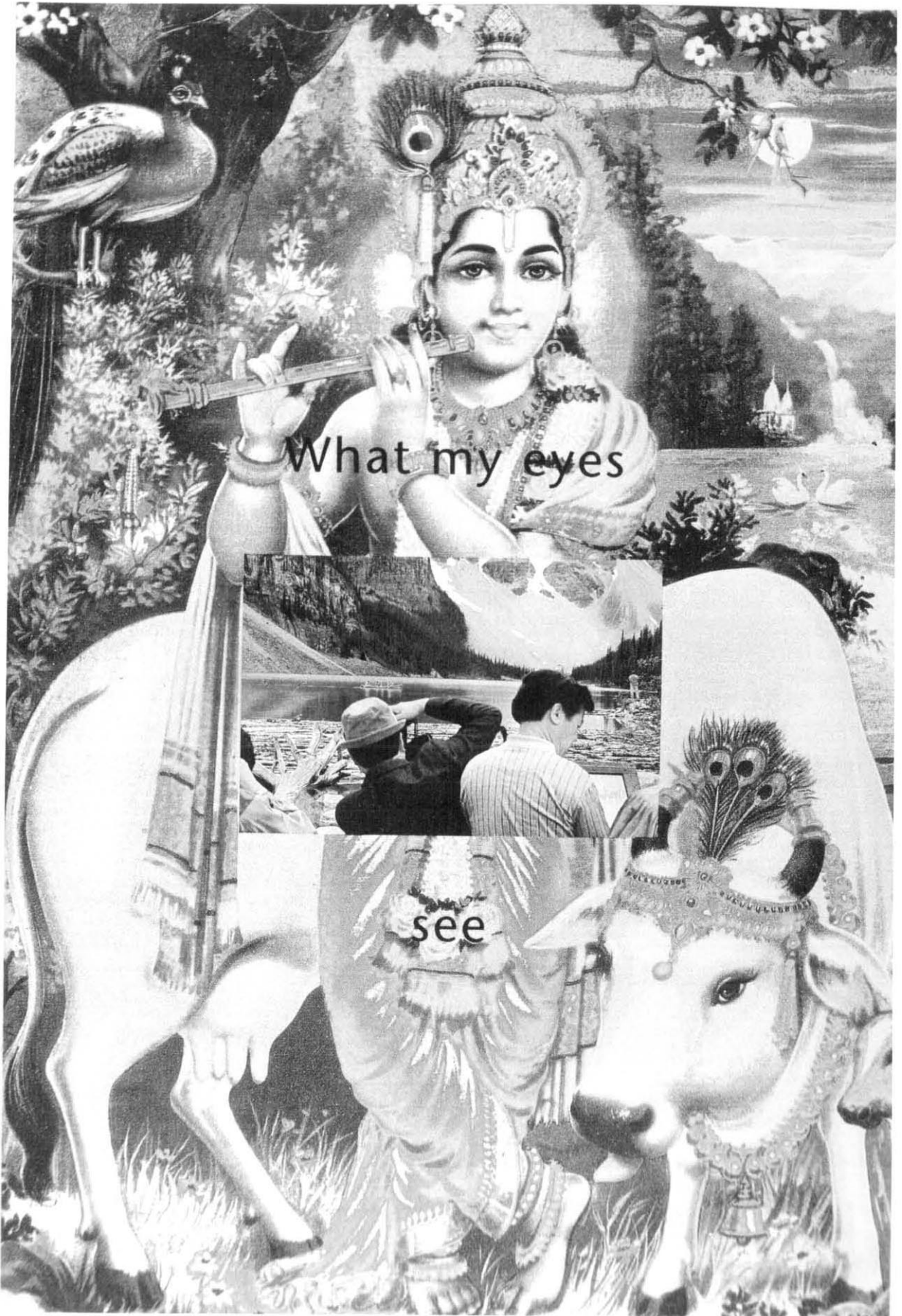
indicated which can support Other art practice and subjectivity, and the strategies I have attempted to develop which can enable this support, and write reviews, context pieces and theoretical articles about, for, and from lesbian/feminist and Other work. I want to develop the creative aspect of my writing both in theoretical work and in the intersection of my poetry with this work and never give up trying to speak of who I love. I hope there are many who will listen and respond.

I am not closed to you
for how would I speak?
My body does not resonate alone.

I dive into you
swim your depth length breadth.
And after we dine, I hold still
against your breasts
while you wait for your wings to dry.

You kissed my lips
and sent new words chasing through my veins
pounding in my ears
flowing freely, clearly, proudly from
these lips.

Illustration 1 Shani Mootoo:
"What my eyes see" (1992)
Collage, text and colour photocopy.



What my eyes

see

**Illustration 2 Shani Mootoo:
"What my eyes see" (1992) - continued
collage, text and colour photocopy**



I dream of



doing

Illustration 3 Margot Butler:

**"Their feet fell cleanly on either side, and she, between them?"
Installation photograph, Prince George Regional Art Gallery,
October 23 - November 20, 1991.**

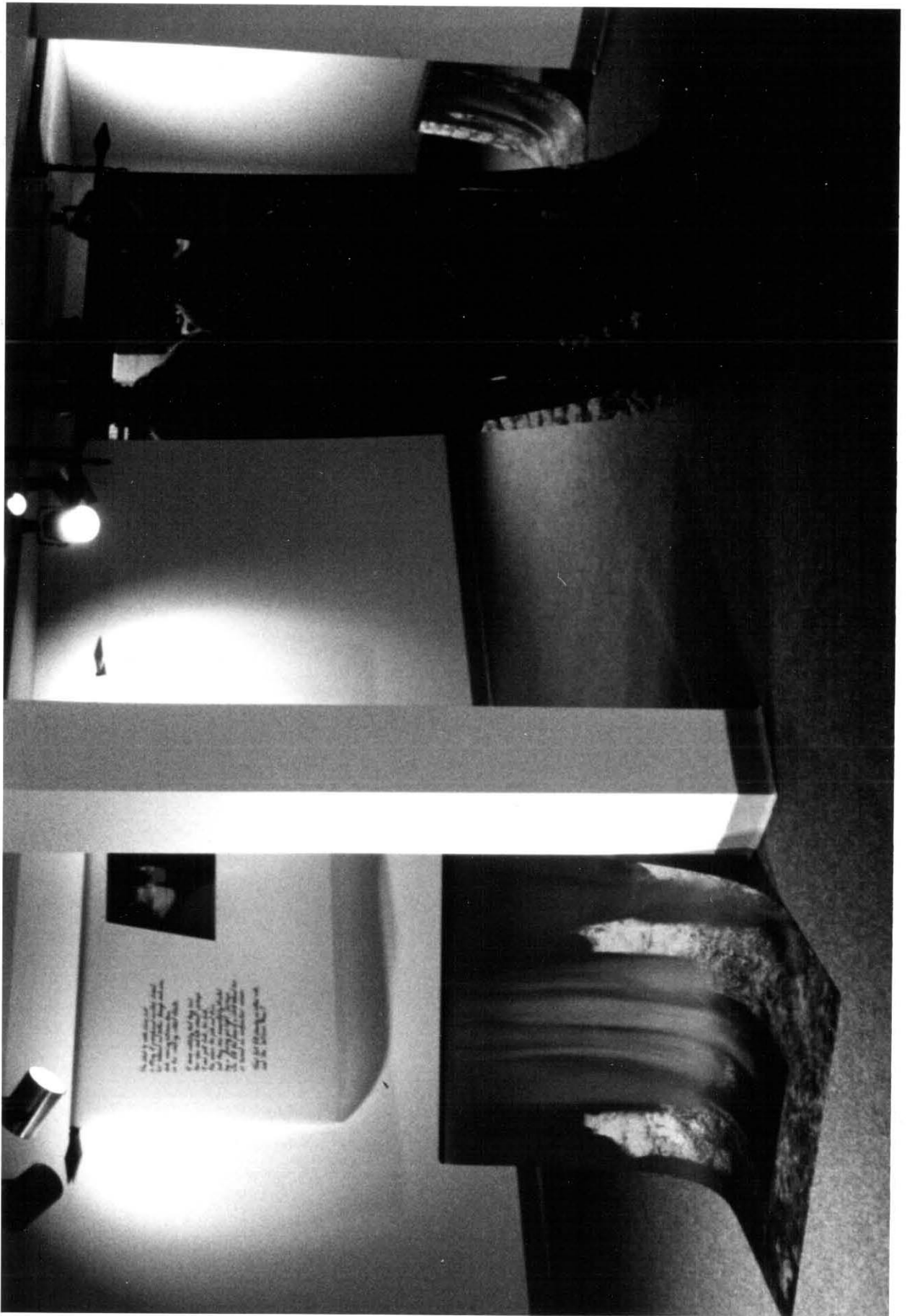


Illustration 4 Margot Butler:

"She liked to walk alone" (1991)

black and white photograph on mylar suspended from a wrought iron two-headed spear, 63" x 96".



Illustration 5 Margot Butler:
detail of "if they are after you" (1991)
colour photograph on mylar, suspended from a wrought iron
two-headed spear, 105" x 36".

I walk
my glee
I keep
which c
and a b
twisting
Cate
somethin
I turn
securing
How lo
following
on either
I couldn
and m



linked
each arm,

to
did
find her
er.
side,

**Illustration 6 Susan Stewart:
"Leatherface" (1991)
black and white photograph.**



Illustration 7 Susan Stewart:
"Beth" (1991)
black and white photograph.



Illustration 8 Susan Stewart
"Shanti" (1993)
black and white photograph.



Illustration 9 Shauna Beharry:
"discourse/dis course/chapattis" (1993)
detail from *ashes to flowers: the breathing*

discourse



dis course



chappatis

One day, while walking in Regina, I stumble upon Ganesa! Ganesa, the elephant headed son of Siva and Parvarti; remover of obstacles and protector of the home, is standing defiantly outside the Dunlop Art Gallery. What is he doing in downtown Regina? My own feelings of cultural displacement seem to pale in comparison, as I look at Ganesa ... and Ganesa looks at me.

Ganesa is made out of steel, and seems to have recovered from his battle with the Raksha by growing a new tusk. Who has brought Ganesa here? I walk over to a nearby signpost. Is it a "Rajiv" perhaps: Or an "Indira"? Someone like me, who fearing the coming winter, has called upon Ganesa to turn back the winds, and swallow up the snow? No. It's Russel Yuristy -- A Hindu artist I have never heard of. And even stranger ... the sign says that Ganesa is known as "Rusty" in these parts.

No matter. Whatever the name, Ganesa is definately here.
Finally I have found a sign of my presence.
I will not disappear.
I am here.

Illustration 10 Shauna Beharry:
excerpt on Regina *Ganesh* from artist statement for
ashes to flowers: the breathing (1992).

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