### HOUSE OF MIRRORS: PERFORMING AUTOBIOGRAPH(ICALL)Y IN LANGUAGE/EDUCATION

by

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### A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

### THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

**Department of Language Education** 

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

#### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

May 28, 1999

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Date June 9/99

#### Abstract

This dissertation, a textual House of Mirrors, examines autobiography in/as re-search through performance and reflection. Utilizing the leitmotif of the mirror, I invite readers through entranceways, passages and spaces that optically reflect and refract the writer, the reader, the text. My autobiographical writing herein is an artistic performance, simultaneously enacted as Ι speculate (about) autobiograph(icall)y. This autobiographical performance is presented through poetry, personal essays and stories, theoropoetic ruminations on the literature and theory and journal entries that record the journey.

this dissertation, I In ask: How consider can we autobiography in/as re-search? How does women's writing contribute to autobiography in/as re-search? Mirroring these consider the themes of writing, mothering, questions, I teaching, by examining my self/selves as writer, m(other), teacher, scholar, Jew, in the context of many textual and living others. However, this work is more than a self-examination. This House of Mirrors is peopled with many women's lives and words, a deliberate gesture to bring others to my life and work: Doris Lessing, Hannah Arendt, Jill Ker Conway.... I also explore some of the vast and rich theoretical writing on autobiography, such the work of Leigh Gilmore and as Janet Varner Gunn, intertextually interspersing this theory among the mirrors of my

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own and other women's autobiographical writing, so that the text works reflexively and disruptively in the manner of André Gide's mise-en-abyme, the mirror-within-a-mirror-within-a-mirror. In an effort to apply the re-search to schools, I demonstrate how some specific strategies for autobiography in education might be employed in the classroom. This interdisciplinary approach draws upon the zones of feminist thought, post-structuralism, literary criticism, language education and the hermeneutics of interpretive inquiry.

Autobiographical writing as a re-search method assists us in making sense of experience and memory, life and text, self and others. Writing and thinking of our place in the world is a necessary and vital process, part of living in, and in Hannah Arendt's terms, loving, the world.

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It has been an incredible journey of discovery and rediscovery, this transformation to the life of the mind, this rebirth of the writing life. I am deeply grateful to many inspirational scholars/writers:

Dr. Carl Leggo, superior supervisor, loyal mentor, fellow poet and writer, constant friend, who first named me poet and writer six years ago when I did not yet have the confidence to do so myself, and who has been generously supporting me in poetic ways ever since...

Professor George McWhirter, splendid poet and writer, wise respondent, reflective thinker, who agreed to work with me as a poet when I entered his office four years ago, some poems in my briefcase...

Dr. Valerie Raoul, discerning feminist and astute editor, brilliant scholar on autobiography, French women and much else, who so unstintingly provided energy and excellence...

I am also appreciative of the fine mentorship and friendship of Dr. Patrick Verriour and Dr. Wendy Sutton, our association dating back over twenty years. Thank you, too, to Dr. Ted Aoki, luminous wise man and poet of the soul, for his words of encouragement and teaching.

It would have been impossible to accomplish much of anything without the love, support, nurturance (and spaghetti) of my husband, Don. To my three beautiful daughters, Sara, Rebecca and Erin, for whom I am also writing: thank you for the joy and learning and love that you bring to me. Whenever I look in mirrors, I see the five of us reflected there.

Thank you, too, to my parents, Shirley and Joe Silver, my siblings and my in-laws, who have been there for me throughout this process.

I am also indebted to:

Dr. Erika Hasebe-Ludt, faithful friend, not only for our exploration together of Hannah Arendt, but for the many books, articles, talks, conferences, meals, "between friends..." Dr. Lynn Fels and Dr. Wanda Hurren, fellow PhD friends, who have been sharing this journey...Friends Jacqui Wittman and Donna Chan, who always listen, advise, laugh, love...Homeopath/friend Marlow Purves who dispenses wisdom and remedies...The many students I have taught and learned from over the years...

And because I promised my daughters I would--thank you, Tux, perfect poodle, for warming my bare toes as I sat and wrote, and joining me each day in the computer room.

I gratefully acknowledge the support of this work by The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in the form of a Doctoral Fellowship.

#### FOREWORD

Some of the poems (and excerpts from poems) in this dissertation were published or accepted in the following journals or anthologies:

Amethyst Review Canadian Woman Studies Child (anthology) Educational Insights English Quarterly Freefall Green's Magazine Language and Literacy Journal Prairie Fire Prairie Journal Room of One's Own Sandburg-Livesay Anthology Whetstone

The first three "Reflections on Ethics in Autobiography" are in press, Room of One's Own.

"Genesis" appeared in Canadian Woman Studies.

"Surviving Treason: Writing the Layers of Our Lives" appeared in Room of One's Own.

Permission was given to include an e-mail from Erika Hasebe-Ludt.

Permission was given to include a book report and excerpts from her autobiography by Sara Norman.

Permission was given from Shelley Fralic, Deputy Managing Editor of *The Vancouver Sun* to include the photographs, newspaper article and letter.

Three "Martha" poems won first prize in Whetstone's Poetry Contest.

"Segments" won second prize in the Southwest Regional Poetry Contest.

"Surviving Treason: Writing the Layers of Our Lives" won third prize in Room of One's Own Literary Contest.

"Between the Lines" received honourable mention in the Cecilia Lamont Poetry Contest.

"In Benign Remembrance" is a finalist in the Sandburg-Livesay Anthology Competition.

### DEDICATION

### For my daughters and my mother

mother to daughter daughter to mother mother to daughter

your touch there your print left on the creak suck click tsk sound of seconds smoothed between us

# GENESIS

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#### SURVIVING TREASON: WRITING THE LAYERS OF OUR LIVES (a personal essay)

December

I went to the Calvins' house. A woman had just got killed by her husband. He had just stabbed her. I arrested him. Case closed.

So begins my latest journal, the words written by one of my daughters. (Where does she get her ideas?) This journal is partly filled already with one daughter's pencilled words and another daughter's small horses and unicorns, a gift to me on my birthday. Months ago I gave each of my daughters a journal and now this one has been returned to me, an act of reciprocal love.

I write between their lines. I write on top of small scrawls and drawings, not to erase them, but so our writing is fused. This palimpsest contains the layers of our lives.

All I can hear as I write is the hum of the fridge. The dog lies nearby, curled into a black ball. Not even his dark eyes show, surrounded as they are by black fur, curly night shadows. My new calligraphy pen leaks splotches of black ink onto my fingers as I write, conspiring to stain me as I stain the page. I go through calligraphy pens like my children go through school knapsacks. Well-used, they only last so long. I break momentarily to peel an orange, and several sections turn black from the inkstains, but I eat those segments anyway. The ink is inside me...

"Writers are always selling somebody out," Joan Didion wrote in an essay (cited in Stamberg 1984, 25). Explaining this much-quoted statement in an interview, Didion revealed that she meant "it is impossible to describe anybody--a friend or somebody you know very well--and please them, because your image of them, no matter how flattering, never corresponds with their self-image" (26). Whoever (or whatever) we write about, we never write alone. Partners, lovers, friends, parents, children, hamsters peer over our shoulders, ready to check for accuracy and who-knows-what-else. And intermingled with all these others in our lives are our many changing selves. The self who was, the self who is, the self who writes, French critic Roland Barthes distinguishes. Is this self who writes a ruthless opportunist, as Didion's statement at first seems to suggest? Or is she more like a telescope, focusing on people and details with the lens of her pen, always aware that with just one small turn of the telescope, the frame changes? Always aware that the lens may be out-of-focus, dusty or absolutely clear and sharp, and that each of these views presents a picture...

One gusty evening, my children and I returned home from the mall, our eyes glassy from the glitter of red and green displays and fake feathered snow. The wind whipped around the house, circled us with violent ghostly noises that sent the children wide-eyed to the TV screen of window, drawn there by the pull of violence and outdoor abuse...

the next day when we walked in the forest two thick evergreen trunks barred our way the wood had snapped off in a jagged pattern celery strands which curl down the stalk one line leading to another another then what's left

we climbed over the obstruction mud from the fallen trunks streaks of brown angry tears on the legs of our pants drying like flakes we brush off without even thinking

small branches thick with pine needles littered the leaf mulch of undergrowth thin trees bent across the forest flora we held our heads down as if the wind an elastic slingshot would snap us in the face any time

high in an upright tree which reached to pierce the sky branches twitched in the aftermath of storm one small nest clung to the highest fork in the hands of this hearty survivor even the wind could not shake off this clump the nest a single decoration

There. A sigh. A sense of satisfaction. A poem: composed of the windstorm in me and a December night; my daughter's child-eyed story of violence and abuse; and a walk in the woods when we saw the bird's nest which survived the storm, a clump of domestic solidarity. The lure of violence exists in TV and in nature. But nature presents small, important acts of survival. What awe, horror, surprise we felt at the wind's destruction and cruelty; what relief about the elements of nature which survive no matter what. A metaphor for the family unit, how we are whipped by wind forces in culture, but cling together in our

mud-glue-twigs nest, perched on the highest tree...

I like what Annie Dillard writes in "To Fashion a Text" (1987). First of all, when we write, we decide what to put in and what to leave out. I suppose I might add: what to change. (As an example, I changed the month at the beginning of this essay where my daughter's words appear, because it makes more sense in the rest of the context. It is less complicated to change the date than explain the discrepancies.)

I like how Dillard muses about the writing life: that writing changes what we have already lived because we spend more time writing about the moment(s) sometimes than living them. After a while it is the writing part of the memory/event that takes precedence and looms large in our consciousness.

Add a word here, delete a word there. Mix and check the resultant recipe. Too much bitterness and failure? Simply soften with synonym. Redeem with a pinch of humour and selfdeprecation. Read better now? More acceptable? More truthful? Write a more tolerant spouse closer to the truth we want to be. (Don't write the harsh word shouted in the heat of a fullblown argument and taint that truth with madness and paranoia, with midlife crisis and change, with fear of growing older and avoidance of intimacy.)

Don't restore what was deleted by the press of a keyboard that acknowledges human frailtv button. а button and imperfection. Life is a palimpsest of events, each written over by the next day that we rise again from our beds with some kernel of hope that this day will be better, no matter what; life is good and could be so much worse. Forget the harsh words, the fear and vulnerability. In spite of everything, the new layer that covers all that is underneath is the layer that matters most. In the end there is only that. How could we expect of one another anything more? This layer the years of night shift and uncertainty. This layer the miscarried babies. This layer the years of sleepless nights and open doors and small sleeper-clad bodies between us. This layer the hair that greys and the trips to chiropractors and homeopaths. This layer the years that sped by like the pages in a flip book...

I wrote a piece called "A Woman Writer's Diary" which chronicles my coming into writing later in my life. It is a postmodern diary which weaves in and out of time, in and out of my life with my husband and children, in and out of my growth as a writer. It begins:

I write my first poem...and it is all about my silent voices, my hoarse voices, my lost voices...my unspoken, unshapen, unbidden, underneath my tongue voices...

It ends: "I am a writer. I am a writer." Repeating the sentence as if to truly convince myself.

This diary has undergone several revisions, revisions which transformed my husband from a stiff, unaccepting person to a

mildly bewildered but constantly adjusting spectator. The truth of this slips back and forth like the runner on a slide rule, attempting to find accuracy, I suspect. During each revision I found myself terribly aware of how he would appear to others, how my reaction to his responses would seem to come across. A patronizing pat on the knee became an endearing show of support. I added a comment I remembered about how he thought I was in my power mode. Suddenly the diary shifted slightly to the right. I was not unhappy with this new slope, but I wondered if it was I, not my husband, who was really shifting here. I wondered if he was just a sort of chess piece I was moving around until I found the right combination of moves.

When I read the diary now, I am satisfied with the alterations. But nowhere do the words on paper reveal the many stages that diary (and my husband as written) went through. That is another text that lives underneath the words, between the lines, like my daughters' entries in my journal. Which readers will be able to read beyond what there is written now? Who but I will know which cruel remark became a mild rebuke? And who knows what is closest to the truth? Perhaps the cruelty was of my own making, borne out of mis(sed)interpretation. Distortion is another version of the truth...

I throw all the printed revisions and transformations of my computer-entered writing into a box. I find I must print what I have written on paper copy. I cannot seem to get a sense of what I have written on the bright screen, no matter how many times I scroll up and down, as if this night sky of star-words blinds me.

My daughters use the box of recycled words for their drawings, stories and projects. A poem might wrap a bone for the dog's Chanukah present, or a herd of unicorns might prance around four corners of a page whose reverse side contains the beginning of an article on homeopathic medicine.

On the back of the final copies of my poems I record where I have sent them. The scribbles on the back tell a story of faith and hope, commitment and obsession, another story entirely than that which the poems might tell, like the reverse side of my recycled revisions upon which my children create. More layers.

One poem travelled back and forth across Canada fourteen times until it found a home in a journal in Thunder Bay, Ontario. I do not know how I kept faith in that poem, why I kept sending it away again when I kept receiving it back. The poem, prophetically enough, is called "Passage." It is my passage to a place where I grow more confident about what I write, a passage from silence into song, introspection into communication, poetry into praxis...

At a conference in Montreal, I attended a presentation by a group of women writers. One of the poets who read her work mentioned that her Greek husband threatened to sue her if she

ever wrote about him. Later I spoke with her in the hall where she told me she was trying to write a sonnet about her husband, but she was blocked. It did not escape my notice that she still wanted to write about her husband. Try a prose poem, I advised.

(My prose poem had long run-on sentences, was a humorous but sharp-edged account of my twenty-year marriage living with my husband and our three children, was published in the newspaper. I sold out for \$150. My prose poem rocked my marriage. The prose poem as betrayal...)

In my journal I once wrote that I believe writing is the single most radical and threatening feminist act of all. To construct on paper everything I have been thinking, to allow first thought to flow from my pen in a stream of joy, pain, bitterness, elation, humour, despondency. Words break through the wall of silence, the years of female silence: growing up female, growing up quiet if you are good and tidy and obedient and don't speak out if you don't throw rocks at the wall of silence o baby in pink o little girl reflected in her patent leather shoes o young woman who nods, agrees o woman in the kitchen, in the laundry room, in the bathroom head stuck in the toilet bowl bowl! ten pins down and a strike ten poems, ten articles, ten manuscripts strike! strike! strike!

Here! The *chai* necklace, my present to him before we were married, angrily tossed back into my hands, hands now stained with ink. Something I said at brunch a year ago with a cousin who was getting married. Who remembers? Not me, who can describe the house I lived in when I was 4 in perfect colorized detail. He remembers, he who does not always lock the door at night and shops with a grocery list and still forgets the soy sauce. *Chai*-life. Life restored to me. In an agony of irony, I wrote about the returned necklace in the same journal that was returned by my children, necklaces and journals chained together with links of various kinds of love.

I put the necklace on at Christmas and wore it, feeling like some part of me had been given back. A gift. He didn't say a word. He didn't even notice. Who remembers?

(The prose poem was a litany of all the remembered moments of I forget, I didn't know how, I don't want to take responsibility. A list. I write lists.)

You use lists a lot, a man in my writing group commented in the margin of my autobiographical piece. I tried a new form in a poem and I could tell the professor with whom I was working (a generous man) didn't like it. It's a list, he said. Stop there. (He then cut out three-quarters of the poem.) I write lists. I

am a list. Stop there. me 3 daughters a black poodle 6 motorcycles 2 cars & oh, yes 1 husband who still whistles when he comes home at night 2 Jewish parents who live in Calgary my mother's eyes don't tear properly & my father's knee is shot 2 Christian in-laws who live on the Sunshine Coast she smokes incessantly like a candle with a Duracel battery on her deck in the rain he slaps me on the shoulder whenever he greets me wants me to edit his book a racist tract originally titled "Blue Eyes" "Someday," he said at Christmas one year "the way things are going a Black or a Jew will be prime minister" women didn't count on his list someday I am going to slap him back

how can you cry if your eyes don't tear?

(The French have two verbs for betray. One verb, *tromper*, is a lesser kind of treachery, and means to deceive or mislead. The other verb, *trahir*, translates as treason of the strongest, hardest type. My prose poem ends redeemingly, acknowledging our foibles as part of a deeper love that grows despite the many wrangles between us. There must be a third verb somewhere for betrayal.)

My friend Jacqui wrote a clever poem about a cup, in the shape of a cup. The poem relates to an incident in a writing class we took together. A man in the class became irritated with Jacqui and peevishly left his cup for her to wash up after class. The poem was published in a chapbook produced by *The Vancouver Sun* newspaper. Uncomfortable with a public voice, Jacqui submitted the poem under her maiden name. (A cup is a public document.) She described placing her manuscript in the night slot at the *Sun* building. "I felt as if I were naked, standing there and sending parts of my life up for scrutiny. I felt foolish." When the poem was published, I bet her 25 cents that her husband would think the poem was about him. She has not yet paid me the quarter she owes me. She has not yet submitted any other poems anywhere...

(My prose poem created controversy. My husband, adjusting to living with a poet and writer, increasingly resented what I was trying to say as various people responded to the poem. He requested a copy of the poem which he took to work in order to solicit his colleagues' reactions. One woman asked if the house was in my name. A younger, unmarried man pronounced: She loves you. My mother read the poem and asked: Were you mad at him when you wrote this? I read the poem in a writing class and the women laughed; the men looked stunned. My sister told me she cried when she read it; it was so authentic. Jacqui said her husband was incensed by the poem; she felt he was consumed by guilt because he had done everything I had written about. I read the poem at a conference and a colleague called it brutal. At a family gathering of my husband's relatives, my husband's sister commented, "Women like this poem, but I don't think men do." Her husband remarked, "Sounds like Don to me," and laughed. A cousin (whose feminist first wife left him, taking all the contents of the house with her) refused to look at me or speak to me throughout the evening.)

Betrayal compounds, one poem upon another. This creates layers of poems. Once begun, they are impossible to stop, these poems spilling from my pen, climbing over the wall of silence, telescoping betrayal. In the end there is also that...

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2 pink leather chairs are framed against candy pink walls soothe the restless spirit provide a topic for conversation

the psychiatrist's expensive running shoes look worn a comfortable sweater tops casual pants in an American accent he checks out what they expect him to do

a Man in the pink chair swivels slightly

a Woman swivels in her matching chair until the soft rich leather hits the wall with a scrunch then slowly backtracks the other way

ground rules set the Man begins to talk the Woman listens to his nervous laugh notices his reddened cheeks embarrassed that he treats every question as a confrontation every comment as a misunderstanding

it is the Woman's turn to talk she doesn't know how to begin then once begun doesn't know how to stop the Man is embarrassed by details she reveals encouraged by the hopeful remnants in remarks

the chairs are stationary quite still other objects in the room are moving the chairs like tongues frozen against a pastel wall in this tableau the blistering burden of thought melts pink off the walls a sweet paint whose rosy poison unleashes a torrent

from the waiting room another Man and Woman approach the chairs momentarily they are empty the pink swivelling

#### December again

These are my words. I am at my house. A woman has not been killed by her husband, and writes on. He introduces her to psychiatrists and restaurateurs as a poet. Another small, important act of survival. Case closed. In the previous autobiographical essay, I examined the writing life as poet, mother, wife, "where truth is inevitably a form of distortion" (Putnam 1996, 4). Throughout this dissertation, I examine my self/selves as writer, m(other), teacher, scholar, Jew, in the context of many living and textual others. Such writing and analysis with all its attendant complexities constitute autobiography in/as re-search. The writing is an artistic performance, enacted as I simultaneously explore and interrogate autobiography in/as re-search. My autobiographical performance is presented through poetry, personal essays and memoirs, stories that arise out of my life experiences and subject positions, theoro-poetic ruminations on the literature and theory and journal entries that record the journey, my reflections and emotions.

The previous essay, also described as "an act of selfdisclosure" (Putnam 1996, 4), demonstrates how the process of autobiographical writing can work experientially towards selfknowledge, even with/in the twists and turns of distortion. Autobiographical writing in education is considered a process for gaining knowledge, but like this essay, it is also a product which can be interrogated in terms of identity and representation. Therefore, in this dissertation Ι also investigate selected autobiographical writing by women: Doris Lessing, Hannah Arendt (her letters to Mary McCarthy), Jill Ker Conway, Erica Jong and others. I concentrate on women's autobiographical writing including my own, although I certainly

read work by men [for example, George McWhirter's essay on the life of the poet Federico Garcia Lorca (1998); Timothy Findley's book of autobiographical reflections: <u>Inside Memory</u> (1990)]. The offerings on autobiography studies are voluminous, so I have explored some parts of the rich and vast theoretical writings in order to get a sense of where autobiography has been. To a larger extent, I have engaged with feminist writing on autobiography in order to focus on the pedagogical possibilities of writing by and about women.

In an article (1997a), I emphasized that reading women's autobiographical writing can be deeply satisfying, a way of spending time with women whose lives are reflected through their eyes and the filter of our own, as we enter into Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact."\* I added that as we and our students are drawn to these other women and magnetized by their stories, we may be compelled to write our own.

The dissertation, then, interweaves the strands of my own writing, other women's autobiographical writing, and autobiographical, feminist and pedagogical theory in intertextual ways. In some sense the dissertation could be seen as a *bricolage*, that is, incorporating material in a new work and

\*Leigh Gilmore critiques the term "autobiographical pact" because the pact between author and reader makes invisible the differences between the writing self and the written self (1994a, 76), because it over-privileges the reader, but Lejeune's more recent work (1989) re-works the dimensions of the term.

transforming it. In an interdisciplinary approach, I draw upon the zones of feminist thought, post-structuralism, literary criticism, language education and the hermeneutics of interpretive inquiry, especially as it is practised by pedagogues such as Ted Aoki (1994) and David Jardine (1992), a narrative and poetic rendering which is written and writes itself with/in the topic.

My interest in autobiography originates with finding my own voice(s) as a writer, as a woman, emerging from a long (and according to feminist writings, common-to-women) silence.

The following poem included in my MA thesis (1995a), the first poem I wrote following my long silence, recalls the deep feelings of having finally found my voice(s) and wondering who will sing them back to me, who will listen (1993, 5).

#### A Lullaby of Voices

Who will listen to My voices Hoarse as they are Some a mere whisper Silenced as they are Beneath the layers of Wife, mother, teacher, student, woman, me

I would shout my words to the ocean If it listened If it didn't take the words and rake them over barnacles Washing them away like grains of sand Lost Are my voices already lost? Drowned out by the cries of small children Joyous but unrelenting The words spinning round and round inside my head Waiting to be Released Given sanction Unburdened by the constraints of time Time the drifter Time the excuser Sad the words lav unspoken, unshapen, unbidden, underneath my tonque

I would sing those words to the ocean if it sang them back to me

Who will sing back my words? A lullaby of voices Humming in my head Rocking me to speak.

Another poem included in the thesis speaks to the writing that goes on in women's heads, in women's dreams, and ultimately, breaks through to words on paper, but not without some price (1993, 7).

Stories Not to Live By

I write in my sleep I write in my dreams

I have a whole other life that exists underneath the surface of my days A life that gets written mostly in my head while I wash the mustard off a spoon

I am like the woman in a children's novel who my daughter says doesn't exist in the story but just comes in as a detail

I am a detail existing in my own story only through these details

Do you understand that I do not love any of you less for that? Just that all our details crowd my dreams (I am ambiguous woman not a shrill and strident just-a-woman's voice)

But when I tell my story when I try to write that otherworldly life do you understand my love is not diminished but strong Growing Dormant while the details disappear and like a sleepwalker not asleep but neither fully awake I travel through this world for a while coming in not as a detail but the story

It is you who make me strong who give me the story I would not trade our details for any dreams

I just want to write the story awake

It is not co-incidental that I returned to graduate school after the youngest of my three children was in her second year, when I finally summoned the energy and desire to get out of the house more, having returned once again to part-time teaching limited amount of parenthood following a leave. In the Department of Language Education I began my studies, with issues of mothering and writing at the heart of much of my work. In Creative this subsequently the department and Writing Department, I also found generous encouragement for a writing life as well as a life of the mind. It is through writing that I discovered much more of my life. As Michel Butor has commented: "If I write, if I do all this work, it's because I discover something new in writing. It's because this work lets me understand what I didn't understand, to imagine what I couldn't imagine" (1969, 69).

My magistral work involved a collection of creative writing that autobiographically traced a story about "coming to writing" and transforming through writing. It was framed as a phenomenological revisitation of lived experience with a poststructural consideration of the possible meanings within experience as it is written and re-written. The pedagogical implications of the work were situated within the empowering teaching strategies which encouraged the writing and serve as a

model for teaching practice.

My doctoral work has grown out of this autobiographical beginning, and looking back, I am aware of how the "coming to writing"--an autobiographical act--was the pull, the hook, the continuing compulsion, to work in autobiography autobiographically. Six years from when I first began to write, some of the same issues and themes of writing and mothering, mothering and writing, emerge, although in different forms, and I re-visit these themes in the context of this dissertation. The following more recent introspective and retrospective piece, "Genesis" (1998a), illustrates my passage to becoming both mother and writer.

#### GENESIS

When the first of my three children was born, I died. Then, in the hazy moments following her journey out of the birth canal, I was birthed and born again. I am reborn each time a child of mine looks up from the parking lot at school and smiles at the sight of me. I am altered when one of my children shrieks from the back seat of the car at the sight of a rainbow in the overcast sky above the highway and between the mountains. I notice a daughter across the gravel field of the playground, her head bent so she can whisper secrets with a friend--this daughter seeds me and I sprout and grow wings and fly and I am transformed. The gentle but persistent tap-tap-tap on my shoulder, woodpecker daughter muttering something meant only for my ears, fills me with the rhythm of breath and life, opens up pores I thought were closed, fills me with holes that the air can whistle through. Tap-tap-tap and the whistling rustles my insides, right past my skin to my bones, to my blood...

The Renee who died was different. Lonelier of course. Certainly more self-serving. Independent. Not so afraid to take physical risks. Not so tortured by love and the thought of death or danger. I miss that Renee sometimes, I would be lying if I didn't confess that.

My first daughter pushed her way out of my womb quickly, forcefully, two weeks early, bruising me. Later I stood in front of the mirror and looked at my body, which I have never liked, even before pregnancy and childbirth. The great ball of baby was out, but oh, god, what about all this slack flesh hanging loose, like an old sweater pulled out of shape that will never again be knit tight. If I died and was regenerated by giving birth, if the metamorphized Renee would never be the same (and I am thankful every day for the differences while I simultaneously miss the former Renee on occasion), then did it have to be in this shape, in this form?

The mirror lied. It showed me empty sacs of skin that no longer had anything in them to provide continued tension and elasticity. But I was not empty. I was full--of milk, of tension, elastic with worry, pulled between the Renee-that-was and the Renee-about-to-be.

I spent only two days in the hospital. I couldn't stand any more. Nurses swooped in with my baby because it was their break, because I'd finally fallen asleep, because I was in the shower or groaning on the toilet. How did one take care of this beautiful crying creature and oneself, too? How did one find time to brush teeth? drink a cup of tea? read a paragraph? listen to the silence (a luxury of the past)? And where was my husband? He visited each of the two days, then went home to read a magazine or watch TV, skin intact, proud, happy, only halfthere, and able to leave everything to me, leave by simply walking out the door through which the nurses swooped.

Every woman considers her own mother when she gives birth.

I was no exception. Think back through your mother, advised Virginia Woolf. About to be launched into the real world and out of the sterile confines of the hospital environment, I not only thought back to my mother, but longed for her wisdom and attention. Although she lived miles away in Calgary, she had always planned to fly out to help during the first hectic weeks of life with a newborn. This was complicated by the fact that my sister Estelle was also expecting her firstborn two weeks before my due date. We agreed that our mother would initially support Estelle and then move to my household.

So much for the well-laid plans of mothers and babies. Estelle and I gave birth within hours of one another. Estelle walked into the birthing room where I was being stitched back together, trailing an IV, breathing in between her own contractions, to celebrate the birth of her niece. Later, lying with ice between my legs, I phoned the nurses' station from my bed, post-partum, to check on the outcome of the Caesarian section performed to save my nephew.

It took my mother most of the five days she spent with us to recollect the folding and pinning of a diaper. She debated the best position for baby's sleep pattern. She anguished over the interpretation of the various melodious cries of an infant. I have one other sharp memory of that time: my husband attempting to change the squalling babe while my mother and I lay, exhausted, in a nearby bed. He stood at the changing table for a few minutes, beginning his clumsy ministrations, then went absolutely still, like a dog who senses an earthquake. Then he ducked. The baby's maize-colored feces spewed across to the bed and landed on the two of us. Punishment for resting.

"I can't be in two places at once," Mom proclaimed on her way to Estelle's home. "And your sister needs me, she has to recover from the surgery, too."

I missed her. Five days were not enough. My husband, proficient at ducking, worked on draining the fat from the roasted potatoes when the baby was screaming and I desperately needed a break. We couldn't hear each other over the continual screaming. Because he had to work the next day (as if I didn't, as if none of this was work), and I was the only one who could breastfeed the baby anyway, I got the least sleep. Although we did take turns in an upstairs bed whenever we could manage to escape.

Sleep-deprived, the reborn Renee was dazed, irritable, nervous. But happy. Yes, amazingly happy and content. University-educated, she could not seem to change a crib sheet with the bumper pad in place. She could not figure out how to line a Playtex bottle with the small plastic bag provided in the box. She did not realize for the longest time that the baby might never sleep unless she was placed in the crib (a wide-eyed survivor of numerous rockings, nursings, singings.)

Still sleep-deprived, less nervous but more content, and skilful with sheets and liners, I stood in a specialist's office two more babies (and the same husband) later. Pressed grey pants, shirt and tie, polished loafers stood before us. A trim Yuppie haircut just touched a starched white collar. He barely looked up at me in my thrown-together, only-pair-of-pants-thatstill-fit, mother of three-daughters-under-six look. He didn't meet my eyes. He seemed slightly bored, looking through me as if I were some kind of window to a more interesting world. Ho hum, another mother, another less than perfect baby, another dollar. I responded to the lack of warmth by hugging my daughter tight, and she squirmed and cried out. Confirmation we were not invisible.

"Which foot is the problem one?" he finally asked, cutting off my edgy mother babble: the family doctor said, inherited foot problems on the father's side, blah, blah, blah. Not until later did I wonder why he directed that question to me, instead of simply taking both of her little feet in his own hands. He was, after all, the foot expert.

At the time I looked at my daughter's feet, wildly kicking up stray dust motes that had escaped sterilization and thought hard. Is it her right or left foot? Must be left. But I'm facing her feet, so left is really right. Maybe the crooked foot is the right one. I tried to recall images of her lying on the changing table as I pinned her diaper, both feet flailing wildly. Which one flew crooked? (Where was that crooked little footsie? Here, foot, here, where arrrre you?)

I couldn't think. Mother of three, reborn or not, I could not seem to remember which of my lovely infant's feet was crooked. The specialist finally looked at me, attention riveted: the curtain drawn on that window to another world. Disdain and disgust replaced his earlier boredom and disinterest.

That was my first strong realization that mothers are treated differently, and not always well, in the world. Almost as well-educated as that specialist, I felt stupid and incompetent beneath his withering gaze. Hell, often I was stupid and incompetent at mothering. But I loved that crooked foot almost as much as I loved the straight one. Certainly enough to be forgiven for having trouble finding it. And of course, I was the one who had to strap that crooked foot (when I'd finally located it) into the stiff white shoe that looked for all the world like it was on the wrong foot, adding little to my diminutive credibility as a mother.

When I began writing, it was as a mother, and I became what Ursula Le Guin calls an "artist-housewife" (1989, 224)--what I prefer to call a mother-writer. This hardly increased my credibility quota, because I am to this day stuck on writing about mothering as I mother while I write. You might think I had nothing else to write about, no life outside of mother-writing. Not true. It's just that being a mother dominates me to the extent that it <u>is</u> life. Regardless of the artist part of me who composes at the kitchen table between unpacking the school lunchkits and preparing dinner for five, regardless of the imaginary characters who inhabit my inventions, the mother life looms largest and is writ in the writing.

I often feel that I gave birth to a fourth daughter, the writing life: my mid-life baby. I came so late to writing, and came only after becoming a mother. I have wondered, sometimes, if this literary birth was the culmination of the world's longest pregnancy. But no, many other writers began to write later in life after their babies were born or raised: Ursula Le Guin's mother and Helen Weinzweig, to name only two.

That is one other reason why I feel reborn, renée. Not only did I die and leave behind that other Renee when I became a mother, I left behind a life of silence. I gave birth to the voices that I had always curbed and concealed, to the words that lay trapped in me and that couldn't get out. Words growing louder, stronger, bigger, kicking against my enlarging abdomen, beating with a rhythm like the tap-tap-tap of a daughter's finger on my back or shoulder. Voices rustling my insides, right past my skin to my bones, to my blood...

Though re-born as mother-writer, a role which consumes much of my time, I am also teacher. My interest in autobiography intersects with my life as a language educator. I have been teaching either full or part-time since 1972, as a classroom teacher, district consultant, university instructor, even for one year a homeschooling mother. I continue to teach part-time in a Vancouver school. Of course, there were brief periods in the 1980's when I took time off teaching to give birth to three daughters and organize my life as a mother. Rachel DuPlessis refers to how she has even had some of her babies without fuss between semesters (1990), characterizing how many women juggle teaching, mothering and a great deal more. The writing that has become as much a part of my life as mothering and teaching is informed by the teaching that I do, by the students I meet, by the stories that we live together and separately. It is, therefore, fitting that the final section of this dissertation is set in a classroom, a place where I spend and re-member some of my days, a place where I could experiment with (and describe autobiographically) a project that demonstrates some practical curricular applications of autobiography in education, inspired by women's autobiographical writing.

Autobiography is currently a burgeoning field in education (Butt and Raymond 1989; Chambers et al. 1993; Graham 1991; Griffiths 1995; Hasebe-Ludt and Norman 1996; Jipson 1995; Leggo 1995 and 1997; Miller 1998; Neumann and Peterson 1997; Norman 1995a and 1997a; Schmidt 1998; Witherell and Noddings 1991) and

increasingly, autobiographical writing has become an integral element of educational practice and theory. Carl Leggo's continuing work in autobiography is exemplary of how writing autobiographically and poetically informs the theory which he connects to the practice. Steeped in literary criticism, curricular and pedagogical concerns, postmodernism and other areas, his work is a courageous act of both interrogative deconstruction and autobiographical auto-reflexion, a model for autobiographical writing.

Robert Graham invites educators to find ways to incorporate post-structural thought with/in autobiography in education in a contemporary postmodern culture (1991, 141). Providing another specific example of how we might do so, Janet Miller calls upon educators to call attention to the incompleteness of our interpretations and disrupt our versions of stories (1998, 151). She is referring specifically to teacher stories, a visible element of autobiography in education, and problematizing those that assume a unity and seamlessness that is linear in their representation of reality and experience (149). Yet such disruption could be applied to all our stories (and poems), including those that our students write, opening up spaces for a multiplicity of meanings. Taking Graham and Miller's advice to heart and word, in this text I draw upon writing and organizing strategies that work to fragment linearity and in so doing, give some attention to the free play of meanings in a post-structural way. However, in my teaching and mothering I am a humanist. I

vacillate between embracing fragmentation and cultivating some wholeness in my self/selves and others. A tension exists in the interplay of the writing that I disrupt and the narrative flow of the everyday life that I live, both with/in and outside of the writing.

This tension is theorized by Ted Aoki, who invokes a discourse of in-betweenness which hovers in a middle place between Discourse A (Representational Discourse) and Discourse B (Discourse of Floating Signifiers) and which moves back and forth between them (1994). He describes Discourse A as a site where narration involves a retrieval of lived experience, a discourse that privileges presence and assumes accessibility to the so-called essence of truth. Discourse B is the site in which there is an "interplay of languages" and where meanings are not recovered, but "constituted and produced" (6) "midst the floating world of signifiers" (Aoki 1998). The "logic of doubling" is at work. Aoki's discourse of in-betweenness (Discourse C) allows for the tensions that exist in my own writing and thinking.

Recently, Aoki has revisited his thinking on Discourses A, B and C, so that we understand that the tropes of metaphor and metonymy are worked into the way signification is practised in the discourses. A more metonymic (horizontal) writing, while still having metaphoric roots and rhizomes extending vertically (Aoki 1998a), allows for spaces in-between that are fluid, elliptical, performative, hybrid, partial, incomplete. While in

Lacanian terms, the horizontal or linear is linked with insufficiency, and metaphor is privileged over metonymy (Gallop 1985, 122), the Metonymic Discourse C writing hybridizes metaphor and metonymy and performs it. Of this performative writing, Della Pollack states:

After-texts, after turning itself inside out, writing turns again only to discover the pleasure and power of turning, of making not sense or meaning per se but making writing perform ... shaping, shifting, testing language. (1998, 75)

Turning autobiographical writing over and over, and considering metonymy as well as metaphor in autobiography are two ideas that I will re-turn to later in the subsequent sections of this text.

The pieces of this dissertation are connected through the leitmotif of the mirror, that "organ of reflexion" (Dällenbach 1989, 30). This mirror leitmotif curls its way throughout the text. There is likely an infinite number of ways to accommodate all the pieces of this text, except possibly for an opening which frames the work, and the mirrors add exponentially to the equation. The text works reflexively and disruptively in the manner of André Gide's mise-en-abyme (Dällenbach 1989), the mirror-within-a-mirror-within-a-mirror, to look back on itself; in other words, the text questions what we take for granted, suggests infinite possibilities of meaning, indicates the contradictions between what we intend and construct and how this is continually interpreted and re-interpreted. In The Mirror in the Text, Lucien Dällenbach defines the mise-en-abyme as "any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by

simple, repeated or 'specious' (or paradoxical) duplication" (1989, 36). Internal mirrors appear in this text as do other mirrors, both mechanical and/or structural, such as Primo Levi's meta-mirror ("reflected" in the upcoming section, "Women Writing Women"). Directions follow which illuminate the remainder of this dissertation, a textual House of Mirrors.

#### DIRECTIONS TO THE HOUSE OF MIRRORS

Here we stand in the hall of the introduction, checking our appearances in the mirror, wondering what is next.

This dissertation is a textual House of Mirrors, inviting readers through entranceways, passages and spaces that optically reflect and refract the writer, the reader, the text. Though we may lose ourselves inside a carnival House of Mirrors, we still come out the other side. So readers requiring assistance in winding (reading) their way through the many passageways should follow these directions.

Enter the House of Mirrors through the first of three rooms, "In the House of Mirrors," each room containing three sections of autobiographical reflection and performance.

The initial inter-text (inter-mirror) that follows, a poem, "House of Mirrors," upon which the title of the text is partly based, leads into the first section. The **inter-mirrors** are broken mirrors, meant for catching your breath, signalling another passageway to somewhere else and illuminating or complicating some of the ideas and mirrors that follow.

Then enter Section I, "Women Writing Women," which explores aspects of women's autobiographical writing and ends with the questions: How can we consider autobiography in/as re-search? And how does women's writing contribute to autobiography in/as re-search?

Follow those questions and the next inter-mirror to Section II, "Re-searching Lives" where I join Doris Lessing, Erica Jong and others in interrogating some of the theoretical and ethical issues in autobiography in/as re-search and where I deliberately disrupt the narrative flow with my own autobiographical poetry writing.

Wind your way through the twelve page inter-mirror of mirror passages, and you will end up with "Martha-and-I-in-Mirrors," Section III. There you will look into many "paper" mirrors which refract back theoro-poetic musings about the autobiographical I in metaphoric and metonymic terms. For a time, linger poetically and autobiographically with Martha Quest (Lessing's fictional and autobiographical character from the "Children of Violence" novels) and me in a poetry manuscript of Martha poems.

Continue on to **Room Two**, "**The Other Side of Mirrors**." Past the "mirror, mirror on the wall" inter-mirror, you may become temporarily lost in **Section IV**, "**Autobiography in/as Re-search: Getting Lost**," which addresses further those questions about autobiography and re-search. Carry on to the other side of the mirror in Section V, "The Strangeness of Autobiography..." and Section VI, "Between Friends...," where double-sided writing in two distinct fonts is interspersed. Theoretical engagement with some autobiographical concepts in Section V is contrasted with poetic and meditative writing in Section VI.

In Section V, I centrally consider the autobiographical theory of Janet Gunn (among others) who theorizes autobiography as worldly, such worldliness derived from Hannah Arendt's writing. I also relate autobiography to language education.

The thirteen reflections with/in the meditative writing in Section VI respond to Hannah Arendt's life and work as I encounter her "between friends," a different way of arriving at the same destination.

Once you leave the other side of the mirror, proceed to the **third** and last room, "Mirrors of Pedagogy." Speculate in mirrors as you look at m(others) and maternal subjectivity and maternal narrative and poetic space in Section VII, "Spec-ulating with M(others)...," themes that occur and recur throughout my writing and this House of Mirrors. Listen there to a poetry reading/performance about mothers and daughters.

Fly through the inter-mirror, "When Mirrors Fly," to Section VIII, "Four Reflections on the Ethics of Autobiography," which takes some of the themes such as disclosure and memory and throws them up into the air--flying mirrors.

Finally, re-turn to Section IX, "Mirroring the Classroom," which grounds autobiography in the schools through an autobiographical account of a teaching project, described through teacher day plans, journal entries, poems, and forms.

Exit the House of Mirrors through the Bibliography, not the same way you came in.

# ROOM ONE: IN THE HOUSE OF MIRRORS

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### **House of Mirrors**

in a bedroom stands a full-length mirror it distorts the truth somehow elongates your frame like a fun house of mirrors shows you slimmer like toffee pulled thin

before the mirror a 70 year old woman criticizes: this is false

before the mirror a new mother fingers her slack emptied flesh

before the mirror head turned as if on backwards to glimpse the view from the rear a schoolgirl asks: do i look all right?

we are born in skins we don't choose astonished when messages are reversed in the glass e z a g s r e t t a m

when someone Jewish dies the mourners cover all the mirrors in the house stark grief reflected back in others' faces you don't want to see your self when the soul leaves a body

advice to schoolgirls: cover the mirrors for a week at least mourn the body

in it when it shatters

### **I. WOMEN WRITING WOMEN**

There is an abundance of autobiographical writing by women (as well as men) in many forms and genres, some of it gracing my bookshelves, the material listed in the bibliography at the end of this text only a fraction of what is available. I have chosen to feature writing by women because that is my interest as a woman/writer/teacher/feminist. And perhaps this might be a small gesture towards addressing a historical and cultural imbalance in the literary canon of what is considered autobiography--a "discursive hybrid" (Gilmore 1994a, 17) -- an imbalance that exists even today. One has only to look over a daughter's readings in a high school English class, or peruse the anthology currently in use or listen to the report of a class discussion often led by a male teacher, to immediately detect that while women writers are more prominent than ever, we still have a long way to go in establishing them in classrooms and curricula. Carl Leggo conducted research that examined texts authorized and recommended for use in B.C. high school English literature courses and found that women were significantly underrepresented as authors in the texts in all genres including non-fiction (1994).

Maynard's work is seen within the purview of women's magazines: her subject matter is the stuff of domesticity--Barbies and Tampax and motherhood burn-out--which automatically marginalizes her as a "women's writer." (Kingston 1998, 68)

Leigh Gilmore shows how, even though autobiography has become unstable generically, crossing the boundaries of genre from narrative to verse and drama (for example), autobiography

criticism has maintained a gender hierarchy so that "women's autobiographical writing remains anomalous" (1994a, 40). Anomalous and underrepresented.

However, I am aware of the dangers in categorizing gender into the binaries of women and men, without re-membering race, class, sexuality, and I am aware of how such "lists" do not adequately un-cover "how gender identities are specified in cultural identities, how racial identities are sexualized, how ethnic identities are gendered, and how sexual identities are inflected by class" (Gilmore 1994a, 184). The category of woman/women shifts. Woman/women is/are more complex than the sexual difference the category implies.

Woman, as Cixous defines her, is a whole--'whole composed of parts that are wholes'-through which language is born over and over again. (Minh-ha 1989, 38)

Hélène Cixous addresses "writing as a woman," but puts the word """""""feminine"""""" "between 150 quotation marks to prevent it from being used in the mode of a 'feminine woman ...'" (Conley 1991, 137). Although she claims that men, too, can produce "feminine" texts, that is, texts filled with the fluidity and transgression of the poetic and the lyrical, Valerie Raoul reminds us that "this assumption is belied in Cixous' own works by the predominance of imagery based on the female body" (1992, 263).

Additionally, Gilmore reminds us that woman/women is not a stable category (1994a, 24) and that being a woman is not all one ever is (xii). To focus on autobiographical writing by women

is to enter territory that occasionally (Wakes. Betty Bergland cautions us about making assumptions that merely "being woman means speaking in a woman's voice" (1994, 134). Subjectivity is more complicated than that. Bergland argues that in autobiography we read a postmodern subject, "a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses" (134), a subject shaped by language. Nevertheless, a subject who is a woman is automatically and culturally constructed as Other, biologically and socially.

Feminine bodies, then, are constituted in the social mapping of female bodies which are "always already cultural."

(Neuman discussing Elizabeth Grosz on the feminine body 1994, 295)

In order not to fall into the trap of binary oppositions which omit many other points along a continuum, points that slide back and forth, I have tried to sample a wide range of material. In calling this material "autobiographical" I am aware of Gilmore's question, "Where is the autobiographical?" (1994a, 13), and her advice to examine "not what autobiography is but what it does" (39), in order to consider autobiography for both educational re-search and practice. I am also, like Gilmore, considering autobiography as foremost "a practice of language, a signifying system charged with the representation and construction of identity through the organizing modes of gender and genre" (61), a signifying system that is disrupted by women's writing, which in turn disrupts the "regulatory laws of gender and genre" (45). Employing Gilmore's "autobiographics,"

we can find and read autobiographical writing by women in many places and spaces. We can write autobiographically, too, as an act of undoing many silences and of becoming aware of the elements of autobiographics: a reading practice and a description of self-representation that involve contradiction, experimentation, word-body connections (42) and the view that we are produced in our writing.

Many of the books mentioned in the bibliography may not appear under an "Autobiography" listing. Gilmore writes about trips to libraries and bookstores to try to find women's autobiographies, where they were not consistently catalogued as autobiography (1994a, 3), and in one interesting case, where the autobiography of a woman, Joyce Johnson, was shelved under her former lover's name: Jack Kerouac (8). Finding any autobiographical writing is not a clearcut task, as I discovered when I sent a class of Grade 5/6/7's into the school and public libraries, amazed when many returned empty-handed or said they had little choice.

The variety of books speaks to the rich availability of writing by women about women, contributing to a representation of women that Gilmore characterizes as largely unmapped (1994a, 5). Yet despite this proliferation of material, and the avidity with which readers and consumers indulge in momentarily sharing other women's lives (whether in books, tabloids or talk shows), some women writers, theorists and philosophers harbour misgivings about "opening up" autobiographically. While reading

and writing autobiograph(icall)y, I have discovered a range of negative attitudes towards the autobiographical. These include those who distrust the confessional in autobiography (Griffiths 1995), as well as those who outline the disadvantages of asking students to write autobiographically (Pagano 1991). One language educator referred to a study that suggests fiction writing is more comfortable for students to write than autobiography (cited in Graham 1991). Even women who are working with/in what could be generally termed women's studies, or writing in ways that often autobiographical, seem have repudiated the autobiographical (Luce Irigaray and Nadine Gordimer).

These negative attitudes have challenged my own thinking as I read (and write) autobiograph(icall)y, but they have also strengthened my conviction that there is a great deal of value autobiography. In re-visiting its significance, in Ι am convinced that autobiography is vital to education, and that women's autobiographical writing is vital to both autobiography and education. However, while looking for the autobiographical American Educational Research at the Association Annual Conference in 1998, I encountered some views that in my opinion lacked sufficient depth or rigour. Three entries from my journal that recount my impressions follow. I temporarily diverge from my consideration of autobiographical writing by women in order to demonstrate the wide range of ways in which autobiography in education can be represented, and the need for penetrating reflection on the topic. In the remainder of this section, I

continue with a further examination of some women's resistance to the autobiographical.

## Journal Entry

What I learned about auto/biography from the AERA sessions I attended was illuminating (and sometimes horrifying too). At one roundtable session (Swafford et al 1998), the presenter discussed her autobiographical analysis of students' literacy backgrounds, such analysis coded for words and phrases, the autobiography graded, with restrictions about just what literacy experiences were permissible to write about for the assignment. I felt concerned about the student/teacher power relations, so powerfully present to me: If there were restrictions, how did this affect the writing? the grading? the analysis? the way truths can be presented or hidden? And what about the analysis? Was the autobiographical writing seen as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of those students' childhood experiences? I am not thinking that there wasn't some useful literacy information in the assignments. After all, some facets of autobiographical writing include a life and facts copied down. I am thinking that the analysis needs to be deconstructed in terms of how autobiographers might write to potential audiences, in this case the grader of the assignments who was requiring particular aspects of their literacy stories, perhaps unintentionally silencing parts of those stories, certainly calling into question how we remember our pasts and how the writing can be colored by present experience, how our truths are distorted by whichever version we are giving at the time.

At another round-table (Olson et al 1998), autobiography was invoked as the impetus to narrative reflection, looking for threads that ran through

rather (I thought) simplistic narrative. Here autobiography was an uncontested and not-very-deep or reflective accounting of experience. Autobiography as event, without attention paid to the indeterminacy of texts or how an autobiographical episode is always already much, much more than the account of an event. It is the lens through which the autobiographer gazes, a lens that may seem bright and sharp, but one that can trick us into thinking that we need only look through it to arrive at "threads" in narratives.

At the very interesting session on childhood secrets (van Manen et al 1998), autobiography was confessional, disclosure supposedly protected only by insisting upon the telling of "healthy secrets" (me thinking: what are those?). As if secrets could be so universally and easily categorized. During one exercise in which we, the participants, were asked to remember and share our earliest remembrance of a secret, I was stopped, my tongue locked, all my earliest secrets seeming to me to be ones I would never share because they were not only unhealthy but dangerous. It gave me considerable pause thinking about what we ask children to do in schools, students to do in university classrooms, and I couldn't help wondering that if we ask only for healthy secrets, are we silencing others? indicating that we are only prepared to go so far in dealing with others' lives? So why deal in secrets at all? Because it's powerful, the presenters commented. It unlocks the self, and important childhood experiences. I thought about all the times children I taught blurted out secrets readily, secrets that were whispers about their lives, secrets that held pain and confusion and sorrow.

### ANTI-AUTOBIOGRAPHY

women's hesitation In examining some towards autobiographical writing (and the contradictions therein), it appears that such writing is sometimes feared. As both Jill Ker and Leigh Gilmore point (1998, Conway out 1994a), autobiographies have contributed to the construction of gender, race, class, politics, individualism and much, much more. Such writing has longlasting (and often hegemonic) effects on identity, authority, truth claims and traditions. We are reautobiographical texts presented in within cultural and historical scripts, and although we may believe we are produced in our texts, we may also feel pinned down by them. Though, as Gilmore contends, autobiography is not any "experientially truer" or any "less constructed" (25) because it refers to the self as subject, nevertheless, we may feel more vulnerable.

Are the women who are dragging their feet autobiographically hoping that the autobiographical can/should somehow be filtered out of what we write, a notion that I will engage with through their words? Some people are more imagine themselves to be! autobiographical than they In investigating our reluctance, I believe we reveal where we are most afraid to tread. Like Natalie Goldberg (1986, 1990, 1993), I agree that we need to write about whatever we wish to avoid-those cracks and corners of our lives.

There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. (Leonard Cohen 1992) Hannah Arendt, Luce Irigaray and Nadine Gordimer all balk

at divulging the personal through auto/biography. In an interview in 1983, Irigaray stated: "I don't think that my work" can be better understood because I've done this or that. The risk is that such information will disrupt people when they read" (Whitford 1991, 1). Margaret Whitford explains Irigaray's autobiographical reluctance in terms of the fear that a woman thinker's work might be reduced to her biography, that the political is reduced to the personal. This is what happened to Simone de Beauvoir, as described by Toril Moi (cited in Whitford 1991, 2). Whitford refers to Irigaray's "uncompromising antiautobiographical position." This position has echoes in Hannah Arendt's disapproving thoughts on auto/biography and her desire to keep the private private and the public public (which I will engage with in more detail in Section V, "The Strangeness of Autobiography: From the Other Side of the Mirror"):

Biography ... is rather unsuitable for those in which the main interest lies in the life story, as for the lives of artists, writers and generally men and women whose genius forced them to keep the world at a certain distance and whose significance lies chiefly in their works, the artifacts they added to the world, not the role they played in it.

(cited in Young-Bruehl 1982, xvi)

While Arendt referred here in general terms to biography, her own biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl describes how Arendt did not wish to write autobiographically either.

Yet Irigaray writes very autobiographically about sending a copy of her book, <u>Speculum of the Other Woman</u>, to de Beauvoir, and of her profound disappointment that de Beauvoir did not respond. One of Irigaray's pieces of writing in <u>The Irigaray</u> <u>Reader</u> has autobiographical roots in a woman friend and

colleague's suicide, following her expulsion from the Department of Psychoanalysis at Vincennes (where Lacan was in charge), an expulsion that Irigaray also experienced (Whitford 1991, 6). Is it possible that we do not even realize that we are always already writing autobiographically, or that we do not always recognize/admit/acknowledge it? Irigaray worries about some of the effects of women's autobiographical writing, namely that women might be taken less seriously, certainly a concern. But surely work in feminism has led to the understanding that the political is personal, too, and that the personal is also political.

Indeed, even in the narrowest and most ambivalent sense, writing an autobiography can be a political act because it asserts a right to speak rather than to be spoken for. (Gilmore 1994a, 40)

Every time a woman puts pen to paper, it is a political act. (Hollingsworth 1990, 142)

[writing of the work of Maxine Greene] ... Maxine acknowledges the **impossibility** of constructing her life story outside a whole variety of ideologies and discursive practices, including those related to gender, sibling and maternal relationships, political and professional phenomena. (Miller 1998, 147)

But Lessing's insistence on "relationship"--of the person to the political ... makes her "feminist" in the broadest sense.... (Greene 1985, 284)

Surely Irigaray's own *oeuvre*, whether or not she places it autobiographically, "disrupts people when they read" it, a risk she seems to embrace in her theoro-poetic writing, though she resists the disruption that she feels autobiographical information would wreak.

With/in Arendt's story, she learned about the details of Martin Heidegger's collusion with the Nazis, and her respect for his work decreased in a painful awareness that the poetry of her mentor/former lover's work was not necessarily the same poetry he lived (Young-Bruehl 1982). Though she decried autobiography, especially for herself, it was through the autobiographical that she encountered what Virginia Woolf called a shock of awareness (1989/1976), one that contributed to her own thinking and writing.

Gordimer states:

I shall never write an autobiography--I'm much too jealous of my privacy for that.... (1995, 115)

Yet she <u>does</u> write very autobiographically in <u>Writing and Being</u>, luckily for us, and apparently in her novels as well: In the 1970's, Gordimer wrote a novel that included a character based on a revolutionary hero, an anti-apartheid activist, a character she wrote into the novel "in coded homage" (7). She also based the opening paragraphs on a single real life moment that involved this man's daughter. Concerned about the effects of her imaginative fiction (and I would add, the autobiographical within the fiction), she gave the manuscript to this daughter to read prior to publication (7-12). The daughter responded: "This was our life" (12).

Though Gordimer tenders an autobiographical disclaimer, she does confirm that her own experiences in South Africa are of historical relevance "beyond the personal" (115). Her statement, "I shall never write an autobiography ...," may reveal an expectation of autobiography that corresponds to the description

on the flyleaf of the second volume of Doris Lessing's autobiography, <u>Walking in the Shade</u>: "a great modern autobiography" (1997). Perhaps a view of autobiographical writing that moves it beyond "great modern autobiography" and into the realm of risk and disruption will open the doors of Heidegger's "house of language" (cited in Whitford 1991, 75) to all the cracks, the cracks the light gets in.

### LETTING IN THE LIGHT: BETWEEN THE CRACKS (AUTOBIOGRAPHY ENTREDEUX)

In contrast to the "anti-autobiographical positions" described above, Hélène Cixous embraces the autobiographical in <u>Rootprints</u>, valorizing poetic writing that is "entredeux" (1997, 8-9):

writing that chooses the interval space, the between, the in-between, the entredeux....

Cixous remarks:

... it is feelings that are more important to me than anything in the world (12)

and feelings are evident in her autobiographical piece, "Albums and legends," where she writes with great emotion about her "so strange roots," interspersing reflections of childhood memories and landscapes with photos from her album and a family tree that breaks hearts with some of the entries:

5 children: 4 died in concentration camp (191)

Xennoe Buchinger and his wife die in c.c. with their seven children (192)

Died in c.c. (193)

### Died in c.c. (194)

(the above repeated again and again in a carbon copy of death).

Such personal, autobiographical information is also historically relevant, beyond the personal, in Gordimer's words. But it reminds us, too, in Cixous' own words, that

One goes forward, sowing the stones of grief behind oneself. (179)

How much richer we are to touch the stones of Cixous' grief, sowing ourselves as we simultaneously move forward in our own lives, somehow forever changed by the experience.

Dorothy Allison writes:

I am one woman, but I carry in my body all the stories I have ever been told, women I have known, women who have taken damage until they tell themselves they can feel no pain at all. (1995, 38)

In the opening epigraph to "Albums and legends," Cixous writes:

All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story. (1997, 178)

This places her own autobiographical writing in the entredeux, a site that opens into risk, disruption and a house of language that is also a House of Mirrors, reflecting in myriad (mirroriad) ways "the cracks in everything," the cracks the light gets in, and the light, too. Writing entredeux enables us to re-present ourselves through the features of autobiographics-contradiction, experimentation, word-body connection--that remarkably resemble the poetic and the in-between.

### HYPERTEXTING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING: METAMIRRORS

In <u>Two or Three Things I Know for Sure</u>, Allison writes of a young man who tells her about the possibilities in using hypertext with one of her stories:

Every time you touch a word, a window opens. Behind that word is another story... Every word the reader touches, it opens again. (1995, 91).

Not only are there many stories to tell in autobiography, as Cixous suggests, but in the House of Mirrors, a word is a window is a mirror that opens onto more stories, an endless reflection of our lives and the lives of others.

Hypertexting our stories, our autobiographical writing, we move away from the linear expectations of "great modern autobiography," and into multiplicity. There might be some comfort for those who like Irigaray are reluctant to divulge the personal, if we were to remember that our writing mirrors us, but that there are many mirrors. And the light in these mirrors changes, too. We may read autobiographical writing with satisfaction at reading of others' lives, of being

inside the experience of another person who really lives and who tells about experience which did in fact occur (Conway 1998, 6)

or in order to

see what the image in the mirror then looks like (6).

Yet there is always more. More angles, more light that did not yet get in, more cracks.

Gordimer invokes Primo Levi's meta-mirror, a metaphysical mirror which "does not obey the law of optics but represents

your image as it is seen by the person who stands before you" (1995, 5). Gordimer adds:

The writer is that person who stands before you. (5)

The autobiographer, too, is that person who stands before you, reflecting and refracting you back, not only through what she writes of her self/selves, but through what she may write about others, possibly even you, steadfast reader. Our writing mirrors others, too; autobiographical writing is never a singular gesture. There are always others in the Mirror,

in the interval space,

### in the in-between.

Entredeux, "literally, betweentwo (or entertwo) meaning the space or the time between two things, points, events" (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 1997, 113, f.n. 3). And the space or time

between (at least) two people.

And the space or time

between one story and another.

### DECONSTRUCTING OUR OWN WORDS AND TELLING SILENCES

Jill Ker Conway deconstructs some of these stories in her semi-meta-autobiography, <u>When Memory Speaks</u> (1998), a book of reflections on and about autobiography by the author of autobiographies of her own: <u>Road to Coorain</u> (1989) and <u>True</u> <u>North</u> (1995/94). Disappointingly, she only refers to her autobiographies on the last page of the book, deconstructing her own stories fleetingly (hence the "semi" in my above description of the book). She actually provides more analysis of her autobiographies in a newspaper interview with Max Wyman (1998).

Conway's book is devoted to looking at the "very different ways men and women understand and tell the stories of their lives" (Wyman 1998, D11). By looking at the ways we are gendered and the (mostly Western) cultural mirrors in which the autobiographer gazes, Conway asks what we are to make of the silences in women's autobiographies (1998, 16), silences which in some cases hide agency, romanticize successes and otherwise present public versions of private matters that have many, many windows behind the words.

# Her [Joyce Maynard's] first memoir, she says now, was "fundamentally dishonest," the work of a "Good Daughter," filled with manufactured angst. (Kingston 1998, 69)

These are telling silences, silences that are stories in themselves, and we can learn from these silences, constructing and re-constructing stories upon stories (more windows behind windows), text "also composed of silence for which no text can exist" (Neumann 1997, 92). There are many women's autobiographies which contain silences that scream of pain, nothing to do with success or the public, everything to do with the struggle to survive. Anna Neumann's essay, "Ways without Words: Learning from Silence and Story in Post-Holocaust Lives,"

addresses Conway's question about silences. Neumann re-searched her father's Holocaust experience, a story she often heard throughout childhood, and then her mother's repressed story of her experience, only recently narrated. Neumann learned that "even in the silence of a story that lives without words, there exists a text to know and to tell, though its telling may occur in unexpected ways" (1997, 92). She learned that stories in text may emerge from untold (silent) stories. Neumann writes:

... even in the void of not-knowing, we nonetheless come to know, how even when we have no interpretation, we nonetheless construct one, gathering wisps of sight and sound that surround us into images that, through the weaving of interpretation, become real for us. (96)

Neumann believes that to unearth silences, we must attend more to what is absent, to what remains unsaid, to what is unacknowledged, to what remains unknown, to the "'not story' inscribed between the words of text" in the story of the past which lives in the present (108). Such silences, such notstories, exist in the (MCK) in the facade of the House of Mirrors, in the interval space, in the in-between (*entredeux*), in women's autobiographical writing.

Conway exhorts us to closely examine our own stories and become conscious of how we "report ourselves to ourselves" (1998, 178), interrogating the cultural assumptions that may slide by us, what she refers to as the mirror of culture. But Neumann reminds us of the meta-stories (1997, 110), and although she also re-searches others' stories in her work, she is

conscious of how in her own autobiographical writing, she writes about others "in whose presence I become my self" (115). Another kind of meta-mirror in the House of Mirrors. And a meta-mirror which may be particularly reflective for women, who very much see themselves in relation to others (Belenky et al. 1986; Chambers 1998a; Gilligan 1982; Jacobs 1998; Witherell and Noddings 1991).

Like all memoirs, <u>At Home in the World</u> attempts to impose a fictional narrative on life. What emerges, though, a risk of the genre, is that the reader comes to know more about the writer than she knows about herself. Writing it, Maynard says, required multiple versions before she got it right. (Kingston 1998, 69)

These meta-stories in the meta-mirrors layer autobiographical writing, and we can become conscious of all the autobiographical texts which preceded us (Conway 1998, 145), the intertextuality of autobiographical writing as well as its gender-ality.

Both the silences and the meta-stories teach us, too, that "the live person always remains different from the text" (Conway 1998, 145).

[writing of Louis Althusser's murder of his wife] I seem to be confusing the text with the man, and this is a crime in itself, from the standpoint of a reading practice which resists this kind of reduction. (Walker 1998, 43)

This live person, Conway maintains, is an autobiographer, practising "the craft of autobiography in our inner conversations with ourselves about the meaning of experience" (178). Though not all of us write autobiographically, we are all autobiographers, Conway adds. And if we are all autobiographers, we can all make meaning of our lives through autobiography, not only as craft but as re-search. However, we can never adequately

capture in language who/what/how/why/where we are. Moreover, "when memory speaks," it can do so in many voices, including ones that distort, change, silence, embellish, obscure, invent lives. Conway asks us to pay close attention to the "forms and tropes of culture" (178), but they seem deeply imbedded in individual experience and memory, and the way we see ourselves prior to or while or after we report ourselves to ourselves. So how can we consider autobiography in/as re-search? And how does women's writing contribute to autobiography in/as re-search?

In the next section, I address these questions by engaging with more autobiographical writing by women, and complicate the issues with the insertion of my autobiographical poems. I link the discussion to autobiography in schools and to a consideration of ethics that is further developed in a later section.

my face a simulacrum at home in the mirror i look to see...

All summer I have been reading voraciously--autobiography, meta-autobiography, theory, poetry, fiction--storing words like nuts to see me through the winter. Squirrelling thoughts away. Come September, when the children return to school, I will harvest ideas.

It is not September yet. I am writing this two weeks before I begin. Have I not already begun? Where is the beginning in this venture? "There is no true beginning; writing is always already there, as Derrida said..." (Conley 1991, 8). I continue to begin.

### II. RE-SEARCHING LIVES

I spent the summer with Martha Quest. I grew up with her in the wild veld of Southern Rhodesia as she fought her mother, witnessed her wedding out of haste and habit, celebrated at the birth of her daughter, mourned when she abandoned her along with a loveless marriage. I sympathized when her father, a war veteran, succumbed to further illness, still embraced her as she embraced communism, a second loveless marriage, an errant lover. I understood her disillusionment following the war, as she prepared to move to England.

In one of those strange psychic coincidences that sometimes occur, I decided to delay reading <u>The Four-Gated City</u>, the fifth novel in the Martha Quest "Children of Violence" series (1972), a novel which is all about Martha's life after she moves to England. By then I had also consumed Doris Lessing's <u>The Golden</u> <u>Notebook</u> (1973), and so I eagerly turned to Volume I of her autobiography, <u>Under My Skin</u> (1994). The autobiography stops temporarily, as I did, when Doris (Martha) moves to England, and so as a reader I unwittingly mirrored Lessing's autobiographical strategy of carving up her life into two distinct parts.

Somehow this seems significant to me because I discovered Lessing only of late, as if my own life were carved up into two distinct parts. Just as I came late to the writing that is now a central part of my life. My younger sister tossed off this comment: "Well, haven't you read Doris Lessing? I read those books <u>years</u> ago."

It was worth the wait, because I believe I brought a lifetime of my own experience to Martha and Doris' lives. Intertwined among the three of them is all that has happened to us over the years.

In her autobiography, Lessing writes of yearning, yearning, yearning, a refrain I am to hear again and again as I read the autobiographical writing of women, as I write autobiographically myself...

Dorian

if a face records territory travelled the lines spreading across the skin like the tributaries that branched from a deep river

why should i be shocked

i sat beside this old woman did not know the face whose eyes had glinted once as if she knew all my secrets could hold them in the irises could shut them away behind the lens with a smug smile

did not know a face is a map that helps us find our way read the routes we have taken

how could i forget the images left of where we have been and who we are fade like a sepia photograph

### over the years

my face a simulacrum at home in the mirror i look to see if i myself had not turned into an old ogre in the glass some female Dorian Gray comparing the graven image to the flesh

### THE STORY AND THE LIFE

Lessing maintains that she wrote her autobiography in selfdefence; biographies were being written about her, by people she has never met or even heard of. She writes about trying to claim one's own life by writing an autobiography (1994, 14). The story of a life is both story <u>and</u> life. We live an event, and then live it yet again when we write and even re-write that event. We re-live the event always somewhat differently because the lived past is cast in the writing present, knowing there is a writing future, too. The ever-changing I who writes/views particular events is shaped and acted upon by many different forces.

Annie Dillard in <u>The Writing Life</u> (1989) suggests that writing changes our perceptions of what we have already lived because we spend more time writing about the moment(s) sometimes than living them. After a while it is the writing part of the memory/event that takes precedence and looms large in our consciousness.

So we can try to distinguish the life from the text as

### Judith Summerfield does:

The discourse is not the event. To distinguish event from discourse is to respect the confusions, mutabilities, shifts, and needs of memory...how writing itself transforms memory, and how discourse arises out of the writing or telling situation. (1994, 183)

Even the form, the genre, non-fiction or poetry, for example, can alter the impressions conveyed in the writing, like applying very different lenses to the same specimen, and uncovering new dimensions and angles.

Lessing asks in her autobiography:

... were I to write it aged 85, how different would it be? (1994, 17)

One of the most interesting juxtapositions of text and life that I have encountered is the story of a sister's death from a drug overdose. Two of the victim's sisters wrote quite independently about the same event, unaware that the other was also writing autobiographically. Reading both stories is like viewing the event from two very different kaleidoscopes.

One sister, Zoe Landale, depicted her very difficult relationship with the drug-addicted sister and the pain involved (1993). The other younger sister, Marjorie Simmins, recorded her close relationship with the drug-addicted sister and how it pitched into a spiral of lies and deceit and disappointment, as the addiction took precedence over sisterly devotion (1993). To further complicate the colors and refractions that radiate off the kaleidoscope glass, Landale, a poet, included scenes and images from the event in her book of poetry, <u>Burning Stone</u>. We can compare the following excerpt from Landale's story

"Remembering Karen" to the lines of one of her poems "Karen in

the Kitchen Again":

The sun was so warm I had the window open to let in some air. And I heard you laugh. I'd forgotten you ever laughed. What really surprised me was that I was glad to hear you. It was like watching you eat toast. You ate it piled with more butter than anyone I've ever known. The flavour of you was unmistakable. You laughed and went out the window. (1993, 58)

This is the sister I see eating butter in the kitchen, black eye-makeup seeping down her cheeks while I lock my bedroom door pound hands over an emptied heart

This is butter which stays dripping for the seventeen years since her overdose, until the sight of it, melting again on toast makes me want to break the frame.... (1995, 33)

Which account is more "true," "honest," "accurate?" Truths are mutable when we acknowledge multiple perspectives and infinite possibilities of re-framing and re-writing. Although the truth can be regarded as a textual and temporal and tenuous affair, writers still cling tenaciously to the idea of writing "honestly."

I am trying to write this book honestly. But were I to write it aged 85, how different would it be? (Lessing 1994, 14)

Are we ever more "honest" by virtue of our own intimate knowledge of the facts?

Erica Jong quotes Henry Miller, who quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson:

... novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies--captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly. (cited in Jong 1994, xxx)

"Truth truly is what I am after," writes Jong, but she admits that fiction often seems much more real than the "truth." In her autobiography, <u>Fear of Fifty</u>, she amusingly describes how she writes the section on her father, then decides to interview him to make certain she got it right. She dutifully tape records (or so she believes) their conversation over lunch, only to later discover the machine wasn't working. So she reconstructs the conversation and concludes:

I will reconstruct the conversation as I always do anyway, writing fiction. It's all made up anyway. Especially the parts that sound real. (1994, 29)

She also includes the page of notes her father typed out for her, in the autobiography! Most of the facts mesh with Jong's account, but how different they sound in her father's voice, and what angles they provide in contrast and likeness to what Jong has already written!

Truth in autobiography seems to be relative, or at least, relative to what your relatives might add. What strikes me most is how the same episode can seem somehow dissimilar when the narrator changes. The kaleidoscope has been turned.

Telling the truth or not telling it, and how much, is a lesser problem than the one of shifting perspectives, for you see your life differently at different stages, like climbing a mountain while the landscape changes with every turn in the path....

... the landscape itself is a tricky thing. As you start to write at once the question begins to insist: Why do you remember this and not that? How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't? (Lessing 1994, 12)

... we make up our pasts. You can actually watch your mind doing it, taking a little fragment of fact and then

spinning a tale out of it. (13)

view of what Lessing writes, how In can we consider autobiographical writing in/as re-search? Valerie Raoul comments that re-search may be defined as a search to find something that is there but buried, or a quest to give something new and creative, or both (1998). However we define re-search, the very ambivalences ambiguities and of autobiography, the acknowledgement that "truth" may be fictional, and that fiction may be based on some truth, can provide us with a vital means of re-search which could have lasting effects on the work we do both in the academy and in the classroom. At the very least, the notion that autobiography shifts and changes releases us from accepting any piece of text as finite and finished, the wor(1)d as Law, just as any life written about is far from over when we reach the last page. Even death doesn't end the story, one example being the revelations about Virginia Woolf's abuse at the hands of her step-brother, a part of the story added long past Woolf's death and countless diaries and biographies. As Carl Leggo suggests, "an autobiographical story cannot end with 'The End'; ... the story always ends in etc." (1997, 85).

Such a release from finality can be both transforming and informing, a learning experience that continues long after the concluding sentence which is never really a conclusion. Such a release moves us from a linear world to one that is full of the geometric shapes of the kaleidoscope, each turn or climb or landscape teaching us again and again and yet again.

### The Truth Is

"Truth is a woman" Nietzsche wrote and it wasn't a compliment either

Nietzsche must have dressed her in chameleon seductive because her siren eyes signal immutable depths Nietzsche must have drawn her mother to fragments daughter of deception sister to suffering and singing a lullaby that pierces our neck cords

i think Truth is a man and i'll paint him in silver swords and shields that reflect off the frost on the ground the beams that scatter at the rainbow's refracting

i'll name him father to the zenith son of the horizon brother to brokenness and it's no compliment either

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION**

In <u>The Golden Notebook</u> by Lessing (1973), the narrator writes in one notebook about her novel-writing, while in another notebook the events of that novel take place, both of them mirroring one another with really only minor differences of plot detail or character name. (There are four notebooks altogether, not including the golden notebook, but I am referring to only two of them here.) After a while, as I read, I am unaware which plot I am reading, experiencing, vicariously living in--the story of the narrator, or the narrator-in-the-novel's story. And I don't much care that these distinctions become blurred anyway, because they seem to be part of one and the same tale, mutually dependent, congruent, offering another look at what is there.

In the first volume of her autobiography, Lessing states that all one needs to do to know her life is to read the Martha Quest books (1994). She explains that a particular person is so and so in this story, in that book. She describes the straw yellow of someone's hair, the scene in a hospital. Read it in <u>A</u> <u>Proper Marriage</u> (1966a) or in <u>A Ripple from the Storm</u> (1966c). No, she will not tell you the real name of a character in one of her books, as she writes about the part this character played in her own life, because the person is now ensconced in high society. Yes, this person whom she admires so greatly is the same Greek character in her Martha books, and in tribute to him, she acknowledges the connection. As I read the autobiography, I even begin to recognize bits from the novels before Lessing

places them for the reader. I know who this is. Or, I see now how Martha's mother came to be written as she was. Or, yes, I felt Lessing's grief over the two of her three children whom she left when I read that Martha left her fictional child. Each Martha Quest book becomes a kind of golden notebook of her life for me, and operates in the same manner, a narrative collage which is overlapped with the autobiography. As a reader I lose myself in that autobiography as if I were steeped in my summer reading of the Martha books, and it is a powerful experience.

On the flyleaf of Lessing's latest book, Love, Again (1996), a novel about a 65-year-old woman who falls in love with two younger men (Lessing is 79 now), she is described as one of the finest psychological writers of our time. I agree, and I would add that she is also a writer whose fictional work is very autobiographical. Writing about his own "semi-autobiographical novels," Britt Hagarty recalls that "a famous novelist once remarked that all novels are autobiographical to a certain extent since they all come from the author's personal experience at some point" (1998, J4). Though this point can be contested, it acquires credibility when expressed by writers. The concept of the autobiographical impulse doubles, as autobiography crosses the boundaries of form and genre, but it also becomes more complex.

Stories are changing arrangements of words, thoughts, actions that involve us in the autobiographical imperative (Randall 1995), the autobiographical impulse (Kadar 1992).

Marlene Kadar takes this term from Virginia Woolf in <u>A Room of</u> <u>One's Own</u>: "the impulse towards autobiography may be spent" (cited in Kadar 1992, 153). Kadar does not believe Woolf meant that autobiography was or should be passé (as if it could be), but rather that we must "theorize a new genre that goes beyond and yet includes the old word, the old gender, and the old style" (153). (Kadar is particularly concerned with what she calls the "pure term autobiographical," an adjective which she believes "has been used to dismiss women's text from the valued canon" [158]).

All writing is autobiographical, as claimed by Donald Murray (1991) and others such as Jerome Bruner (1993). Such a claim is by now well-known (though still contested), and although I have no difficulty placing myself by Bruner and Murray, I recognize that the autobiographical qualities of any one piece of writing are related to its function and that some writing is certainly more deeply and obviously autobiographical. I remember, too, that there are writers such as Nadine Gordimer who stress that while the connections to real life exist, we cannot underestimate the role imagination plays in fiction (1995, 14). And the role imagination plays in autobiography (Gilmore 1994a; Pagano 1991).

### Cinemamoments

i'm reading an excerpt from linda frum's memoir about her mother barbara and crying i can hear the deep timbre of barbara's voice from the TV in my head

i'm watching the movie The First Wives Club and crying it's a comedy but i wipe my cheeks with a crumpled kleenex when my daughter asks me if i cried during the movie i lie and say i was laughing so hard i-you know the rest

i explain pain in platitudes i enter the lives of screen women knowing all is fleeting despite my grip all as tenuous as tissue paper as easily torn or blown away as the most delicate filaments of ribbon

### DOING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I included the following statement of purpose in a program description at the school where I teach one day a week: "writing expressively and autobiographically." I was then teaching a pull-out program across grades one to seven and so distributed my program description. A teacher came to me and said: "We've already done autobiography."

None of us can have tapped the limitless potential in autobiography in one fell swoop, as this comment seems to indicate. Where do we think we stop? Lessing stops temporarily at 1949, and continues with Volume II. Were she to live another 100 years, no doubt we could expect Volumes III and IV as well.

No autobiography is ever over. At the end of hers, Jong adds an Afterword which updates the reader on developments since the publishing date of the book. In the Preface Jong remarks that writing her autobiography is her way of facing mortality, but also, as she turns 50, of trying to make sense of her life before it is too late. What else has happened in her ongoing life story since writing the Afterword?

"We've already done autobiography." My program description read: "writing autobiographically." That covers a wide area, not restricted to what we have come to accept as autobiography proper--and many boundaries are being broken in what we name autobiography. Kadar writes about the narrative unity that can bind autobiography into a more rigid form than what she prefers to call "life writing" (1992).

How wide an area can writing autobiographically span? bell hooks writes a series of vignettes in her autobiography, Boneblack (1996). Her compelling book of essays, <u>Yearning: Race</u>, <u>Gender and Cultural Politics</u>, is most certainly autobiographical as well as academic (1990). So is the collection of poems by Marilyn Bowering entitled Autobiography, after the long poem of the same name in the collection (1996). Hélène Cixous' theoropoetic essay, "The Last Painting" (1991), is as autobiographical as Frida Kahlo's intensely disturbing and beautiful paintings which detail her suffering and her humanity (Kismaric and Herferman 1992). Jeanette Winterson reminds us, in defending Stein's Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude that autobiography is not "a rigid mould into which facts must be poured" (1995, 47). Winterson goes on to call Stein's autobiography an "act of terrorism against worn-out assumptions of what literature is and what form its forms can take" (50). What had Stein done, Winterson asks, but "take a genre and smash it" be autobiographical terrorists (53). We can in the classroom, too, and smash rigid expectations of what autobiography can be.

### In the Bathroom Thou Shalt Eat Stones

"In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones." Sufi proverb in <u>The Handmaid's Tale</u> by Margaret Atwood

in the bathroom at intermission she fluffs her dyed blonde hair

she's gorgeous i step aside in the path between the stalls and sinks

the flower who primps with me at the mirror a sleek willow dressed in black who i don't yet know is the same Nicaraguan poet who once fled with her poems in a backpack exiles look different on PBS

we smile shyly our eyes meet in a Hallmark moment this is the bathroom, after all and a woman who has eloquently spoken of how she continually put her family at risk by writing out is free to check her appearance

a woman once told me my poetry is too harsh she's telling the audience by the time I realize i escaped from a crowded bathroom with Daisy Zamora

this poem is for that woman Daisy begins ends: a woman who eats bonbons while i eat stones

O, Daisy there is no sacred sweetness in chocolates for any woman and stones like hairdyes come in many shades and sizes

we all sound harsh in the mirror have reflections weighted with monumental poems

## THE ETHICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"What about your husband and children?" a friend and colleague asked when enquiring about my work in autobiography. "Won't they mind?" I assured her, first of all, that there are many ways to write an autobiography, or autobiographically, as my personal essay in the introduction of this dissertation illustrates. Even if it were possible to write the entire story of my ordinary life from a to z, I would surely put everyone who waded through it asleep!

There is another assumption in my friend's friendly question that needs to be challenged, the notion that we can ever control other people's responses to what we write. Even when we write with the noblest of motives and with what we believe to be the finest of ethical standards and the most protective devices (such as changing names or details), we have to accept that we may offend someone. Writing is dangerous. There are risks. (Re-call Joan Didion's famous lines about the impossibility of pleasing anybody one describes, also addressed earlier in the introduction.)

Writing autobiograph(icall)y is dangerous, because of course we are never just writing about our selves, but about all those to whom we are in relationship, and that spans a very wide area, too. Could it ever be any other way? We live in relationship to the world: our families and friends, our colleagues and students, our pets, our neighbours, strangers, foreigners, presidents, queens...We never take a step without

affecting some/one/thing. Have we stepped on a snail? Crunch! Have we misjudged and twisted an ankle? Have we taken the right path? Used well that fleeting moment to step aside? Have we stepped when we could have hopped or skipped or stood absolutely still?

Writing is dangerous. Absence is always present for me. What is not can always be a possibility. Valerie Raoul adds: "what is said cannot be unsaid" (1998). Though it can be erased, written over, given a different slant or version. If I write autobiograph(icall)y, if I re-search my selves, I am seeking to search for the [what, who, how, why, where, when] I [am, will become] as my plural I's revolve around the spirograph of many, many Others.

Like other feminist re-searchers such as Janice Jipson (1995), I have come to feel that I must approach re-search in this way. The reading I have done in feminist theory alerts me to the colonialism of the privileged studying and then writing about the less privileged; to the appropriation of others' voices for research purposes; to the misrepresentation that can occur in paradigms that are very much steeped in hierarchies and power structures. As I have listened over the years to feminist researchers speak of their work, I began to notice how often they insisted that the work changed <u>them</u>. They became a part of the research. I am seeking a place from which to re-search our selves as we exist in relationship to Others, including the Other in our selves as Julia Kristeva theorizes in an interview

(Clark and Hulley 1990-91).

Those eternal questions echo: aren't we, who are in the academy, part of an elite, privileged and advantaged group? If we focus on our selves, do we contribute to what William Gass has pejoratively called "Autobiography in an Age of Narcissism" (1994)? The question of just who is part of one elite and who is not (and who gets to decide) is a relational one. As a student, I am decidedly not elite if you line me up beside the full and associate and assistant professors. But change the line-up to street people, or newly arrived immigrants who have fled wartorn countries, and the relative status changes drastically. Change the cast of characters once more to the male editors of mainstream publications which predominantly feature men's work, and I am less elite than ever. Step back in time and people the line-up with Nazis, and I am not only non-elite, but my life is in great peril.

I concur with Trinh Minh-ha that anyone can become an oppressor to an-other at one time or another (cited in Ellsworth 1992, 114). Furthermore, we are all oppressed at one time or another. And while I do not claim my Jewish experience is unequivocally identical to bell hooks' black experience, I think I can understand hers because of (or in spite of) mine. I do not apologize for my life of relative privilege, but I am very aware that it places me somewhere very different from the place of many women and men who have not had two loving parents, a happy childhood, a middle class upbringing, and now, a fulfilling and

equally middle class family life with a husband and three children.

I join Jacques Derrida in exclaiming:

Narcissism! There is not narcissism and non-narcissism; there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended. What is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism, one that is much more open to the experience of the other as other. (1995, 199)

I am re-searching autobiograph(icall)y through the mirror of my selves, in the context of the great body of work that already exists, and in relationship to the living and textual Others that I meet and live with and love and encounter every day. I know that I continually chase words in order to even begin to come close to capturing what I think is there. And I know I will never quite capture all there is.

I continue to chase words in the mirror passages that follow and that lead into the next section which re-turns to Martha/Doris through poetry.

### Cracked Pottery

all weekend i dropped objects: my husband's \$100 motorcycle helmet, the lid to my mother-in-law's Brown Betty teapot, words that ought to have followed a preposition

i was reaching: for a boot which caused the helmet to skid and land with a THUD, for the lid which simply slipped out of my hands,

## for immortality in ink

i watched it all fly in slow motion knowing the ending before it hit like watching a film fully foreshadowed

it's just a helmet a lid nouns until the breakage then objects animate with an afterlife of wrath or grace me scrabbling a weaponry of defence my husband of course temporarily unforgiving a furious contrast to his mother's acceptance that the lid was inexpensive and had lasted longer than ever she imagined it would

this morning the crows cawed to one another from the housetops they had been rummaging through plastic garbage bags picking turkey off the bones sifting through scraps of cracked poetry and dented debris calling calling: look past broken lids which sometimes last longer than ever we imagine they would I am at the mirror.

What do I see?

Today, a middle-aged woman with wild hair and glasses,

who hasn't yet gotten dressed.

Naked with her words.

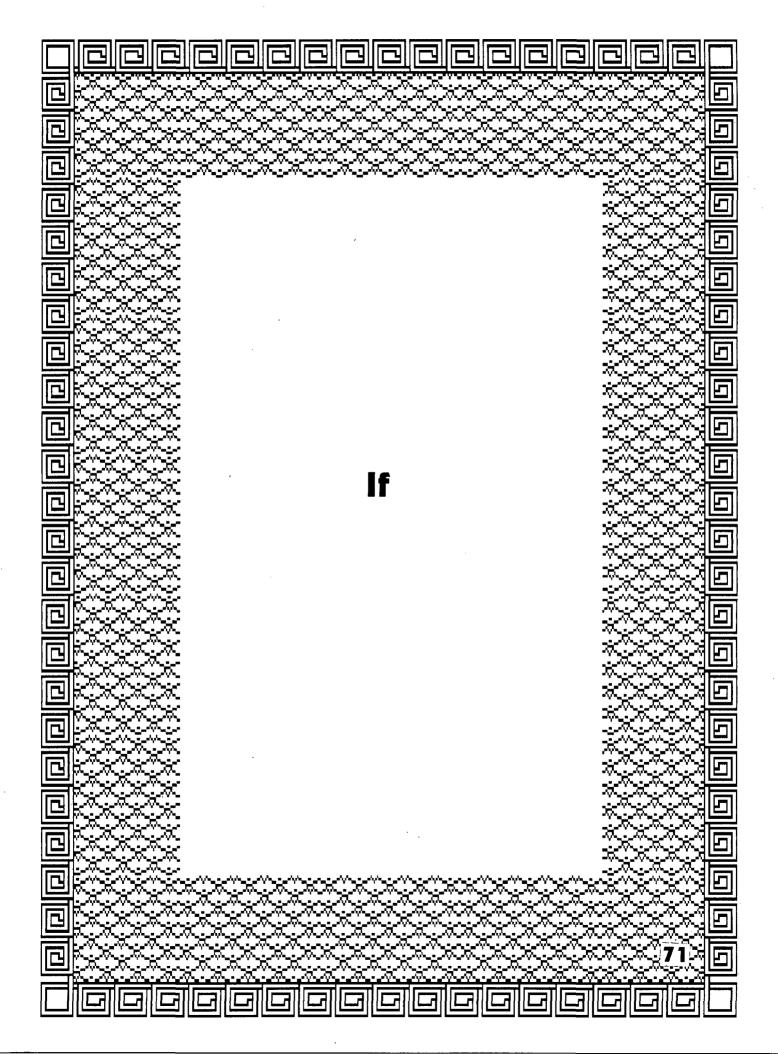
I am at the mirror,

dressed for my teaching day,

in comfortable shoes and a cool dress

that will carry me through the heated tensions of children who claim they do not want to be pulled out for my program and teachers who offer children's names, then send them late, or not at all,

or say they have no idea about what I am doing.



I am at the "mirror," my body partner in a drama exercise. We gaze into one another's eyes, then by tacit agreement,

my partner raises his hands slowly and I follow those movements exactly with my own.

After a while, I spread my hands in an open gesture of acceptance and I watch as each time my hands widen,

his do, too, in a reverse replica of my fan.

Sometimes something unnamed is silently passed back and forth between us, drifting to him,

72

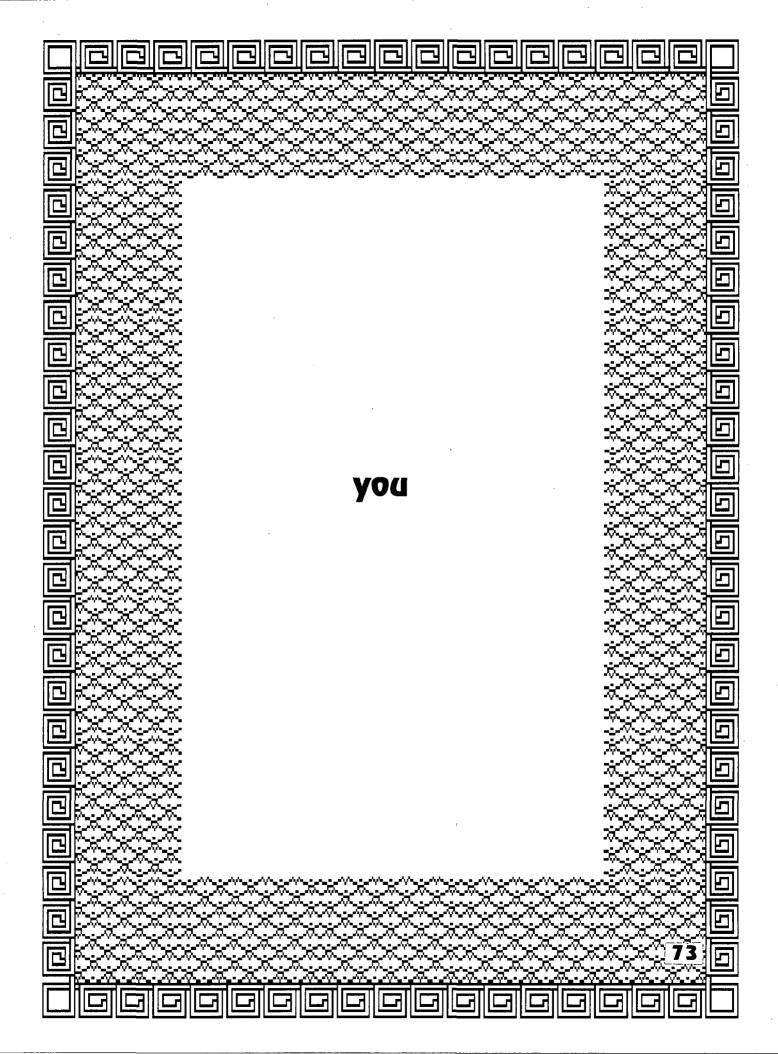
then back to me,

as we continue to move, ever-so-slightly out-of-focus to an observer.

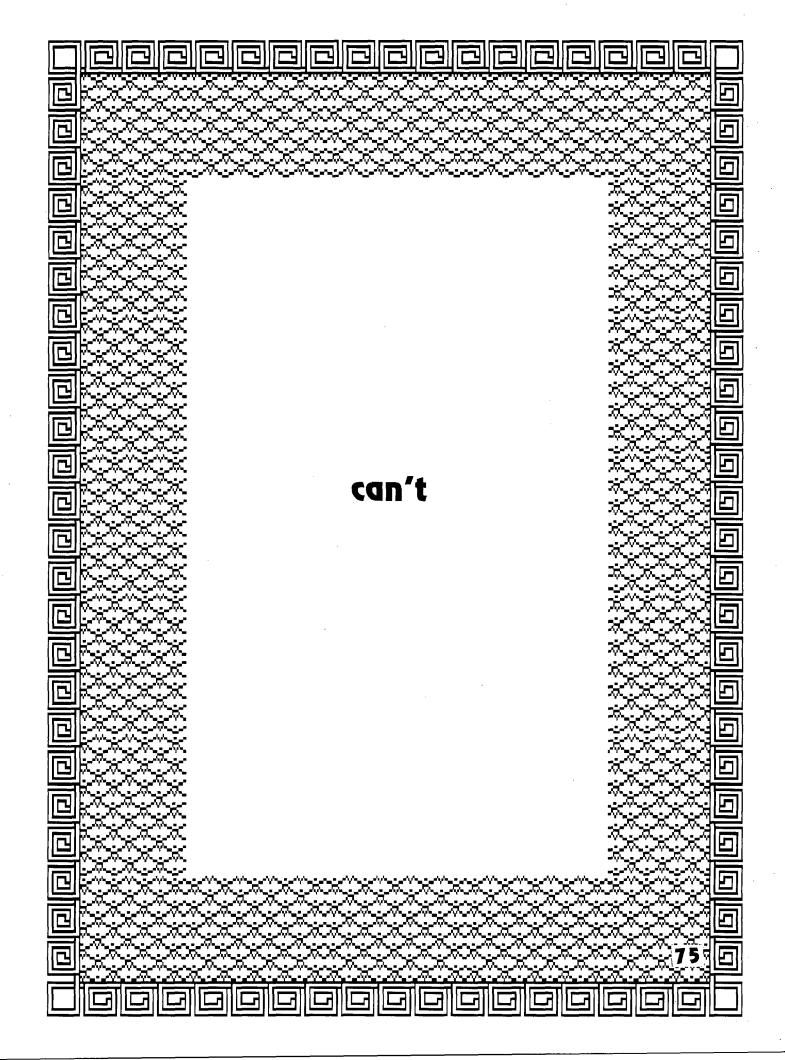
Eventually, the rhythm is as even as two people breathing together

and neither of us can tell who leads with the body, who follows, so that we meld into silver.

This silver swallows the two of us and we are one.



I look first into the mirror in my own room, which elongates my frame, and check my appearance, pleased, then walk to the mirror in my daughter's room where I appear squat, and am appalled. Which reflection is me? Which reflection should I embrace? Both? Both.



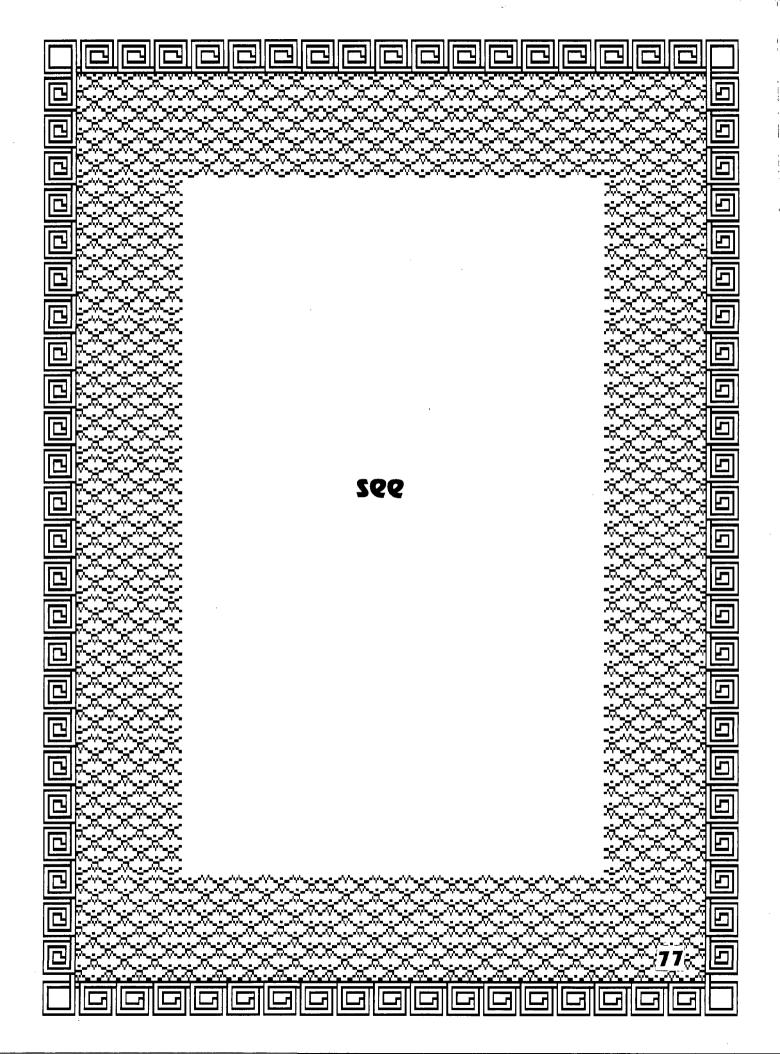
mirrorsmirrorsmirrorsmirrorsmirrorsmirrorsmirrorsmirro

... and I saw truth in the mirror of words.

## Marilyn Bowering in <u>Autobiography</u> (1996, 4)

I do not think she would have agreed it was only *her* truth-instead she often said she looked upon her writing as a mirror.

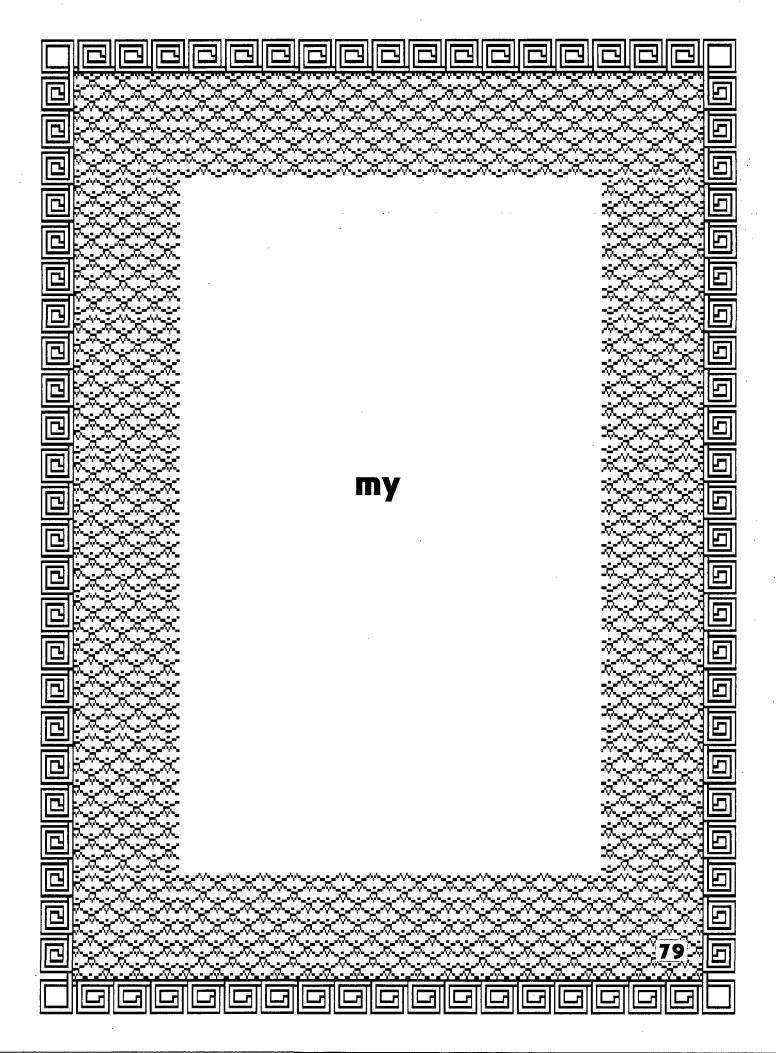
Elizabeth Hardwick in the foreword to Mary McCarthy's <u>Intellectual Memoirs</u> (1992, xi)



... the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of selfreflection in the mirror of (human) nature....

Homi Bhabha (1987, 5)

What is profoundly unresolved, even erased, in the discourses of post-structuralism is that perspective of depth through which the authenticity of identity comes to be reflected in the glassy metaphorics of the mirror and its mimetic narratives. In shifting the frame of identity from the field of vision to the "space of writing," postmodernism interrogates that "third dimensionality" that gives profundity to the representation of Self and Other and creates that depth of perspective which cineastes call the fourth wall; literary theorists describe it as the "transparency" of realist metanarratives. (Bhabha, 6)

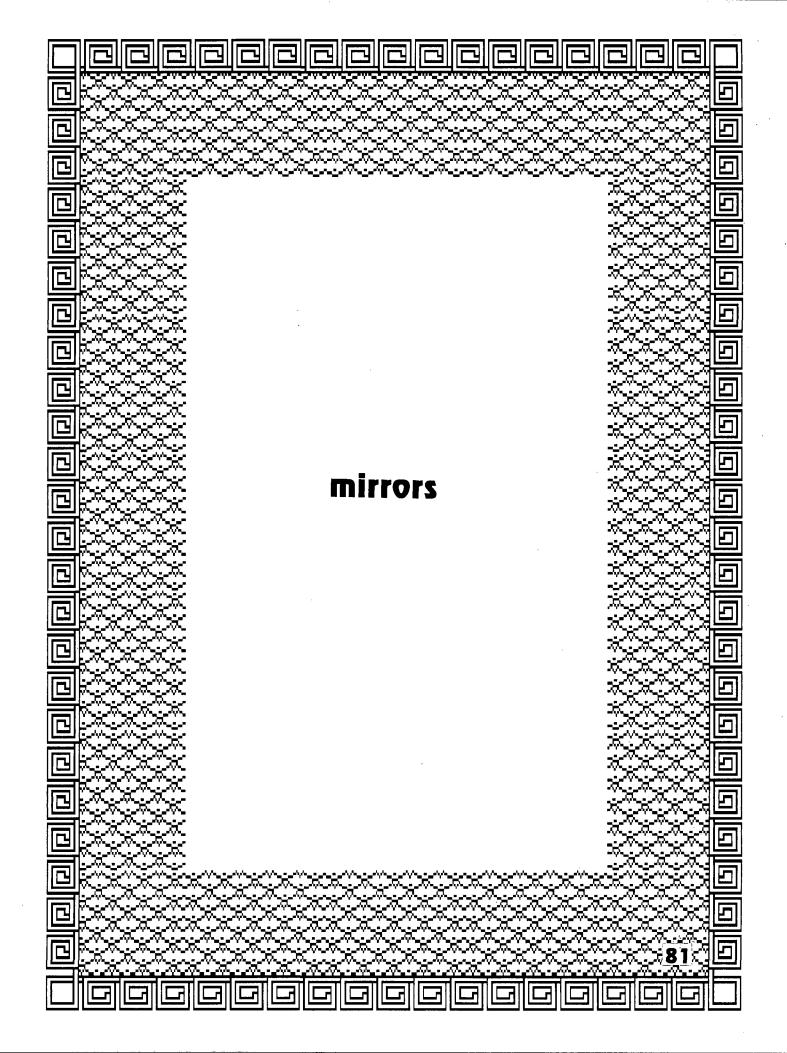


She looked at herself in the mirror. Her white and delicate face lost in darkness, her eyes open wide, her inexpressive lips....

Going out of the limits of her life she did not know what she was saying while looking at herself in the mirror in the friend's room....

The mirror episode continues: I am here in the mirror, she shouted brutal and happy. But what could she do and what couldn't she do?

From a book written by Clarice Lispector, as cited by Hélène Cixous in <u>Three Steps on the Ladder of</u> Writing (1993, 70-71)



#### III. MARTHA-AND-I-IN-MIRRORS

I offer the previous passages and the metaphor of the mirror as a movement deeper into this House of Mirrors. The profoundly personal and poetic autobiographical act has not only taken me deeper and deeper into the silver lining of my own life, but into a House of Mirrors peopled with other women.

This collection of mirror passages is but a sample of the many mirrors I encountered in autobiographical literature and theory, and in cultural practice. For example, in one essay alone, "The Self as Other," by Robert Folkenflik (1993), I counted twenty references to the mirror. I came across so many references to the mirror in my reading, and (surprisingly to me) in my own writing, that I began to see the mirror as a sliver of glass piercing many discourses. I see this sliver of glass, not as a knife that cuts through difference, but rather as a sharp object that makes holes and gaps and pokes through to other dimensions.

Georges Gusdorf writes of the invention of the mirror as disruptive to human experience, after which mirror-gazing became an everyday aspect of modern life (1980, 32).

Nature did not foresee the encounter of man with his reflection, and it is as if she tried to prevent this reflection from appearing. (32)

Gusdorf might also have written that Nature, knowing what she did, foresaw the encounter of woman with her reflection, as the mirror of autobiography widened to include the second sex.

"Autobiography is not a mirror," stated curriculum theorist

82 .

## Poetic Surgery

it's a lot like cosmetic surgery the liposuction of fat word cells lopping off a spare tire of a line augmentation of full-breasted images into a more enhanced lean body of verbs

the poet looks in a mirror too

## ...in/scribed upon the blankness even the silence is a mirror...

From *M(other) of the Text* a poem by Renee Norman

# ...your face the one i know from mirrors and pictures...

From For Sara at Twelve a poem by Renee Norman

and autobiography doyenne Janet Miller at the JCT Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice (1997), perhaps in response to Gusdorf's essay in which he writes: "If it is indeed true that autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image..." (1980, 33). Later in her address, which conceptualized Ellen's coming-out television episode in autobiographical terms, Miller claimed that Ellen is mirrored in difference. Not-mirror or mirror? Or perhaps both? Miller might have clarified: autobiography is much more than the image we think we see at the moment we gaze in the mirror. It is complicated by invisible but weighty cultural and gendered constructions. But autobiography can indeed be a mirror, if we are willing to visualize the mirror differently: as an everchanging House of Mirrors, bending and curving and de-forming images into distortions; as a rear-view mirror, reminding us of what is behind as we simultaneously move ahead; as side-mirrors, affording us a larger-than-real/reel view of what approaches or what has disappeared; as a two-way mirror, where we may or may not be aware that there are others gazing at us as we simultaneously gaze at our selves.

These are the mirrors of autobiographer Andrei Codrescu, who writes:

The mirrors there, at the junction between past and present, make it appear that there are thousands...[of famous people]. But there are only a few. (1994, 28) These are the *mise-en-abyme* mirrors of Gusdorf who also writes: Any autobiography is a moment of the life that it

...but once I thought I saw that shadow's inner tear felt its black fingers clutch my shoulders fast from fear and turning looked into a broken shadow mirror...

> from *Shadow* a poem by Renee Norman

recounts.... One part of the whole claims to reflect the whole, but it adds something of this whole of which it constitutes a moment. Some Flemish or Dutch painters of interior scenes depict a little mirror on the wall in which the painting is repeated a second time; the image in the mirror does not only duplicate the scene but adds to it as a new dimension a distancing perspective. (1980, 43)

These are the mirrors of Folkenflik who writes:

This is the narrative that serves Augustine as a mirror of his own life. And yet it is both mirror and anti-mirror [because it points out what he has not followed, what he has not done]. (1993, 217)

And these are the mirrors of women autobiographers, theorists, feminists, writers, among them Doris Lessing, who in the novel <u>The Four-Gated City</u> writes:

One's got to stand by what one is, how one sees things. What else can you do? And I've had the other thing too, the mirror of it: all my life I've believed that somewhere, sometime, it wasn't like that, it needn't be like this. (1972, 82)

The mirror is symbolic of the autobiographical I, but not in any uncomplicated way, and not just in a metaphoric sense, either. I realized after reading Leigh Gilmore's <u>Autobiographics</u> (1994a) that the trope of metonymy cannot be excluded here, and that often the self (part of the selves) looking in the mirror is/are but a part of some imagined, reflected whole. The mirror reflects what is located near or opposite it, a contiguous association that is metonymic. Gilmore suggests metonymy is much more representative of women's written lives. Women see (them)selves in relation to others metonymically. However, Gilmore does not discount metaphor:

While I would agree that autobiographies are filled with metaphors for writing and for the self and that these metaphors are a crucial part of autobiography's rhetoric, A scene from the movie, Fahreneit 451: One of the "firemen" is in an old woman's house with Montag, who is also a fireman. The house is filled with shelves of books. He is sweeping books off the shelves, ranting to Montag about these forbidden pleasures, in preparation to burning all of them. Novels, he spits out disgustingly.

All about lives that make our own more unhappy... Philosophy--one book says one thing,

another book the opposite. And with particular venom, he gathers up an armful of bound words and cries: Autobiography!

They start with the urge to write. Then two or three books later, they think they are better than everyone else. it is autobiography's metonymies that seem to ground it in real life. Thus, as I will argue, it is within the structure of metonymy that autobiography's metaphors have meaning. (68)

Though Gilmore points out that metonymy seems much less theorized in autobiography studies, it is also, I think, more slippery.

But back to the mirror, the "I-as-mirror" in Gilmore's words (54). According to Jacques Lacan, when the infant looks in the mirror, it sees where it is not, in relation to other objects and people [namely the mother] (Lacan 1977; Raoul 1993). The infant also sees what it is not in relation to the m(other). This "drama" of the mirror stage "manufactures for the subject ... the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality ... " (1977, 4). When as not-infant, we gaze at our body in the mirror, we can focus on an individual part (such as a hand), or take in the total view, or move between part and whole. (Try experimenting with the drama mirror exercise described on Page 72 while locked in eye contact.) Is the face we stare at intently, temporarily forcing the focus off the rest of the body, really ours? To some extent, mirror-gazing is a leap of faith, and what we think we see is not necessarily what is there. Much depends on the angle of view, the way the mirror is turned, who is gazing and when and how, and whether the glass of the mirror is clear (as in a window reflection) or backed with metal. At times the body reflected in the mirror seems "whole"; at other times, an extension of something or someone else, as my "I am at the

On the Edge

the top of the car is folded down like a quilt on a close night the Indian summer sun follows me home in the rearview mirror too bright in my eyes despite dark glasses

a shining pinpoint of light it does not fade along the highway its flashing light atop my vehicle signals alarm

with reverse glances i check what does this signify: a moon on a black-shadowed night a candle lit on a cake in a darkened room a beacon in a window that beckons me home this way the light summons through an open curtain this way, home

when i turn up the driveway i have set the sun aside for another warmth

much later i remember how the mirror caught the glare in my eyes

Renee Norman

mirror" passages on the previous pages illustrate.

The metaphors and metonymies of the mirror can be related to the mirror experiment I learned about at the school where I teach. In this experiment, many mirrors are placed at angles to one another. If the angle is right, a light flashed in one mirror bounces off all the other mirrors. The mirrors produce a metaphoric/metonymic light show that complicates I-as-mirror, the light bouncing off the paper mirrors throughout this textual House of Mirrors.

mirrorsmir

### Vacuum

inside a thermos hot soup warms the silver lining made possible by an empty space between the walls

smooth broth scorches the throat a downward path of heat to gullet

when I gaze into the concave flask emptied afraid to touch bottom a thermos house of mirrors reflects back my face distorted in a grimaced grin disturbed by circular criss-crossed lines in the silver glass

I cannot look into a thermos fill it with my soupy tears perceive the future there

I keep the cold remains until the slosh of more broth heats the vacuum "Now I am in Miss Anna's room, sitting on the edge of her bed, my back stiff, reading her what I have written down, and she says, No, no, Ivy, that won't do. A story isn't a broken mirror, pieces of glass all over the place. A story is a whole thing, it has a beginning and an end, like a bolt of cloth."

> from First Nights by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, cited in Telling Women's Lives Page 166

But stories, like mirrors, reflect back images, and like mirrors, stories can sometimes break and shatter, so that the pieces of glass show only small parts of our selves, parts that can be rearranged into countless patterns. The whole thing is also the sum of the broken parts.

91

I have come to know that enclosed space swallow it whole and keep it warm

A thermos house of mirrors. Many mirrors reflect my engagement in the autobiographical act of writing poetry. Recently, when discussing (yet another) autobiographical poem in a tutorial, George McWhirter mused: "So many reminiscences..." This particular poem originated during my teaching day. A bright student told me how he loved to take things apart and rebuild them, and that made me remember Gerald Zucker, a classmate who had built a vacuum that really flew. I told the story of Gerald, and as we laughed, that brought on a whole spate of memories about Gerald, who sat behind me and used to love to write in ink on the back of whatever I happened to be wearing, and about the class of thirteen children with whom I attended Hebrew School for seven years in Calgary, Alberta. And so a poem was born, now published in a Calgary journal (1997b), where Gerald is Phillip Jacobs, among my other former classmates, who might or might not recognize themselves with/in the protective pseudonyms I gave them.

When Vacuums Fly

in 1961 Philip Jacobs rebuilt his mother's vacuum so it flew first prize at the Science Fair also wrote morse code dashes in ink all over the back of my favourite white dress the designs of a genius while i drew pimples on a portrait of Mr. Ripkind during our weekly half-hour of art

"It has literally become impossible for anyone to read a work of fiction except in terms of the author's life. Plays, novels, stories, poems, are "taught" in schools, in terms of the authors' lives....

(Doris Lessing, Page 489 from The Four-Gated City)

"We have come to Martha Quest, which begins about this time--and a need for explanations. Readers like to think that a story is 'true.' 'Is it autobiographical?' is the demand. Partly it is, and partly it is not, comes the author's reply, often enough in an irritated voice, because the question seems irrelevant: what she has tried to do is take the story out of the personal into the general. 'If I had wanted to write autobiography, then I would have done it, I wouldn't have written a novel.'

One reason for writing this autobiography is that more and more I realize I was part of an extraordinary time..." (Page 160)

"In short, when I wrote Martha Quest I was being a novelist and not a chronicler. But if the novel is not the literal truth, then it is true in atmosphere, feeling, more 'true' than this record, which is trying to be factual. Martha Quest and my African short stories are a reliable picture of the District in the old days." (Page 162)

(rage 102)

"I then got a room, from an advertisement in the *Herald*, in the house of a widow--but it is in *Martha Quest*...No writer can come up with anything as merciless as what Life itself, that savage satirist, does every day." (Page 197)

"Now begins A Ripple from the Storm, the third in the sequence Children of Violence, and of all my books it is the most directly autobiographical." (Page 267)

"There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth." (Page 314) (Doris Lessing, Under My Skin: Volume I of My Autobiography.)

worried i'd have to ask him for my first kotex saw him half-smile when he passed by my desk hurt outlined in his pock-marked face a lesson in cruelty

and homely Joanie Dvorkin came to me declared she and Tommy were an item i'd have to bow out after years of our mothers crying: machetunem whenever they met in shul it would not be my first rejection

and Sarah Holtzman wild Sarah Holtzman whose mother spanked her with a wooden hanger the wire ones had no substance ran a black market pencil and eraser store out of the teachers' stockroom at Hebrew School played strip poker with her male cousins made Dvorah who'd arrived from Israel take off her top so we could see her well-developed breasts you didn't have to do it i told Dvorah next day

as i wrote steamy entries about red-haired Harry Holt for five years in my five-year diary: (today Harry squeezed me in a game of tag; it felt good)

who knew then Becky would come to my engagement party in leather pants and a see-through blouse no bra Sarah would leave her pearl ring in an airport washroom love a married man who left his wife and three children then dumped her Joanie's firstborn would be housed forever in an institution and i would have recurring dreams about Jerry Goldfarb's house where i'd never been long after we went to prom (i wore the same pink gown in every dream) long after the year he died (a brain tumour) while i was at university

36 years later in a school

And, standing here, feeling herself (or rather, the surface of herself) to be a mass of fragments, or facets,

or bits of mirror reflecting qualities embodied in other people, she looked at the ascending stairs, much narrower and steeper here than lower in the house, and at the edges of each stair, and noted that the carpet needed renewing.

"Martha" Page 365 in *The Four-Gated City*, Doris Lessing

95

# Chris my student tells me he likes to build and take things apart

Philip Jacobs rides again!

Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth but not its twin. (Kingsolver 1996, 71)

Yes, memories and reminiscences, and the desire, no, the compulsion to write them into poetry is unabated after six years.

Sometimes I wonder if I am bottomless, like the mirror. Will I ever hit bottom in the abyss of autobiography?

"It gets harder every day," Oprah Winfrey confessed in an interview (1997). "When you've done it [daytime TV talk show] for twelve years, you've covered every topic."

Can autobiographical writing, like daytime TV talk shows, run out of material?

In an attempt to help me focus, and perhaps sensing my desperation that every poem I write might be my last (how long can one go on writing about the selves?), George McWhirter suggested I needed a project (although I confess I thought I already had one). The project became the Martha poems, which grew out of my obsession with the five Martha Quest "Children of Violence" books and author Lessing's autobiographies, where she writes that her life is written in the Martha Quest books.

I read history with conditional respect.

I have been involved in a small way with big events,

and I know how quickly accounts of them

become like a cracked mirror. (Page 11)

Women often get dropped from memory,

and then history. (Page 12)

Under My Skin: Volume I of My Autobiography, to 1949 Doris Lessing

# Journal Entry

You need a project, said George, and I thought I already had one. Was he tired of reading about my ordinary life? Couldn't be. He told me once that the strangest characters he had ever met--and he reads a lot of fiction and poetry-were the ones he'd met in my poetry, out of my ordinary life. Was he feeling my own indirection, my sense that I had no life anymore unless I had something in it to write about, my fear that each poem I write is my last, I have nothing more to say, that's it, I'm finished, empty, storyless, bottomed out? And yet as I now write about Martha, this character I have lifted and borrowed from Doris Lessing, considering her life and times, it is still me who sneaks into the poems, creeping in unannounced not only between the lines and stanzas, but offering details and impressions and emotions of my own life for Martha to use, a curiously freeing and uncensored experience where I know I am contemplating and writing about events in my life which I would never have written about so openly under the guise of my own name. Writing the Martha poems is like writing a novel, only I can leave big gaps and open spaces for Martha and me to move around in.

encountered Martha the mirror, And so Ι in and the autobiographical act of writing poetry expanded to viewing/writing Martha. This mirror reflects back the Martha of Lessing's Bildungsromane (that is, as I read and interpret her); the Martha who is in me; and my selves as they filter through Martha's reflection. These Marthas come to light in the mirror of writing, a process at times metaphoric, at times metonymic.

And so I entered Martha, inhabiting her like a spirit for a series of poems. These poems are as much about me as about No animals in the kingdom except for humans and chimpanzees understand that a reflection in the mirror is the self and not another animal.

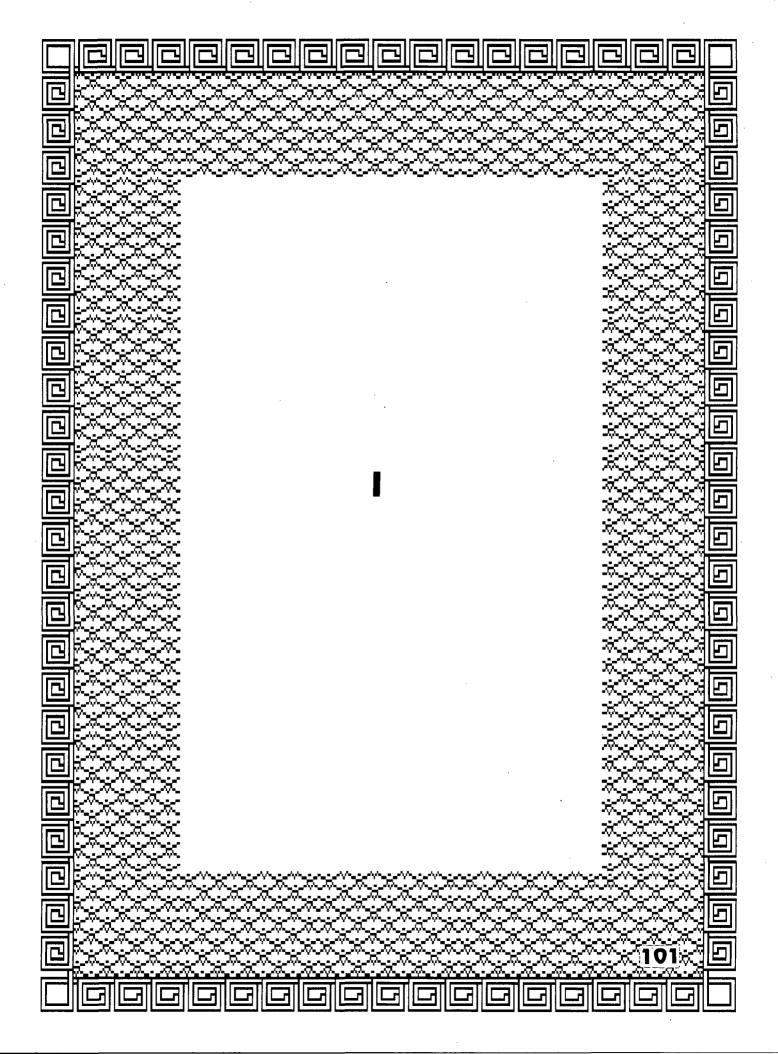
> Fact offered on the Discovery Channel

Martha, or Doris, and I found that in the process of exorcising Martha from the books and giving her a newly re-written life in my poems, I was also exorcising even more of me. I was also considering all I have never been. There apparently is no bottom; autobiography follows me everywhere; and Oprah is wrong, not every topic is ever covered.

What is especially interesting to me in the autobiographical venture with Martha are the many differences between Martha and me. She is Rhodesian, I am Canadian. I am Jewish, she is not. She was for a while an avowed Communist. I have little interest in politics. She left her first husband and only daughter (Doris left two out of her three children). I count myself content in my life with my own three daughters and my husband. And yet, and yet, both women, both wives, both mothers....In the words of one of my Martha poems:

yet if she rose off the pages swelling in novel possibilities i would recognize the limbs hers a composite heart transplanted where a person is most worthy of the color of her skin the cold ungentle parts of her that worded me....

The cold ungentle parts of her that worded me. With/in the differences, there are mirrors that reflect back metonymic parts of the body of humanity and living, frames of resemblance whose wavering silvery pictures are both one thing and another at once, a doubling, in the sense that Homi Bhabha evokes:



The performance of the doubleness or splitting of "the subject" is enacted in the *writing/écriture* of the poems I have quoted. (1987, 7)

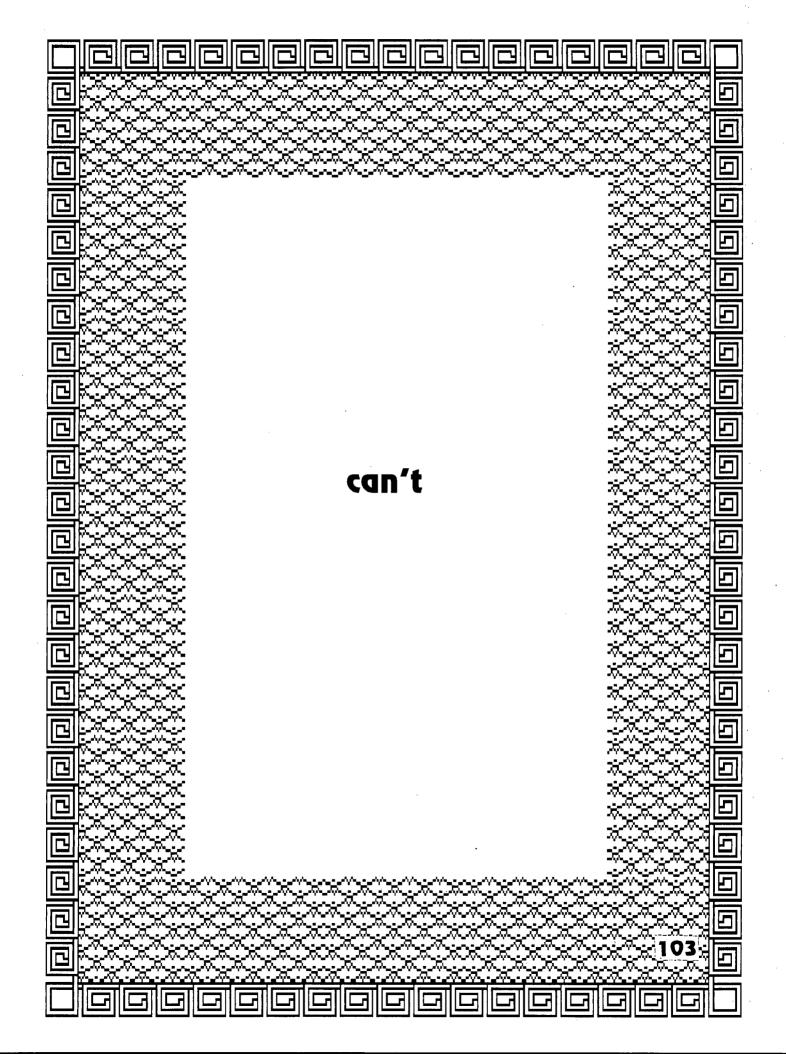
This doubling is both a presence and an absence, both inside and outside the frames. Bhabha adds that

... the subject cannot be apprehended without the absence or invisibility that constitutes it ... so that the subject speaks, and is seen, from where it is *not*.... (5)

The splitting of the subject is further compounded by the doubleness of Martha in the mirror, Martha as Other. This is the Other of *écriture feminine*, a form of literary expression which articulates "the inarticulable 'Other'" (Perrault 1995, 9), a "metaphor for whatever appears to disrupt a uniform presence, authority, or (re)presentation" (9). This is the Other of the female body, which, in Hélène Cixous' terms, is written and is already text:

Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text. (1991, 52)

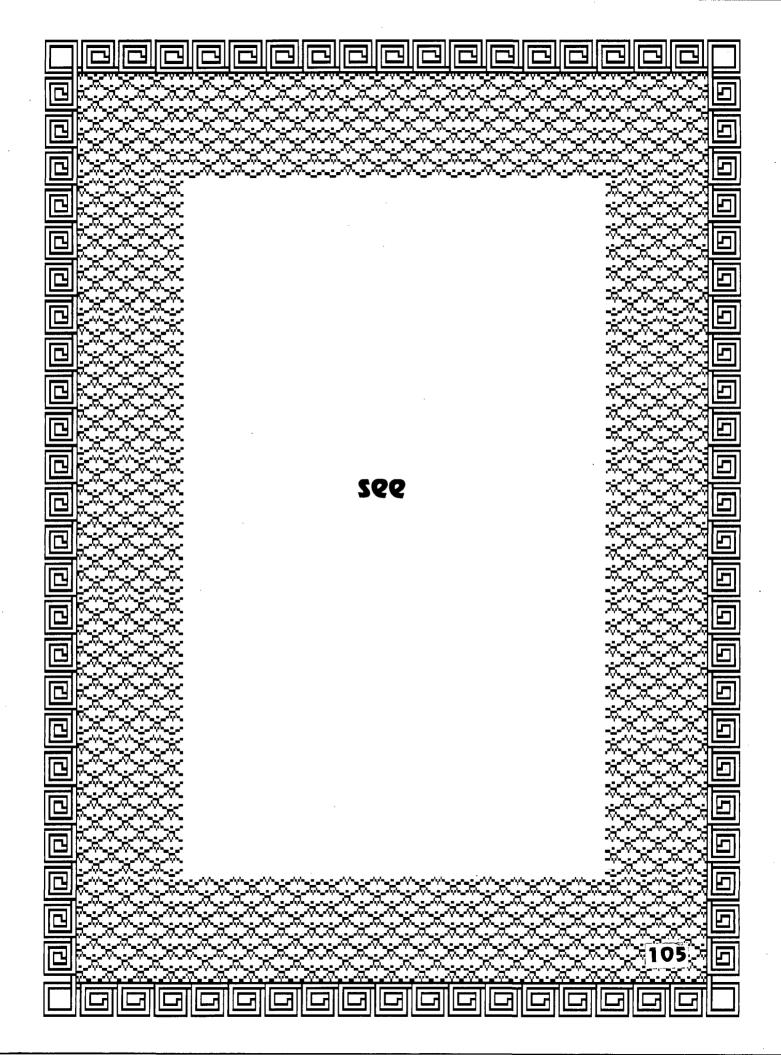
The text of the Martha poems re-writes my body and its parts into a new kind of autobiography, combining elements of self (auto) with Other, life (bios) with text, writing (graphie) with imagining. Autobiography seems to be everywhere. Store windows, ponds, spoons, TV screens, picture glass, Bhabha's "third dimensionality," and novels that are *Bildungsromane*, all mirror us back, however distorted.



## Journal Entry

The Martha poems get into somewhat different territory: autobiographical fiction which inspires fictional autobiography. My collusion with a fictional character (who is really autobiographical), whom I then inhabit and write about as if I am living her story. I story her life with what I am also living (and have lived). The reader connection is brought into the writer/text triad in a very dominant way: the reader not only interprets what the writer/text offer, but takes this a step further and creates another kind of triad: reader/writer who writes new text which has arisen out of/intersected with original text for new readers to then interpret in a new reader/writer/text triad. Truly an intertextual and multi-textual layering of the reader response. It is more than reader response, really, as I read not only as a reader but as a writer. Perhaps we all do? When I begin to write out of what I have read, I become a writer/reader (a writing reader) and the new text is like a burlap that warms the frozen ground. It temporarily covers over the ground of the text underneath--which is always there. Sometimes completely buried, but felt or known to be there. Sometimes parts poke through, or sometimes stones and roots of text are formed in new ways, retaining the old. And when the burlap is removed, the new text is peeled away, and there lies the text that came before, looking the same, but somehow different due to the temporary covering. Some literary erosion occurs.

Folkenflik suggests that since for Lacan the self can only exist in language, the self in autobiography "is the only thing we can call a self," but the self as other "is a condition of the autobiographical narrative" (1993, 234) as we consider the I who is talking and the I of the past, the Writing I and the Written I. Gilmore refers to the three identities of

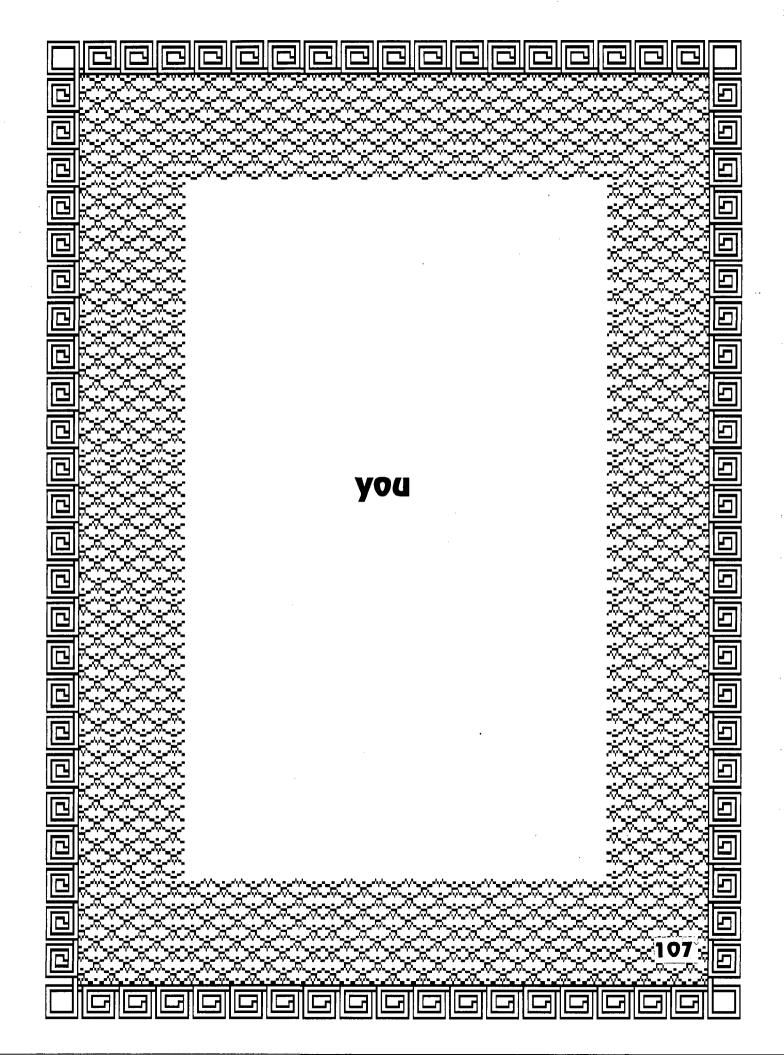


autobiography and calls them: "the I who lives, the I in the text, the I who writes I" (1994a, 93). Roland Barthes, on the other hand, distinguishes between the self who was, the self who is and the self who writes (cited in Stanley 1992, 131-132). (There is also the self who reads, observes, assesses....)

Folkenflik concludes his essay by suggesting that what he has called a "mirror stage in autobiography" can instead be conceived as "autobiography itself as a mirror stage in life, an extended moment that enables one to reflect on oneself by presenting an image of the self for contemplation" (234). He continues:

This does not happen in early childhood, but, if at all, in adulthood or old age. And the self is not that of the mirror or photograph. In Lacan's terms it is part of the symbolic, not the imaginary. I say this because if the "I" relates to a "you," it is not simply narcissistic, as in the infantile "mirror stage." Autobiography promises intersubjectivity.... (234)

Autobiography may also leave room for Julia Kristeva's imaginary and "semiotic," which come to life in the *jouissance* of poetic language, and "[continue] to co-exist with the symbolic" (Raoul 1992, 269). Nevertheless, Folkenflik presents a "mirror stage" that extends into the autobiographical act, much more than a mere self-gaze, much more than a stage of our lives in any historical or biographical sense. He offers a compelling reason for the autobiographical venture of writing self into language, at any age. Drawing upon Lacan, the self in autobiography is/are always more than what is at first glance reflected in the mirror, always what is also not there, and additionally, what is



written into language.

This I who relates to a you. This intersubjectivity which autobiography promises. "I am not Martha," I have written in the poem, "For Martha's Ears Only." (See the "Martha in the Mirror" poems included at the end of this section.) This line calls into question the slippery subjectivity of the I, a contested place/space in the post-structuralist enterprise. The divided I, the split I, the contradictory I, the multiple I, the unstable I, the non-unitary I, the separated I, the autobiographical I, the I-in-the-mirror, dividing and subdividing like cells. This "dance of I's" (Gilmore 1994a, 90). And in the Martha poems, the I who claims not to be another I, but writes her self into the poetry of Martha.

How do we accept the holistic Self of some feminist rhetoric (as Jeanne Perrault terms it), the Self of *écriture feminine* which validates difference, the Self which becomes selves, and still hold on to some sense of identity without resorting to the binary opposition of either/or? A contemporary feminist does not have to delimit the I-in-the-mirror identity, but rather in blurring it, can re-cover her body in the mirror and acknowledge its changing dimensions in the textuality of how she is continually written and re-written. Kristeva suggests that we are produced in our texts as we produce them (Lechte 1990, 58), an eternal subject-in-process of a text-in-progress (Norman 1995a, 25). I once wrote:

No longer composed of the same parts I slowly gave up, but

### I-in-the-mirror

### .......................

this "dance of I's"

(Leigh Gilmore 1994, 90)

the divided I/I

the split i-i

### ???????? the contradictory I ???????

I

i

the multiple aiiii

the an iiiii stable i

the non-unitary I/I/I

the autobiographical I/eye

the sep-ar-ate-d e-y-e-i-l

missing them, I am an apparition apportioned into poems and stories and other written matter: eyes replaced by words, images instead of ears, a nose of metaphors, ink to taste pieces of life-sustaining nurturance, and memories that probe like fingertips. (Norman 1997a, 33)

Perhaps it is in the production of text that we hold on to some sense of identity, however this changes. The record of words is the record of an identity, however it is subject to the next experience that comes along and re-forms it.

No sooner do the words inscribe experience, another experience comes along and re-writes a life, the already written text be/coming a record of words subject to the multi-faceted subject who recorded them, subject to the multi-faceted subject who read them. And always, subject to the multi-faceted texts reflected in that mirrored sea of texts. (Norman 1995a, 28)

The Martha poems re-present the autobiographical I in an autobiographical body of poems that is layered with material and textual selves. The Kristevan intertextuality which is glassy throughout these poems is "guilty" of re-writing which occurs through re-reading, re-reading which occurs through re-writing, an inter-textual inter-connectedness which is not innocent of the words and interpretations of others (Norman 1995a, 28):

Reading then is writing, in an endless movement of giving and receiving: each reading reinscribes something of a text; each reading reconstitutes the web it tried to decipher, but by adding another web. (Conley 1991, 7)

A text is always guilty, in an Althusserian sense. A text is a rereading, not only because we must reread in order not to consume but also because it has already been read. We approach it with the memory of other texts, and there is no innocent reading as there is no innocent writing. (12)

This "guilt" of intertextuality pokes holes in the mirror stage of the autobiography of the Martha poems, so that they are "incoherent" in the positive sense in which Gilmore uses the

## If you can't see my mirrors

I can't see you!

# Sign on the back of a truck

term (1994a, 81).

In the exemplary text of the Martha poems, autobiography is a mirror stage of my life, involving moments where I am reflecting on my selves by presenting the image of Martha written in the language of poetry. If, as Gilmore contends,

... autobiography provides a stage where women writers, born again in the act of writing, may experiment with reconstructing the various discourses ... in which their subjectivity has been formed.... (1994a, 85)

and "writing is born when the writer is no longer" (Minh-ha 1989, 35), then I have been born again through Martha, experimenting and mapping "loss and transgression" (Gilmore 1994a, 73). I have also been writing the Martha poems as a kind of trespassing between genres, experiencing a "desire to write as trespassing" (63). Re-call that Gilmore asks: "Where is the autobiographical?" (13), claiming that autobiographical writing can be expressed in a variety of genres. I answer: "Here, in the poetry that writes my life and Martha's," always mindful of what Jerome Bruner playfully writes about autobiographers in Plato's Republic, namely, that they would have been as dangerous as poets, since they practise essentially the same art (1993, 55). insists that more than genre Gilmore is at stake in autobiography, that it is also gendered. The Martha poems (and indeed, all my autobiographical writing) are a gesture towards mapping some of that gendered territory. I can move around in all the spaces which the mirror opens, all the "qlassy metaphorics" and metonymics in-between I-in-the-mirror and Martha-in-the-mirror.

## If you can't see my mirrors

I can't see you!

alaury & to alaced ody as aging

## MARTHA IN THE MIRROR

(a manuscript of poems)

by Renee Norman

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#### Martha, in White

she has sewn a white gown for herself the vestal virgin of discontent she dances in this bridal skin out of a mudhut home

floats over the deeper mud in the rains still unsullied except for spatters on the hem

like blood they stain the white fabric weigh down the gauze of the dress with fingertips heavy and black as if someone is dragging her back, back snipping the threads she worked so carefully exposing all her darkness underneath

#### I Am the Land

this mud, the rains the heat of the veld and the movement of a jacaranda tree throb in her heart the rhythm through centuries of weather-beaten abuse on skin the country the scarred back of a monkey-kaffir-skin like muck trod upon-sucks her in covers her head she breathes moist earth loose from the plough of footsteps running hers

#### Between Friends

he lends Martha books the latest in socialist trends between navy blue hard covers that replace the childhood games of their youth books held against her chest to block his gaze at her new breasts

does he daily chant the Jewish prayer which thanks God for not being born a woman as he lectures her on dialectical materialism and the plight of the worker?

it is his smouldering Jewishness as much as the books which attract her over and over to his father's store the old man (eyebrows raised) peering at her from beneath his yarmulke distrustful of another Gentile shiksah in a land where white supremacy is draped like carpet across the veld

with Marx and Engels and the trouble in Spain they spar his passion to bend her thoughts turn another kind of prayer

#### Between Wor(1)ds

in book time between wor(1)ds books stacked like steps around the architecture of her rented room Martha does not sleep snacks on sentences all night long

gone is the flat line drawing of her day the structure of the office the symmetry of a prim supervisor the tailored suits on cool skin

in her nylon slip she climbs and climbs the words a stairway to her reformation amazed at first light of morning to be identical she has not moved at all

#### Mother

the word lays claim to Martha
a heavy breastplate of armour
encircling her
until she finds it hard to breathe
sometimes she wants to slap her mother
throw the nearest object
at those two nervous chattering
lines of lip
which always seem to dribble criticism:
 the unsuitable close fit of your dress, Martha
 the wildness that sends you to those books, those ideas,
 Martha
 can't you just settle down with the child
 and welcome matronhood

#### Motherhood

the word like a drawstring pulled tight
and then unfastened
back and forth between
the chafe of strangulation
and the freedom of relief
 love with anger
 edginess with pride
 ownership with fear

Martha pulls away from the endless tugging her mother's thin body birdlike over a hundred broken dreams

laying the sharp sudden burn of a noose letting go

#### Martha, Leaving

mama

she can hear the bleat like a lamb knows the thumb will find its way to the bottomless hollow of mouth sees the diapers hanging to dry unfolded, white flags of surrender

she can feel the small body weight pressed against the ache of her breasts though her hands are empty

but flung out weightless no longer attached to the part of her that thinks limbs drooping out of embroidered nightgowns

she remembers the calendar on the wall months of softness of pink and blue wool knitted into patterns the smell of fresh, innocent powder through the sharp yellow of urine that spot on the neck where she buried her nose to breathe baby

she feels and remembers all of it as she watches her hands break through the door to air

#### Martha's father:

the boy-man damaged by war & the Englishman who emigrated to Southern Rhodesia with a Queen Anne chair

he is a heat sensor who reflects Martha's change in temperature or a veil that is drawn to distance confrontation

he knows the restlessness in her but did not question her marriage did not pass judgement either when she left the child

deep in a drug-induced sleep he mutters wisdom awake he offers nightmares

fingers that accuse stakes of the fallen walls around his body his mind's grasp of the horror he brings home to her

when she reads the first documented accounts of Hitler's atrocities it is her father's ribcage she envisions every bone of Adam another finger pointing The Mouse Ran Up the Clock

Martha knows how to wait in doctor's offices men's beds over bitter cups of coffee in cafés by all the sidestreets and alleyways leading to a different world the waiting is a virus in her blood that spreads

like many women she lives behind the clock hands where they meet as if that overlap were protection from a lapse

once a woman said: you're frightening the mothers picking up their children at the church-are you meeting someone here? can't you wait somewhere else?

she moved away an excommunicated mouse felt her cheeks burn with shame knew for a moment what it meant to be black

how the waiting must have flushed through her eyes red with desperation the mothers thought she'd steal their precious children

like the dog in Cadiz, Spain who at last count had waited 7 years outside the hospital where his master died Martha knows how to wait

Assignation

he enters Martha as he might a room where the light is blinding his eyes

in the tub he draws circles on her skin
with the soap
laughing he tells her
on his way to meet her
approached and propositioned
"i said i already have a lady"

he pushes small beds together holds Martha where the space between them forms a crevice a hard ridge of earth she feels beneath her back overpowering his tender hold

in this scented sinkhole talking the pronoun I rings in her ears

it is then she knows the future her skin round with dried white foam

#### Dream Moments

Martha felt his absence keenly when next day the meeting over he looked at her stubborn, unhappy defiant a kind of unperceptive dullness in his eyes missed moments that's what she feared most from these encounters

in her dream his kiss so fierce grabbed the unresolved feeling between them crushed it in the physical act of embrace

today her arms empty like a baby torn from a loving grip he stood there only a dream away

#### Dear Doris Lessing

Doris-i am borrowing Martha am writing autobiographical episodes under her name an alias for my own indiscretions

Doris-i am signing her out like a library book opening her chapters bending the corners of pages and reading them backwards

Doris-i am borrowing Martha will not return her in the same condition although she's long overdue

#### Martha Answers

you think you know me so well as you sit in your house with your middle class life

that wasn't me why are you tainting me with your own pathetic stories waiting in the churchyard and hauling out my parents, my friends for re-inspection changing Doris' history

what do you know of war or injustice i grew up with spilled blood in my veins & crushed skulls for breakfast

rug fluff in an ovary you were not even born how dare you invade my soul These Women in the Mirror

while Hannah was interned in a Parisian detainment camp dreaming of a lost lover who signed Nazi memos Martha/Doris distributed pamphlets in the Black district wondering if her children placed their baby teeth under pillows not-too-late at night

and Dorothy wrote poems and practised politics only feeling free the moment she learned of her husband's demise

I was not yet born into this women's world an egg latent in my mother's womb rocked in forgotten memory on an immigrant ship

how is it without ears yet formed I heard these women calling from a choric past years before I met them on the mirror of a page

#### Till Death Do Us Part

she wakes to his snores air sucked into a rhinoceros her elbow in his back a pencil pointed writing her dislike

no, it is not dislike, distaste strong and bitter with baked edges

the baby cries out in her sleep, briefly a clarion that returns her to the domestic no, she has undone the apron of dumb acceptance

she can smell the beer the smoke on the long drawn-out breath of another gigantic hippopotamus

repelled by the injustice in his freedom to make such a zzzz she creeps around in her mind gathering twigs of hatred to fuel her blaze

#### Messages from Martha

Martha wants to tell me how her body was stolen when she got pregnant how she could not find the bone on the inside of her ankle for months the pressure of her finger searching left a dent like poking around in the stuffing of a cooked turkey

Martha wants me to know it was not her choice that women should throw up blow up stretch beyond all that could be imagined until the skin on her belly pulled parchment-thin was a hot air balloon about to explode in letters

and Martha wants me to know every night when i arrange the blankets round the fireplace of a small reddened cheek and run my hand along the stove of a dear damp forehead i am touching the body the bone the heat of her scripture

#### Through the Crib Bars

#### I.

her pink cheeks leak through the crib bars asleep at last as if she hadn't been screaming that colicky high-pitched wail only moments ago

shadows of the rails fall down across her small back with weightless rods that imprison her to Martha's care for an instant Martha sees the stripes as lashes from a whip she shakes the image off with loathing

afraid to touch the soft skin for fear she'll wake and start the cycle again too soon she dreams the baby is pliant molded to her ribs like putty more like the babies in the books with four hour schedules and gurgles not this fierce creature hard to hold impossible to cuddle

#### II.

she calls the baby's name through the leafy openings in the hedge a kind of lament whispered in the floral underworld but the baby doesn't respond already she has forgotten Martha forgotten the vessel

her curls are looser now the head upright she sits unaided fist tight around a plastic toy slick from saliva Martha misses her more than she would have thought possible a pink baby from some magazine Martha feels pain that someone accomplished what she didn't

III.
the rules are that she must observe
from a distance
(her mother makes that clear)
when Martha sees the child
placed on her father's sickbed daily
a small body curved into
her father's emaciated thigh
she can smell the camphor of the medicines
hovering
and her mother's servitude

IV.

in the photos a stranger with Martha's eyes glances back good-byes made years ago

#### Martha in England

she is not the Martha i met on the pages of Southern Rhodesian veld this second Martha walks into the novel of an English family's life hidden in the complications of their British citizen's lives

it is not the Martha i have welded into being all regret and pain and memory as if with this new landscape one which her mother and father breathed into her infant lungs she can exhale with ease the heat, sweat, wounds, iron of Jacob's Burg Lost Landscapes

Martha! i call her name in the séance of this poem invoking the spirit of her land the heat of Southern Rhodesian sun beyond the damp grey English rains

my own memory of landscape is patched onto my first flight away from the parched prairie the pull of the plane into the altitude of the unknown swelled with sorrow

neither of us could bear to leave or stay knowing that if we grew into the moist soil of wet places our selves and souls would keep from burning dry

#### In the House on Radlett Street

*i cannot stay long* Martha's caution to the household a distance she required unencumbered was the word she conjured

the word transformed: entrenched in long years where she seldom remembered the initial warning

the Martha who had walked the streets of London for days hungry exhausted inside herself reaching deep into a core of fresh apple flesh

though this middle-aged Martha had nothing to show for years of service just prune-dried skin on her hands she was an apple doll on a stick stuck away inside someone's bottom drawer in the house on Radlett Street

but not ill-treated not at all likely would be missed if she left a part of dinner parties and family plans daughter of Eve she had grown from seedling to oak whose leaves changing colour signalled each new season in the house blending in to the stable colors

but Martha knew it was a doll's existence the way she played house as a child mother of dolls wife of playmates and nothing real to call her own at the end of the day when carriage was wheeled back into the corner lifeless because the players had disappeared to families of their own

#### Confetti

more important than the people she sees through gauze in her interior life she visits corridors of memory that twist and turn a maze of pain re-visited again and again every phrase facial movement a remembered piece to complete the puzzle

aloud she names no part of flesh so when her daughter's name appears on a peace march placard CAROLINE she reads it like a newspaper eager for the first glimpse of the day but easily placed upon the fireplace hearth

later when she revolves in the tunnel of madness her introspection has arranged that sign will appear from the top of a ten foot window distraught she plunges to the grassy dreams of half-asleep, half-awake and alive, broken she eats the excrement of ashes blowing high letters tiny print CAROLINE caroline burnt confetti of a lost child

#### On the Rug of Madness

one reddened leaf suspended in the air on the finger of a spider web this is what Martha thinks lying on the rug in the midst of their madness this is the place where Lynda always lives Martha visits the dying green the plunge off the great grasping hands of a tree caught on the happenstance of this limb of web not clinging precarious desperate or afraid but waiting for the sensation of the rest of the fall

# Martha in the Mirror

Martha in the mirror is a young girl expected to do so well at school a young woman drinking dancing at sundowners carefree alive a young wife and mother with a sense of purpose

Then, who drew these lines on a neck? this pouch that sags underneath a chin? weatherbeaten hands that must belong to some farm labourer and a thin frame no longer voluptuous just thin

image is reflected back
again and again
in the disinterested glances of men
who quickly look away
children whose faces never light up
at airport terminals

this 3-way mirror exposes every sharp angle of relationship

# For Martha's Ears Only

if she were to take shape
in my room
i would whisper
the only two words that fit

i am not Martha not a child of war seeking solace not Martha trapped in a loveless marriage or oppressed by children's petulance

yet if she rose off the pages swelling in novel possibilities i would recognize the limbs hers a composite heart transplanted where a person is most worthy of the color of her skin the cold ungentle parts of her that worded me and whisper: i understand

## What I Dream for Her

it's not what i dreamed for her this grey doomed climate following Martha over the mud of the veld youthful rebellion dried by marriage and motherhood the releasing rains of communism and lovers in a spectacular rainbow of abandonment finally to become housekeeper-cum-lover-cum-friend a dull autumn in a brilliant succession of seasons

there have to be some other endings not failed marriages not dead lovers not lost children this whirlwind of the past a cyclone of madness

i want to give her mild temperatures the contentment of a daughter's warm back lodged up against her own solid earth under the fallen leaves of a home of her own and love, a cloudburst of love

# **ROOM TWO: THE OTHER SIDE OF MIRRORS**

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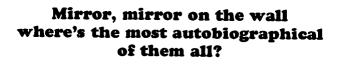
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. . . .

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#### IV. AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN/AS RE-SEARCH: GETTING LOST

As well as writing autobiograph(icall)y about Martha/Doris, in the previous sections I pondered autobiography in/as research. Re-search implies investigation, findings, data... Donald Blumenfeld-Jones and Thomas Barone in <u>Daredevil Research</u> write of alternative, artistic modes to display data in the educational research process: " ... we are concerned with relationships between data display and forms of expression" (1996, 84).

What is my data? (A recent report in the news confirms I can now make data singular. Data is...not are.) In my autobiographical work, am I the data like Data on *Star Trek*, *The Next Generation*? Data is...not are.

Blumenfeld-Jones and Barone continue: " ... data display may be a form of concrete poetry that attempts to teach the reader about the findings of an investigation" (84).

What am I investigating? What have I found?

Echoes of Erika Hasebe-Ludt's dissertation work, when one of her committee members commented: "I have read your thesis for the third time, and I still wonder: What did she find?" (Hasebe-Ludt and Norman 1996, II-9).

Must something first be lost before it is found?

Lost and Found: mittens, data, poems, socks...

"To teach the reader about the findings...." Take heart, steadfast reader, I am not sure I must teach you anything in order for you to find out what I must have lost.

And perhaps what I have lost is simply--me.

In Part III of <u>Repositioning Feminism</u> (Jipson et al., 1995), titled "Getting Lost," the authors write:

To "get lost" is to continually interrogate and distance ourselves from the positions we take up as researchers as a means of locating sites of power and privilege. (135)

They seek alternatives to traditional research, which can be exploitative and patriarchal. In a chapter on research as autobiography, Janice Jipson states:

What I learn from research, I learn from myself. (188)

and

My only area of expertise seems to be myself. (188)

and

My quest is to invent an autobiographic inquiry: a methodology through which to find the patterns for understanding what has happened to me as a teacher and as a woman; a method for imposing meaning on my own life. (189)

But what does Jipson mean when she writes about "imposing" meaning on her life? I know she is concerned about the theme of imposition in power relations between students and teachers, but do we impose meaning on our own lives? Or construct it? And is the one the other? I wonder.

Jipson wonders:

It is no longer just my story. But is it still autobiography? (194)

and

"How can this be real research? Where's your data?" And most stinging, "What does this have to do with the rest of us? With children? With schooling?" (194)

I continue to wonder.

Jipson titles the chapter "research as autobiography." Is all educational research autobiographical? What happens when we reverse that? Autobiography as research. Is all autobiography educational research?

Is there a difference between the two phrases? It seems to me that in the phrase "research as autobiography," we are saying that educational research has autobiographical roots and rhizomes worth investigating, what the writers in Learning from Our Lives: Women, Research and Autobiography in Education (1997) do, and I agree. [Every theory is a fragment of autobiography, said Valéry (cited in Lejeune 1989, vii).] In this book, each writer is a researcher (not necessarily in autobiography) and writes autobiographically in the book about the origins of her research field and the extensions of her research to her life (and vice versa). All the writers conduct research in education and tell their stories in this collection. Everydayness is an important part of their lives and their process. Research is relational (1997, 1), the essays are seen as seen as "intellectual autobiography and reflexivity" (3).

"Research as autobiography" may imply the autobiographical roots and rhizomes of a researcher/research field/research method, or may point to a particular author's use of autobiographical method (as in Jipson's essay), but it also infers that any kind of research may be autobiography, a disputable point. The term in reverse--autobiography as research--speaks to me about how we are aware that the writing can

be the research. Writing is what we all do--both re-searcher in the academy and writer at large--to make sense of matters, to bring them into some light, to weave together our own perceptions with what we encounter. As sociologist Laurel Richardson writes:

Writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing'--a method of discovery and analysis. (1994, 516)

science She is referring to social research and how experimental, creative and literary writing can be models for social science enterprises, as Blumenfeld-Jones and Barone illustrate in Daredevil Research (1996). I want to extend her vision of writing as central to the re-search in order to promote the notion that writing itself can be the re-search, and that when the writing is consciously autobiographical, and we turn it over and over, it is autobiography in/as re-search, the additional preposition "in" floating back and forth across the backslash, opening what is signified to Ted Aoki's discourse of in-betweenness (discussed in the introduction of this dissertation).

Carl Leggo, writing about his autobiographical collection of poems, <u>Growing Up Perpendicular on the Side of a Hill</u> (1994), turns his writing over and over. Leggo reminds us that he is "not writing history in the commonly understood notion of factual narration about the empirical details of people in particular places and events. I know that with certainty. I am writing my impressions, and perhaps my impressions are writing

me" (Leggo 1995, 6). He explains that "writing enables the writer to explore possibilities of meaning" (6) and that in his story poems which capture elements of his childhood in Newfoundland, " [he] wanted to leave a final testimony, an epitaph, a trace" (6). While "exploring possibilities of meaning" and wanting to "leave a final testimony" seem like contradictory elements, they speak to the autobiographical impulse and the desire to leave a public imprint, while acknowledging that this imprint is only ever one part of an story. ongoing These elements of are part writing autobiographically in/as re-search.

Recently I agreed to participate in a doctoral student's research on mothers who are also doctoral students. Sitting out on my back patio, the researcher answered my own questions openly and autobiographically for a while, with the tape recorder off, and I answered in a similar vein, with the tape recorder on. But if she writes and analyzes what she hears of my life, not hers, and even if I get to respond to what she writes, it will still be her words and impressions. Is her ethnographic, dialogic research "autobiography in/as research"? Like Patti Lather and Chris Smithies' work in <u>Troubling the Angels</u> (1997), her research contains autobiographical dimensions and depends on autobiographical details. I am one of x number of women speaking into a tape recorder, answering her specific questions and waiting to see how she heard and interpreted me, compared me to the others. In her role as researcher, she re-constructs my

speaking, re-interprets my life as doctoral student-mother and produces the subsequent writing, in response to how I have constructed my stories for her tape recorder. How will she represent all the layers (and contradictions) of that production and re-production? Lather and Smithies offer a postmodern text, where the women's stories run across the top of the page and the re-searchers' stories run along the bottom of the page as a subtext. Framed areas provide information about AIDS and are interspersed throughout the chapters. Chapters of angel intertext interrupt and disrupt these stories, chapters that draw upon "angelology," that is, a survey of angels in both theology and popular culture. Lather and Smithies write that the angel intertexts

... are intended to serve as both bridges and breathers as they take the reader on a journey that troubles any easy sense of what AIDS means for our living in the world. (1997, 47/48)

This detour into angels is intended both as a breathing space from the women's stories and as a place to bring snapshots from poetry, fiction, sociology, history, art and philosophy.... (47)

The book is difficult to read, but important, calling into question any easy interaction between reader, writer, text and serving as a model of what a postmodern text might look like, as a model of how to work with the autobiographical as researchers of others' stories, as a model for including the researchers' autobiographies.

How differently do my stories of student-mothering appear, if I write them without the friendly researcher (which I do), in

and out of many dialogues, contrasted against many textual or living others, always related to and affected by other relationships, responses, theories, autobiographies, but from the vantage point of me as re-searcher? There would be no necessity for a "member check," though I could share (and have learned to) some of my constructions of self when they involved others publicly. Ultimately, what I do with the shared reactions is mostly up to me. And the consequences are all mine! I have also shared my constructions of self with others, not as an ethical check or to prevent potential relational difficulties, but to share a view of self, a way of presenting a part of me that had been under the surface or unexplained until the autobiographical writing.

"Why have we chosen autobiography as method?" the editors ask in the opening chapter of Learning from Our Lives (1997, 7). They answer that first of all, autobiography is a window to the organizational and institutional lives of the women researchers (7). The editors view knowledge itself as an "institution that frames the lives of researchers" (7). Secondly, the editors continue, autobiography sheds light upon how knowledge and affect women's epistemologies in discourse research and teaching. Thirdly, autobiography helps us make informed changes: " ... the experience of reading and writing autobiography may provide the reader/writer with the reflective space necessary to reimagine her life, and her work as reflective of her life" (8).

Jipson intersperses an autobiographical account of her life

with questions about autobiography as method, but she is not necessarily looking at that account as (only) intellectual autobiography. I sense that hers is an emotional autobiography, too. Her use of autobiography could be said to comply with the above answers to the question, "why autobiography as method?" And the women featured in Learning from Our Lives certainly include an emotional dimension to their essays (Anna Neumann's wording is evocative at times). However, Jipson experiments more playfully with form and content, allowing a letting go that I don't always detect in the more tightly wound, controlled (but still remarkable) essays in Learning from Our Lives: a letting go that is emotionally deep and moving, but that also interrogates the words and the possibilities of meaning. Something seems still hidden behind the more linear narratives of dates, facts, curriculum vitae details of the intellectual autobiographies, though of course there is always something hidden behind all our words. But when the spaces are so filled with dates and facts and the narrative is more linear, do we detect what is unsaid and silent? What is in-between the lines? Where might the windows behind the words be? take us? lose us?

Perhaps what I have lost is simply--me.

Perhaps I am not the only one who gets lost, and getting lost may create important spaces in autobiography in/as research.

Jipson concludes:

And yet, I see other researchers also challenging the imposing cultural universals of research ... creating opportunities for new methods for doing and displaying research; making spaces for new ways of knowing and doing. (197)

Perhaps it is in the doing that we find (our)selves when we feel lost, in the doing that we lose (our)selves so something can be found.

Find and lose your self in the following two sections, whose pages are intermingled so that one part plays with and against the other.



the sun a medallion of light in a mohair fog warm on your feeble knees fuzzy with the memory of that jacaranda tree on African soil the day your husband died miles away and you felt free the touch of young girls' hands upon your own a father's newsprint stamped forever in your brain a mother's poetic legacy written over with a woman's lot

**In Benign Remembrance** 

i lived with you three days until you died swirled like the fog among the chapters of your life wondered: how did Gina die? and what about your son, Peter daughter, Marcia as you sat in that nursing home a grey fog on your knees in search of a sun a drop of benign remembrance

the newspaper eulogized a matriarch of poetry equal in scope and talent to an earl the mother of us all you were not about to go forgotten

this fog the sun your poems mist on my cheeks where your words burn now

Dorothy Livesay died December 29, 1996, as I was reading her memoirs.

without ears yet formed

...how is it

i heard these women calling

from a choric past

years before i met them

on the mirror of a page...

# V. THE STRANGENESS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY: FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR

Turning now to an/other woman in the mirror, I view Hannah Arendt. Re-searching "I" leads to exploration of the other, a stranger I don't know, yet connect with as Jew, thinker, notmother, friend. From autobiographical theory to letters between friends, I move between one side of the mirror and the other, between what be extracted from the strangeness can of autobiography and what I perceive in Hannah. But first, I begin with a recent review of a new autobiography by an Egyptian writer. The reviewer, a PhD candidate in comparative literature, states that this autobiography with its eccentricities will happily expand what we have come to know and expect as "standard autobiography." The reviewer states: " ... if not for the book's title, the reader could be forgiven for not suspecting that this was an autobiography at all" (Echoes of an Autobiography by Naguib Mahfouz, reviewed by Harris 1997).

Fifteen years earlier, Janet Varner Gunn wrote in <u>Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience</u> that "Autobiography completes no pictures" (1982, 25). She wrote about the "unruly behaviour of autobiography" and "the attempt to control rather than to respond to its strangeness" (11). Her reconceptualization of autobiography places it in the "larger context of hermeneutics, narrative theory, and the current debate about the determinate meaning of texts" (11). Reviewer Harris' words, on the other hand, echo the remains of what seems

# **VI. BETWEEN FRIENDS: ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR**

May 3, 1960

#### Dearest Mary:

I slowly get used to not having you around and still miss you. Your letter arrived just in time when I had started to think if I should start worrying. But had not yet. Today is a bad day for writing. Letter-writing day-like housecleaning. How is your work? back to the novel? I am still translating <u>The Human Condition</u> and cursing God and the world, history and my own stubbornness. Except that nobody listens. Certain not Heinrich... Love and yours, Hannah

June 27, 1951

Dear Hannah:

You needn't apologize to me for slowness in writing; I am a frightful correspondent, having never learned to communicate in a brief style. I've been delaying over writing to you for the past ten days, to ask you whether you and ... [Heinrich] would like to spend a week with us in August, very simply, without compulsive cooking on my part....

My own book [<u>The Groves of Academe</u>] is going along. I find it harder and harder to blend the action with the opinion of the action and yet don't feel sympathetic with the talk-novel where the characters discuss the ideas--while they are being enacted.

Our best to you both, Mary

(From <u>Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy</u> 1995, pages 69 and 3)

to be a lasting tension between what autobiography could be and what it is traditionally expected to be. While he characterizes the autobiography that he is reviewing in terms of its own strangeness and eccentricity ("The last third of this book is even stranger than the first two"), he reminds us that there is still an expectation of what autobiography proper should be, that there are yet boundaries to be broken, that the book he reviews (favourably) somehow lies tantalizingly outside the realm of autobiography. His description of the exotic qualities of the autobiography sets it outside of the genre even as he lauds how it will open the boundaries.

#### **AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS CULTURAL**

Gunn discusses these boundaries as cultural territory, not the parameters of taxonomical divisions of autobiography into memoir, confession and so on, which is more common (Goodwin 1993). Sidonie Smith emphasizes this cultural territory, too, when she writes:

With contemporary writers, autobiographical acts become occasions for searing cultural critique as autobiographical subjects vigorously interrogate cultural subjectivities. (1993, 184)

This cultural territory is the landscape of the self (the autobiographer), the text [the "flesh made word" in Gunn's own words (43)] and the reader. This reader can be the self as well as an other, locating meaning from an autobiography in a referential way that is also autobiographical in terms of the

#### e-mail from erika hasebe-ludt to renee norman 1/23/97

hi renee ... i just had to re-read some of hannah's letters last night after our conversation. i think we are at a "space of vibrant possibilities" as ted [aoki] would say ... (i'd like to somehow engage with the notion of correspondence which is such a prominent aspect of her life), multiple ways of layering voices...

# e-mail from renee norman to erika hasebe-ludt 2/3/97 and 2/9/9

hi erika ... i love your idea of using correspondence re: the hannah project. i got her <u>between</u> <u>friends</u> book ... why don't we call our project "between friends: letters to hannah arendt," and actually write letters to one another about our reading and thinking? what do you think?

i have something to start us off, and that's the very interesting story about how hannah and mary met and immediately disliked one another because of what mary said about the holocaust which hannah found so offensive. that got me thinking about how you and i met ... in [ted's] narrative course ... there is the german-jewish connection between us, altho' hannah gets to claim both, and the feminism, of course, so it seems somehow right for us to be interacting and intertextualizing with hannah and mary's words ... i came away with the sense that here was the autobiography of both of them in all that correspondence ....

reader's own life. In other words, we read what we want or need to read, see, understand, find, experience. We also read an autobiography, as Bruner informs us, as a cultural product, that is, constructed out of "the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language" (1993, 38-39).

Gunn, too, is viewing many autobiographies as already strange, as a result of the complex act of interpretive activity which autobiography as narrative necessarily involves. Autobiography as narrative always involves the unsaid as well as the said; in Merleau-Ponty's words, "the presence of the unpresented" (cited in Gunn 1982, 14). Within what is presented and what is unpresented (yet somehow still present), we look back with a forward thrust. We discover, we create. We resist, we accept. These many tensions nudge autobiography outside the realm of binary oppositions (standard or strange) and well with/in a range of experience that is "strange" already by virtue of how much can be read into it, again and again, and differently. Autobiography is more than merely "a life copied down" (104). It involves a "discourse of interpretation" as well as a "discourse of witness" (Bruner 1993, 45), and in this witnessing, we are always re-writing culture as well as our lives (40). Smith again:

If we look more broadly, we would find an array of contemporary autobiographical occasions--the comics of Lynda Barry, the quilts of Faith Ringgold ... the provocative videos of Madonna.... On the eve of the twentyfirst century, we find autobiographical subjects all around us, and they are stretching textual forms, multiple media, and diverse occasions to fit their excessive negotiations of subjectivity, identity, and the body. (1993,187-188) I finished <u>Between Friends</u>, the correspondence between Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt, the ending chronicling both their deaths--Hannah in 1975 from a second heart attack, and Mary in 1989.

Why do these women seem to call to me, begging me to learn of their lives, so that after a while I feel I know them, have spent time with them, the way I spend time in halls, xerox rooms and stairwells, talking, listening, remembering...Xerox rooms and stairwells, where intimate conversations permeate the walls and echo back and forth across the spaces, the machinery. "I don't know how you women do it," a male acquaintance commented to me in one of these stairwells. We do it with love, we do it for our children, we do it for our selves. We do it, get frightened, pick our selves up and do it again, because we know it matters somehow.

Again, I entered the lives of two women, previously unknown to me. Their letters affected me deeply in a lasting way, gathered as they were out of authentic lives and spontaneous correspondence, and set against a cultural, historical and political backdrop which included many life-shattering events. The reminiscing that we all do seems to take on a different kind of reflection when mirrored against the lives of others.

Their letters were testimony of a deep friendship bound by a love of writing and words, and by an interest in philosophy and the political events of the day. I was struck by how often they discussed world events--the Eichmann trials, the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, Watergate, Nixon... To read of Hannah and Mary's essays and books published in the context of such historical markers is fascinating, but set as they were within the context Gunn starts, not from the "private act of a self writing," but from the "cultural act of a self reading" (8). This reading occurs both by the autobiographer who reads his/her life, and by "the reader of the autobiographical text," which I take to mean not only an/other reader who lives outside the text, but by the autobiographer who is also at times the reader of his/her own text. She states:

As the reader of his or her life, the autobiographer inhabits the hermeneutic universe where all understanding takes place. (22)

# LOOKING IN THE MIRRORS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Gunn's hermeneutic universe, as she calls it, is one which grounds autobiography firmly in the field of language education, where life and experience are taken up into language for examination and re-examination, the "flesh made word" which we can view from many angles and surfaces, the "flesh made word" which is reflected back to us in the many mirrors of our own ever-changing experiences and the many mirrors of those around us. Alluding to Marcel Proust's <u>Remembrance of Things Past</u>, Gunn remarks:

The reflection he sees in these eyes provides him with what he acknowledges as "the first truthful mirror I have ever encountered." (22)

But Philippe Lejeune points out the trap of the mirror (1989, 118), describing Norman Rockwell's painting, <u>Triple Self-</u> <u>Portrait</u>:

We have a *back* view of the artist, seated on a stool, leaning over in order to look at himself in a mirror posed on a

of their domestic lives, too, I enjoyed the politics more than I usually do. Both wrote extensively for The New Yorker magazine. Mary was a journalist, too, who covered many main events such as Vietnam and Watergate. Hannah covered the Eichmann trials in Israel, and both supported one another through criticism and unfavorable reviews, giving feedback about drafts and finished pieces.

I loved how throughout their correspondence, they sent flowers to one another, as if the cut blooms which both appreciated so much, represented the colorful aspects of their lives, emblems chosen and selected and sent. A reminder of how their friendship bloomed and flowered, mainly through words--letters, writings--but also as they visited one another sporadically over the course of the years and their busy lives: writing, lecturing, living.

These Women in the Mirror

while Hannah was interned in a Parisian detainment camp dreaming of a lost lover who signed Nazi memos Martha/Doris distributed pamphlets in the Black district wondering if her children placed their baby teeth under pillows not-too-late at night

and Dorothy wrote poems and practised politics only feeling free the moment she learned of her husband's demise

I was not yet born into this women's world an egg latent in my mother's womb rocked in forgotten memory on an immigrant ship chair....The painter and his image in the mirror correspond to one another perfectly....On canvas, oneself painted like someone else, a mere portrait; in the mirror, a portrait of the self in the process of painting himself ... in "reality" ... the relationship of the first two images with the painter ... what we see here is both exactly what the painter cannot see and what the onlooker of the selfportrait imagines. (1989, 111-112)

When I look at the painting, I am immediately aware of the fourth Rockwell, the one painting the self-portrait. In the painting, Rockwell (seated) peers in the mirror, that ultimate object of our gaze, a kind of satiric statement on how we gather information on ourselves for self-portraiture, as if the mirror could ever show all we know or learn about ourselves. In this mirror-gazing moment, it is not the infant realizing that it is separate from an/other, but rather the adult who, having experienced many events already in her/his life, looks back to the mirror to see if what she/he thinks is there is really there. But as Rockwell shows us (and Gunn reminds us about autobiography), mirrors have depth as well as surface, and the Rockwell reflected back in the mirror is only part of the picture. (Rockwell paints the Rockwell-in-the-mirror wearing glasses which the Rockwell as he is painted on the canvas does not wear.)

The Rockwell whose back is to us, the metonymic picture of Rockwell's head on the upper lefthand corner of the canvas, the glasses which hide his eyes--these are all the mirror reflections, too, emanating in and around the appearance of Rockwell-in-the-mirror. Rockwell looks younger on the canvas painting than in the mirror painting, glasses removed and eyes

how is it without ears yet formed I heard these women calling from a choric past years before I met them on the mirror of a page

B.

Hannah was criticized for writing about the part the Jewish Councils played in supplying lists of membership in the Jewish community to the Gestapo, but steadfastly claimed she only stated factual truth, did not opinionize or comment upon the matter. This was, of course, a sore point with the Jewish people at the time, and a letter even went to all rabbis, entreating them to sermonize against her. (They did not.)

What I find contradictory is her avowal that what she wrote is simply the truth, and that the furore was somehow misplaced. This does not seem to acknowledge how we can frame our words so many different ways, whether those words are alleged "truth" or not-truth. This does not seem to consider how "the great unsaid" (Brunner 1996, 10) can also shape what is written and then interpreted; how the reader brings her own experience to the text. Though I am aware that some writers believe that reader response may be too overemphasized, that it is still the writer who must call the reader to the writing. Considering the many missed-interpretations of Hannah and Mary's writing over the years, I would have to conclude that Hannah deluded herself somewhat over the Jewish Council issue. But having absorbed her "love of the world" philosophy, I have no doubt her motives were only honorable, and motive is what matters in the ethics of writing. This philosophy places all

open, looking out into (one imagines) the eyes of the painter, whose back remains to us in the invisibility of our imaginations. Here, a self-portrait is truly a House of Mirrors, and what we see when we look is different from what we paint, the difference between mere appearance and what a person thinks, feels, is, always coming into play in the arrangement of the portrait.

Gunn's mirrors are not those where a Narcissus-like self drowns in its own image, but rather, those where an Antaeus, a mythical giant, is grounded by his contact with earth (1982, 23). About Gunn's Antaeus conception, Robert Graham suggests:

... we might begin to consider [this] an alternative myth to capture the essence of autobiography. (1991, 31)

I like the image of Antaeus with his feet on the ground, but I would like to suggest that even if Hercules had not come along and strangled him, Antaeus might have lost his bearings when the ground shifted beneath his feet. I would like to suggest that in order to remain in touch with an earth that not only quakes, but has fissures where we might occasionally try to put down our feet, we need to embrace Narcissa as she beckons us into the pool of water. Like Virginia Woolf who invents, then invokes, Shakespeare's sister in <u>Room of One's Own</u> (1929), I want to invent Narcissa, sister to Narcissus, and invoke her name as I re-call a different story of what is narcissistic.

humankind as inhabitants of a world in which we must act--vita activa--which we are not only capable of, but responsible for, and which creates "the web of human relations" (Zerilli 1995, 183). As she wrote between friends, Hannah dreamed of the between as a space "in-between which consists of deeds and words," that "physical, worldly in-between," that "something which inter-est, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them" (183).

C.

I wish Hannah had written more about her youthful affair with Martin Heidegger. She only laments his aging, after a reunion with him, and laments her own aging, for that matter, referring to the world filling with strange faces, as more and more of her friends and loved ones die:

I must admit that I mind this relentless defoliation (or deforestation) process. As though to grow old does not mean, as Goethe said, 'gradual withdrawal from appearance'--which I do not mind--but the gradual (rather sudden) transformation of a world with familiar faces (no matter, foe or friend) into a kind of desert, populated by strange faces. (Brightman 1995, 352)

It struck me as I read through the letters that after Watergate and Heinrich's death (Hannah's husband), a floodgate of sadness opened up, washing over Hannah and Mary, as year by year they grew older. Frightening to read and contemplate and experience via the letters at this stage in my own life.

Hannah never had children. Her biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruel explained that as émigrés, Hannah and Heinrich waited until they could afford it, and then it seemed too late. I wonder sometimes what her children would have been like...

#### NARCISSISM RE-WRITTEN

The strangeness of autobiography that Gunn refers to is certainly a strangeness which women have become accustomed to over the years, their autobiographies added slowly to the established canon (Jelinek 1980). The cultural territory of women's autobiography is one where the boundaries dissolve as more and more women write, but the stigma of narcissism persists.

Valerie Raoul, in chapter on "Narcissism а in Psychoanalytic Theory," refers to the term which is "frequently used in everyday speech to designate a self-centred and selfindulgent type of behaviour or attitude that others do not usually find pleasant" (1993, 14), although she does point out past situations where the term was both complimentary and indicative of postmodern writerly practice. Raoul notes that the expression narcissism "currently denotes a wide range of behaviours and interpretations, which may sometimes appear contradictory. These include the distinction between primary and secondary narcissism ... " (15). Primary narcissism refers to the "premirror state of non-subjectivity" (16), which exists prior to the mirror stage theorized by Lacan, and is associated with self-destructiveness. Secondary narcissism, which has been associated with personality disorders as well as necessary selfpreservation, refers to self-objects as "a part of the self, a double (reflection) of the self (as it was, is, or would like to be), or an extension of the self with which the self identifies

# Hannah's Child

would have been precocious female of course chattering away in German & English before she let go of Hannah's desktop to try walking

would have learned to scribble quietly while Mamala worked filling papers with the dizzying marks that fenced out a distance

#### loved

of course she would have been a child of the republic a light ahead of the dark times behind more at ease with adults whispering to her teddy about Aunt Mary's blueberry pancakes

until she begged again to hear the story of the Holocaust a family album of never forget this page Buba Martha sounding strict turn over to someone named Walter Benjamin the sad pallor of suicide in the tone of voice a puzzle when she pointed to a framed picture of Uncle Martin on the desk & in the way that children can imaged a second picture there in her mother's measured reply black & shadowy like a silhouette excessively (child, loved one)" (18). The Narcissus myth can be re-written as the Narcissa myth in light of these parts, doubles, extensions, so that the feminist self looking in the mirror is reflective of positive self-representation.

I wrote my Narcissa into being *before* reading Raoul's article on woman as diarist (1990), where she, too, invokes Narcissa, as a young girl looking in the mirror as a subject and recognizing that she is Other, that she is Echo, the nymph whom Narcissus refused to see, and who

... becomes anorexic and disincarnate, her body disappearing to leave only her voice, a voice which can only send back, deformed, Narcissus's own words, an acoustic double of the mirror reflection. (1990, 21)

I have written my Narcissa differently, more like Kristeva's "stranger within" (Clark and Hulley 1990-91), the Other in our selves, and a feminine other at that, one whose body does not disappear in drowning or anorexia, but is re-born in possibility; one whose voice sends back her own words, not in a deformed echo of Narcissus' words, but in a chorus which joins other words and drowns out the echoes of gender division.

There are several stories about Narcissus. In one he reaches into a pool of water, having fallen in love with his own reflection, a curse he is condemned to by the gods. He falls into the pool and drowns. In Ovid's version (cited in Raoul 1990, 20), Narcissus does not drown, but his body wastes away, and so his image dissolves as well. A third story, the one which I am interested in, involves a twin sister with whom Narcissus

Yesterday felt satisfying, filled with the sort of work I have come to love: writing, arranging my words to send them away... I am determined to write more in my journal, and not let my thoughts disappear. Hannah, writing to Mary, said that it is so much easier just to go on thinking, instead of writing. Writing stops the thinking, Hannah wrote. Writing interrupts the pleasure of her thinking. But writing also records the thinking. I love what Hannah said to interviewer Gunther Gaus about writing to understand (Kohn 1994, 3). She considered writing a process of putting down what she had already been thinking through. I do not think she sufficiently paid attention, though, to how the writing itself adds to, even changes the thinking; how the writing is a medium which pulls thoughts together, sometimes in ways which can surprise us. In the interview, Hannah claimed that if she could remember everything, she would not write at all!

I have signed out more Hannah books, but they look so dry. I'll attack the Hannah/Karl Jaspers correspondence first, hoping to find life within those letters. I prefer extracting wisdom and philosophy from the words embedded within a life. Perhaps it is the epistolary form that adds to the reading-learning experience for me. The participants are not physically present when conversing, and so must infuse their dialogue with the niceties of life that I have come to regard as providing a down-to-earthness that I don't find much in theory. I seem to need that down-to-earthness in order to re-affirm my own particular circumstances of mother-scholar.

has fallen in love. It is her that Narcissus sees reflected in the pool of water. It is her that he reaches for, and he drowns. How interesting that in this third version of the myth, Narcissus sees a female vision of himself in the pool-mirror and this is what beckons him into the water, where he not only drowns in his feminine likeness-image, but where he is drenched by a vision that was absent, may have only been in his mind, a divided part of himself perhaps.

I want to complicate this story of the myth by suggesting that Narcissus' twin sister is not the impetus for his unfortunate fate, but rather the inspiration for his movement to a new mirror world, one that is inhabited with feminine promise and new beginnings. Must we accept that Narcissus drowns, or can we remain open to the mirror world, a world where Narcissus' sister leads the way to the other side of our selves? As Narcissa beckons us into the pool of water, there we imag(in)e new forms, in particular, ways of looking at our selves that do not penalize us for mirror-gazing. We can re-vision drowning not as death but as a re-birth of possibility, in a mirror world that is populated with women as well as men. The alternative myth to capture the essence of autobiography is that of Narcissa, who rises up from the mirror water to claim both the fragmentation and the solidity of humanity through writing and re-writing women on the earth, hands extended to all those gazing in the mirror. I envision Narcissa looking back from the pool of water at Narcissus with the same love he extends to her,

Hurricane-strength winds are blowing as I sit curled on the couch in the playroom... Hopefully they will blow away my vague discontent, too...

I have been reading the Hannah-Karl correspondence which recounts a studentteacher relationship that grew into an equal meeting and corresponding of minds. It occurs to me that with the advent and convenience of e-mail, we may be losing a form of autobiography to cyber-purgatory. What may once have been expressed--and kept--in letters and correspondence is now dispensed over the cyber-waves, perhaps saved to disks, but more likely than not, deleted in order to save disk space. And there goes all those details and records of many lives, the nitty gritty that those bound-in-ribbon envelopes full of lives held. In years to come, where will we look to corroborate dates, names, places, events? In the min(e)d of some computer? And where will we look to find the human, the humanity, that is so evident in Hannah's letters? Will a web site give the same in-sight that one of Hannah's letters offers? How many "hits" of Hannah-Mary, Hannah-Karl library books can we count?

In the future, will these hits be a factor of the immediate present, not a consideration of a future which looks back to the past? Hannah's "absent tenses": the "no-more" of the past and the "not-yet" of the future (cited in Gunn 1982, 43). It is a fascinating experience to look back at the past through the eyes of Hannah, Mary, Karl, as written in the everyday form of the letter. Susan Koppelman writes: "I can write more about your questions if I know that you want to use my work in letter form. I hate writing essays. I never have a clear sense of audience when I try to write that way. I know I prefer reading letters to reading essays. I like the special feeling of being addressed that letters give me--either I am being addressed,

E.

twinned in their mutual reflections by similarities and by differences, Narcissa calling: Come, enter, the pool of water is a House of Mirrors. And behind every reflection is another reflection. Behind my body and my form are the bodies and forms of many women. Narcissa knows, like Jacques Derrida, that there is no shame in looking 'at one's selves if one also sees others there (1995).

I am at the mirror. Narcissa, dripping wet, reaches into the depths of the pool of mirror and pulls out a child, another child, a third child, a man she knows she loves, and a reflection of her own dripping body that she has not seen for years. The water glows in droplets that cover her with jewelled mist, and she drowns herself with the images she has pulled out of the pool of mirror.

I have already cited Derrida's claim that there is no such thing as narcissism or non-narcissism, since we are all narcissistic (1995). It is important to re-member the positive notions about narcissism in order to re-admit the "self" of autobiography and the selves of women's writing, legitimately and without guilt, to language education enterprises. Graham, who has admirably related autobiographical theory to education, discusses the tension between the literary function of autobiography and the historical, an interplay which has social dimensions that counter the narcissistic withdrawal of autobiography (1991, 42). I like to think that the narcissistic withdrawal of autobiography is in itself a social function, which, far from removing us from the world, helps us see our place in it. Bruner writes that we cannot reflect on the self

or I am eavesdropping on a personal communication" (1993, 75-76).

I notice many differences in the way Hannah wrote to Mary or Karl; the latter with more deference and respectful distance, as to be expected, as Karl Jaspers was Hannah's teacher, mentor, hero. But there is a quality of down-to-earthness in the Hannah-Mary letters that I don't see in the Hannah-Karl ones, which hold back emotionally. Hannah calls her husband Heinrich "monsieur" continually in the letters to Karl, but only rarely in the correspondence to Mary McCarthy, who I imagine laughing herself silly over that salutation. I can't imagine calling Don "monsieur"!! I can't imagine Hannah continuing to refer to Heinrich as "monsieur" after his affair with another woman, a fact not disclosed in the letters to Mary, but discussed as a painful but passing event in Hannah's life in Young-Bruel's biography (1982).

Of course, I am reading the Karl letters and comparing them to other student-teacher relationships. Hannah continually sent food parcels to Karl and Gertrud Jaspers, too, a generous post-war gesture, and an appropriate parallel for the spiritual and intellectual nourishment they gave one another. It is not unusual for such love, respect, contact between a teacher and a student. "Anjin's Story" which Ted Aoki writes about comes to mind (1990). I wonder if there is something very important in the notion of like minds writing to one another that we should be capitalizing on more in curriculum, a correspondence "between friends."

"without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists" (1993, 43).

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS WORLDLY WITH HANNAH ARENDT

Gunn certainly offers us legitimacy as well as urgency when she theorizes autobiography as worldly, such worldliness derived from Hannah Arendt's writings. I find it interesting that although Graham takes up Gunn's notions of the worldliness of autobiography as important to the field of education, he does not mention the link to Arendt, as if she had never existed. I am redressing that oversight and incorporating Arendt's beliefs as they elucidate Gunn's theories. In so doing, I highlight another woman thinker in an attempt to add her to the autobiographical arena.

Arendt believed that to live in the world was to be a part of it, to be part of a "common world shared by others" (cited in Gunn 1982, 27), where we must think and act in relation to the world of politics and happenings. Such beliefs were a result of Arendt's own life story: she had to flee Hitler's Germany and her home in what became for her a jolt of awakening as to how we are all affected by living in the world. To live unaware is to live at even greater peril.

Arendt would not likely have been very happy about connecting any of her theories to autobiography, even her own, believing as she did in the strict separation of public and private, commenting about her own autobiography:

F.

I like the way Hanna Pitkin, another Hanna, uses the biographical details of Hannah Arendt's life to conceptualize her notions of the social, that is, the parian who is capable of human action, as opposed to the parvenu whose "conduct can be seen in all sorts of conformism, denial, cowardice, and short-sightedness, and it often widens into appeasement...." (Pitkin 1995, 77). Pitkin writes:

... Arendt made a series of discoveries about love: the thrills but also the costs of romantic love with its unrealistic fantasies of merger, behind which lie exploitation and inauthentic self-abnegation, and perhaps also about the possibility of a different, more neighbourly sort of loving. She made discoveries about ambition and the intellect, and particularly what they might mean for a woman and a Jew in Germany who has a gift for philosophy, with its characteristic déformation professionelle, liable to turn her into a political idiot and a scoundrel. She made discoveries about Jewishness and assimilation, about the complex relationship between self-defense and duty in the face of persecution, but also about the possibility of autonomous action and of solidarity. These lessons were profoundly interrelated, and all of them together--political and personal, intellectual and emotional, shaped Arendt's vision of the parvenus, and consequently of the social. Omitting Heidegger from the story would make these links incomprehensible. (71)

Hannah Arendt herself said in an interview: "I do not believe that there is any thought process possible without personal experience. Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event" (Kohn 1994, 20).

"There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography" (Valéry cited in Lejeune 1989, vii). But I would like to reverse such a statement, too, so that it reads there is no autobiography that is not also a fragment of some theory, autobiography and theory assuming some middle place of poetic language, a Kristevan revolution that produces theoro-poetic and autobiographic writings. Autobiography is a vital aspect of education, and an educating aspect. So Hannah's rather dull, dry Life of the Mind takes on

If I write my stories down, who will come around to hear me tell them? (Young-Bruehl 1982, xviii)

Yet Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhargen was in its own way very autobiographical, under the guise of another's "bios." Her letters, most of them consciously and conscientiously preserved for posthumous publication, except those to her former lover, Martin Heidegger, remain as epistolary autobiography of the most intimate, confessional and personal nature. Even the letters to Heidegger were bundled up and sent away for safekeeping, rather than destroyed. Ironically and somewhat sadly, despite Arendt's wishes, soon even the letters between Hannah and Martin will be available for public consumption through publication (this information provided in a footnote in Larry May and Jerome Kohn's book 1996, 7). No doubt Arendt's early unhappy love affair led to her fierce belief that

our eagerness to see recorded, displayed and discussed in public what were once strictly private affairs and nobody's business ... is probably less legitimate than our curiosity is ready to admit. (from her review of a biography of Isak Dinesen, cited in Young-Bruehl 1982, xvii)

What would Arendt have said about the fascination with the life and death of Princess Diana?

It seems important to keep in mind that Arendt's doctoral dissertation dealt with St. Augustine, whose writings are considered to be one of the earliest autobiographies, very personal and confessional in nature. Though Arendt's reluctance to mix the world of private and public was very real, such a division may be impossible in a world where binary oppositions dissolve in the intertextuality and intersubjectivity of post-

a mind with/in the life.

The term/concept déformation professionelle is interesting. It speaks to the tendency in academia and philosophy to disregard the simple, ordinary realities of everyone else's political lives. This is the term which is aptly applied to Martin Heidegger (Hannah's teacher, mentor and lover) and his connection with the Nazi party, so bewildering and upsetting to Hannah and others in light of his poetic and profound thoughts:

The poet need not think; the thinker need not create poetry; but to be a poet of first rank there is a thinking that the poet must accomplish, and it is the same kind of thinking, in essence, that the thinker of first rank must accomplish, a thinking which has all the purity and thickness and solidity of poetry, and whose saying is poetry....In order to say what he must say, reporting what he sees, relaying what he hears, the author has to speak of the gods, mortals, the earth, shoes, the temple, the sky, the bridge, the jug, the fourfold, the poem, pain, the threshold, the difference, and stillness as he does. In truth, this is not philosophy; it is not abstract theorizing about the problems of knowledge, value, or reality; it is the most concrete thinking and speaking about Being....In this thinking, which is the thinking that responds and recalls ... the thinker has stepped back from thinking that merely represents, merely explains.... (Heidegger 1971, x-xi)

Ironically, there Hannah dwells in the foreword of Heidegger's <u>Poetry, Language,</u> <u>Thought</u>, thanked for providing advice and assistance to the translator on certain German words and meanings. [Ironic when we consider Hannah's years-long estrangement from Heidegger, and her critique of his writings (how he privileged being over thinking). Understandable when we remember she studied with him and admired his beautiful and poetic words.]

#### Between What Is Between

i read you in between these letters to your dear friends all you did not say or write, Hannah structural postmodernity. Our fragmented selves and the textuality of our existence move us back and forth between wor(l)ds, between the private and the public, between people and texts.

Understanding the self through language ["the matter of autobiography," "its form as well," (Gunn 1982, 43)] is to begin to understand culture, too, and the landscapes of that culture. Gunn's placement of autobiography as an interpretive activity means that any interpretation involves our selves in relation to the world and to others in the world, in acts which help us become "fierce with reality" (1982, 3). I somehow believe such fierceness would be looked upon with approval by Arendt, who lived her own life fiercely, and who was "loved fiercely," as her friend and publisher Bill Jovanovitch said at her memorial (Brightman 1995, 391). This is the fierceness of the personal, the emotional, the embodied, the feminist and the poetic in language learning, which autobiography embraces through its unruliness, its strangeness, its refusal to be the "dark continent of literature" (Gunn 1982, 29), and instead, its willingness to be much more than a mere account of details and happenings.

#### **UN-DEFINING AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Aoki reminds us:

... we need to be cautious about 'defining,' as by so acting, things that have infinite possibilities of meanings are being reduced to one finite meaning.

the great unspoken silence of your heart your love of the world a woman's love for that which never could have been

did you re-read his beautiful words for those years after you parted incredulous a second childhood growing upon the first did you feel a traitor to all the women who later breathed the gas?

between the letters you sent flowers to Mary a botanical friendship over the years and food parcels to Karl and Gertrud another intellect aged in cheese and sausage

food, flowers emblems of a capacity to love to give away what fleets of flowers would not adorn

or did you burn his beautiful double words the flame igniting relief your own bursting into fire

(cited in Hasebe-Ludt and Henry 1997, 2) Bruner's view is pertinent, too, that "definitions of a genre (particularly autobiography) serve principally as challenges to literary invention" (1993, 42). Certainly Lejeune's initial attempts to define autobiography (which rather narrowly privileged prose over other forms) have met with criticism and have led to Lejeune's own revisional work in 1989 where he asks: "Is it possible to define autobiography?" (3).

However, it seems impossible to consider autobiographical theory without some reference to the term "autobiography" and its meanings. Domna Stanton and Jeanne Perrault both prefer the term autography, removing the "bio," the life, so the self is the focus, the writing of the self. Stanton explains this in the preface of her book of essays with the statement that the "excision of *bio* from *autobiography* is designed to bracket the traditional emphasis on the narration of a 'life,' and that notion's facile presumption of referentiality" (1984, vii). She justifies this removal by suggesting that ideally she is attempting to "create a more generous and dynamic space for the exploration of women's texts that *graph* the *auto*" (viii). Liz Stanley disagrees in part:

Narrative--in this case, in the form of the story of a life--is neither so simple nor so easily dismissed as this argument suggests, and nor is referentiality. (1994, 135) Stanley claims that many autobiographical writings by women are constructed referentially out of a life, but that they "do so in awareness of the 'inner' fragmentations of self" (135).

contradictory if not vacillatory, depending on whose theories you ascribe to:

*\*difference (or standpoint) feminism* 

\*diversity (race, sex, class, etc.) feminism

\*deconstructive feminism (the non-universal subject; fragmentary and shifting positions which open up new spaces)

and now we can add:

\*dissident feminism [characterized by the work of women like Donna Laframboise who contend that the statistics lie and that gender work needs to be more balanced (1996)].

In terms of what I am learning about Hannah, I think I teeter in the spaces among the first three feminisms. Most of Adrienne Rich's difference feminist criticism of Hannah is based on her reading of <u>The Human Condition</u>. Rich said that Hannah wrote like a man (as discussed in Honig 1995). I maintain that reading about the life and the philosophy through the life can give one a totally different picture of a person's writings. Are the Hannah-to-Mary letters the writings of someone who is a woman who thinks/writes like a man? (And these categories of man and woman are not as uncontested and uncomplicated as Adrienne Rich's essentially essentialist statement implies.) Virginia Woolf wrote: "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities?" (1929, 95). But Woolf also wrote: "It is fatal to be a man or woman Perrault, who names women's self writing as that "whose effect is to bring into being a 'self' that the writer names 'I,' but whose parameters and boundaries resist the monadic" (1995,2), comes closest to an in-between zone where self and life meet, both with connection and with transgression. She differentiates autography from autobiography (and I read this as "traditional autobiography") in that the former is concerned with writing as a textual site/sight of self construction.

The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Tn Criticism, Kendall invents the term duography to demonstrate her deep self-involvement in another woman's autobiographical writing (1993, 273), not unlike my own responses to various women's writing. I think perhaps the term might be amended to auto-duo-bio-graphy, to capture self as well as other in the venture of writing with/in a life. Regardless of one's preference for the term of one's choice, it becomes clear that autobiography can no longer be regarded without contestation or complication, and whether or not we say one is writing a life or writing a self or dually writing and reading lives and selves, one is most certainly writing. The "graphie" of autobiography remains, whether the language is in the form of a written narrative or a video or a quilt. In 1964, Gunter Guas, a wellknown journalist interviewed Arendt on West German television, asking her:

You live in New York....Yet I should like to ask you whether you miss the Europe of the pre-Hitler period.... When you come to Europe, what, in your impression, remains and what is irretrievably lost?" Arendt replied: "What

pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (112). Leigh Gilmore mentions Denise Riley who "argues ... 'women' is not as stable, as inevitable (let alone natural) a category as it seems" (cited in Gilmore 1994a, 24).

Mary O'Brien critiqued Hannah's strict division of the public and the private, as well as her elevation of the public realm which women infrequently occupy (as discussed in Honig 1995). The Hannah-Mary letters are private and deep, public and tender, all at once. What would Hannah say now if she knew those very personal letters are published? Like the categories of "woman" and "man," the distinctions between the private and the public are blurred, often contradictory and certainly difficult. Do we somehow wish our personal letters preserved--which implies shared--because they were not destroyed? Many women have quite deliberately burned their journals and letters. Perhaps many of us are so unwilling to face death and our own mortality that we cannot bear to do anything with our letters but collect them, as if each new letter is a further investment into our sojourn in the physical world.

With e-mail, there is much less chance someone will encounter a letter in an attic trunk, unless one prints and saves the hard copies. Or reads what was never meant for his/her eyes. On the other hand, our e-mail may be less private when sent than a letter sealed and delivered in an envelope, a rather flimsy but ever-effective symbol of privacy. But as Margaret Atwood writes in the poem "Dancing":

> There is always more than you know There are always boxes put away in the cellar, worn shoes and cherished pictures, notes you find later, sheet music you can't play... (1995, 90)

remains? The language remains." (Kohn 1994, 12) In autobiography, the language remains.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

In the area of language education, where language lives, autobiography can play a vital role, if it includes autobiographical writing by and about women, and we utilise strategies that interrogate this writing and our own. As we rethink women's identities in autobiography, as we re-cognize the body in and of women's autobiography, as we re-consider genre and gender in autobiography, we can feature the strangeness of autobiography in a constructive sense.

Driving one of my daughters home from school, she commented to me: "I like writing about myself, I don't know why." I want to encourage her to continue writing about herself. When Blanche came to me in the classroom where I teach and said, "You'll know much more about me when I finish the autobiography I am writing for Ms. Davis," I smiled and nodded my agreement, letting her know that I am yet another interested participant in her autobiographical performance. And I can expand and complicate both my daughter's and Blanche's notions of autobiography to include the view of the following writers.

Andrei Codrescu declares:

The truth is that I am not all that interested in "myself"--I am only curious to see what kind of person is going to emerge from a certain arrangement of personal stories, which are themselves not facts but earlier arrangements, for certain practical uses. (1994, 30)

Reading Hannah and re-reading Hannah through the filter of others, forces me to face my own Jewish question. I understand the ambiguity with which Hannah described herself, her identity, writing as a Jew at times, as a citizen of the world at others. It is similar for me. Although I am nowhere near as politically astute or involved as Hannah was, I still at times respond strongly through my identity as a Jew, for example: in a class where we were examining culture and roots; in social situations where unthinking anti-semitic remarks were made. At other times, I discard my Jewishness because it is neither relevant nor useful, and even at times, it seems dangerous. This danger is not what Hannah experienced, fleeing from Germany for her life, or escaping from a Parisian internment camp just in time. It is not the danger my own grandfather experienced a world, a generation and a lifetime ago. He fought as an officer for the Germans three times in Czechoslovakia until he realized he and his family would have to leave in order to survive. I sometimes feel danger, the danger that is behind ignorance and prejudice and the totalitarianism which Hannah theorized. I felt danger one Christmas night when a relative by marriage, on my husband's side, lit into me, accusing all Jews of being technocrats because of his boss' views. Then I was representative and accountable for all world Jewry, the silence and the tension down the long festive table background to my reluctant and clumsy defence against this person's overgeneralizations. That night was an epiphany of sorts, a realization that just to be a Jew, not even a devout Jew, was an identity I would have to cope with all my life.

Another memory, more recent: "You aren't afraid to wear your magen david?" the grey-haired woman with a Jewish accent asks my 13-year-old daughter in Fanny's Fabrics

#### And Leigh Gilmore refers to:

... autobiography as a performance played before others who witness (and may judge) how writing itself is one way of "Adding to My Life." (1994b, 8)

and

... forcing an acknowledgement of that which is not represented and, therefore, of the limits of representation in autobiographical writing. (12)

We can respond with much more than a simple yes or no when our children, cultural consumers of the TV/Video age, turn to us and ask, as did mine: "Did it really happen?" (They were watching the film about writer Janet Frame's life, <u>Angel at My</u> <u>Table</u>.) We can respond in classrooms, too, with more than the typical book report assignment on auto/biography to construct a chronological time-line of a life. "I'll have to do 'other options,'" my daughter commented. She was reading bell hooks' <u>Boneblack</u>, a series of childhood scenes, dreams, memories, vignettes. Where does this fit into timelines? Where does bell hooks fit into mainstream Canadian school life? "She sounds like an interesting person," wrote the teacher to my daughter. "You forgot to say if she is still alive." (In the chronology of life, alive-ness must be counted.)

## Boneblack: Memories of Girlhood bell hooks a book report by Sara Norman, at the age of 12

This book, about bell hooks (she does not capitalize her name), is about a woman who rebels against what is expected of her as a girl. The when we are purchasing material for her home economics class. "No," my daughter replies with an attitude, the large star of david she wears around her neck her emblem of individuality, identity and difference. "I wear one, too," I add, lifting it. "Yes, but yours isn't showing," the woman points out, my star hanging back underneath my shirt.

## Anatomy of an Evil

aren't you afraid to wear that? a grey-haired woman with a heavy Jewish accent points to my daughter's magen david on a chain no, my daughter retorts with an attitude black lipstick wild hair trademark adidas and some boy's initials carved on her hand in colored felt

i wear a magen david, too point to mine around my neck it's hidden, the old woman announces my star under the collar of my shirt

it takes several generations to learn not to flinch

How poignant that Hannah wrote a biography of Rahel Varnhargen, who only realized and confessed to the value of being a Jew on her deathbed, after a lifetime of trying to make up for the shortcomings she perceived in such an identity. Hannah's biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruel, believed that Hannah identified strongly with Rahel and that the writing of Rahel's biography was Hannah's way of working through some of the events of her own life. Hannah realized she had to face the Jewish question as it so profoundly book has been written so it is impossible to do a time line, so here are some of the main events and outtakes. This book has been written so that it's like bell as a child is talking, and in some parts as though her brothers and sisters are talking. The book is written in short chapters of about two or three pages, and each chapter is a memory and short scene.

It's a book about a feminist, and how she is a rebel in her family. It makes as though in society at that time, feminists are seen as rebels and freaks. That in some cases is true of this time also. Bell hooks believes that women should have choices too, and should not be expected to follow the things that are stereotyped for us.

The main events/outtakes:

--Bell, who is poor, is called a problem child, because she has asthma, because she fights, because she is always sick, because she does not play like the other girls, but reads expanding her knowledge.

--Her parents tell her that men do not like women who read, who are smarter, more knowledgeable than them. They force her to play, to stop reading.

--Bell demands she does not want a white doll to play with, but instead, a brown doll, one to look like her. Her mother thinks that this came from nowhere. "Only grown-ups think that things children say come out of nowhere. We (referring to children) know they come from the deepest parts of ourselves." Bell puts this in her book. I find this to be true.

--Bell has a best friend, Rena (a last name is not stated) at a young age. She and Rena talk about everything: boys, books, etc. Bell decides at this time she will not marry. She is laughed at, told of course she will marry. --Bell's father beats her mother. She stands up for her mother, thinks, and knows, this is not right. Her mother will not do anything so bell tells her father to stop. Her mother accepts the abuse because they're married, and he may beat her if he'd like. Bell then sees marriage as a trap, a cage, in which a woman loses all rights. She is seen as more of a problem child for this.

affected her life, and although she weathered much criticism for some of her views, she also worked tirelessly for many years on behalf of Judaic groups and causes. Hannah's belief that who-ness should take precedence over what-ness is a strong statement about identity, one which I am pondering as more and more of my own Jewishness creeps into my poetry.

I.

Hannah believed that vita contempliva (thought) and vita activa (action), a life of the mind that takes root in social action, could be accomplished as a conscious pariah, a term she borrowed from French thinker Bernard Lazare, which captures the marginalized aspect of her own background and existence. She had less respect for those who were assimilated and led a parvenu existence. Eleanor Skoller claims that Hannah rode between these polarities, avoiding binary oppositions and so resided in the in-between (1993), the and/or. This is so like curriculum theorist and wise man Ted Aoki's philosophy. I like Eleanor Skoller's postmodern reading of Hannah, but feel neither her book nor the book on feminist interpretations of Hannah take into account what the letters written between Hannah and Mary reveal. (The letters were published in 1994, which may account for some of the omission and oversight, but certainly their friendship was widely known.) For example, Skoller discusses how language-aware Hannah was, how she knew words disclose or hide as well as communicate, how she knew we must look critically at the meanings of words that evoke/connote/intend: "Sense how the purest story/Still hides everything. Hannah Arendt, from an early poem" (cited in Skoller 1993, 97). Again, it is almost as if I hear Ted Aoki speaking. But Hannah was not really as much of a deconstructive thinker as Skoller

--"Do not believe that he who would seek to comfort you lives untroubled." Bell is exiled from her family. She is terribly unhappy, but remembers these words when she is thinking it better to die than live misunderstood. This is what she's exiled for, the misunderstanding of her, of her life.

--Bell has a white friend who she is very close to. They both rebel against what is expected of white and black girls. Bell's family doesn't want her to associate with white girls. Bell does not tell them that her friend needs her support. Her friend tried to kill herself because a boy she loved so very much, did not return the feelings, let alone know she was alive.

--Bell joins a Christian church, and later becomes involved in campus ministry. This is a crusade for Christ. She joins because it breaks the barriers of the white and black people. She meets a priest through this, and he saves her, that is to say, he sees her standing on her cliff in her mind, about to jump, and he pulls her off the cliff. "Before anyone goes to that real place where we leap to our death, the dying has to be imagined."

Betty Bergland advises us:

If understanding diverse cultures and multiply positioned persons remains an ultimate goal of cultural knowledge, helping us to live together co-operatively and harmoniously, then we must radically rethink how we read, understand, and teach autobiography, especially ethnic autobiography. (1994, 131)

We can expand "doing autobiography" in schools to writing an autobiographical episode from our lives, as Erica Jong does in <u>Fear of Fifty</u>. Just as Jong lunched with her father to check her version of events, students could discuss their episode with its significant participants.

We can ask questions like:

What part did memory play in your autobiographical writing? Did you forget or embellish or invent, according to the people may have projected onto her. Consider again her insistence in a letter to Mary that she is simply writing the factual truth about the Jewish Councils in her book on the Eichmann trial. Consider, too, her discussion in an interview with Gunter Guas in 1964, where she refers to the impartiality of truth, a far cry from James Clifford's postmodern placement of partial truths (1986).

Hannah's action stance seems to be what mitigates her to many feminist theorists. This stance moves beyond her so-called gender blindness, which in some ways is conceptualized positively because it does <u>not</u> focus on essentialized differences. Hannah does not "collapse difference into sameness" (Zerilli 1995, 184) and " ... the plural subject of action is animated by a semiotic drive-force that resists the formalization of meaning and conformity" (184).

## J.

Reading about Hannah and the Eichmann trial brought back that time to me--1960-when I clearly recall Mr. Eisenberg, the principal of the Hebrew school I attended, and an Israeli citizen, fervently denouncing Eichmann and his crimes against humanity. I recently asked my mother what she remembered about the Eichmann trial--as she is and always has been part of a strong Jewish community in Calgary, with many Jewish friends and a member of the synagogue and Jewish women's groups. My mother replied that she remembered little, explaining: "You must remember I was at home with four young children, two of them under four. I wouldn't have had time to notice much or even read the papers."

We cannot forget this is often the reality, even today, and we can add the busyness

#### you later consulted?

Did this change the heart of what you wrote? Do you agree or disagree with their version of the episode? What would you say to be the "truth" of the matter? Is there any one truth? Is truth relative? Is truth one of your relatives?

Can you write the episode another way (or two or three)? What connections can you make between your experiences with this autobiographical writing, and any autobiographical writing by an author that you have read?

Did gender play any part in how you wrote about the episode or how anyone responded to what you wrote?

Have you read any autobiographical writing by women?

What did you notice?

What is your response to this line by Andrei Codrescu: "Had my mother become a rich and powerful woman she might have written her autobiography" (1994, 27)?

We can expand children's concepts of self-and-other representation to include the less powerful and rich, the ethnic and the feminine, the edges and the margins, the gaps and inbetweens. In other words, what we have been overlooking with the singular patriarchal eye. And we can alert them to how language plays a central role in culturally shaping and re-presenting and mis-representing women, and how patriarchal values have bent the images in the mirrors, sometimes unrecognizably.

In an article in 1997 I wrote:

of work outside the home in order to contribute vital income to the family. The privilege some women do have to pursue thought and action is always a contrast to those who simply cannot, whether because of time, finances or energy.

## **Ordinary** Politics

in the Greek polis no one is cutting the jagged toenails of someone else's feet scrubbing dried feces off the rim of toilets no one consoles the sobs of an adolescent huddled in a corner or soothes the itch of a holly berry rash

in the Greek polis there is the sound of words tossed like rubber balls against the walls which echo like bullets an adult's game of onesie twosie played for passion

in the Greek polis beautiful phrases seduce young minds consorting with the enemy letters learned while sucking dry the breastmilk of forgotten labourers

K.

## Dear Hannah Arendt:

I write you 22 years after your death at 69, as if somehow you will hear me from the grave, a fellow Jew, a woman, a stranger.

I know from reading your letters, from reading about you and your work, that at the

In our classrooms, in our homes, we can articulate our own lives and the lives of many women. In a recent six-part series on CTV entitled "Women: A True Story," narrator Susan Sarandon asked what knowledge has been forever lost because we do not know what so many women did, thought, believed?

Similarly, Nicaraguan poet Daisy Zamora lamented in an interview that she knew nothing about the women in her family, only their names: "You never heard what these women did because they were involved in minor activities which have no lasting impact. I mean, maybe they did embroidery, or maybe they cared for children, or maybe they kept all the family memories in albums, but I never learned what they *felt*.I never learned what they *thought*" (Moyers 1995, 432).

In her poem "Mother's Day," Zamora writes: "ever since I was small like you/ I wanted to be myself--and for a woman that's hard--[even my Guardian Angel refused to watch over me/when she heard]" (Moyers 1995, 436).

When Zamora was asked in an interview if her children understood what she was trying to tell them in that poem, she replied that she always brings her children to her poetry readings and that they comment freely and sensitively about her work (438).

The poetry (and the narrative) that we write is our legacy to our children. Our students can also be encouraged to read autobiographical books that are compelling written testaments of women's lives. (Norman 1997a, 31-32)

#### A POST-SCRIPT

As we write these stories, as we read these stories, we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of embarrassment, the embarrassment of liberal guilt (Ellison 1996, 345), particularly with/in the confessional moments of autobiography. "The confessional is not my cup of tea" (1997, 31), Patti Lather admits as she writes about her own response to an AIDS test, a test that momentarily at least casts her on the same stage as the women with whom she becomes involved as both re-searcher and friend. Nevertheless, the confessional plays a large part in same time you were "loved fiercely" and fiercely loved back the world, you were intensely private, believing that the realm of natality should shift and revolve from the basic world of love and household and labour to the elevated world of thought and action, not be amalgamated. And yet, Hannah, as I write you in-between my own amalgamated life, your letters to Mary indicate to me you were more in both worlds at once than you might now in mortality wish to admit, to whisper through your grave.

I know this letter of mine intrudes upon your need for privacy, even in death. I'm sure you would not even wish to be posthumously disturbed.

But Hannah, my curiosity may be invasive, but it is not malicious. I seek to understand my own life through the lives of other women, and oh, Hannah, what a life you led. You see, there are many who do not see the value in confessional writing, the "possibility of political opposition based on testimonial and confessional writing as forms of resistance" (Gilmore 1994a, 41). As if the details of our lives did not continually configure our destinies, as if the lives of others were not a mirror with which to regard our own.

"I have filled in the dark or bare places with my own life and the lives of other women" (Griffin 1993, 262).

I crave some vestige of detail from or about an author, even in a factual academic piece. This knowledge seems as important to me as the opinions, facts, theories, hypotheses being presented. Ultimately, this personal knowledge seems a more forthright kind of writing, granting, of course, that it can range high or low, left or right, up or down or across a wide continuum. We converge, diverge, merge and re-converge always in an amalgam.

So here I am, Hannah, reading your letters as you once read those of another Jewish

and Smithies' book, Lather and Ι am assuming that by confessional Lather the disclosure means of personal information. How could the confessional possibly be avoided in such an undertaking, pages and pages of women's stories of pain, hope, life with AIDS, death struggle, activism? Autobiographical pages that detail both the horror and the everydayness of this plague of the twentieth/twenty-first centuries. Gilmore's discussion of confessional writing, which links it to gender, is also an important one (1994a). It includes some mention of confessional writing as a transgressive act which seeks to break expected boundaries of form and propriety (41).

With/in the classroom, the confessional can be both disclosure and transgression. There we need to get "between theory and embarrassment," in Julie Ellison's words (368), between embarrassment and confession, in my words. So we are somehow steady when a child writes "I hate my father" in his journal when asked to evaluate himself in a program, a child whose death threats to his father have yielded a visit from social services.

When the class' group work was seemingly filled with locked-in-battle headlocks over details and decisions--there are many strong personalities and they are all bright--I brought them together for a discussion. How could we resolve some of the conflicts? What were some good strategies that helped include ideas, make decisions and not hurt anyone? It was Brad who offered

woman years ago, Rahel Varnhagen, and I am making sense of all our lives as they are filtered one onto the other: my letter written after your letters written after Rahel's letters. Generations of letters, epistolary layers, an intertextual postal web.

I live always with a sense that what/who I love can be swept away in the flood of an instant. How important it becomes to make sense in the autobiographical terrain "between friends."

Please understand, I only associate myself with you through this reading, through this ruminating. I am no great philosopher or politician or theorist. A poet and writer and teacher, yes, and there I like to think we intersect. A student alive to ideas as you once were. A daughter but a mother, too. An ordinary individual who confesses to scanning headlines, to treating politics with apathy or scorn, when I muster up the energy to care. More often than not, my days are filled with lunchboxes and playdough, trying to remember what crucible means so I can explain it, reading and thinking when the needs of others are temporarily stayed, writing between drives to and from volleyball practice. I think as much about the towels and the toast as the human condition.

To be heard in our community of women, we tell our stories ... We listen to stories, we talk about other women's stories and we gossip, basically. We tell our bodies. Our lives are political: we're the body politic. That phrase seems perfect for women. Barbara Herringer, a former nun. (Telling It Book Collective 1990, 99)

L.

What is the call of autobiography and why is it so compelling? We want to read and know others' stories, we want others to know our stories. We don't want to be invisible. At a conference last year, a professor who taught me what I consider to be the worst course I

sensitive and constructive solutions, bright with wisdom and sincerity as he spoke. With me knowing some of the parts of his autobiography that formed a surreal backdrop to this brief episode of sanity and reason.

"Try to work in some part of everyone's ideas," Brad suggested. (Make death threats because you write in your journal that you hate your father.)

"Let each person offer some part of the group project," Brad continued. (And some part of this: When you are living in a foster home and your father doesn't come when invited for Thanksgiving Dinner, and the social worker sent to the school for intervention says he can't work with you, come to school.)

Come to school, somehow steady, and take attendance as Daria, eyes wide and disbelieving, blurts out: "Daddy pushed Mommy out of the car when we were driving home."

It is not possible to avoid the autobiography of children's real lives, or how this is constructed through the events of which they find themselves a part. If we are embarrassed by confessional telling, perhaps it is an embarrassment that begins in our own childhood loss of innocence, an embarrassment which we can deconstruct through our own autobiographical moments. ever experienced in my graduate career--a course on research--looked at me blankly, no glimmer of recognition in his face. Of course. I was invisible to him then, a ghost still. I had early in the course been moved to defend my paper on male talk dominance to which he and a colleague had reacted negatively. At that time I was writing columns for the city newspaper. Even the Dean had mentioned my freelance writing at various functions. Yet to this professor I was invisible. No one to remember, not counted, no special history, no future worth noting. As I watched this professor interact with various other students, I wondered how I had become so invisible in my 40's when in many ways I felt more alive than I had for years.

Perhaps this is what calls me in autobiography. I want to immortalize women. I don't want them to be invisible, and perhaps I see my selves resurrected and come-to-life through the filter of their lives, every time I read/write/re-write them. In reading/writing autobiograph(icall)y, we are validating lives, using the poetic language of life.

I think British feminist (and former midwife) Mary O'Brien's criticism of Hannah's writing/thinking may be very much related to Hannah's childlessness. I can't help feeling some of Hannah's ideas were affected by the biographic fact that she never had to raise children, did not know the interruption and plurality of motherhood. That may account for Hannah's strict division between the public and the private, a division which of course is criticized by many feminist thinkers. Hannah was a historic figure of her time, someone brought up not in feminist emancipation but rather in the intellectual rigour of an equality assumed by brilliance. The women's movement made her uncomfortable because she feared that if women divorced their causes from the rest of humankind, everyone would lose out politically. Perhaps, too, she never embraced feminism because she never felt she needed to. Reading in the footnotes, Elisabeth Young-Bruel, confirming my own conclusions, maintained that some of Hannah's beliefs on public/private arise out of the fact that she was not a mother: "... I would speculate that one of the key reasons why Hannah Arendt did not focus her attention on sexism is that she never had to confront personally the complexities of combining motherhood with an intellectual public life. She could also stress the private side of child rearing and insist on the prepolitical nature of education without having been challenged as a parent by the grey zone where private and public meet ..." (Young-Bruehl 1996 324, f.n. 11).

The next section of this dissertation moves directly into this grey zone with the m(other) in the mirror.

M.

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M is for Mother Microwave and Mirrors

Tonight at supper I told Rebecca to go ahead and cut herself a piece of autobiography and heat it up in the microwave. The funny thing is, at first no one missed a beat and kept on with supper as if what I had said was perfectly normal.

Autobiography for supper (and lunch and breakfast). Lasagna for a dissertation. My family is very accepting of my semi-permanent distraction, my offerings of autobiography as nourishment.

I am not only breathing, living, thinking autobiography, immersing myself in it. I am autobiography. Autobiography is in me like a spicy lasagna.

## VII. SPEC-ULATING WITH M(OTHERS) IN THE MIRRORS OF PEDAGOGY

"Yes," said Molly. "You haven't really thought it out. Children...no one who hasn't had them knows what work they make." Here David laughed, making a point--and an old one, which Molly recognized, and faced, with a conscious laugh. "You are not maternal," said David. "It's not your nature. But Harriet is."

(The Fifth Child, page 13)

But when Harriet gives birth to a defective child (a monster, an alien, a throwback, a changeling, a gnome, a troll, a hobgoblin, a hobbit, in Lessing's words), it is Harriet's maternal nature that is challenged and called into question. It is blamed not only for the birth of Ben, their fifth child, but for all the problems this birth causes the family. Harriet openly admits to herself that she does not love or like Ben and cannot seem to summon any deep feeling for him except disgust and hatred. Yet she saves Ben from the institution in which he will surely die, more as an act of moral courage than one of motherly love.

Throughout the novel, which seems to operate on literal and symbolic levels, Harriet and David's original blissful belief in family and parenthood is not only challenged but punished. There is the sense that Ben is there to teach them about living with the difficult and that with/in our humanity we are all as inhuman sometimes as Ben seems to be. The maternal mother metaphors that society thrusts upon us are also our burden when something goes wrong. These metaphors are perhaps requiring too much of any of us. If we mother monsters, we cannot, as mothers, kill monster-children, even if these children damage others. There is no way out, no solution, just a shroud of bleak destiny where we are at the mercy of our own genes.

Everything Harriet does to protect the others from Ben, to protect Ben from himself and a cruel society, turns back against her as never-adequate, a not-solution. No one, especially family and doctors and teachers, recognizes how hard Harriet struggles to balance her sanity and morality and maternity. Her maternal instincts receive the ultimate test, a test in which she constantly fails, because as a mother she is not supported. As a mother who gives birth to a monster, she becomes suspect.

At one level, the novel is a heartbreaking account of what it is to live with difficulty and disability, of how mothers bear the brunt of such a life and always come out not-quitegood-enough. At another level, the novel is a searing critique of what we have/can become as a society, of what we are capable of--the Bens in all of us--if we are not careful to analyze our own culpability in contributing to society's ills.

As Ben grows up, Harriet is gradually cast into the role of pariah and outcast, too. She is seen as the bad mother with bad genes who cannot love deformity that is evil, but is held accountable for that: the bad mother who cannot put an end to her own child, flesh of her flesh (the evil side), for which she is also held accountable.

Like mothers who experience both the joys and the burdens of maternity, Harriet can never win. She can't do enough, be enough, take the right turn, make a wise decision. She is forever mirrored by a mother image that is de-formed because of her defective child.

Doris Lessing subverts stereotyped maternal metaphors in The Fifth Child (1988), as she does in the Martha Quest novels and in her two autobiographies. Motherhood and mother-child relations are woven into complex webs of silences, contradictions, unmet needs, burdens as well as joys. In her own life and in her fiction, Lessing confronts her desires and capabilities as dutiful and loving mother, as dutiful and loving daughter. She finds she cannot live comfortably either with her mother who annoys her, holds her back, disapproves of her, clings to her, or with her child, whose needs and demands remind her of her deficiencies.

Thus Doris Lessing's heroine, who has felt devoured by her own mother, splits herself--or tries to--when she realizes she, too, is to become a mother.

#### (Rich 1976, 236)

Reminiscent of Jill Ker Conway's story of her mother who wants to run and ruin her life, forcing her to finally separate and release the unhealthy hold (<u>Road to Coorain 1989</u>, <u>True North</u> 1995/94), the fictional and autobiographical Martha makes an emotional break with her mother (in the fifth and final Martha Quest novel). Martha also leaves her daughter, conceiving of her departure as a gift which derails yet another stifling motherdaughter relationship, not as an act of abandonment, although it is that. The fictional Martha mother-story is complicated by the autobiographical Doris story in which Lessing leaves her first two children but raises her third child as a single mother.

... Martha resists the notion of the child as an end-in-itself; she sees, with bitter clarity, beyond the sentimental image of "motherhood" to the life-span of the woman defined as mother; instead of a "peak experience" she perceives a continuing condition. For a creative woman ... the child can be perceived as a disaster, as an "enemy within." (Rich 1976, 160)

Conway, like Hannah Arendt, never bore children, but Conway refers often to the many maternal experiences expressed in autobiographies and how such writing contributes to the sentimentalization of maternity (1998, 43) and the gendered representations of women in our postmodern culture. Perhaps it is partly Conway's own status as unhappy daughter, but seemingly content not-mother, that leads her to write:

Then there is the related myth of the maternal female, always nurturant, always able to process everyone else's emotions, the caregiver who is at her best when those around her are in crisis ... This maternal female is the inspiration for many strands of contemporary feminism ... [from groups] who want to base a worldview on women's connectedness to others. (179)

In contrast, Arendt's close relationship with her mother, another Martha, is not replicated either by bearing children or by fully conceptualizing the private and the public in terms of what it means to (be a) mother. Both Arendt and Conway are daughters and not-mothers, yet both in different ways enter the contested territory of what it means to (be) mother.

Di Brandt, who wrote several books of poetry that deal with her own relationship with her mother and her daughters, suggests

that maternal subjectivity has another side, not-mother (1993, 160), and that not-mother is part of all women (9). My own writing demonstrates some of the not-mother in me, for example, in the essay "Genesis": "I miss that Renee sometimes [the preparturient Renee], I would be lying if I didn't confess that" (1998a, 93). Like me, Brandt characterizes maternity as the most important and transforming experience of her life (6), but Brandt writes that "none of the texts I had read so carefully ... had anything remotely to do with the experience of becoming a mother" (3). Brandt believes the mother has been absent and suppressed in Western narratives (7) and that writing mother stories is both important and political. And she is not alone in this belief, as Susan Rubin Suleiman demonstrated when she wrote: "We need to have more information--more interviews, more diaries, more memoirs, essays, reminiscences by writing mothers" (1985, 362). (A recent article in the Globe and Mail by motherwriter Margie Rutledge (1998) includes interviews with and reminiscences by women who combine(d) writing and mothering: Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Rosemary Sullivan. Other writers focus on mothers and the autobiographical, too, such as Daphne Marlatt who offered a course at UBC on mothers and daughters in 1995.) Though Brandt mostly examines fiction writing, her call to write and re-read "mother" aligns her with Luce Irigaray whose work she both cites and honors.

## IRIGARAY'S WOR(L)D

Irigaray privileges sexual difference (in addition to equality), insisting that we must have love of self and of the same, not just of Other/other (the capitalized Other referring to the symbolic realm). She valorizes the maternal, motherdaughter relations, eco-feminist belief in the earth, the natural, the spiritual. A post-Lacanian, she is critical of Lacan who places the mother as the figure from whom the subject must separate and who ignores the daughter in the Symbolic and the Imaginary realms. [Irigaray was in fact expelled from Lacan's École freudienne (Moi 1985, 127)].

Irigaray believes women need their own Imaginary/Symbolic, beyond the "law of the father," and that we must speak (as) women (Whitford 1991), using a language that is not simply the patriarchal one imposed by men. Irigaray theorizes that the Lacanian image of woman as "hole," as she who derives her unconscious from how she is perceived/gazed upon by men, must be re-placed to give women their own place. She proposes the image of two lips (speaking lips and vaginal lips) re-touching, always open, never sutured or closed. She interprets the unconscious as that which is not-yet, the yet-to-come (73).

Irigaray is hopeful for a more creative wor(l)d, one which recognizes the debt to the mother and allows for a contiguity between the two lips, between mothers and daughters: horizontality in addition to verticality, reminiscent of what Ted Aoki theorizes about Discourse C and metaphor and metonymy.

Her two lips image is metonymic and re-turns speaking to women in a way that is open like the two vaginal (labial) lips. Much of Irigaray's metonymic writing speaks of/to/from the inbetween, this <u>and</u> (not or) that, what cannot be defined. She envisions mother <u>and</u> woman--the double threshold (195)--to reimagine the female subject (not object) more w/holey (my word), in all her fragmentation and division, a sexual and desiring (not just desired) woman. Her writing speaks to daughters, too, who need not merge into mothers-to-be and hate/blame mothers. Daughters are differentiated be/comings who have agency in the acknowledgment of their difference.

Irigaray maintains that women have been exiled from Heidegger's house of language, and that the Lacanian mirror image does not fully realize women. She re-turns them to speaking through body and word, and thus to a metonymic writing in a House of Mirrors.

A Dozen Brown Eggs

free with \$100 purchase courtesy of free range chickens and the health food store

like tiny eggs i lay out my
 evening primrose oil (lumpy breasts)
 calcium with D (nails too soft)
 phytoestrogen (what's surely soon to come)

in rows pills like ellipses to be continued... in.between.the.d.o.t.s.

your breasts are lumpy too much coffee but i don't drink coffee or it's hormonal but i don't drink hormones it is difficult to find abnormalities but i can't find normal

speculum in place it pinches my lips the doctor asks if i am still writing for the newspaper i think it is an odd question considering the view considering abnormalities i reply with pursed lips wonder if my eggs are brown free range unbroken

Michelle Boulous Walker's discussion of Irigaray's work on the maternal contrasts it to what Walker calls the romanticism of Hélène Cixous' work (1998, 175) and the ambiguity of Julia Kristeva's work--that is, that Kristeva speaks and writes the mother's body, but the mother cannot do this as speaking subject herself (156). (All three women theorize the maternal, but differently.) Walker remarks that Irigaray's contribution is to re-turn the repressed, murdered, silenced mother, speaking her body. I appreciate and often emulate the romanticism of Cixous, who calls upon us to write (our)selves. And I find the ambiguous spaces with/in Kristeva's revolutionary poetic language open enough to admit my writing, despite her focus on male avantgarde writers (and Walker, too, emphasizes the importance of poetic writing). However, I agree with Walker that "we need to re-chart the maternal as a terrain of body and word" (140), as Irigaray does, so that "the maternal can be played against and with the mother" (125).

## MATERNAL NARRATIVE AND POETIC SPACE

Playing the maternal against and with the mother, throughout the text of this dissertation I (make) present maternal narratives and poetry. Maternal metaphors and metonymies pervade the House of Mirrors, reflecting and refracting back the (m)other in the mirror.

For example, in the memoir "Genesis," I write about writing as giving birth, a re-turn to one's self, very Cixous-like. In "The Note," a story which follows on Page 222, I write about one of my daughter's school experiences and this writing is doubled by the mothering that winds its way throughout the story.

The poetry and narrative with/in the personal essay which begins the text of this dissertation, "Surviving Treason," is filled with images and references of mothering.

In the poem "Hannah's Child," I re-write Hannah Arendt's childless state, imag(in)ing what her daughter might have been like.

In the section "Four Reflections on the Ethics of Autobiography," I write about my mother through the poems "The Long-handled Fork," "A Fork, A Slap, A Poem" and "Every 4200 Years." In that section, I also describe a conversation with another mother about mothering.

The Martha poems are very much about Martha's mother, Martha's daughter Caroline, and mothering. "Martha, in White" (page 116 of the "Martha in the Mirror" manuscript), does not at first glance seem to be about the mother-daughter relationship. However, in the first novel, <u>Martha Quest</u>, Lessing describes how Martha sews herself a beautiful white dress for a party, much to her mother's disapproval. Her mother would prefer that she wear the youngish clothes that hide her contours, her bloom. But Martha's will prevails, and the well-made white dress carries her through the party, through her inner stirrings of being alive, young, something about to happen. The white dress symbolizes both the brightness and the blindness of youth and beauty. This is no white flag of surrender, nor a pure and innocent white of unsullied virginity. This is white heat, white noise, the blank white page, white that is a roll of paper about to unfurl. Martha sews herself, Martha re-writes and re-whites herself.

When the hem of the dress drags in the mud of the Southern Rhodesian veld during a skirmish with a young man, the dress becomes heavier, stained with the muddy complications that white rebellion opens itself to. The blank white page, the blank white dress of Martha growing away from home and mother, away from restriction and convention, is marked with mud prints that write a new white for Martha, replete with danger, excitement, unsettled thoughts, and most of all, possibility. I can compare Martha's sewing of the white dress to my adolescent daughter's sewing of a costume for her school medieval fair, a project she chose herself. Like Martha, my daughter wanted to make a statement to her classmates and her mother. Though not as restrictive as Martha's mother, I still hold final say, arbiter of taste and suitability! Both Martha and my daughter were playing dress-up, grown-up, donning the dresses of adulthood and fantasy. My daughter wanted to create something wonderful, outof-the-ordinary, that said: "Look at me, I am not invisible. I am beautiful and I can create beautiful things." This is not so very different from Martha's desire. Martha's frustration with

her mother who always clucks and disapproves is parallel to my daughter's frustration that I don't sew. Unspoken: What kind of mother are you? You don't sew? Can't help your daughter with the costume? What kind of mother <u>are</u> you? My daughter, unlike Martha with her mother, was occasionally generous about my shortcomings, but how we agonize over them, making ourselves mothers of/to failure.

In my poem "Martha, Leaving" (page 121 of the "Martha in the Mirror" manuscript), I draw upon my own experiences of mothering as I contemplate an act of leaving which I have never experienced, at least not in any permanent sense. When Martha/Doris leaves an unhappy marriage and children, she is going against the conventional grain. She is acting out a different scenario, one that women may have fleetingly thought about, but not acted upon, one that creates another kind of mothering, a more distant and self-centered one. When Doris embarks later upon willing single motherhood [with her third child, as told in Walking in the Shade (1997)], she adds another mother-role to the roster, perhaps foreshadowing a family unit much more prevalent today. We leave our children all the time, whether or not we come back to them. One of the central understandings of mothering is that we must prepare ourselves for separation from our children, although Irigaray suggests to us that we need to re-conceptualize this more positively and imaginatively and resist the Freudian, Lacanian images given to us by the fathers.

In my poem, "Confetti" (page 137), I mark absence with a poem. In The Four-Gated City (1972), I am struck by Lessing's description of a placard at a peace march: CAROLINE SAYS NO! It is not only a powerful yet simple statement of hope and idealism, it also contains the name of the fictional daughter Martha left--Caroline. Yet nowhere in the novel does Lessing deal with the fact that Martha in England sees her abandoned daughter's name on a placard. There is no acknowledgment, almost as if Lessing forgot by Novel Five what Martha did in Novels One to Four, what and who Martha was. Did she? Was she so caught up in the events of Novel Five that she didn't pull that thread through? Or want to? Yet Lessing brings back Martha's mother in Novel Five in a sad reprise of guilty love and longing. Perhaps Lessing couldn't bear to return to lost children, children left. Perhaps she repressed Martha's deed and left it buried in the earlier novel.

I pick up some clues in two significant passages of Lessing's second autobiography. In the first, she addresses criticism of her first autobiography, Volume I, namely, that she does not write about the pain and heartbreak of leaving those children behind. She defends this by writing that of course it was painful, that goes without saying. " ... I describe leaving two small children, and I earned criticism for not going into what I felt about it. It seemed to me obvious that I was bound to be unhappy and any intelligent reader would understand that without ritual beatings of the breast" (1997, 156).

In the second passage, she writes about one of the Aldermaston peace marches in England, where she saw a young woman carrying a placard whose message summed up for her the spirit, intent, aspirations of the peace/disarmament movement: the Caroline of CAROLINE SAYS NO! The stark simplicity and humanity and particularity of the message impressed Lessing, so much so that she wrote this into Novel Five. But still no reference to poor fictional Caroline, no acknowledgment that this is the name of Martha's daughter left behind, although she frequently links the Martha Quest fiction to her life throughout both autobiographies. I am convinced that Lessing was so focussed in reminiscence on her own real-life children, that Martha's Caroline remained, even in autobiographical retrospection, in the emotional shadows.

It is there, though, in the earlier novel, not in the autobiography, that I feel Lessing's pain, regret, confusion. There that she deals with the conflicting emotions, the torn longings. There that she writes why she acts as she does and how it feels. This virtually glows through the lines, and I pick up the intensity when I read, so that the silence in Volume I, and even the brief defence of it in Volume II, and Martha's faulty memory about Caroline in Novel Five, are glaring to me, deliberate absence in the reflections of the mirror.

I write, re-write and cite "mother."

# Journal Entry

Michelle Walker theorizes the maternal in philosophy as that which does not have to occupy an outside space/place, as that which is elastic, ambiguous, both metaphorical and real, articulated in transgressive, semiotic language and labial logic (à la Irigaray). The maternal is re-produced in non-productive poetic language ("non-productive" meaning the affirmative alternative to a productive masculine logic/labour). Walker draws upon Kristeva's subject-in-process and the maternal chora and revolutionary language, while critiquing the omission of women as avant-garde writers of note and the absence of women as speaking subjects in Kristeva's work. Walker re-calls Cixous' white ink as a metaphor which evokes writing as birth and re-birth, the mother's milk as the ink that makes this possible, while acknowledging Cixous' romanticism. Walker appreciates Irigaray's portrayal of the mother (and sexual difference) as part of a symbolic, inside language, with an important language of its own. The mother-daughter bond, too, in Irigaray's terms, is vital to women, but has largely been ignored and excluded in Lacanian and Preudian theory.

Valerie Raoul has commented that some of my writing in some ways reminds her of Cixous. As I reflect upon the poetic narrative which compares my "coming to writing" to the birth of a fourth mid-life child, another daughter, I realize that the maternal in my writing is my body speaking through/as/in the mother. The real mother has miscarried twice, been pregnant five times, given birth three times--a multi-para. And the metaphorical mother, who has given birth to writing, re-presents a jouissance that is borne in poetic writing. Perhaps the metaphorical mother should be re-named the metonymic mother, following Irigaray's dis-placement of body parts: the breast(s), that site of suckling, that producer of white ink, giving way to an opening, the labia, a site/sight where fluids still flow but where other lips speak. A site/sight where the maternal breast-turned-faucet, once the object of man's gaze, flows into the sexual/sexed place of woman's desire.

It occurs to me, too, that my two miscarriages, the aborted attempts of my body to re-produce, to carry the embryo to term, and the silent buried grief which followed, are the precursors to my coming to writing. I broke silence and the re-pressed language of my body-in-crisis welled up and out and spilled over in writing, an event that occurred only after the births of my three daughters. My coming to writing could not/did not happen until I became a mother to living daughters, until I was able to come to terms with and bear the unbearable--which was my maternal body failing me, reminding me of its tenuous position outside of language, outside of the symbolic. I re-member the first writing I did as a surfacing from underneath my denial. My maternal body, at least the one I was conditioned to expect, betrayed me, a betrayal perpetuated by silence on the subject of miscarriage, silence about the grief which accompanies no born child to mourn, an absence which is the space beside madness. I re-member the outpouring of grief as the emptying of my body-mind-soul (chora?), the spillage of salt and water in tears, a flow which emptied me of the impossible blockage of words. Words that flowed first along with the tears and then beyond them into poetic language which called upon the emotions of my maternal real and metaphoric and metonymic.

In "Surviving Treason" I write how the ink is inside me: "I break momentarily to peel an orange, and several sections turn black from the inkstains, but I eat those segments anyway. The ink is inside me ..." (1996, 17). In "Genesis" (1998) I write of both the difficulty and the joy of the maternal, how the maternal is denigrated in our phallocentric culture, and I write of how the maternal became central to my own writing, a re-birth of my self, enacted through my daughters. In much of my poetry, I celebrate each and all of my three daughters, and the mother-daughter bond among us. I question this bond, too, particularly through my mother and two sisters.

It is the maternal in me that impels me to consider Martha/Doris who re-writes (re-futes?) the mother-daughter bond in different ways; to

consider Hannah who is very close to her own mother, but like Virginia Woolf, never realizes her dream of giving birth to a child. Virginia births her writing. Hannah births political theory. And my fascination with Hannah's youthful affair with Martin Heidegger can perhaps be understood as my realization that the daughter of a father figure must rise up and out from the domination his law/word/love provides, in order to birth her own self and philosophy. To go beyond daughter as sex object of desire; beyond the desire to love the father; beyond the father's desire to love and control the daughter. (Walker writes of Michèle Le Doeuff writing of philosophising women who shared their love of philosophy through their love of a particular philosopher, and the "erotico-theoretical transference circulating between female disciple and male philosopher" [cited in Walker 1998, 21]). My experience of coming to the power of words did not occur until I was able to birth my daughters, my self, and to break out of the law of the father, the Lacanian and Preudian drama which had scripted me as dutiful, silent, not-writing wife and one-dimensional, unambiguous, devoted mother.

Heidegger had trouble with Hannah's success and for a long time neither read nor acknowledged her writings. My essay, "Surviving Treason," chronicles the difficulties which coming to writing (and feminism) visit upon my marriage and the changes and havoc this wreaks. There is some resolution both for Hannah and myself, but not without crisis, pain, and a loss of innocence. The father (whether older lover or husband) cannot be challenged without incident, without consequence, without repercussion. This produces movement to a new, ultimately better place, but a place that is dangerous, unsettled, frightening, ever-changing.

The process of naming and un-covering these maternal themes in my autobiographical project is one which re-minds me that women are multiple and contradictory. For Cixous, woman re-turns to herself through writing, re-born through the laborious breath of writing, a maternal imagery. For me, woman re-turns to herself through autobiographical writing, re-born and

re-written again and again in the poetic texts that are her life, her breath," her labour.

I MINON what Conway writes about the maternal in autobiographies: that the maternal experience is one which many women (and men) write about (1998).

I MNNOV what Walker writes about the maternal in women's writing: that "we need to look at women's writing, to investigate the ways the maternal surfaces there ..." (1998, 128).

I MINN what Brandt writes: Contemporary woman writers ... particularly in Canada, have begun writing mother stories in large numbers despite ... theoretical and social difficulties, and in defiance of the constraints of the Western narrative tradition with its long history of enforced maternal absence. (1993, 16)

My poetry, narrative, and even my theorizing, enter into what Brandt calls the "maternal narrative space" (160), what I prefer to call the maternal narrative <u>and poetic</u> space. And despite the long history of maternal absence, this space does not exist in a vacuum. Authors Cynthia Chambers, Antoinette Oberg, Arlena Dodd and Mary Moore wrote "Seeking Authenticity: Women Reflect on Their Lives as Daughters, Mothers and Teachers" in 1993. In this essay, teachers reflect upon their practice and "write about the life in which they are immersed" so that a "deeper understanding of who we are and who we have been opens the horizon of possibilities for who we can become--as teachers, mothers and daughters" (75). A recent (1998) double issue of <u>Canadian Woman Studies</u> was devoted to the theme of Mothers, Daughters and Feminism, my own contributions included in it. A conference on Mothers and Daughters was held at York University

in 1997 and I have been invited to an upcoming conference at Brock University in 1999, "Maternal Pedagogy: Mother Matters and/in Education." (In 1998 the theme was Mothers and Sons.) One of the conference organizers, Dr. Sharon Abbey, wrote about the collaborative research she and several colleagues conducted into their daughters' educational experiences in connection with having feminist mothers who are university professors (Castle et al. 1998). They also investigated how their daughters' schooling experiences affected them as mothers. The authors point out that "in their life stories, women have talked more about the mothering they received than the mothering they had done" (cited in Castle et al. 1998, 64).

When theorised as mothers of daughters, women always speak. (Walker 1998, 181)

### A MOTHER/DAUGHTER STORY

"I couldn't put it down," one of my daughters tells the other. "It" is one daughter's autobiography, neatly typed and hole-punched, arranged in a binder. One hundred pages of teenaged angst, love, hope, regret, determination, anger, loss, titled <u>Why Me?</u>. A female <u>Catcher in the Rye</u>, a story of growing up and coming of age in the Nike age, this document has had my daughter(s) in its spell during the entire year of its labour. (The writing of this autobiography continues to this day.) Jockeying with me for computer time, my daughter discovered that if she wrote about it, she could make sense of it, and most important of all, she could preserve it. [Echoes here of Carl

Leggo's words: "I wanted to leave a final testimony, an epitaph, a trace" (1995,6).] This autobiography was written wholly outof-school, but it is very much about school experiences. It is both a magnet and a comfort for my daughter as she grows up female in the 80's and 90's, filling its pages with stories of gender bias, harassment, unrequited love, acquaintances who are children of divorce, schoolyard bullying and many other symptoms and features of postmodern life.

I mention this autobiography (autobiographically) because it seems to me it is one important example of how autobiography can operate in that turbulent time of female adolescence, how autobiography can assume centrality and importance in a child's life. I am excited by the possibilities in such autobiographical writing for children. If we can capitalize more explicitly on the desire to write-it-down-because-it-happened-to-me, and then interrogate the silences, spaces, contradictions, constructions, perhaps we can utilise autobiography as a tool for growth and learning as well as writing and reading. We can look at what "language does to limit, shape, and make possible one world or another" (cited in Miller 1998, 150). It seems a shame that most of my daughter's autobiographical writing is conducted and validated and turned over and over out-of-school, but school is the very place where she most needs to make sense of what is happening. And a place where interrogation seems not only possible but desirable.

The story that follows is an autobiographical piece that is

a blend of my words and my daughter's, a story that both plays with and calls into question whose stories we are writing, which stories should be told, and always, what is hidden or revealed in those stories. The story could be an example of one collaborative way to take a lived autobiographical experience written by a daughter/student and complicate it by layering it with the words/experiences of a mother/teacher. The story represents, too, an/other side of mothering and writing than that offered by writers such as Lessing who have left behind a great deal in order to write. The story is not only about a daughter's experience, it is also a story about mothering. And writing as mother. An/other reflection in the MMYON

# THE NOTE

### by Renee Norman (with Sara Norman)

Bricolage--like a collage, incorporating material in a new work, and so transforming it. (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms)

On a daily basis ... personal narrators assume the role of the bricoleur who takes up bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining and joining them in excessive ways, creates a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space. (Smith and Watson in <u>Cetting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography</u> 1996, 14) This is not my story. I tell you this because she said so. One day when I was washing the pots and pans while she dried them, I casually commented that I would write about it. "It's my story," she stated clearly, though I for one confess that I cannot ever tell where her story ends and mine begins...where my story ends and hers begins...My eldest daughter once inside my womb kicking me awake with rhythmic taps resides there still. Only now we fight for computer time, birthing our stories with the electronic midwife, the rhythmic tap tap on the keys, both our heartbeats in the womb of words...

So this is not my story.

I am sitting at the desk in the computer room, wrapping presents, waiting to use the computer, hands always busy in a family of 3 children, 1 dog, 1 husband. It is my husband's desk, he makes that clear by the way he fills it with his papers, his books, his invoices and letters and pictures and calendars and memos, all spread so you have to guess that the grainy wood is underneath. So this is not my desk. Already my story which is not really my story is taking on more territorial tones.

I wrap the presents by placing them on top of all the papers and just by sheer luck, managing not to cut through some invoice or accidentally tape up some sentimental picture of Don on a motorcycle. Sara is directly across from me at the computer, working on her full-length book, 100 pages now, an autobiography of her life titled, <u>Why Me?</u>. Perfectly suggestive of teen-aged love and angst, a kind of female <u>Catcher in the Rye</u>. She wants to get it published so I suggest she may want to fictionalize the names of the characters to protect the guilty. I add: "Have fun with the name changes. Think of some code. Or some attribute the person possesses and work from there." A teacher we both think is picky becomes Ms. Starch. Her teaching partner who is caring and kind, Mrs. Kindred. A boy who harassed her, Aaron Harass. You get the picture.

I have not used any codes so far in this story, not that I'm aware. Sara is Sara. Don is Don. The dog sitting on and warming my bare toes while I write is the dog. It is Sara's story, as she reminded me, but I'm in it, too, with no alias. It's hard to find an alias for "my mother." And I am writing Sara's story, sometimes calling it mine, as you must have noticed in the previous paragraphs.

Cut to a day at school. Sara, five feet ten inches tall at 13 years of age, big and still growing, wants to be six feet tall, wants to play on a university basketball team in the future, wants to find jeans that are long enough. Sara is playing basketball with the boys. She hates playing with the girls who are mean and cliquey and stop to fix their hair in the middle of a pass. The girls don't like Sara because she is different: tall and good and gentle. Schools don't often honour difference or gentleness. School has been hard for Sara. One year when she was eight and couldn't seem to cross the threshold of the classroom door without clinging and crying, I homeschooled her until some of the bruises healed.

Cut to the principal's office. I am sitting across from her, my eyes on her well-cut flowered polyester suit, on the desk photos of her children and grandchildren. Asking why my daughter was asked to stay away from the school basketball court. Asking why my daughter was advised to "pick and choose her battles." Asking why girls are expected to be the peacemakers and the blametakers. Asking why.

#### Excerpts from Why Me?

After I got a rebound, he gave me a "spanky wanky" as he put it. Then when I put up a protest, he said, "Isn't it okay to give someone a spanky wanky?" No, it's not. He went around and told the boys, "I spanked Sara."

"Would you like an orgy Sara?" I tripped over someone's foot, backing away from him, so as not to let him get close enough to touch me again.

He is scaring me and I can't even think straight when he does this. Could you tell him to stop?

He is sick, he is perverted, he asks inappropriate questions, he touches like he shouldn't, and thinks it's okay, he puts his arm around me, and tackles me while playing basketball when I get a rebound or basket or even receive a pass, he's absolutely crazy in every way and I hate his guts.

Any personal story, any autobiography, is more than merely a life copied down. Always there are subtexts and intertexts. Parts of the story that exist running alongside of the narrative like the gorgeously illustrated borders of Jan Brett's books. Borders filled with mice and rabbits and other ground creatures who live a story, too, in their own particular minuscule world within the larger story world. Always there are parts of the story we don't know.

I am picking up clothes off the floor of Sara's room, trying to decide if they go in the wash or the closet. Is this camisole an item she decided not to wear, or the cast-off soiled garment of a busy day? Sorting. Wondering. Moving clothes around like words. A bricoleur of laundry, in this bricolage of a story.

Out drops a folded piece of paper from the pocket of a pair of not-quite-long-enough jeans. I could tell you I didn't open it up and read it. Maybe the paper wasn't even in her jeans and I'm just writing that so you don't think I was snooping on Sara's dresser and not respecting her privacy. None of that changes what the paper revealed, what Sara wrote, the part of her story that I didn't yet know, that she didn't tell me, that I shouldn't tell you, that is not my story. Cut to the basketball court. One of the boys is attracted to Sara. I can tell by what she reports he says and does. But adolescent boys often seek attention by being offensive, gross and disgusting. As Sara puts it in Chapter 2 of her book, which she gave me permission to quote: "...he makes rude sounds that should not be out of the bedroom, occasionally burps to be macho, and attacks on call (or insult)..." These days, adolescent boys also seek attention by being overtly sexual.

#### Excerpts from <u>Why Me?</u>

I decided that no matter what he does, I will always play with the boys and will have to deal with him. My mother says I need to tell him that I will go to someone in authority and tell them all about his harassing me, touching me, and his inappropriate remarks. I will not hesitate for one second to do so.

He told me today that I play with the boys every day, and I wasn't going to today. I did anyhow. No one tells me whether I can play with the class basketball or not. He made like he was going to shoot the basketball but passed it to me suddenly. I knew he was going to do that...so I jumped up and caught the ball, and did an incredible hook shot that was a swish. He didn't say anything about me for the rest of the lunch hour.

Today he came up to me at lunch. "Sara, would you like to lick my juicy jell?" I answered no. "Sara wants to lick my juicy jell," he announced to the entire class. I ran out the door with the basketball. Yesterday he came close to me, pointed at his penis and said: "Inch by inch by inch." Then he bragged to his disgusted and tired-of-his-antics friends. My long-standing problem is now ending (THANK YOU LORD) and I will not miss the things he did to me in the least manner. My mother is going to Ms. Starch and saying, "Hey, this is enough, I don't want this to happen anymore." He has pushed his limits. Even his friends told him to stop, but no, he doesn't know when to quit...

These fragments from the 100 pages of Sara's book are part of her story, but she agreed to my including bits and pieces of it here. This is not like the finding of the note. Sara wanted me to read her book. I have read all of her story and she has read mine. Though you must note that again I am claiming what was never mine to begin with. Sara wants me to edit her book and suggest revisions. Therefore, I am only providing brief glimpses of <u>Why Me?</u>, small tastes, and if she gets it published, you will have to go out and buy it to fill in the gaps.

The note, the note. It plays in its absence like a tune that will not leave your head. It contains the missing piece in the puzzle of this story. It contains Sara's shock at the one incident that she could not seem to come to terms with, and instead wrote about on a scrap of paper. It established that the principal should not have said "just-seeking-attention, Sara'sambiguous-signals, thought-you-were-his-friend." Alice Walker writes about the empty mirror, but I can't fathom how a mirror is ever empty. Surely it still reflects the furniture in a room, the sunlight streaming through a window, the garbage can spilled over on its side, the folded paper that fell out of a pocket...

#### Excerpt from <u>Why Me?</u>

He is not a problem anymore. But today when I came to school, the boys greeted me with an accusation that it was my fault the class had to stay after school for knocking over the garbage can, and that I should have confessed to it.

Sara and I are walking the dog on a hot summer's day in the cooler air of dusk so we will not have to wear sunscreen. I have to speed up to keep up with her long legs, freed for the summer from too-short jeans. I finally broach the subject of finding the note, carefully, gently, hesitantly. We walk and talk, talk and walk... I say I understand that she could not comfortably voice the words aloud, not to the principal, let alone me, her mother. But I also add that this one fragment of information, this jumble of words and feelings she committed to paper, left no doubt. Would probably have spurred the principal on to more appropriate and serious action. Would it have prevented the reverberations that followed? Who knows? I suspect that Sara knows at some deep level that because I am her mother I feel compelled to bring things to the surface, more out in the open. Away from the decorative illustrated borders and spilling into the illumination of the mirror, never empty, brimming with stories, hers, mine, ours...

I agree with my philosophical, literary and educational sisters that mother stories (and poems) need to be written and heard, and the maternal narrative and poetic space must also make room for how these stories and poems, like any autobiographical writing as re-search, can be turned over and over, so that we open the space to the in-between, the entredeux, the interval space that re-writes them from many different perspectives and in performative and intertextual ways. Then we can not only attend to what needs to be heard and made visible, but we can both present and move beyond some of the more limiting maternal myths.

When women are theorised as mothers of daughters there is much to be said. (Walker 1998, 181)

# AN EXCERPT FROM "LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER" (a poetry reading/performance performed live at Vancouver's Cityfest in May 1998)

Welcome to LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER! This is a poetry reading that celebrates and complicates the mother-daughter relationship. We will end with the performance of a Jann Arden song, GOOD MOTHER, by my daughter, Sara, 14. (Introduce Rebecca and Erin, too).

In relationships with our daughters, we consider our own
mothers.
Where does she begin and I end?
Where do I begin and where does she end?
The I is blurred.
The daughter is in the mother.
The mother is in the daughter.

Think back through your mother, Virginia Woolf said.

And so I did, back, back to the time when my first daughter was born and my mother was there to assist... Backhand Through the Mother

the blur of nights when all else asleep the two of us rocked in the creak suck sound of minutes wanting her to finish one part drifting off to sleep each draw and suck a shock of body pleasure

you passed me hot cloths early morning hours knew my pain sought to ease the crust hot compresses drew my reluctant milk softened the click tsk sound of seconds

you cooked scrubbed organized red raw hands dry folds of skin crooked index finger (never properly healed) shook your fatigue pointed out my dependence gratitude quilt

my hands dry folds of skin hold pass cook scrub organize mother to daughter daughter to mother mother to daughter your touch there your print left on the creak suck click tsk sound of seconds smoothed between us

Our daughters grow, so do we, and we ALL get older. The motherdaughter-mother relationship is a three-way mirror...

#### Chop

chop! my mother dices zucchini like a sushi chef with a flourish every piece small and tidy uniform white nuggets cut with green coats migod, her shirt is on inside out she hasn't even noticed

the tag at the back sticks out its warning

duly alarmed i watch her precise movements as she sweeps vegetables into a bowl is this how it begins? and how do i handle this without cutting into pride

without a word i turn my mother
who cries,
what are you doing?
i lift her shirt
off her shoulders
the way i undress my youngest child
when her head is stuck
my hands radiate
tenderness and humour

my mother laughs with me at the adjustment made exclaims: your damn aunt; we went shopping, she didn't say a word

this is how it begins

### Between the Lines

what's wrong with your hands? she asks as i grip the steering wheel

how to answer a child who writes madly, deeply about a boy she barely knows?

a veneer of tracks i had not noticed until now drives over my skin

do i reply: my skin's wrinkling, the elasticity's gone, it's soybean time, it'll happen to you, watch the sun, watch the road, watch what you read in those girls' magazines?

instead i say my hands are dry i need some cream (and cosmetic surgery and soft lights and trick mirrors and a time machine)

it is a turning point all day i check my hands rub in lotions make the lines disappear

I think it was former New York Times columnist and novelist Anna Quindlen who said she had to write two more novels for sure, because she had dedicated one novel to one of her three children, and she promised the other two their turn would come.

In our house it's poems. Counting how many get written about whom. Checking about poems. And also, occasionally commenting after a conversation: AND DON'T PUT THAT IN ONE OF YOUR POEMS! So the next three poems make sure to even out the process, a poem for each of my three daughters.

The first is for Erin, the youngest, and it is about how we watch our children grow too quickly, the bittersweet delight of being a mother to a daughter...

Dog Day

the dog lies in the same sunbeam day after day in this summer heat too his curly black coat blacker than hot tar

the clothes on the line stiffen creases glue sleeves together tight no air between the fabric like summer tempers fused

raspberries drop off the bushes unpicked hidden under weeds & brambles scarlet spots that mark our languor

i empty torn knapsacks & put away half-used scribblers broken crayons wrinkled pictures

my youngest child dances with her paper body drawing
as if she knows
she is waltzing with a memory
step
she is dancing in the sunbeam
step
she is dancing in the space between the stiff sleeves
step
she is dancing all the fallen raspberries into wine
step
she is dancing so fast with paper shadows

The next poem is for Rebecca, my daughter in the middle, inbetween. I have learned so much from my daughters. This poem, written on the occasion of the last lunar eclipse of the century, honours all that I have learned from Rebecca, and it is about my love for my daughters...

#### Lunar Alignment

under the orange glow she explains to me how the earth comes between the sun and the harvest moon how the moon slips into earth's shadow as i have slipped behind her to view the eclipse from her eyes

she sounds like a Science textbook i try to fix the facts in my head as she pontificates but the moon is mystery to me an occasion for a poem a reason to trek outside with daughters and stand in moonlight my hands light upon her shoulders our voices so clear in the night a couple walking past turn their heads and stare

you are the sun, the stars, the universe of light i am the harvest moon absorbing whatever rises between us as i stand in your dark night shadow together we look for Saturn's rings in a jewelled sky i warm your back this the most celestial motion of all

The third poem in this series is about the mother-daughter relationship as it gets seasoned in time, written when Sara turned twelve...

For Sara at Twelve

you sat by me while i relaxed in bathwater no rubber ducks launched around my thighs no plastic ships sailing through my legs connected by your body stretching into womanhood

12 years old today

you run your hands along the ceiling leaving fingerprints sticky with childhood the length of mine you chase the dog for a hug never quite catching on to his game but always second-guessing me like a thermometer you rise and fall your mercury held in my hands

you're not the mother crabs your youngest sister when you admonish her the red lipstick i gave away slashed across your lips wax fire waiting to be heated by love

your face the one i know from mirrors and pictures the same knots tangle your hair and mine we both squint through glasses spotted with breath

sometimes you *are* the mother swirling as water rubber ducks and ships get suctioned into drains

Not all is sweetness and light in raising daughters, in parenting of any kind. Do you remember the man who was thrown in jail overnight several years ago for spanking his daughter in a parking lot? Well, at the time, I envied him the night in jail!...

Shit Work

toilet paper roll replacer filtered water jug retopper clothes refolder toothpaste swisher close-the-cupboard-doors

snack and lunch co-ordinator used kleenex detonator print remover toilet flusher turn-off-every-light

Barbie search and rescue captain

violence and sex detective family rooster in-house psychic close-the-cupboard-doors

daily planner form signer time keeper appointment maker child minder wound binder turn-off-every-light

protect deflect detect advocate and engineer save the planet search and rescue close-the-cupboard-doors

And every year about this time, I get a bout of--

I. Mother's Madness

is this what you want them to remember? the mud on the floor on the dress-up shoes on the rug on the salamander on your face the mother who rose up from the deep

the tension i'm sorry i'm sorry a massive throbbing amoeba crowding the room so viscous it spreads like gel across the children across the years i felt my own mother's anger in the kitchen in the potatoes in the silence i filled with worry about words unspoken

is this what you want them to remember? stop running up and down the stairs stop teasing your sister stop bothering the dog stop interrupting me when i'm working stop stop stop expecting me to be/hold everything together in my hands which are wringing words out of children which are folding words into apologies which are throwing words up into a barricade STOP

is this what you want them to remember?

II. Out of the Fire and into the Frying Pan

for god's sake get a grip you
watched enough june cleaver brady bunch
 smile
 encourage
a salamander in time saves nine
good night sleep tight
don't let the children bite
to bed, to bed says mother head
after a while says it all
put on the ritz
put on the supper
there was an old mother who lived in a poem
1 potato 2 potato the 3rd potato looks like me
lullaby and good night

Daughters are so special. At no time is this brought home to us more than when we consider loss...

Segments

we are cutting the buns in half the oranges into quarters when i mention my youngest daughter threw up 3 times the night before

it is then she tells me the young heal quickly your daughter will be fine daughters are special she loves her sons but a daughter oh a daughter

she had a daughter once she quietly adds one minute there at the dinner table the next gone and she could not accept that absence that loss

my eyes fill with the crumbs

gathering on the tabletop the juice released from sweet oranges her split citrus pain

it is something from which we never recover, i say recalling my 2 miscarried babes and the terrible joy of daughters who are only ever on loan from one moment to the next

we sweep the crumbs into a bag she cuts the orange quarters smaller even smaller

And now finally, before we conclude with Sara's rendition of Jann Arden's GOOD MOTHER, let me conclude with a poem that is in a way about the new territory that we enter with our daughters whether we like it or not. Sara decided she would sew a costume for her project at school, part of their Medieval Days Festival. But I'm the mother who buys plastic capes at Hallowe'en. I don't sew. I wasn't too much help, but I saw Sara in a new light and as I frequently am with all three of my daughters, I was astonished...

The Costume

i can't help laughing don't sew but know lop when i see it sided

the next day down on my hands and knees material spread out like a billboard poster awaiting a message i help her pull out more threads

pin measure

hunt re-pin the ungifted leading the eager drawing upon the artistry of common sense and love

at the machine intent head bowed like a woman in prayer she runs the costume under the needle that pinpricks the fabric lightly of this scene she is so much more than me a blessing in/at disguise Sara (singing): I have a good mother./ Her voice is what keeps me here./ Feet on ground, heart in hand, feet on ground, heart on hand...(fade out).

Rebecca: I'm hungry!

Erin: Can we go home now?

### TEACHING AS M(OTHERING)

Where the maternal intersects with autobiography in education is at the axis of the teaching as mothering myth, a myth that Janice Jipson examines carefully in her own teaching, a myth that she finds she cannot live up to and may not desire anyway. While trying to be the good mother to her students, Jipson reflects that she becomes instead the wicked stepmother (1995, 32). In critically analyzing her attraction to the romantic and essentialist notion of mother as self-effacing nurturer who serves all (except herself), Jipson decides that being the mother to her students defines them as children (33).

Such an analysis would be more upsetting to someone who teaches (young) adults, and I am thinking here of my own teaching in the elementary school, where I really am teaching children, a role that requires a fair amount of caretaking. Even so, I am hopeful that in re-constructing what she calls her metaphoric definition of teacher as mother (to teaching for social change), Jipson does not totally relinquish what Nel Noddings and others such as Jane Roland Martin have theorized as a curriculum of caring. A curriculum of mothering.

It is important politically, aesthetically and ethically for women to adopt the maternal,

### despite the considerable risk of doing so. (Walker 1998, 4)

We can still nurture (mother) while we recognize and encourage independence, agency and social change, our own and others. For me, this is as important in teaching/learning and mothering as it is in writing and mothering. I am not Hannah or Doris/Martha in that I gave birth to children and I continue to mother them. And yet I am Martha/Doris and Hannah, too, as I against the constraints of mothering and teaching, work mothering and writing. When we leave our own homes and our own children to teach/mother the children of other mothers, as Madeleine Grumet points out (1988), we can be mindful of not becoming the wicked stepmother and not letting m(others) project us into such a role.

Journal Entry

As teachers, we both mother our students and leave them every day. The North American concept of good motherhood seems to be one of sacrifice, all for the children to the exclusion of the selves. Very different, say, than how children are parented and taught on a kibbutz in Israel, the collective taking responsibility for many parental chores and duties, and even the establishment of values. Less time is spent with children in the single family unit, far less than in an average family living in an American suburb. In Britain, boarding school takes many children away from their parents at the tender age of 7 or 8, cutting formative ties.

These days both parents work in many families, the stay-at-home Mom of the 1950's TV sitcoms and the fundamentalist movement an anachronism who must earn dollars to help keep the family financially afloat. This working Mom often works double time out-of-the-home and back in it

(evidence of the pervasiveness of the good mother myth: there is more to do, so Mom just selflessly does it).

In the schools, we teach and mother students who are "without" mothers either due to work outside the home or divorce, and we teach and mother students with more than one mother, and we teach and mother students with the traditional June Cleaver mother, too, although she has transformed to the 90's version, often manifested in home businesses, a sense of angst about fulfilling herself, and a continuing search for additional meaningful activity such as writing or returning to school. (Now that sounds strikingly familiar.)

So M is for Mother is for many variations and permutations of roles and subject positions, leaving mother-teacher to take up any slack or juggle all the many juxta/positions.

As "mother" our students write we to and read autobiograph(icall)y, we can both embrace and move beyond the metaphor of the nurturant caretaker who wants her family of students to express themselves. We can encourage our students to turn their own writing over and over, re-thinking, re-writing, re-vising... We can re-sist the wicked stepmother role, too, by keeping spaces open for metonymic possibility with/in the revolving words and bodies in the House of Mirrors.

Only two sections remain in this House of Mirrors, before exiting to the bibliography. The following section re-turns to some of the ethical issues in writing autobiographically, such as disclosure and the complications of memory. The final section describes an autobiography project in a classroom. When Mirrors Fly!

There are structures ... that make mirrors fly,

that put disturbing images back into circulation.

(Hélène Cixous 1986, 155)

# **VIII. FOUR REFLECTIONS ON THE ETHICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

## **REFLECTION 1.**

"There is no ethical question about writing: write it down." Kamala Das

I read this quotation in an anthology of non-fiction whose autobiographical contributions include my own (Cockfield 1997, n.p.).

I have been writing it down...

My mother asks me for a copy of the poem I wrote about my grandmother's fork. She is proud that the poem is published in a special double issue of a journal devoted to the theme of Jewish writing (Norman 1996b). That I readily tell her. What I haven't yet said is that the poem includes a slap she gave me years ago at a Passover Seder at my grandparents' house. (Not only locusts and the slaying of the first-born make up the ten plagues at this Seder. Spill a drop of wine for the slap.)

What's one slap over the years from a loving mother?

But this past summer, when my family and I visited and spent two weeks in my mother's house, there was tension:

don't play with the cupboard doors she tells my children who should have known better should have immediately hung the wet towels after swimming and the eldest should not be allowed to wear lipstick the same color as mine i have to tell you she says in between clarifying what she meant when she berated me for allowing the youngest to phone an aunt and leave a message she's 90 years old my mother reminds me she'll get confused

you're so jumpy she comments after the latest lecture on not placing bottles in the bathroom garbage the cause pinpointed for yet another accumulation of water only this time it turns out the sink is leaking the whole household is letting my mother down

What color would a red slap turn our relationship? My mother asks me again for a copy of the poem I wrote about my grandmother's fork. She will be spending a few days with us at our house, so I risk telling her about the slap at long last.

The Long-Handled Fork

long strips of noodles dry
the dining room table a lattice
a screen door slams as we run in and out
my grandmother pokes a chicken
boiling in the soup pot
her long red-handled fork piercing its skin
small eggs harden in the broth
later my cousins and i will fight
over who gets to eat those eggs
hard yellow balls dissolve in your mouth
in those days we never thought
about dead chicks or pregnant chickens

i sat at that long table set for Seder ma neeshtanah halaila hazeh mecoll halailot why is this night different from all other nights

too shy to sing the four questions
the year i was the youngest my face reddened
all eyes on my indecision until my mother
(impatient with my games)
broke the hold with a slap
don't shirley, implored my grandmother
poking her red-handled fork
into more than chickens stewing

when i left home i took that fork after my grandmother's heart had stopped (always a complainer no one listened to her complaint: the ache in her chest)

at the airport the fork posed a great security risk the attendant tossed it carelessly into a box large enough for a table as if he somehow knew this was no mere fork the box chock-full of ghostly noodles phantom yellow eggs fictive footsteps

i use that fork in my own kitchen the red paint peeled off the handle down to the plain grainy wood as my children run in and out the slam of a door a skitter past long-handled forks that pierce the skin of more than chickens the ache in my chest

#### A Fork, A Slap, A Poem

my grandmother's fork
poking about in a poem
my mother wants a copy
she remembers
only part of this story
the outrageous:
my trying to get through airport security
with a weapon from her kitchen
and the slap
she doesn't recall at all

i soften it by admitting i deserved it but this is written through holes like a wood table showing through a lace tablecloth the wood makes its own pattern which you see both separate from & underneath the lace

one person stands in a pose taking a picture behind her someone else clicks the camera too & behind the 2 of them a 3rd lens records the record of a record a fork poem stirs a poem about a poem

my mother muses about how careful a mother should be how slaps leave imprints on our children but you know that she reminds me you have your own

my own standing behind me with their cameras

When my mother visits, I read her the long-handled fork poem, the poem above, and some other autobiographical writing in which I pay tribute to her: " ... [my mother] commented to me that she reads my articles and wonders in awe how I know so much. I know whatever I am today is because of her" (Leggo and Norman 1997).

She cries. I cry. I write it down again.

Every 4200 Years

above the room where my mother & i talk the Hale-Bopp comet makes its appearance for another night i am eager to spot it before it disappears from view for another 4200 years

my mother, 71, has just put corrective drops in her eyes she doesn't care for comets her vision is inward streams of viscous tears rain down her cheeks i don't know how many more times her eyedrops will turn to salt

my yellow words light a sodium comet in the room and one of Hale-Bopp's tails wags a trail of dust in the universe

On the phone my sister, with a residual trace of sibling jealousy over all the attention I am getting, says: I told her you still wrote about how she slapped you!

I gave my mother copies of the poems and the tribute. But not the poems from the summer filled with tension.

One slap at a time.

Sometimes a slap wakes us up, and maybe what we write autobiographically is a way to speak to those with whom we are in relationship, a way to say what we would otherwise have kept silent.

#### **REFLECTION 2.**

Di Brandt writes on a preface page in her confessional book of poems, <u>Questions I Asked My Mother</u>: "some of this is autobiographical and some is not" (1987, n.p.). We know from her powerful and moving essay, "letting the silence speak," that her mother was devastated by what some of those poems revealed, including the abuse that Brandt experienced from her father (1990). I tend to doubt the disclaimer, "this is not an autobiographical book/film/play/sculpture...," when I read or hear it because I think we are often not totally aware of just how our life stories shape what we do, say, write, create.

At the school where I teach one day a week, a school to which I was new two years ago, I discovered another writer on staff, a talented woman who has already published a novel and a book of short fiction.

One day we were talking...

"Renee, will I make a good mother?"

I laughed and reminded her: "J., you have been a mother for 23 months now!"

In the spirit of beginning friendship, she lent me her prize-winning long poem, all about her abusive father and the pain she and her siblings and their mother suffered (Mitton 1991).

(her father threw her mother out a closed bedroom window one day)

The poem is powerful and riveting, raw, confessional. And very brave. I felt privileged that she shared it with me, and I

understood at a much deeper level what she had half-jokingly asked me.

(in her poem she mentions how she wrote her journal in code, so when her father read her words, he would not understand)

(her poem ends as her mother instructs her and her siblings to each pack one box of special things)

There is no code in her poem.

Zoe Landale's book of poetry, <u>The Burning Stone</u>, chronicles her re-search into her family history (1995). In the process of meeting her "beautiful ghosts," she uncovers the story of an abusive relative. Such disclosures that divulge family ghosts and secrets can cause much anger and discomfort, but like Di Brandt, Zoe wrote autobiographically, "letting the silence speak," and she sought and found publication.

ethics involved What the in this kind are of autobiographical writing? Do we ignore our mothers and our fathers and write anyway? Do we bury unsavoury pasts and words that expose? And what about those of us who are not only writers and poets, but are writing autobiograph(icall)y in the re-search we do in the academy? Do we risk angering and upsetting our biological parents and upturning the laws of the fathers? And unsettling those fathers and mothers of the academy who sit around oval tables with us at defences?

Theories of feminism and postmodernism and literary theory encourage us to speak and write out of the silence, to move from the centre to the margins (with bell hooks 1990),

to take off our strait jackets (with Jane Tompkins 1993).

But do we risk:

--being silenced for breaking silence?

--being pushed off the edge of the margins?

--getting caught in the sleeves of our straitjackets, as we shed them like old snakeskins?

#### **REFLECTION 3.**

Today in class, our drama became quite theatrical, tensionfilled and powerfully emotive, as one by one the residents of our fictional space community stated whether or not they would leave our white hole/black hole for other parts of the universe. We had been roleplaying for weeks, imagining and developing this space community and the parts we each played in it. Reaching a point of crisis, each "resident" considered the risks of remaining in the "hole" or the hazards of further journeying.

I ended up in the hall, hugging and comforting Donna, who broke down and cried. Her father died this year, and I think the emotion in the drama brought her feelings of grief once again to the surface. During the drama, she insisted on re-doing an improvisation so that she could revise it. In the first version, she is seated in a rocket, about to take flight, but it crashes. She was desperately upset about having "done it wrong" (her words), not the way she wanted to. She redid the improvisation by cancelling out that shattering ending and adding more hope to her exodus, a sense that everything could once again be rebuilt. Such drama is a kind of writing inscribed with/in the body, a potent force that enables children to work through life's events, and a strong example of how the autobiographical details of our lives shape our invented stories. In the hall, speaking to her about how she missed her father, I felt so useless, and all I could think of to do was hug her and say "I understand."

The role drama is a fiction, enacted in the dimensions of

time, space and imagination, concocted out of the children's fascination with white holes, black holes and the endlessness of universe. But for Donna, this fiction is mostly the autobiographical, all about the death of her father, and autobiography pulls her through space, like the rocket trip she mimes in her improvisation, a rocket which takes her to a different, more hopeful world.

I think of my story of Donna in the drama, and I know, with the knowing that comes from loving parents and children, that her story will shape her now and for all the days of her life. We need to embrace the risks of autobiographical writing and acknowledge the significance of writing our lives by body and by pen.

But what about the reliability of memory, that source and instrument of autobiography? How do we re-member (and forget) our stories, as we engage in the important business of autobiographical writing, "memory work" (Chambers 1998)?

#### **REFLECTION 4.**

When you write about anything--in a novel, an article--you learn a lot you did not know before. I learned a good deal writing this. Again and again I have had to say, "That was the reason was it? Why didn't I think of that before?" Or even, "Wait...it wasn't like that." Memory is a careless and lazy organ, not only a self-flattering one. And not always selfflattering. More than once I have said: "No, I wasn't as bad as I've been thinking," as well as discovering that I was worse.

(From <u>Under My Skin: Volume I of My Autobiography</u> by Doris Lessing 1994, 13)

What is a memory? Is it a recollection of actual events, filtered through our perceptions and consciousness? Is it a series of sharp or hazy incidents and images which we occasionally pluck out of the past for our own purposes? Is it yet another story out of the stories of our lives, a story which can change in the way we tell it, the way it is received, the context within which it is framed?

And while I'm asking, is there some Memory Judge somewhere sitting on a throne with a Book of Facts who knows when you've strayed too far from the "truth" (whatever that's supposed to be) or when you've perhaps come too dangerously close to it?

#### \*\*\*\*\*

I consider that I have a good memory, a visual one, filled with sights and sounds and smells and pictures. I remember many of my memories like a movie, re-playing them again and again. They are full-screen, fully colorized and I can still hear voices and tones and nuances. I can remember what people have said to me, and the way they looked when they spoke, and the circumstances around the speaking. But I don't remember everything with absolute clarity. I lose the order of things sometimes, and I am left with a jumble of juxtaposed and blended occurrences. And when it comes to a sense of direction, my memory is totally disabled. My youngest daughter continually gives me directions while I drive and I am grateful for the assistance. My other daughters led me off a ferry once to our waiting relatives.

Still, even with my direction-disability, I believe my memory about my life to be sound and fairly intact. Subject at times to the exaggeration and embellishment we all sometimes use to adorn our lives, but with underlying grains of substantial accounts of actual lived experience.

#### \*\*\*\*

In 1994-95 when I was writing my autobiographical master's thesis, I said that when I first began writing, I didn't really consider the public or the private. "But Renee," Carl Leggo reminded me when he read this preposterous statement, "what about when you used to carry every word you'd ever written around with you in your briefcase, for fear of someone else seeing it?" Oh, yeah. Right. That's what friends and committee members are for. Reality and memory checks. How could I have forgotten that stage? Or glossed over it so? Re-constructed and re-written it? What I meant to say was that I didn't really consider all the ramifications of making public my private life, like the time my prose poem about my twenty-year marriage was published in the newspaper.

It took some more sifting and re-membering to get a more accurate version. Or do I mean merely a different version? I find that when we write and remember, this process is colored by the present moment, and just how much writing and remembering we are doing...memories can be suppressed, forgotten, filtered by time into what we want or need at the moment...it takes a great deal of writing and introspection to uncover a "truth"...writing a memory may only be a tiny beginning kernel of a "truth," or an untruth waiting to be re-sifted...

#### \*\*\*\*

There's no doubt that our words and our silences color our memories (and our inventions). There's no doubt that time and other events change the way we look back at something. But does this make a memory invalid? false? just another construction in a long row of warehouses that store our lived experiences in boxes of facts, impressions, clues, artifacts, feelings...Do we have to bring along a lawyer who argues our case for or against our memory?

Geoffrey Woolf, in the introduction to <u>The Best American</u> <u>Essays 1989</u> writes about the story he wrote of an old friend from the Vietnam days who came to his house to forgive him for being a CIA agent and FBI informer. Woolf was neither. Woolf writes:

One aspect of my account is not open to textual exegesis.... One truth, take it or leave it. Not a question of memory. A reader of that essay--a philosophy professor, for God's sake--an acquaintance, said he had scrutinized my narrative and found in it a subtext that persuaded him I had indeed been just the mole my ex-friend believed me to

have been. I say to that reader ... : Fuck you. (1989, xxxiv)

\*\*\*\*

In 1995 I wrote an account of my first few years of teaching in a rural Bible belt in the Fraser Valley of B.C. in the early 70's (Norman 1995c). The memory of certain events is sharp in my mind, as sharp as the smell of the sweet daffodils I received in the Spring and the feel of the soft, purple plums offered to me in bags. I wrote these memories into an article published in the weekend newspaper. I wrote about actual events, happenings that I could swear to in a court of Memory Law if necessary: words etched forever in my mind because this was my first teaching assignment.

An irate principal wrote back that my memory was selective, I distorted my account, and the interim had played havoc with my memory: to him some events were a figment of my active imagination--the latter a nice compliment for a writer, actually. Interestingly, this total-stranger-of-a-principal admitted he was principal of another larger school in the district, and based his account of events that happened to me on his own experiences.

It seemed as if I had discovered a new syndrome: the repressed teaching memory syndrome. More likely, as one colleague suggested, I irritated the principal with my irreverent questioning of both teaching method and district procedure and Christian doctrine. You should irritate a principal at least once a year, this colleague added.

Accuracy of a memory, then, seems to be in the eye of the beholder. Or the beholder who has power. I look back at the words I chose to describe events and am conscious of how I framed them, what was not said, the interpretation that any writer/reader/text interchange brings. But I own that memory of my first few years of teaching, and however it was questioned, it felt right when I wrote it into words. Can we ever not distort what we write by virtue of the very words we use, the way we order them and choose them and arrange them?

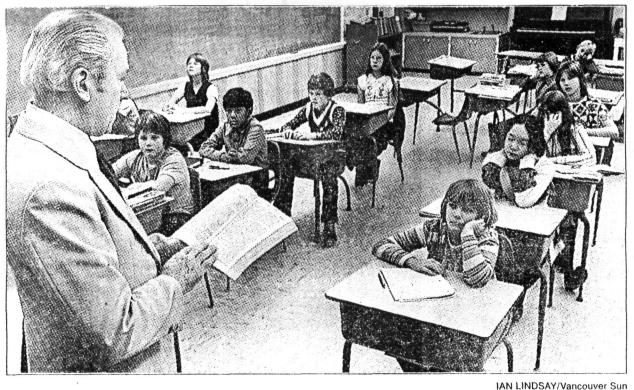
# SATURDAY REVIEW

### Education

Priorities have changed in education as they have in life

Creation, evolution take on new meaning in '90s BY RENEE NORMAN

All the attention recently given to the teaching of the creation theory versus the evolution theory in Abbotsford schools brings back memories of my first two years of teaching in Abbotsford school district. It was 1972, and teachers fresh out of university were lucky to be offered jobs in the Lower Mainland, so I readily accepted the first offer I received. I am grateful for my experience in Abbotsford. It helped me form my philosophy of life and learning. I came to realize what teaching methods I did not want to use. I also discovered that I didn't like being bound by the strictures imposed by



REQUIRED READING: the Bible is read to class in an Abbotsford school in 1977

others. I understood something else, too. Something about what matters to me in the evolution of life and the creation of community. Feeling somewhat out of place--a Jew in the so-called Bible Belt of the Fraser Valley---I aingerly took the Bible out of the desk in my first classroom and turned to the Old Testament.

I considered skipping this required morning ritual altogether, but the children never let me forget, and in this district the supervisors conducted surprise spot checks and they checked everything.

Were the children divided into three traditional reading groups? Was I using the prescribed books? The children must sit on small chairs, not on the rug I'd brought into the room. The children must be given more blackboard busywork if they finished too quickly.

No, I could not start a drama club in the school.

When you're

21 and it's your first teaching job and you're on probation for the year, you read from the Bible, but it always felt like an intrusion.

My own upbringing involved all the familiar Bible stories, including Adam and Eve and the week the world was born.

Moreover, I could pronounce the names of all the main characters such as Nebuchadnezzar with an impeccable Hebrew School accent.

These stories are laden with passion and purpose, messages and morals, and I believe stories are vital in education.

But daily Bible reading was not my choice as a morning starter for a class of diverse, eager sevenyear-olds in 1972.

It seemed like an anachronism from a time when the Bible was also the reader, and the teacher was more than likely the matriarch of the family.

Besides, there are other more

innovative ways to introduce those stories into the classroom. Other more inclusive ways exist to create a feeling of spirituality and community in the public school. Many wonderful children's books deal with a variety of myths from many cultures.

Bible reading has long been banished from the opening routines of B.C. classrooms, but 1 never forgot how constraining it felt to flip through this avowed best seller for some passage that would hold meaning for both me and my young charges, all the while looking over my shoulder for one of those supervisors.

Priorities change in life and education, and the Bible and religious dogma legitimately disappeared from the curriculum of classrooms.

I learned a great deal from those Abbotsford children that had nothing to do with the Bible. 258 When they chatted about cats in Show and Tell, they meant tractors in the fields, not the felines I envisioned.

I received stacks of sweet daffodils and bags of soft plums and l learned to be patient with the boy who was late every morning in the spring because he had to help around the farm before school. taught them many new songs on the piano in my room and l even introduced some drama activities (but called them something else).

The biggest problems these children had were bed-wetting, boredom with my endless blackboard questions about wooden reader characters and—for some—poverty.

Today, over 20 years later, I listen to the children I teach in Vancouver.

It is a different world. I listen to Alice comment that the folk song we've just learned would have been a nice one for her auntie's funeral, the auntie who died of AIDS.

Andy tells me how he spent the holidays with first one parent, then the other. And Sharlene announces that her mother married her father this week. Whether it was a big bang or somebody's rib that led to life, children's lives today are full of change and sadness.

Once I drove down a street and saw some children l had taught years earlier. I saw dear, familiar heads, much bigger, perched on alien, elongated bodies, and I wanted so badly to call out the window some of what I had learned in my first years of teaching, much of it from those Abbotsford children.

Jimmy, I'm sorry I made you miss all those recesses to finish those useless blackboard questions, while your uncoordinated little fingers held the HB pencil too tight.

Polly, I should

have hugged you more, smell and all, lice and all, hugged and held your thin brown arms in that sleeveless dress you wore all winter.

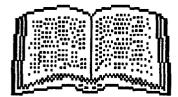
Danny, your mother was right. You could read.

Randy, sing as loud as you can offkey, and never mind about the festival.

The age-old debate about creation or evolution rages on in a new context, one where children dwell with the awareness of dreaded diseases like AIDS, with divorce, with dysfunction, with disillusionment.

So I'm going to concentrate my energy on many songs and stories, on harmony and movement, laden with recognition for both past and present but seeking hope in the future.

Renee Norman is a writer living in Coquitlam.



love and tolerance and forgiveness

remembrance and regret

defiance and humility

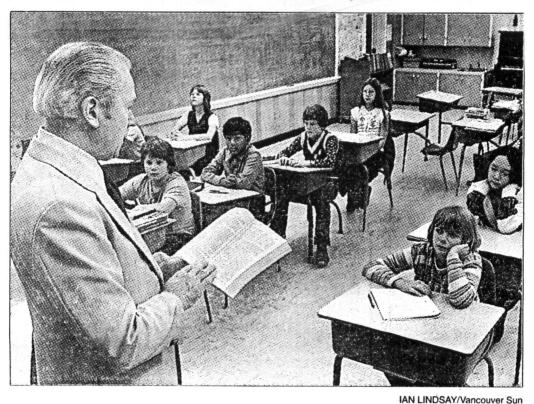
# SATURDAY REVIEW

# LETTERS

Renee Norman's account of teaching in Abbotsford in 1972 was interesting, but I'm afraid the intervening 23 years have influenced her memory of how schools in this district operated during her first teaching experience.

I was principal of one of Abbotsford's larger schools in 1972; at that time The Lord's Prayer and Bible reading were compulsory, without comment, in all classrooms in B.C. However, if a teacher had a legitimate reason for not participating it was the principal's obligation to find an alternate. Sometimes an older student performed the 90-second exercise.

Her statement that the district supervisor conducted



BIBLE READING: account of Abbotsford schools in 1972 was distorted

surprise visits are more figments of her active imagination.

Many of the classrooms were fully carpeted and lessons were often conducted with pupils, and sometimes the teacher, seated on the floor. In some of the older classrooms, a small carpeted area was often supplied for that purpose.

As for drama being a forbidden topic, more nonsense. Most elementary schools put on plays, musicals and concerts. The secondary schools had drama clubs. In fact, Abbotsford sponsored a drama festival for many years.

If one of her biggest problems was pupils bedwetting, then her class was unique. In my 30 years as a principal, I knew it to be a problem with very few seven-year-old pupils. Some of the rare cases I did hear of were caused by insensitive and poorly trained teachers.

If pupils suffered from boredom, that was the teacher's fault. Most of the Grade 2 teachers I knew made school and learning an exciting and worthwhile experience, even in Abbotsford in 1972.

JM Abbotsford

letters

letters

letters

lottons

M is for M(other) Metaphor Metonymy Mirrors Magnets

For my birthday, I asked for a hot tub. Don just laughed. So I settled for a (second-hand, \$50) desk of my own in the computer room, where I either had been perching at one of our two computers with my books and journal balanced over keys, or writing on top of the incredible mountain of paper on Don's desk. If I don't have a room of my own, or a hot tub, a desk will do nicely for doing dissertation.

I invited my daughters to work at my desk any time I'm not there. Often during the day when they are away at school, I find a world atlas or a Sarah MacLachlan CD or one of my electronic grandchildren (a Tamagotchi)--more often than not dead--lying inbetween my words. As if to remind me that my work is grounded in other worlds, other people, other metaphors and metonymies.

Sometimes after the rush of afterschool-supper-cleanup-pianosaxophone-bassoon-singing, I drift downstairs to my desk for a few more minutes of dissertation, and my daughters join me in the computer room with their homework. I have made it clear that at this time it is okay to interrupt me when they need help. I move between autobiography

and spelling (does bee rhyme with leave?)

and mapping (what latitude is the Antarctic Circle?) and French (help me study the months;

does décembre have an accent?

how on earth am I supposed to fill out a passport application en français?).

I am quite used to an interrupted life, but occasionally when I lose a thought mid-sentence in order to hear un-deux-trois or help fill in another one of those infernal blanks on those interminable spelling worksheets, I dream about a hot tub. In a room of my own.

Occasionally when someone refuses to go get help from Dad (he's the geographer and I have no sense of direction anyway), I think it is the words I am writing, the project I am involved with, that bring my daughters like magnets to my side, so they can share me and my work.

(And anyway, Mom, I can't go to Dad with my French homework. You have the best French accent. Dad's sucks!) Vive le hot tub!

M I

# **DAILY PLANNER**

# DATE April 21

**TIME:** 9:00 AM

#### **CONTENT:**

Begin Autobiography Project.

Share excerpt from Erica Jong's <u>Fear of Fifty</u>, the one where she writes about her father, then interviews him for a reality check.

Read aloud some of my autobiographical writing--poems and narratives.

What is autobiography? Can it be defined? Their ideas on a long sheet of white paper rolled across the floor.

> Explain the project--writing interviewing versioning dramatizing.

We will be writing autobiographical episodes, something that "really" happened to you, yet involves others. These will eventually be shared in various ways--readings, script, drama...We will look at truth, a complex notion. We will write various versions of the same episode, so it should be one you can stick with for a long time. You can interview any others connected to your episode and we will compare the versions, the interview notes.

They should begin thinking of what to write about.

**REMINDERS:** Felts and long roll of paper.

Band people will have to catch up.

# **DAILY PLANNER**

DATE April 28

**TIME:** 9:00 AM

#### **CONTENT:**

Display the long sheet of paper and discuss their views on autobiography.

Share more of my autobiographical writing.

Read several of the vignettes from bell hooks' autobiography, especially the ones that deal with what it is like to be a child.

Begin writing a draft of the autobiographical episode.

### **REMINDERS:** Bring Boneblack.

Band is cancelled today.

autobiography--the art of life

WRITE REMEMBER

### describing experience YOUR LIFE

autobiography: your life on paper

experience of a life time something that makes you think about your own life expressing your life through your words

a story of life YOUR STORY OF THE PAST

A TIME OF IMPORTANCE my life a story of your closest stories

your interpretation of life RECOLLECTION OF A LIFE

remembering your past and writing about it **GROWING THINKING** 

### REPRESENTING YOURSELF

### story of a lifetime

autobiographies are stories or important events in your life

THOUGHTS & DREAMS writing a story about yourself and your life

autobiography is a piece of work revealing the life of the author; but don't believe everything they say because they may screen or change (incidentally and accidentally) the truth

**RECALLING THE PAST** reminiscences

your own words or the words you've spoken FEELINGS

ABOUT YOURSELF, BY YOURSELF

## Journal Entry

I began some work in/on autobiography with the Grade 5/6/7's yesterday. First we looked at the word, and Donald knew that auto meant self and they all guessed at bio and graphy-correctly! I spread a long piece of paper on the floor and asked them to write what they thought auto/biography meant or entailed. We will look back at this long paper when we've moved through our project activities (which I've divided into sections that include re-writing and presenting), perhaps adding to the paper in differently colored felts.

Dew had actually read any autobiographies except for one person who had read about a Disney cartoonist. Some had read biography and knew the distinctions between them. Someone said, "We've read our own autobiography," a lovely reference to how we live our lives in a writerly/readerly fashion.

After I read them the excerpts from Erica Jong's autobiography, they were full of stories of their own childhoods, evoked in part by Erica's own quirky stories as well as her father's. We had to limit everyone to telling two stories each, as they remembered more and more incidents and episodes:

Bob: the only poppy in a field by an Italian villa and they wanted to pick that poppy, but wouldn't; a week later the field filled with poppies.

No, Bob's twin sister, Susan, corrected, the story goes--they were tending a wounded moth who hit a window. This moth was given to them by others staying in the villa, since they had achieved a reputation for moth-revival techniques. They wanted to give the tender tasty morsel of rare poppy to the moth, but were held back by its singular status. (Echoes of poppies in Plander's Dields and the reverence created for the flower, a symbol once а угаг.)

All this against the sad backdrop of what their homeroom teacher had just told me that morning, the twins' mother diagnosed with cancer, the children carrying on in the normality of telling favorite special tales, stories full of family trip memories and the wonder of childhood.

And Donna, who lost her father last year, describing how she secretly climbed out her window onto the roof, and enticed young friends to do this, too. Eventually years later, she confessed to her dad, who exclaimed: if I'd known you wanted to, I'd have tied a rope around your waist and helped you. A father honoring the desires of an inquisitive child.

As I listened, I thought how important it is to create a space for these stories, for bringing dead fathers back temporarily, for keeping dying mothers in the picture.

And Jamie beginning: This is not really my story, it's my brother's...So whose stories really are they? I ask, and do we really own them? Should we tell/write them? No answers, just lots of questions, and I tell them one of my daughters said that to me: It's <u>my</u> story.

All this discussion with the layer of a delicate veil over my eyes-seeing the twins' mother in September, smiling, robust, friendly, telling me how much her children enjoyed the Creative Expression Program; they would not join Band if it meant they missed some of it. My heart expands at all the children's sweet and funny and silly stories, my heart breaking that a mother might not be around to hear them anymore.

Loving Others: the Finest Act, the Riskiest

years & years in the same house then something else goes: the stove element a friend's breast the tiles are loose by the front door next: a uterus? a clock? a bowel?

who will break
& what will wear out next?
that phone call very late at night
--just a wrong number
stops the heart
temporality calls daily

driving away from my house i pray for a return trip & new linoleum to cover the old i want another year without bi-focals or *yirzat* for the dead i don't want to conjure up more children navigating crosswalks motherless where i pause

# **DAILY PLANNER**

DATE May 5

**TIME:** 9:00 AM

#### **CONTENT:**

Finish writing the autobiographical episodes.

Band people should complete them by next week!

Next--interview someone connected with the story. This must be done out-of-class. Either tape-record, take notes, or write it up retrospectively.

Share some of their writing today and identify any other points of view for possible versions. For example, in "The Note" story I read them, the principal.

How else could the episode be written? Begin thinking about this. Imagine, or use details from the interviews. Refer to the questions I devised in Section V of my dissertation ("The Strangeness of Autobiography: from the Other Side of the Mirror").

Next--we will share the interview results, then write another version of the drafts, either in terms of content or form.

**REMINDERS:** Meeting at UBC afterschool!

# Journal Entry

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The autobiography project is exciting, alive with possibilities! I read them some of my narratives and poetry, and they were so sweet and appreciative: "You should put your poetry into a book!" Then I read some of the bell hooks' vignettes to open up the spaces for form as well as content. I also read my touchy-topic "Note" story, which questions which stories are whose, and the unknown parts of stories. They could hardly wait to get to their notebooks and write, unlike other grumbling occasions in the past.

Donna approached me before beginning, wondering if we would be sharing what we wrote. I just instinctively knew she wanted to write about the death of her father last year, so I replied that I had said we would share and dramatize their autobiographical writing-I always make that clear before writing or dramatizing work-but that she could do that however she wished. For example, she could share a part of it. But I also said not to share it at all if she chose, that what was important was writing personally about what she felt strongly.

At one point during the morning, I did not see her and thought she had fled, but no, she chose a private nook in which to write, proud by recess time that she had gotten so much accomplished. At noon I read what she had written, having earlier double-checked that this was okay. I read it at my desk, openly crying. It was an incredible piece, about how her father's death freed her in a strange sort of way, how he will always be part of her...

And all my plans for post-structural contextualization and complication dissolved as I dissolved with the impact of her heartful, emotional words. Here in the face of her heart the fact that there are many truths did not matter even a little, not yet at least. How could I introduce versions and distortions in the wake of a child's very real grief and reflection in response to a parent's death? All that mattered at the moment of the writing was the strength of the feelings, the desire to commit them to paper, the risk in wording in a very public place such very private thoughts and impressions.

I realize that our next step--to interview people connected to the episode--will have to be worded differently, so that they feel free to conceive of the interview as a sharing of the piece, not an interrogation in a deconstructive vein which might seem insensitive to very real, very sensitive matters. There are big, big risks on everyone's part. Yes, I'll frame the next phase as a sharing with an/other whom the writing is about or involves. Then they should remember and record the results. a re-writing in another key, with re-percussions and re-sonances.

# Journal Entry

We continued with our autobiographical work, today mostly devoted to writing. When the Band students left, I read them my Ethics piece about the grandmother's fork poem, to demonstrate the many versions and permutations of writing that can arise out of an incident or episode. I want them to hear about my own hesitation in sharing my poem, but how it turned out okay, though it still raises issues.

I read all their pieces at recess: Donald's is all snatches of dialogue and for once, he warmed to the task. Jane's is sensitive and thoughtful. Susan's breaks my heart, the sad undercurrents of what is really happening now in her life charging her memory-story of a family holiday. (Seeing a fawn: how she will always remember that moment. Unwritten: the painful reality of a sick mother with cancer.) The twins seem happy, oblivious.

When I chatted with Donna about her writing, I told her it was an incredible and powerful piece. She told me when her Dad was dying she put up a shield to get through that time. She said that she would be willing to share what she wrote (for herself), but that she'd best not because the twins' mom has cancer and they may be "shielding" themselves to cope, too. I replied that this was very sensitive of her, and wise, and that it's hard to know what's best to do, because it is also very helpful for others to know and read and hear about people going through similar experiences. Donna plans to share and dramatize a second piece which she will write. I think it is best to defer totally to her child-sized wisdom, which as far as I'm concerned, surpasses the compassion and humanity of some adults I've known.

Earlier when Jane had begun writing, she balked and exclaimed: "We're going to share this??!!??" We must handle autobiography delicately and be very open about our plans, leaving lots of leeway so children are free to disclose what they wish and keep secret, silent, hidden what they wish, too. At the AERA conference, Max van Manen commented that secrets give evidence of a self. So, too, does autobiographical writing, and the "self who writes" grapples with many personal and ethical issues that have to do with what anyone who breaks silence or comes to writing must at some time confront. This process seems different for everyone, and seems developmental, too. Something that ebbs and flows like the tide, always there, in, out, changing hourly, daily, a life force to be reckoned with. We look where the tide is marked before we know whether it's safe or wise to walk across the sand.

Note: Brad is doing his as a chronicle, with dates and entries. It will be interesting to see where it goes. Teresa's is like a poem, from her point of view as a young child.

Next class, they are to report on their sharing/interviews with significant others and we will discuss how that colors the original writing. I will likely ask them to write up the experience of sharing/interviewing, then go back to the episode and re-write it. How would Donald's be different in prose? Or Brad's? Could Susan write a poem about the fawn? And how could they incorporate information or impressions from the interview/sharing?

#### At The Tables

this year death has been a presence in the classroom sitting among the tables like a new bully no one wants to rile invisible but clearly seen in the twins' mother diagnosed with lung cancer and Donna's father who died last year and Jane's piece of writing which records her first day of school with a mother seven years dead

the twins smile, write about summer cabins and fawns who came close enough to touch memories that will last longer than their mother

Donna writes: there was a certain freedom when my father died he will always be a part of me aloud she tells me she was like the twins not yet facing up to death that bully

the ghost of Jane's mother walks through conjured words too: the crisp scratchy feel of a new dress the relief at a beloved familiar face at the end of a day she takes her place at the table

## Journal Pragments

...Jane read her autobiographical piece, beautiful writing written in a young child's voice about the first day of school accompanied by her mom. Perfectly capturing the child-sense of not knowing what is going around her in the adult world, but feeling secure with her mom. She earlier shared the writing with a classmate, and when I asked why, she replied: Because my mom died seven years ago. I felt terrible. As a mother, I am affected deeply by these stories. As a teacher, I am reminded we must tread carefully. But the children seem to need to write about these matters, to talk about them openly. Otherwise they would not have chosen to write about them...

...I asked Robert if he really remembered his story, or if he remembered the stories told to him, or both. A bit of both, he said. That led to a good discussion of what we truly remember, what we're told, and even what we dream. (Some of my childhood family stories were retold so often I no longer remember (or care) if it is the memory I hold in my head or the story of the memory. Do I really re-call running across a busy Calgary street as a toddler, narrowly escaping death, or do I re-call my parents recounting how my father let go of my hand and how he was reprimanded by the police officer who caught me?) My students and I discussed our earliest memories, and they all vied to tell those, a hodge podge of images: crib bars, red bikes, gasping for breath as an infant (a premature baby), all suggesting we remember in different ways. Some of us remember back to our infancies. All this seems complicated by the current debate about repressed memory syndrome. In an article by journalist Paula Brook about a teacher falsely accused of abuse, I read this: " ... though the experts did agree on one thing: that memory--all memory--is fragile and its retrieval can be contaminated ...." (1998, 26). My students'stories demonstrate deep

awareness and the ability to take in and remember at early ages. How impressionable we all seem in our sensory states. Colors, impressions, feelings emotional and tactile (the crib bars hurt when I pressed against them)... These children love to talk about what is going on inside their heads, their conscious selves. I think of Adrienne Rich's poem, "Bears," (1990, 118): Wonderful bears that walked my room all night, Where have you gone, your sleek and fairy fur,

When did I lose you? Whose have you become? Why do I wait and wait and never hear Your thick nocturnal pacing in my room?

Perhaps Rich's poetic questions place memory and childhood in an interesting light. We all have bears of our childhood nights, real and imagined. Some we keep, some we forget, some we alter, some we give away in our own poems and stories...

... Their classroom teacher has assigned them an autobiography to read. It will be interesting to find out what they've chosen, how many are authored by women, and what they think of both form and content. These children read adult literature, as my older daughters both do. I wonder how the reading of the autobiographies will affect the project work we are doing--will they get more ideas from what they read? Will they have more questions?...

...Donna told me her mom got a post-doc and they were moving over the summer. I wished her luck, of course, and said I'd miss her. In her second autobiographical piece, she wondered what life would be like in a new place without her dad. She told me when she first came to our school, she had to "write an autobiography," and now that she was leaving, she was again writing autobiographically. Full circle...

## This presence, Death in the classroom

...Bob chose an autobiography written by a B.C. woman, all about her boating adventures with her family. Interestingly, the back cover called it a biography, but Bob said confidently that it was an autobiography, and the fact that the protagonist's name is the author's name confirms he's absolutely right!...

...Listening to one another's episodes, versions has really paid off. They are trying various forms and really playing with possibilities...

... These are children's real lives. We need to proceed carefully with everything we say and do in teaching. The power we have and hold and use...How well I still remember Mrs. Horn's slap across my face years ago

the book Mrs. Lable threw at me my Grade 4 teacher reading aloud from <u>Jo's Boys</u> Mrs. Miller calling me up to go over my writing with me... The echo of my own life as a middle child in a middle class family of four behind all their words and actions...

... Deeling ten feet tall in my new glasses, the world sharp and clear the brown-green grass and peonies drooping full of ants the bleeding hearts red like I had never seen snap dragons opening their yellow-red-pink mouths to welcome my new sense of acuity and perception...

## Death in the classroom mirror

...An interesting discussion with Ariel yesterday. She shared her writing with her dad, what she called autobiographical "pictures." He thought she made her life sound too sad and didn't like one part about her mom's anger towards him. So what Ariel did was tone down and re-word that one part, but she still kept the rest intact. I told her I thought she had acted sensitively but as a writer, honoring her father's feelings but still making her own important writing decisions. She looked so pleased...

A new big world where a mother would not be

...It is amazing to discover how these children handle situations that adult writers/autobiographers must encounter...

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY FORM

Your name:

1. Now that you have written and re-versioned an autobiographical episode and also shared it, how would you complete the following:

Autobiography is

		please
·		please
·		
Truth is	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	please

2. Have your views changed at all from the beginning of our work when we wrote on the large roll of white paper? If yes, how?

complete	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·		· .	
complete		-		
complete			<u> </u>	

3. What auto/biography have you been reading? Title:\_\_\_\_\_\_ Author:

4. What compelled you to choose this particular auto/biography? (Be as candid as you like.)

 ·		<u> </u>
		·
 1. · · · ·		this
 Commont on t	be sute (biography you are reading)	this

5. Comment on the auto/biography you are reading:

6. Did reading this auto/biography affect your views on the writing of your own autobiographical episode? Explain.

orm form

form

7. Additional Comments on the Writing, Re-writing and Presenting:

# JUNE REPORT CARD

During the final term, we ended the school year with some work on autobiography. This included the writing of an autobiographical episode, followed by sharing this writing with, or interviewing, someone who could provide a response to it.

Throughout this project, we also considered what autobiography entails, heard excerpts from a variety of published and student autobiographical writings, and the students were asked to choose published autobiographies to read as part of their ongoing class work.

During our work, we discussed many possible ways of rewriting an episode, such as including various points of view, using different genres, and even interrupting the flow of the narrative.Some students accepted the challenge of somehow incorporating the results of their interviews/sharing sessions into their written products, if possible. Others worked on expanding and complicating the original piece of writing in other ways.

During the last two sessions in June, we concluded this project with dramatized presentations of the students' autobiographical work. For example: dramatic readings; scripted or improvised plays; dialogues; the presentation of both versions of the autobiographical writing interspersed one with the other, etc.

The students have worked creatively to produce and present some interesting autobiographical project work and it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with them. Good luck to the Grade 7's and those who are moving on to other schools. I wish everyone well with their future pursuits. Have a safe and happy summer.

### (UNTITLED NARRATIVE)

Outside of Kamloops, the steady rhythm of the wheels on the highway with a forward thrust reminds me that many of the children move on to new schools, new places next year. Such leave-taking is a constant feature of school life and yet it is one which never fails to move me, with mixed feelings. I've taught these children over the course of two years, and although that was only for a part of the day, once a week, we have developed relationships. This builds regardless of the number of minutes. Time is relative to much more than quantity.

In some ways I am so sorry to see them go their various ways, knowing it is likely that unless I run into them at a library or Safeway or glimpse them walking down a street somewhere in ten years, only the head familiar on an elongated body, I will lose touch with them. I remember students who have returned to visit. It is never the same. Some unnameable distance fills the air between us during the how-are-you's, what-are-you-up-to's, good-to-see-you's. We have each moved forward.

In some ways I am resigned to the fact that I may never hear much about many of them again, and even relieved about that. Donna will take up a new life with her mother and I will not hear about how that feels without her dad. The twins will learn to live with a parent who fights cancer and I will not keep thinking about how much longer. I will not keep thinking about the stresses of illness that can tear a family apart, which happened to my husband's brother's family.

Our students move in and out of our lives. We move in and out of theirs. For a while, we are an entity, symbiotic and mutually dependent. Life intervenes like golfball-sized hailstones pounding down on the roof of a car. And I can't hear myself speak or think. Temporarily I am mute and deaf, adrift, unable to operate. And when finally the tempest subsides, I carry on in the calm and quiet, in the wake of all the shifting. Knowing that another storm can arise at any moment, but not caring about that. For the moment, all is calm. There is more work to be done. Good work. Caring for others and teaching them and opening myself to them, no matter how soon they move on.

There are memories that together coalesce to form some sense of re-newal and re-birth, some sense that no matter how students come and go, come and go, they always remain. And so do I.

## Journal Pragments

...Above all else, this project has been an excursion into life for these children--re-membering earlier childhood, grappling with issues that arise when we write our lives and our selves, discovering new communication in their own relationships. Intersecting in the spaces between who we think we are, how others see us, how we see others, and all the ramifications that occur when we take parts of our lives, bits of our selves, and write them, record them, share them, consider them, re-write them. I realize that in asking them to re-write at least parts of their stories, I am trying to give them open spaces instead of closed caves, hope where there might only have been sadness, and the wisdom and maturity that comes with knowing and understanding we never act alone. What we do affects others, and we must write and live in humane, compassionate, ethical ways. In many respects, these children have taught me what it means to be more human, more capable of understanding...

...Nate suggested for Jane's version, she could imagine her "now" self looking down the hall at her kindergarten self.

Surely a refracted

atlin

the.

look

MI-R-RD-R

### EXITING THE HOUSE OF MIRRORS

A red sign flashes. The door opens to blinding sunlight...

We come to the end in this textual House of Mirrors, another beginning. Moving from one mirror to the next, and with/in the mirrors within the mirrors, it becomes apparent that there are many twists and turns, many ends and beginnings. In the carnival House of Mirrors, I catch or study my image reflected back and de-formed. But I accept that it is somehow still me when I gaze at the squat shape or the elongated toffeepulled Renee. I am different yet recognizable. I know that what I see in this House of Mirrors is a momentary distortion, not necessarily how I appear to others, or how another mirror might reflect me back, or all there is to me. There is a surreal quality to the images that appear before me, that are me. The collection of mirrors a-mazes me.

In the textual House of Mirrors of this dissertation, I examine myself again and again through autobiographical writing, placing my life up for capture by the mirrors. But I am never alone; the mirrors reflect back the actual, textual and virtual others with whom I am in relationship, an ethical complication. The mirrors can catch others unaware. And the mirrors never capture everything. Like Alice who goes through the lookingglass and realizes that in the glass, you can only see the back of the clock on the chimney piece, I know the limits of mirrors. I know, too, that whatever I think I see or find in mirrors, and however I write about it, I am both writing a life and living one. The life I write can be a mirror reflection that is just as bent or elongated as a carnival mirror, but it is still a What I write becomes another facet of reflection. selfexamination.

But this dissertation is more than a self-examination. This House of Mirrors is also peopled with many women's lives and words, a deliberate gesture to bring others whom I do not know (but can read about) to my life and text. By incorporating women's autobiographical writing into my text, and considering what they have to say and how they say it, I add depth to the surfaces of the mirrors, Homi Bhabha's other dimensionality. I am affected by the textual lives of others as well as my own. I open my text to other women and the boundaries of autobiographical writing expand.

"New mirrors shatter limits of possibility" screams the headline in a newspaper article. It seems a team of scientists at MIT "announced what may be the most significant advance in mirror technology since Narcissus became entranced by his image reflected on the surface of a still pool of water" (Schechter 1998, A13). These scientists invented the "perfect mirror," a multi-layered dielectric mirror, one which holds promise for the future and moves beyond the limitations of metallic mirrors (which absorb only a small fraction of the light that falls on them) and ordinary dielectric mirrors (which don't reflect light well).

In metaphorical and metonymic terms, is there a "perfect mirror" in this House of Mirrors? The meta-mirror which Nadine Gordimer refers to reflects you back as seen by the person who stands before you. In another version of the meta-mirror, "becoming one's self" occurs in the presence of others one writes about. The mirror of writing is held up to what is lived and re-membered.

Martha, Doris Lessing's fictional and autobiographical character, is a mirror. So is each poem I write. And so are the reflective ruminations on Hannah Arendt arranged as double-sided writing on the other side of the mirror.

Inter-mirrors act as inter-ludes which inter-rupt the sections of this dissertation, each of which acts as an internal mirror in a House of Mirrors. The paper mirrors in Section III reflect back (and complicate) the text that is placed across from them.

Mirrors fly, too, as Hélène Cixous suggests, and they fly in this dissertation. The m(other) in the mirror. The mirror of daughters. The mirror of memory. The mirror of the classroom (and students).

Are any of the above "perfect mirrors"? Or all of the above? None? Perhaps such a scientific feat as the invention of the perfect mirror is an impossibility in this autobiographical text, and the ambiguity of writing that can be continually reflected and refracted in many imperfect mirrors is what lends significance to autobiography in/as re-search.

dissertation, this Ι ask: How can we consider In autobiography in/as re-search? How does women's writing contribute to autobiography in/as re-search? Each section has explored aspects of both these questions. Throughout the text, I have referred to many diverse examples of women's writing, including my own, as well as autobiographical, feminist and pedagogical theory. I have applied the re-search to school describing some specific curriculum, strategies for autobiography in education inspired by women's autobiographical writing. I have demonstrated how these strategies might be employed in the classroom, offering an illustration of how we can write about teaching, maintaining a sense of selves and others, admittedly and consciously writing from an autobiographical point of view. Autobiographical writing contributes to a transforming learning experience that is never really finished. We can re-turn to the writing and as it is turned over and over, more can be found, more is created, more questions can be asked. And so I have no definitive answers, only more questions...

are you holding the mirror to the light? drop it and what shatters?

i don't know someone else appears

holding the mirror to the light

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