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**'The Country at my Shoulder': Gender and Belonging
in Three Contemporary Women Poets**

by

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Abstract.

This study considers the work of three women poets writing in English during the period 1970-2000. I argue that the poets, Eavan Boland, Michele Roberts and Jackie Kay are all 'hybrid' voices, positioned and positioning themselves on the borders between different cultures and traditions. Locating the poets within a specific social, cultural and intellectual context the study considers the different ways in which the poets negotiate these mixed heritages and how gender interacts with their cultural location to affect the poetic identities they inhabit.

My study of Eavan Boland locates her as a post-colonial poet writing out of a very specific historical relationship with Britain. I argue that the effects of this relationship are explored in two ways; the political and psychic legacy of the British colonisation of Ireland but also the ways in which women in Ireland have been colonised by a nationalist poetic tradition. I show how Boland interrogates these different colonisations and drawing on the work of Homi Bhabha I argue that Boland finds her own hybrid space in the Dublin suburbs from where she explores the frictions between a number of conflicting positions.

My study of Michèle Roberts explores the effects of her dual French and English heritage on her writing. I argue that Roberts' desire to embrace both aspects of her identity manifests itself as a desire to reconcile what western dualistic thinking has split and separated. I consider how Roberts advocates a writing and reading practise which asks us to embrace the stranger within ourselves and so begin to heal the split within individuals and nations.

My chapter on Kay explores how she negotiates the cultural specificity of her location as a Scottish writer who identifies as black and how her poetry complicates questions of cultural authority and theories of cultural hybridity. I argue that Kay through a focus on 'performance' as both theme and aesthetic subverts simple fixed notions of identity.

I conclude that all three poets problematise any simple notion of home and belonging as a fixed and immutable space. Rather they inhabit borderlands, unsettled spaces, where there is a constant interaction and reformulation of identity.

Introduction.

There's a country at my shoulder,
growing larger – soon it will burst,
rivers will spill out, run down my chest. (1)

These lines are from a poem by Moniza Alvi. The country at her shoulder is her country of birth, Pakistan, and this poem deals with the feelings of being located in one culture, Britain, while still being part of another very different culture and the tensions and creative possibilities this location provides.

One of the notable features of poetry during the last three decades is the number of poets who position themselves outside or on the margins of English mainstream culture. Many poets writing in Britain are 'hybrid' voices, standing on the borders between different, sometimes multiple, cultures, backgrounds and languages. This location is particularly complex and, I hope to show, creative for women poets who, as I will demonstrate in chapter 1, have already been forced to inhabit a marginal position in the poetry world.

The three poets whose work I am considering here also have a country at their shoulder. All three poets are women, write in the English language and have published their work predominantly in Britain and Ireland. However, they bring to their writing a mixed heritage, some constituting 'difference' which locates them outside the boundaries of the English cultural centre.

Eavan Boland is an Irish writer, based in Dublin, whose work negotiates the relationship between the Anglo - Irish and native Irish traditions. Boland's first collection of poems *New Territory* was published in 1967 (2) when she was only 23 and her most recent collection *The Lost Land* was published in 1998. (3) Her work thus spans the whole period from 1970-2000. Boland writes as a 'daughter of colony' (4) and her work is concerned not only with the legacy of the British colonisation of Ireland but also the colonisation of the Irish woman by a national tradition. My chapter on Boland will focus on the ways her poetry and her prose interrogate these different colonisations and how she explores the relationship between the two. As a poet she is concerned to interrogate and break down the fusion in Irish poetry of women and nation and so reveal the costs to both women and nation of this equation. Themes of dispossession and exile and the search for some connection are prevalent in Boland's work in relation to language, country and to a matrilinear tradition. This exile also extends to her own sexed being. I explore how Boland makes connections between these different losses and the extent to which her own subjectivity and insights are useful in exploring the more general position of the woman poet in a national tradition. The specificity of Ireland will be considered and the usefulness and limitations of post-colonial theory in this context.

Michèle Roberts is both French and English, two colonising powers with a long history of rivalry and opposition and she writes at a time when Britishness is having to embrace the 'other' of Europe and reconsider its own identity. This mixed heritage of Roberts' work - Protestant English and Catholic French - and her relation of this to a 'bisexual aesthetic' is what I want to focus on in her work. Roberts is seen as one of the key British poets of the 70s and 80s who are associated with the women's

liberation movement in Britain and her work can be read intertextually as representative of some of the shifts in the politics and theory of feminism in Britain during this time. Her first collection of poems, *The mirror of the mother*, was published in 1986 (5) but by this time she had already published a number of fictional works. The influence of her French heritage can be seen in her positive engagement with French theory particularly the psychoanalytic ideas of Jacques Lacan and their revision by Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, her surrealist style and the pervasive influence of French Catholicism with its focus on the 'maternal.' This is interspersed with a particularly English cultural feminism.

Jackie Kay is the daughter of a white Scottish mother and a black Nigerian father and was adopted as a baby by a white working class Scottish couple. Kay brings to her writing these heritages and explores issues of identity and subjectivity through the creation of different voices and accents. In this way she challenges stereotypes and expectations about colour, sexuality and many other facets of identity. The voices that Kay creates in her writing address the problem of how we relate and construct alliances across the histories of difference when those histories themselves shape us through division, power and domination. As with Boland and Roberts, the specificity of Kay's location as a Scottish writer who identifies as black brings into play and complicates questions of cultural authority and simple divisions between the centre and the margins. Kay is the youngest of the three poets I am considering and published her first collection, *The Adoption Papers*, in 1991 (6) although her work had appeared in anthologies and magazines from the mid 80s.

All three poets can be said to bring a hybrid identity to their work but the particular configuration of this hybridity is complex and refuses simple oppositional or appropriating labels. Their work both shows the usefulness but also the limitations of theoretical models of cultural hybridity as developed by Homi Bhabha and other post-colonial theorists and this is an area I will pursue in this study.

Women poets writing and publishing today in Britain and Ireland are heterogeneous. Although they may share common concerns and themes and although it may even be possible to discern a female aesthetic, their construction of a female subjectivity is one shaped by a particular and specific interaction of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and 'race' located in a particular historical moment. The particular historical moment within which I am positioning these women is the period from the early seventies to the present.

The Period.

In looking at a contemporary period, I am inevitably positioning myself to some extent within a historicist approach. There are many dangers in this, not least that of reducing diverse and inchoate histories into neatly definable decades and thereby shaping and homogenising a past. This is a trap which histories of the 1960s have fallen into, for example, with their accounts of a decade associated with radical freedoms and myths of a counterculture where Britain is supposed to have stepped out into a new era of sexual and moral freedom. Such a narrative has become so embedded in our whole idea of the sixties that the term itself evokes in popular imagination an era of sexual revolution and radical politics. Such a narrative continues to be invoked in its effect on subsequent decades, so the breakdown of

family values and the uncertainty and diversity which has become a narrative of the eighties is often perceived as a legacy of the so-called sexual and moral revolution of the sixties. Other narratives, however, tell other stories. Writing of the literary and intellectual ideas of the sixties, Patricia Waugh argues that:

‘Outside this largely hedonistic culture and the newly urgent libertarianism ... persisted a rather more austere, still influential if modified dissident culture of middle-class liberal disaffection with roots in an Arnoldian and Leavisite belief that literature as the best that has been thought and said, might still save us. And behind each of these emergent, oppositional or dissident cultures continued an official adherence to economic, political, and cultural assumptions about consensus which, though fragmenting since the 50s would not be fundamentally challenged until the mid-seventies.’ (7)

Similarly the 1980s are now often associated with Thatcherism, a term that implies a philosophy which pervaded the whole culture of Britain. Yet Thatcher’s government was in office from 1979-1991 and the relationship between Thatcher’s policymaking and literature produced in Britain in this period is complex. Texts do not simply recover a factual historical reality. The literature of any period both reflects and is a constitutive factor in the shaping of the stories of the age. Waugh argues that any period of history is always in part a construction from within an age of its own sense of itself:

‘a number of explanatory paradigms across the spheres of politics, economics, culture and society will compete for dominance. In turn, such paradigms inevitably

come under the scrutiny of later historical commentators who are themselves in part (and unconsciously too) determined by what they survey. Any attempt to understand an age from within will be unavoidably implicated in a never-ending and finally impossible unravelling of theorisations and myths which operate as much to constitute the identity of a time as to offer a commentary upon that identity.’ (8)

Nevertheless, I feel strongly that each text speaks to some extent from its moment of production and despite the heterogeneity in what has come to be called new historicist perspectives and methodologies I find myself in agreement with what Veenser sees as the five key assumptions that unite such practise. He summarises them as follows:

- ‘that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
- that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
- that literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably;
- that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
- finally, ... that a critical method and language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.’ (9)

The logic of historicism implies that the point from which the critic speaks is as unsettled by historicism as the object she studies and that therefore I am not an objective or innocent critic. In this introduction, then, I am going to give a necessarily selective and partial overview of some of the contexts, social, cultural

and theoretical in which poetry has been and is being produced and read during this period. In so doing I am not focusing on 'imaginary moments of absolute crisis and change', but attempting some understanding of 'the interrelationships between the various political and cultural paradigms which shape the sense of a period.' (10)

1970-2000: Narratives of Conflict and Consensus.

In 1977 Tom Nairn published his influential book *The Break-Up of Britain* in which he characterises the period as one reflecting the end of a post-war consensus. Nairn outlines a number of factors which he regards as contributing to this shift and in particular looks at the demise of the concept of Englishness as the valid description of a state of mind transcending regional, class and subcultural difference. (11) A constellation of events and effects come together here which can be read as a narrative of discontinuity. The period began a radical reconsideration of the idea of Britishness which gained momentum in the 1980s and continued into the 1990s. The burgeoning nationalism in Scotland and Wales and the resurgence of what has been termed the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland called into question the 'unitedness' of the U.K. In 1969 British troops were sent once more into Northern Ireland, in 1971 internment without trial was introduced, in 1972 the then Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, announced direct-rule and abolished Stormont. In 1974 Welsh and Scottish devolution entered the political agenda once more and although in 1978 devolution bills for both were defeated, Scottish and Welsh nationalisms remained important dissident voices culminating in the creation of both a Scottish Parliament and a National Assembly for Wales in 1999. In Ireland too, despite the continuing conflict, a Northern Ireland Assembly was created in 1998.

At the same time as the U.K. was beginning the process of internal devolution, the demand for labour generated by the economic growth of the 50s and 60s saw a great wave of migration to Britain from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. By the late 70s/80s Britain had a significant black indigenous presence. The 1991 census, which was the first to include a question on ethnicity, indicated that 5.5 percent (just over 3 million people) of the U.K. population identified themselves as belonging to one of the ethnic groups which did not include white people. The 2001 census is likely to show an increase on this.

In addition Britain's relationship with Europe was changing. In 1973 the U.K. joined the European Community, now the European Union. In 1994 the Channel Tunnel was opened creating a rail link between England and France. Britishness has increasingly over this period come to be defined in relation to Europe. While for many people such close links with Europe are seen as positive, for others a mythology of European legal dictates and economic policies has arisen against which many people are asserting a 'national culture' that they feel is coming under attack.

Against this fragmentation and diversity, compounded by the deeply divisive and disenfranchising social policies of the Thatcher government, the period produced another narrative of Britain. This was Thatcher's hegemonic idea of British nationhood which combined a 'heritage' sense of the past with echoes of a dimly remembered imperialism and greatness. Thatcher as second Britannia and saviour of the nation became a popular cultural image. As Ian Bell argues:

‘The successful marketing of this curious Anglocentric ideological concoction was one of the key factors in Thatcher’s dominance of British politics for so long, making her the custodian and representative of all things British, and turning disagreements with party policy into an unpatriotic activity, a new kind of petty treason.’ (12)

Many texts of this period interrogate ideas of Britishness and explore the different intersections of national identity with race, gender, class and sexuality. This concern with British identity is present in all genres and modes of writing. (13) Bell’s discussion of travel narratives of the 80s, for example, finds that where the writers are in pursuit of ‘truth’, a grand narrative of Britishness, they find only ‘a conflict of different moods and attitudes.’ He discusses the work of writers such as Paul Theroux and Jonathon Raban and concludes that in place of an encompassing national identity they find lingering loyalties to place and class. (14) With the devolution of Britain has come a crisis in English identity. In the late 90s more and more texts are interrogating what it means to be English and exploring the specific constituents of an English ethnicity. (15)

The Importance of Feminism.

New social movements also produced a new focus for the politics of collective identities, with their concerns with gender, sexuality and race. The impact of second wave feminism is of particular significance. In 1970 the first women’s liberation conference was held in Oxford. Although exclusive of the majority of women, it marked the start of a proliferation of feminist ideas into the mainstream of British social, cultural and intellectual life. The idea of a shared oppression which unites

women in their struggle was central to the development of feminist politics in the late 60s and 70s. By the end of the 70s, however, such universality had been challenged. Differences between women in terms of race, sexuality, geographical location and other facets of identity came to the fore, bringing with them the emergence of identity politics within the feminist movement and a shift in the analysis and explanation of women's oppression.

Feminist theory and politics influenced culture and literature in a number of ways. On a practical level the establishment of women's publishing companies and both formal and informal writing groups were instrumental in giving women space to explore and value their writing. All three writers in my study have at different times been involved with women's writing groups as practitioners or as teachers or both. All have to different degrees relied on feminist presses and journals to publish collections of their work. This is particularly so with Michèle Roberts whose early work was published in feminist journals and by the new feminist publishers and who was herself poetry editor of *Spare Rib* for a time. *Spare Rib* itself was established in July 1972 and despite its many changes through its lifetime it was arguably one of the most successful and influential women's liberation publications. It was significant in providing a space for fiction and poetry by women which explored their experience and reflected the insights gained by the consciousness raising of the 70s. An important part of this was the permission it gave women to value their lives and their feelings and to find a voice. Feminist theories critiqued the phallogentric nature of knowledge, and in literature, feminist ideas influenced reading and writing practise by challenging the values of the canon and the literary establishment and exploring the effects of our gender on our writing and reading selves.

The literary canon and the notion of a pure aesthetic value were also challenged by other marginalised groups such as black and lesbian writers. Theoretical developments which gained momentum in the early seventies such as post-structuralism and post-colonialism intersected with developing feminist theory. Common to these developments were recurring themes such as the decline of a strong steady undivided subjectivity, the refusal of canonised forms, the loss of faith in any pure and separate space for art or belief, the emphasis on difference and the stress on the hidden and marginal. All this contributed to a sense of a crisis of value and a decline in consensual aesthetics.

The Poets.

It is within this context, this constellation of moments, that the poets I am considering have written and published. I have selected the poets for a number of reasons. In their writing and publication in magazines and then in anthologies and individual collections they span the whole period from 1972 until the present. Michèle Roberts and Eavan Boland were writing in the early 70s and Jackie Kay began to publish in the late 80s. All continue to publish today. One of the most challenging and exciting aspects of researching contemporary writers is this ongoing production of work. While I am finishing a chapter on a writer she will publish a new text creating a fluid and constant interchange of ideas on theory and practise and ensuring that my critical positioning of her work does not become fixed and static. They all write in different styles, from the surrealist poetry of Roberts to the lyricism of Boland to the dramatic and conversational style of Kay. Though all experiment in

their work with different styles and genres, their poetic voices are significantly different from each other and representative of the diversity of women poets today.

As poets all three have some sort of relationship with feminism in their work although they perceive this relationship in different ways. As hybrid writers their relationship with feminism is suffused with issues of ethnicity, 'race' and nation as well as sexuality and class.

The Use of Theory.

My own positionality as a white Scottish woman, working-class by birth but middle-class by profession, working in academia at a particular moment and having gone through a particular education will inevitably affect my reading of the texts. I have tried to let the theory arise from my critical analysis of the poetry itself and the texts of the writers rather than impose a closed reading from the outset. In situating the writers within a particular period and in drawing on non-literary texts in my situating of the poets, I am aware of positioning myself in a historicist / cultural materialist camp. (16)

However this is a broad and eclectic church. Dollimore and Sinfield define the term cultural materialism as designating a critical method which has four characteristics – an attention to historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis. (17) In my reading of these three poets I utilise these four characteristics. As I have argued above each text speaks from its moment of production and cannot claim to be universal and timeless. The writing of the women poets discussed here needs to be seen in the context of the cultures of the time,

dominant, emergent and oppositional. A concern with theoretical method enables me to utilise the lessons of psychoanalysis and post-colonialism to name but two theoretical approaches which have been relevant since the 70s. Even if eschewing the tenets of a particular theory I would argue that it is impossible not to have been affected by the so-called 'revolutions' in literary theory of the past three decades. 'Cultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality. It knows that there is no cultural practice that is without political significance.' (18) This explicit political commitment, its attention to the marginal, subordinate and displaced in culture and its use and revisiting of Marxist and feminist theory is important to me. What a writer can say and how she can say it are conditioned by the general ideology of the period, by the aesthetic ideology of the period and by the modes of literary production, distribution and reception; the publishing and literary industry. Her individual and concrete experience of these conditions is significant. The emphasis on close textual analysis using techniques such as structuralism and post-structuralism to mark a break with the so-called 'new criticism' with its framework of conservative social assumptions is also sympathetic to my approach. Too often the actual words of a text and the voice of the poet are lost in a swamp of theoretical word-play.

I also make use of the insights which a feminist return to psychoanalysis has produced drawing both on the tradition of object relations theory and the theoretical reworkings of Freud and Lacan by French feminist critics such as Cixous and Kristeva. While cultural materialism privileges external strictures and how these are experienced internally, psychoanalysis focuses on the internal subjectivity of the female, and her gendered construction in language.

Post-colonial theory and its intersections with feminist ideas also prove useful in 'reading' these texts. In particular the work of Homi Bhabha and his redefining of the concept of 'hybridity' is useful in considering the mixed heritages and influences of these poets. His analysis of coloniser and colonised relations stresses the interdependence and mutual constitution of their subjectivities. Colonial identities on both sides are constantly in a state of flux, are unstable and 'agonised' rather than fixed and oppositional. This undercuts both colonising and colonised claims to a 'pure' or authentic identity. Bhabha's work in its focus on the liminal, the 'in-between' as 'the space that carries the burden and meaning of culture' (19) is useful in reading these poets who position themselves at the intersections of different cultural traditions. In its challenge to dualistic thinking and binary oppositions, it parallels and intersects with such challenges from feminist theory.

Structure.

My first chapter will look at the critical and theoretical context in which women's poetry was being received. Through a survey of anthologies and critical works I interrogate the extent to which the mainstream poetry industry in the U.K. was receptive to new voices from women and how the woman poet was constructed by that industry. I then consider the extent to which feminist politics has provided a cultural space for women's expression and the ways in which it has done this. Questions of politico-aesthetic evaluation and the emerging focus on difference are explored through a consideration of the use of the terms 'British' and 'English' in some anthologies produced from the 80s to the present. The complex relationship between women and national identity is also introduced here to foreground the issues

raised in the next three chapters. Having introduced the context, the rest of my study will evaluate the work of three poets writing and publishing during this period.

Notes.

1. Moniza Alvi, 'The Country At My Shoulder', *The Country at My Shoulder* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1993), p.34-35.
2. Eavan Boland, *New Territory* (Dublin: Allen Figgis & Co., 1967).
3. Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998).
4. Eavan Boland, 'Daughters of Colony', *The Lost Land* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p.16.
5. Michèle Roberts, *The mirror of the mother* (London: Methuen, 1986).
6. Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1991).
7. Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1995), p.11.
8. *ibid.*, p.11.
9. H. Aram Veaser, *The New Historicism* (Routledge: London, 1989), p. xi.
10. Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 10.
11. Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, (London: Verso, 1981).
12. Ian Bell, *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), p. 10.
13. See for example Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) or Douglas Dunn, *Barbarians* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) or Tony Harrison, *V* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1989).
14. Ian Bell, 'To see ourselves: travel narratives and national identity in contemporary Britain' in *Peripheral Visions*, pp. 6-27.

15. See for example Jeremy Paxman, *The English: A portrait of a People* (London: Michael Joseph, 1998) and Simon Heffer, *Nor Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England* (London: Weidenfeld, 1999).

16. These two positions are often lumped together although there are differences between them. In Britain the work of the cultural critic Raymond Williams has been influential in the development of cultural materialist perspectives. For a discussion of the differences between the two perspectives see, for example, Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

17. Jonathon Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester: M.U.P, 1994), Foreword, p.vii

18. *ibid.*, p.viii

19. Homi Bhabbha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Chapter 1.

Politics And Poetics.

The Woman Poet and the Poetic Establishment.

Lying awake in a provincial town
I think about poets. They are mostly
men, or Irish, turn out old yellow
photographs, may use four letter words,
stick pigs or marry twice, and edit
most of the books and magazines.

Most poets, who are men, and get to
the bar first at poetry readings,
don't like us fey or feminist,
too old, too young, or too intense,
and monthlies to them are just the
times when very few need us.

Gowned like women in funereal black
they have friends who went punting
on the Cam. I'm not too clear
what others did in Oxford, except
avoid the traffic, bathe in fountains,
drunkenly, a different shade of blue.

Mostly they teach, and some must be
fathers, but they have no stretch marks
on their smooth stomachs to prove it.
At least we know our children
are our own. They can never really
tell, but poems they can be sure of. (1)

Elizabeth Bartlett's poem 'Stretch Marks' from her collection *The Czar is Dead* was published in 1986, approximately mid-point in the period I am reviewing and satirises the poets most fêted by the poetry establishment in the 70s and 80s. Although she mentions no poet by name the ghosts of Larkin, Heaney, Hughes, Gunn and countless others are present. Her poem also comments on the male network and incestuous relationships which exist between such poets and editors, reviewers and publishers.

How fair is Bartlett's attack here? A review of British mainstream anthologies and critical works of the period finds little to argue with in her construction of the poet as male and Irish. Despite the number of anthologies of women's poetry published during this period, (2) most of the mixed anthologies and critical reviews of poetry published in the U.K. and Ireland during this period pay little attention to poetry by women or are reductive or dismissive in their discussion.

For example Carcanet's anthology *Ten English Poets* published in 1976 (3) was seen by many critics as representing a 70s movement or consensus. The poets are all

male, eight of them studied at Oxford or Cambridge - not in itself a crime but lending some weight to Bartlett's construction of the male poet. In terms of poetic styles the collection values the lyrical, the cerebral and the traditional in form and metre. An even more 'important' anthology was published in 1982. This was the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* edited by Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison. (4) The editors include five women and fifteen men and in their introduction again value reason and intellect and are suspicious of the passionate, the polemical and the confessional, adjectives often applied to women's poetry and indeed to women. This volume claims to represent a turning point in literary history, a decisive shift in sensibility and is written very much against the anthologies of the 1950s and 60s. The women poets included in Motion and Morrison's anthology are Fleur Adcock, Carol Rumens, Anne Stevenson, Penelope Shuttle and Medbh McGuckian. Of these five, the first three are the most consistently anthologised in mixed anthologies covering this period. All three have consciously and publicly distanced themselves from the label of 'woman' or 'feminist' poet claiming poetry as a genderless space. (5)

Bloodaxe, one of the better publishers for women, published *The New Poetry* in 1993 representing 'the best poetry written in the British Isles in the 1980s and early 1990s by a distinctive new generation of poets'. (6) The Bloodaxe anthology celebrates pluralism and diversity and firmly establishes a link between politics and poetry. Thus they see much of the poetry of the 80s as written as a response to Thatcherism, post-colonial Britain and the death of a national consensus. Produced by an all-male editorial team, less than a third of the new poets were women (17 out of 55), although all three of the poets I consider in my study were included. This

represents the best of the mixed gender anthologies. Two anthologies published in 1998 take the same period and geographical territory although with slightly different agendas. *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (7) has still more than twice as many male poets as women poets. This is surprising given that the stress of the editors is on pluralism and diversity, one of the driving forces of which, they acknowledge, is gender. Sean O'Brien's *The Fire Box. Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* is better in terms of its representation and its acknowledgement of the contribution made by women poets, including those outside the English cultural centre. (8)

There are many other examples. The approach of the millenium inevitably heralded retrospective anthologies. *The Harvill Book of Twentieth century Verse in English* edited by Michael Schmidt represents the best of these both in numbers and in variety of poetic voices by women. Nearly one quarter of the poets here are women and each poet is represented by a selection of poems. Significantly the title which alludes to twentieth century verse 'in English' means that Schmidt includes American, Australian and Irish writers also. In his Preface Schmidt argues that his selection 'insists not on plurality but continuity,' on what he calls 'a republic of poetry rather than an irreconcilable anarchy of factions.' (9) *The Oxford Book of English Verse* edited by Christopher Ricks (10) follows a fairly conventional line. The 1972 anthology edited by Helen Gardner contained nine women poets only two of whom were twentieth century. (11) In Ricks' edition, where he claims to have used a meritocratic system of selection, paying no heed to gender agendas, there are 29 women poets out of 217, and only 8 of them are twentieth century. *The New Penguin Book of English Verse* (12) devotes 279 pages out of 1100 plus to twentieth

century poems. Fewer than 30 poems by women feature here and no long ones. As Dunmore says in her review: 'Vital registers and qualities of late twentieth century are missing ... Their absence is baffling and the anthology's representation of the twentieth century is diminished by it, as is the reader's pleasure.' (13)

Anthologies which will be used in schools and colleges are particularly influential in shaping the views of the next generation of readers. Yet in Heaney and Hughes *The School Bag* only 23 out of 271 poets are women. (14)

Bloodaxe's *Sixty Women Poets*, edited by Linda France, was published in 1993, (15) the same year as Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*. The main criterion for entry was two published volumes of work although she also includes a few poets who have just published their first collection. What such anthologies demonstrate is that there is no shortage of collections in print by female poets. Clearly, while women continue to be marginalised by the literary establishment and the publishing world, there is a continuing need for women-only anthologies. Indeed statistical analysis of women's inclusion in anthologies of poetry would give one the impression that few women write poetry. Christine Fitton in an analysis of twentieth - century anthologies has established ratios as low as 1:9 (16) and although representation is normally now higher than that it is nowhere near equal.

Why does such inclusion matter? Despite the criticisms made of anthologies, not least from poets themselves, (17) they are arguably the most influential resource in the dissemination and mediation of poetry. They are used in schools, colleges and universities; they receive the attention of reviewers in both specialist and mainstream

press and perhaps most significantly at this time they sell. While single books of poetry by individual poets are the hardest to sell, a reasonably well – known poet might sell between 1000 and 2000 copies of a new book, anthologies can sell and do so in big numbers. This is particularly true of brand names like Penguin. As Tony Lacey, director of Penguin books, asserts:

‘Having the most potent publishing brand means that those charming and seductive four words ‘The Penguin Book of ...’ are dangerous too. They imply immense authority and status. And they almost certainly confer longevity, because one of the problems with anthologies of this kind is that they hang around.’ (18)

The publishers have fulfilled the enormously expensive task of producing an anthology, with its often very large but one-off permission fees and setting costs, and schools have paid out for sets of anthologies. An educational establishment also becomes comfortable with a book and is reluctant to change it. This is evidenced by the fact that anthologies such as Motion and Morrison’s 1982 text and even Alvarez’s 1962 *The New Poetry*, both anthologies with a critical and cultural agenda, are still ‘healthily in print on the Penguin list.’ As Tony Lacey argues such texts can quickly establish a new kind of canon. Indeed given the conservative buying patterns of schools and other educational establishments, the book itself can become the canon - the poems within it are those that will be studied year after year by students.

(19) Anthologies then shape the image of British poetry. During the twentieth century in particular, the development of poetry in Britain was linked with a succession of programmatic anthologies which often had openly positional prefaces setting the respective anthology off against those of earlier generations. This is true

of nearly all the anthologies mentioned above. If poets are never included in the canon-forming or canon-challenging anthologies they are unlikely to make it into the popular ones either. What more populist or democratic anthologies such as *The Nation's Favourite Poems* demonstrate is the interdependence between popular literary taste and the institutions of education. (20) Thus anthologies are significant as vehicles of cultural values and canon mediation.

The anthologies of the 90s moved away from the dichotomy of modernism versus anti-modernism which characterised earlier anthologies to a focus on a plurality of writers and traditions. While this has given more space to women they are still under-represented or characterised by the same few voices. Inevitably if women are not being included in anthologies they are unlikely to be given space in reference and critical works of the period.

The Oxford Companion to Twentieth - Century Poetry in English (21) edited by Ian Hamilton includes biographical entries for equal numbers of British Isles and U.S. poets and represents also Canadian, Australian and New Zealand writers. Out of 1500 poets only about 200 are women. Critical surveys of the period present the same picture although with the added interest of what to do with the 'women poets'. *British Poetry since 1970: a critical survey* (22) doesn't see any of the 'outstanding poets of the decade' as female. Out of the 18 commissioned articles only one deals critically and specifically with a woman poet; Deborah Mitchell's comparison of realism in the works of Roy Fisher and Elaine Feinstein. Yet even here Feinstein is not free from the 'taint' of the association with women poets. Discussing Feinstein's use of the personal in her work Mitchell writes; 'But she is in no sense the

compulsive annotator of domestic life that we associate with the title 'woman poet': her poems are saved from banality by the evident care which has gone into the selection of a particular event ...' (23) Who are Mitchell's 'we' and why the automatic equation of the domestic with the banal? This equation is one that is made often in reviews of women poets who deal with home and children, we shall meet it again in reviews of Eavan Boland's poems. The critic Blake Morrison in an article published in the same volume looking at 'Young poets in the 1970s' does at least put some names to the feminist poets he dismisses. He accounts for the paucity of women poets in mainstream works by arguing that the women's movement of the 70s has meant that those who might in the past have published with the larger houses and magazines have begun to prefer the readership of the committed few. His own dismissal of these poets gives us some insight into why.

'... To readers who have struggled with the menstrual obsessions of Penelope Shuttle, the fire-and-brimstone of Abigail Mozley, and the banality that pervades so much of the Women's Literature Collective's *Seven Women*, this will not come as bad news; better, they would say, to stick with the 'mainstream' work of such poets as Val Warner, Carol Rumens, Joan Downar and Connie Bensley.' (24)

Of the four poets he mentions here only Rumens is given consistent inclusion in the mainstream. Penelope Shuttle has clearly toned down her 'menstrual obsessions' by the 80s as she is the only woman poet (out of eight) considered in Michael Hulse's review of the current state of English poetry. (25)

Things do not get much better in the 90s. In Anthony Thwaite's revised and updated *Poetry Today; A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-95* we see the same problem with the concept of women poets. Of the 19 chapters allotted to different combinations and groups of poets the odd woman is included in four or five of them. In chapter 14, for example, we have Wendy Cope discussed with Tony Harrison, Douglas Dunn and James Fenton as 'popular' in the sense that their books sell well by poetry standards. We then come to chapter 17 headed 'Some Women'. Its positioning towards the end of the book speaks volumes. In the opening paragraph he writes:

'To corral others of them together in this section is, I would agree, a convenient even a lazy ploy, rather than an intelligent critical act. And yet to do this is, in a sense, to follow a common practice, inaugurated by women, since the 1970s: anthologies, even whole publishing houses, have presented women as women.' He then goes on to open his next paragraph with the words 'They are, of course, individuals, however they may be presented ...' (26)

Then why does Thwaite not present them as such? What is the difference between the few poets whose names are allowed to appear at the head of chapters elsewhere and those grouped together here? His discussion in this chapter does not reveal any link or female aesthetic shared by the many poets mentioned here. As with Morrison there is the get-out of the critic only doing what women themselves have done, namely publish together. There seems to be no awareness that it is because of not being taken seriously by critics and reviewers like Thwaite that women have sought other publishing contexts. Thwaite does at least acknowledge the effect, in a

relatively positive way, of 'the feminist revolutions of the post-1960s' on women poets and gives specific examples in Fleur Adcock and Vicki Feaver. He also argues for their 'high profile' in the late twentieth century. One wonders where this high profile is to be found since they certainly don't have one in his survey.

David Kennedy's survey of British poetry from 1980-1994 (27), written as a companion to *The New Poetry* which he co-edited, is better. Women are not ghettoised in a single chapter although the ratio of female to male poets discussed is similar to his poetry anthology and male poets dominate the longer and the single and dual poet essays.

Martin Booth in his much more anti-establishment review of the period has the same dilemma with the woman poet. While decrying his belief in such a category he nonetheless groups them together and describes their work in patronising terms. Freda Downie's poetry is 'detailed and neat, particularly accurate in that it seeks to explain with a certain finicky tidiness' (28). Fleur Adcock's poetry is 'quiet, sometimes distinctly feminine' (29). Patricia Beer's work is 'best described as safe. It takes no risks and is rooted firmly in a security that chauvinists might say is typical of women who are happy and safe in a home, a marriage and a round of life in which they know themselves.' (30) The unquestioning assumptions here are breathtaking both about Beer's life and about women's poetry. I have yet to read a critical review of a male poet whose work is explained wholly in terms of his happy home life. And a survey of poetry produced by women in this period, established poets or otherwise, suggests quite a bit of writing explores the lack of safety and self-knowledge in these institutions. One or two poets, however, manage to transcend the limiting

specificities of their gender and these Booth disassociates from the female poet.

Stevie Smith and Sylvia Plath, for example, are described as not necessarily female poets but just poets. Interestingly both poets are pre 1970. Plath while managing to avoid the 'neat emotions' and 'feminine gentleness' associated with women's writing 'wrote from the core of the modern woman's soul and, since so many males also took wholeheartedly to her poetry, she did a vast amount for the female cause.'

(31)

These reviewers and anthologists demonstrate that to capture the attention of male readers and critics the woman poet has to climb out of the limitations of her gender. With luck and experience she can find a way of expressing her own specific vision while finding a metaphor which contains truly universal elements. She is then rewarded by being divested of the shackles of her gender and becoming 'just a poet'. The feeling that in order to write poetry a woman has to leave behind the messy 'stretchmarks' of the body and become androgynous mind is shared by many female poets. Eavan Boland, for example, writes of the 'splitting' between mind and body which had to occur for her to be a poet:

'I could give a voice to the certainties of my mind but not to the questions of my body. Once I had seen myself at that table engaged in the act of history, the work of the poem. Now I saw myself - as if I had stepped outside my body - shrivelled and discounted: a woman at a window engaged in a power of language which rebuffed the truth of her life.' (32)

This is not only the case with what may be seen as conventional lyric poetry. The performance poet Jean Binta Breeze writes of the same prejudices in dub poetry. She writes of how many people found her poetry difficult to equate with her gender because of its radical politics. After being criticised for her sensual movement during her performances she took to wearing khaki uniforms on stage to disguise her body before having the confidence to embrace its rhythmic movement as part of her performance. (33)

Importance of magazines and small presses.

All the authors and editors of the critical works discussed above are also poets, editors of publishing houses and /or small poetry presses and magazines and as such have considerable influence in their judgements. We are reminded of Bartlett's poem again. Booth argues that 'Movements in poetry are best viewed through magazines which are more spontaneous than collections or anthologies, all of which have received publisher's editor's restrictions of one sort or another.' (34) Certainly small magazines and presses are the site of emerging new poetic voices although the precariousness of the funding for such ventures means that the field is often changing. Here however we see the same politics of gender. Most of the editors of the poetry magazines are men. (A notable exception here is the poetry magazine *Writing Women* controlled by an editorial female collective.) The debate about the exclusion of women has been conducted in some of the pages of the magazines themselves. (35) One response of editors to the unequal ratios of male and female poets is to lament the lack of contributions from women poets and to assert that women prefer to submit their work to feminist journals, thus effectively marginalising themselves. This is the same argument presented by Booth, Morrison

etc. above. The problem here is that there are few established places for women to go. Unlike the North American poetry scene there are very few 'feminist journals' which publish a high proportion of poetry. *Writing Women* is the only one I know of. There have been others which have produced some but like many small independent magazines have not managed to sustain publication. Non creative-writing journals such as *Spare Rib* and *Everywoman* published some but this hardly adds up to a viable alternative. This is why the feminist publishing context has been so important in getting women poets visibility.

Feminist Publishing

Alison Fell writing in the introduction to *Hard Feelings* asks what relation feminism has to the act of writing: 'does its impetus free women to write exactly what they think or does its ideology place its own limitations on the areas they feel they can uncover.' (36) It would be naive to see feminist presses and magazines as homogenous and all-embracing of women writers, each has its own agenda both in terms of its relationship to political feminism and in terms of how it negotiates its relationship with mainstream publishing. The difference between, for example, Onlywomen Press and The Women's Press is considerable in terms of the works and writers published and their relationship to the women's movement and mainstream publishing. Nevertheless, the establishment of such presses and of journals like *Spare Rib* were significant in providing a space for fiction and poetry by women which explored their experience and reflected the insights gained by the consciousness raising of the 70s. The writer Alison Fell who was fiction editor of *Spare Rib* in the 70s comments on how few outlets there were for the 'spiky, political sort of writing that feminist consciousness produced. Through the magazine

they could reach an audience of their peers and get some support for creative writing about female experience which might never have seen the light of day if left to the prejudices of the literary establishment.' (37)

Spender provides a historical overview of the absence of women from publishing. This is related to the whole issue of exclusion and silencing of women's writing (38). In addition women's structural relationship to paid employment has meant that there have been few resources available to women to finance publication. Although women are employed in large numbers in the publishing industry they are positioned at the lower end. The first feminist presses in the U.K. therefore either had to rely substantially on money put up by men or establish their independence at greater risk of financial security. Both Virago and The Women's Press, set up in the late 70s, have mainly been financed by men. The initial arrangements assured editorial control but the firing of many staff (all women) by the male owner of the Women's Press in 1991 highlighted the inequalities of such a basis.

An example of a press which was owned and controlled entirely by women was Onlywomen press. The aim of the press was not only to provide an outlet for women's writing but also to enable women to take control of the print production process itself. In an interview in *Trouble and Strife* magazine in 1993 founder members Lilian Mohin, Sheila Shulman and others talk about the development of their press. (39) The impetus came from a women's writing group which in 1972 published a pamphlet of their poems called *Too late for ignorance* and from this group was formed the Women's Literature Collective under whose auspices they published a journal called *Women's Literature Review*. In 1972 they published a

collection of poems by the American writer Robin Morgan and another pamphlet of their own work. In order to control the production process of their publications Mohin and others went to college to learn printing and book production. The press was established in November 1977 and until 1984 was a printing venture in order to resource the publishing side. One of the important things about this press was the way it saw literature and theory as complementary. The poems produced by the press were as significant politically as their earlier reprinting of classic works such as Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality*. This is also true of the poetry published by *Spare Rib*. Poetry was not seen as aesthetic and separate from the politics of the women's movement but was part of women speaking out and finding voices. In 1979 Onlywomen press published what they regarded as 'Britain's first ever anthology of feminist poetry' - *One Foot on the Mountain*. (40) This included the work of 55 poets and for a lot of them it was the first time they had been in print: women such as Michèle Roberts, Alison Fell, Sheila Rowbotham, Micheline Wandor, Zoe Fairbairns, all of whom are now established writers in different genres. Onlywomen was important in publishing books by lesbian poets. The logo on the back of all its early publications defined the press as 'radical feminist'. Later in the early 80s the logo changed to read 'radical feminist and lesbian'. In the late 80s this changed again to 'radical feminist lesbian'. Discussing the different 'feminisms' included in their first poetry anthology, Mohin writes:

'When we started we defined ourselves as both a lesbian and radical feminist collective, to describe our politics in contrast to socialist feminism. But we also saw ourselves as part of the women's liberation movement, which to us meant all feminists, straight women as well. We didn't aim to publish work only by radical

feminists, or by lesbians. We were looking at the words on the page and what the printed word was saying, and in so far as any of the women in, say, *One Foot*, had socialist feminist views, they weren't expressed in the poems.' (41)

Mohin is open about her perspective and selection - some other anthologies of women's poetry published in this period are not so candid. (42) This example shows the importance of these alternative spaces for women writing in the 70s and the importance of women's agency and connection here. Given the construction of the woman poet by the mainstream industry, such presses and magazines were a crucial space where women could publish but even more importantly women could read poetry by other women.

One Foot on the Mountain was not easily available in high street bookshops and the need for widespread distribution and marketing forced the press to become more commercial in the 80s. This was a decade that saw many of the radical bookshops of the 70s pushed out by the big chains like Penguin and Waterstones. Mergers and takeovers in the publishing industry threatened the existence of small and independent presses. At the same time, however, the marginalising of poetry as a genre among commercial publishers because of its lack of economic viability has made small presses even more important as a site for new voices.

Why Does It Matter? 'I'm not a woman poet but...'

Dowson (43) argues that one reason for the pattern of the last three hundred years, where women publish and then slip from literary histories, is that they do not receive proper attention from male-dominated literary criticism. Women write poetry, read

poetry and win poetry prizes yet as long as they continue to be sidelined and negatively stereotyped in mainstream criticism and within the academy their names are likely to disappear from the literary records. As with the term feminist, the term woman poet has been so derided that many poets go out of their way to disassociate themselves from it. Anne Stevenson and Sheenagh Pugh are among contemporary poets who reject completely this label. This is nothing new. In 1935 Loise Bogan wrote to John Hall Wheelock, her editor, to report that:

‘Malcolm Cowley, a month or so ago asked me to edit an anthology of female verse, to be used in the pages of the New Republic. They have as you know, already published groups of Middle-Western verse, and what not. They are now about to divide mankind horizontally rather than vertically, sexually rather than geographically. As you might have expected, I turned this pretty job down; the thought of corresponding with a lot of female songbirds made me acutely ill. It is hard enough to bear with my own lyric side.’ (44)

As long as women themselves internalise the strictures against the woman poet the two terms will continue to seem mutually exclusive.

Difference and Diversity. The Aesthetic of the ‘Other’

Debates about whether women should publish separate anthologies have been related to debates around the existence and value of a distinct female aesthetic. Much of the feminist critical work published since the 70s engages with the construct of the woman poet to consider this notion of a female aesthetic. Much of it considers North America or nineteenth-century Britain and locates poetry by women as generically

distinct from the dominant male tradition. (45) With twentieth-century British women's poetry there has been less of a desire to locate it within a specifically female tradition. Jan Montefiore (46) considers both American and British poets, some contemporary, in relation to their 'difference' from their male contemporaries in the use of language, form and theme. Although she raises the question of the relationship between aesthetics and feminism, her analysis is inconclusive. She argues for a distinction between 'bad poetry' which is of interest to the social historian of ideologies and poetry which is valued for its intrinsic aesthetic quality but she is vague about what this quality is. Nor does she take up the relationship between traditional notions of 'aesthetic value' and gender. Minogue (47) critiques Montefiore and others for their limiting notion of a female aesthetic set in opposition to a male tradition and thus proscribed by it. Minogue argues that the notion of a female tradition or aesthetic in the work of critics such as Rich and post-Lacanian French feminists is essentialist and, more importantly, prescriptive putting limitations on what and how women should write. She is critical of the privileging of gender and sexuality in a female aesthetic but she herself resorts to a humanist position as if this is free of prescriptions and proscriptions. She does however look at the importance of social and economic conditions in women's access to writing and publication, something which is played down in many other studies. Greer questions the value of many of the female poets resurrected by feminist scholars. She argues that after the Elizabethan age which she paints as a golden age of freedom from gender and sexual stereotypes where femininity was adopted as masquerade by both sexes, sexual divisions closed in restricting and disabling women writers. She sees the polarisation of sexual difference and women's lack of education as disabling to women writers. At the same time she argues that a select band of arbitrarily chosen

token women, all young, beautiful and virtuous, were rewarded for their failures.

(48) Greer has little time for twentieth-century poets who she casts as neurotic women writing bad exhibitionist verse as a rehearsal for dying. Greer never questions the standards of literary aesthetics that so many of the poets are judged by and her work ultimately adheres to traditional canonical values. Dowson (49) cites Greer as displaying characteristics of Gilbert and Gubar's 'female affiliation complex' where 'by rubbishing women of the past, and by implication of the present too, she shores up her own credentials as one of the boys, clever and worthy of an enduring place in history.'

Dowson sets out an agenda for feminist critics which I want to associate myself with in the following chapters. Her agenda has three main points: 'to be aware that publishing needs to be accompanied by due critical recognition; to conquer the female affiliation complex by providing positive role models; and to counter the myths about women poets by celebrating their diversity but also by making connections between them.' (50) Work which adheres to this agenda does exist but it is still relatively thin on the ground. (51)

The notion of a female aesthetic has lost currency in recent years with attacks on essentialism and the recognition that contemporary women's writing addresses gender but this is often through its intersection with 'race,' ethnicity, class and sexuality. Debates about a black or lesbian aesthetic have been equally contentious: complex cultures are often polarised and reduced for the sake of asserting group identities. All these different aesthetics have however called into question once more the constitution of what is called English literature.

English Literature and Diversity.

The concept of 'Englishness' has become central over the last three decades to a debate about national identity and has brought with it a challenge to accepted ideas about the study of English literature. Literature has never been canonised on purely aesthetic grounds; what constitutes aesthetic values at any given time is always informed by political and social issues. As consensual identification with nation began to shift to cultural identification with gender, region, 'race' and ethnicity, the question of value in literature or indeed what constitutes English literature itself became problematic. The notion of an objective and universal aesthetic value was challenged as a white culturally imperialist masculine myth. The term English literature itself became redefined; literatures in English is now often the preferred term to acknowledge the flux of texts, often from ex-colonial countries, whose appearance poses a challenge to so-called 'metropolitan' claims to offer defining evaluations.

In 1976 Seamus Heaney in his lecture 'Englands of the Mind' analysed the attitudes of three male poets, Hughes, Hill and Larkin to what he called 'the sense of an ending' which in different ways has 'driven all three of these writers into a kind of piety towards their local origins, has made them look in, rather than up, to England.' He locates this in the changing narratives of Britain; loss of imperial power and the diminished influence of Britain within Europe. This, he argues, is forcing poets to explore 'not just the matter of England, but what is the matter with England.' (52) Seamus Heaney himself with his refusal to be included in an anthology of British

verse (53) showed to what extent by the mid-eighties Britishness had also become a contentious notion.

As with women's writing, separate spaces were created for themselves by writers who saw themselves and their texts as marginal or in some way different to the so-called centre. These groups were then often taken up by the major publishers and given a specific cultural identity. For example in the 80s Anglophone Caribbean poetry came into vogue and a number of separatist anthologies were published by major companies. (54) By the late 80s such poets were being represented in poetry anthologies with the term British in the title, even if the term was deliberately appropriated to show its opposition to what the mainstream anthologies considered British. In *The New British Poetry* for example we have the voices of many poets previously only published in separatist anthologies or by small presses and magazines. The four editors select different strands in contemporary poetry in order to avoid a central perspective or 'a narrowly defined orthodoxy.' Fred D'Aguiar who selects the black poetry sees black identity defined 'by a strong sense of being other than what is lauded as indigenous and capitally British' (55) Gillian Allnutt uneasy about the terms feminist and feminist poetry nevertheless selects women poets whose common denominator is difference from male traditions and categories. This anthology sets itself against what it sees as the establishment anthologies and voices, emphasising instead poetry from a plurality of origins and a variety of values, a new heterodoxy as opposed to an old canon. The three poets in my study were all included in this volume.

Grace Nicholls, cautions against the stereotype of the black woman poet in her poem
'Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the 'Realities' of Black Women (aka
Maybe This Poem)':

What they really want
at times
is a specimen
whose heart is in the dust
A mother-of-sufferer
trampled, oppressed
they want a little black blood
undressed
and validation
for the abused stereotype
already in their heads

Or else they want
a perfect song

I say I can write
no poem big enough
to hold the essence
 of a black woman
 or a white woman
 or a green woman

And there are black women
and black women
like a contrasting sky
of rainbow spectrum ...

... Maybe this poem is to say,
that I like to see
we black women
full-of-we-selves walking

Crushing out
with each dancing step
the twisted self-negating
history
we've inherited

Crushing out
with each dancing step. (56)

What Nicholls' poem insists upon is the diversity of the black woman and hence the black woman poet. Black poetry is not restricted to one place or one language. It can include African writing in English, French, Portuguese or a specifically African language, Caribbean writing, Asian writing in English or a number of Asian languages and literature by non-white writers who would not accept any of these labels. To see black only in relation to white is to perpetuate a racist binary which

doesn't recognise the specificity of white literature or the white subject. Such anthologies *have* been important, however, in the politics of publication, political solidarity and creating support networks and greater visibility as a group.

In the 90s more attention was given to the heterogeneity of black culture but the poetry world has been slow in embracing this diversity. Music and film have offered analysis of what Hall refers to as 'new ethnicities' (57) but the poetry world has offered little in analysis of this phenomenon. Anthologies have played and continue to play an active role in constructing national consciousness. Korte (58) discusses the marketing of Ricks' 1999 edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* as a cultural text. Its release deliberately coincided with National Poetry Day, 7 October 1999 and it was marketed as prestigious cultural capital. 'Stoutly bound in blue and gold, and wrapped in a parchment-thick jacket adorned with quill pens, the facsimile of a Shakespearian sonnet, and what looks like National Trust wallpaper, this is scholarship as heritage object, marketed with one eye on the academy but the other on mail order book clubs.' Indeed Ricks, himself, discusses what is 'English and British' in the preface to explain why his book includes small amounts of Irish, Welsh and Scottish poetry- and a little early American poetry-as English, while excluding poetries written in English elsewhere. (59)

Crawford in an analysis of the relationship between anthologies and nations argues for a recognition of the many languages that have made up Britain and Ireland- Gaelic, Welsh, Scots and varieties of English. Although this has began to be addressed with some recent anthologies, as he argues: 'There remains a case for national anthologies which complicate as well as reinforce the collectings of a

community that views itself as a nation, be that community Scotland, Australia or England.’ (60) However such anthologies need to recognise the often very different relationship to nation or community inhabited by women writers.

Women and Nation.

Nation is never simply the now of political and geographical space but always a concept with its own narrative history. As Benedict Anderson states, the imaginary space in which nations exist may be very different from actual physical space. (61) National identities are formed through historical processes and the stories we tell ourselves about nations. The relationship of women to these narratives is a complex one which has received little attention in the burgeoning literature on nation. As Loomba argues: ‘If the nation is an imagined community, that imagining is profoundly gendered.’ (62) Despite the attention given to theories of nation in recent years, women have been excluded from the theories or subsumed as a site of discourse. Feminist and cultural theorists have begun to address this gap looking at the specific effects of how women have been constructed in relation to national identity. (63) Although women have always been involved as activists in the organised manifestations of nationalist movements, it is in their gender specific roles as nurturers of the nation that they appear in most nationalist discourses. Thus women may be assigned responsibility for reproducing biologically the next generation of nationalists or for culturally reproducing characteristics of the nation, such as language, custom and religion. The mother’s nationality may be used to determine and legitimate national citizenship or women may be given symbolic status as mothers of the nation. The nation state or its guiding principles are often literally embodied as a woman –Britannia, Mother India or Mother Ireland –such

figures can be allegories, abstractions, goddesses or real life women. (64) This identification of women as national mothers stems from a wider association of nation with family in both colonial and anti-colonial discourse. The family is often used as a metaphor for the nation and as an institution is cast as the antithesis of the nation.

As Gilroy writes:

‘Gender differences become extremely important in nation-building activity because they are a sign of an irresistible natural hierarchy at the centre of civic life. The unholy forces of nationalist bio-politics intersect on the bodies of women charged with the reproduction of absolute ethnic difference and the continuance of the blood line. The integrity of the nation becomes the integrity of its masculinity.’ (65)

The family becomes the main site for this practise. Ideal motherhood or wifehood is also constructed by purging the ghosts of racial or class others and in the effort to harness women to the nation certain traditions are repressed. Women in any real sense disappear from nationalist discourse. This is the central concern of Eavan Boland’s work addressed in Chapter 2. If women have been the sites rather than the subjects of historical debate, how does a woman poet enter this tradition without replicating the gendered politics and poetics?

In practise feminism and nationalism have interacted and conflicted in different ways. Nationalist agendas have often opened a theoretical space for questioning women’s position and attacked prevailing religious and political doctrines which legitimated subordination. However the two are more commonly in conflict; a feminist agenda is often delayed until nationalism is achieved or subsumed into

narrowly defined spheres. The justification for this is the frequently observed stance that women's oppression is primarily the result of the subordination of the nation. Ward, (66) for example, looks at Irish republican ideology where the subjugation of Irish women is presented as a direct result of the foreign conquest of Gaelic Ireland. Ward writes of how feminists within the Irish nationalist movement faced a conflict of which one to prioritise. Davies (67) notes how Welsh nationalist ideology has made much of the betterment of women under the medieval laws of Hywel Dda.

Theories of nationalism have not received the same attention from feminists as other concepts such as class, 'race' or sexuality. This may be to do with the way in which different nationalisms have constructed women or the associations of national identity with neonationalist politics. In recent years attention has begun to focus on women's relationship to the concepts of home and space (68) and while not dispensing with the idea of nation, I have found these kinds of analysis fruitful in my discussion of my chosen poets. In this I follow Edward Said who states: 'Patriotism is best thought of as an obscure dead language, learned prehistorically but almost forgotten and almost unused since ... Thinking affectionately about home is all I'll go along with.' (69)

While the literature of Britain in the last couple of decades has become less homogenous, this diversity seems to be particularly marked in poetry. Why is this? Bell argues that in poetry, the persistence of small-scale local publishing and the co-existence of strong independent regional traditions has allowed for multivocality and a proper attention to the heteroglot constituents of Britain. He argues it is easier to find such voices in poetry than in the novel which 'often reproduces the hegemonic

gaze' (70) If this is true for poetry generally, it seems even truer for women poets.

Many poets who inhabit the women's poetry anthologies are not unequivocally British. A cursory glance at the poets whose names are appearing in anthologies, both mixed and separate, show an interesting cultural diversity. Fleur Adcock was born in New Zealand and emigrated to Britain when she was nineteen. Moniza Alvi was born in Pakistan, but now lives in the U.K. Nuala Archer was born in New York of Irish parents and has lived in Ireland and North, South and Central America. Leland Bardwell was born in India, grew up in Leixlip, Co. Kildare and travelled widely living in both London and Paris in the 40s and 50s. She now lives in Co. Sligo. Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, India but was educated in the U.S.A. She now lives in Germany. Jean 'Binta' Breeze was born in Jamaica and divides her time between London and the Caribbean. Jeni Couzyn was born and grew up in South Africa. Nuala Ni Dhomnaill was born in Lancashire, grew up in West Kerry and lives in Dublin. Mimi Khalvati was born in Tehran and educated in Britain and Switzerland. Eva Salzman was born in New York and grew up in Brooklyn moving to England when she was 25. Of the sixty women poets in France's collection over one third were not born in England. Of those who were several have parents who are not English such as Michèle Roberts or Anne Stevenson and many more have lived for long periods of time in other countries. A similar pattern emerges in other recent anthologies.

The writers I discuss in the following chapters could all be said to write poetry which is subversive of simplistic truths and binary positions. They all write about 'home' as women, displaying different styles and preoccupations as well as similarities. Their relationship to the country they inhabit is a gendered one but in their preoccupations

and their positioning of themselves, they avoid the polarities seen in recent identity politics where on the one hand we have identity as essential and unchanging, fixed and determined by primordial forces, outside history and culture, or the opposite tendency, often associated with post-modernism, to see individual identity as 'infinitely malleable, constantly reconstructed through the ebb and flow of consumerism and the 'play' of commodities.' (71) Yet this too has been construed as a female position by critics such as Edna Longley who sees the ability to inhabit a range of relations rather than a single allegiance as female. (72) While I would regard such a construction as part of a myth of femininity rather than a biological given, it is a position which is common to the poets considered here. In the following chapters then I will consider the different ways in which these three female poets through inhabiting a 'range of relations' explore new ways of occupying the spaces they call 'home'.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Bartlett, 'Stretch Marks', *The Czar is Dead* (London: Rivelin Grapheme, 1986).
2. A number of anthologies of women's poetry were produced during this period. The following represent a sample of different types. Fleur Adcock, *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); Jeni Couzyn, (ed.) *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1985); Linda France, (ed.) *Sixty Women Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993); Rosemary Palmeira, (ed.) *In the Gold of the Flesh* (London: The Women's Press, 1990); Illona Linthwaite, *Ain't I a Woman! Poems by Black and White Women* (London: Virago, 1987); Christian McEwan (ed.) *Naming the Waves: Contemporary*

- Lesbian Poetry* (London: Virago, 1988); Carol Rumens, (ed.) *Making for the Open* (London: Chatto, 1985); Carol Rumens (ed.) *New Women Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1990); Melanie Silgado and Janet Deck, (eds.) *New Virago Poets* (London: Virago, 1994).
3. Michael Schmidt, (ed.) *Ten English Poets* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1976).
 4. Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, (eds.) *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).
 5. See for example the comments of Anne Stevenson in 'Some notes on women and tradition' in *PN Review*, 19, 87 (1992), pp.29-32.
 6. Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Morley, (eds.) *The New Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993).
 7. Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford, (eds.) *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998).
 8. Sean O'Brien, *The Fire Box. Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* (London: Picador, 1998).
 9. Michael Schmidt, *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), p.xxv.
 10. Christopher Ricks, *Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1999).
 11. Helen Gardner, *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1972).
 12. Paul Keegan, *The New Penguin Book of English Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000).
 13. Helen Dunmore, *The Observer* Nov.12, 2000.
 14. Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, *The School Bag* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997)
 15. Linda France, (ed.) *Sixty Women Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993).

16. Christine Fitton's analysis is cited in Lizbeth Goodman, (ed.) *Literature and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.47.
17. There are a number of criticisms made of anthologies. See for example Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Pamphlet against Anthologies* (London: Cape, 1928); Barbara Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Teresa Kynell, 'Negotiating Gaps in Reader Anthologies. The Role of Context in Selections by Women', *Reader* 30 (1993) pp. 65-74.
18. Tony Lacey, 'The Anthology Problem A Publisher's View', in Barbara Korte et al. (eds.), *Anthologies of British Poetry, Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) pp.333-342.
19. Ibid.
20. Griff Rhys-Jones, *The Nation's Favourite Poems* (London: BBC, 1996).
21. Ian Hamilton, *The Oxford Companion to twentieth century poetry in English* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1994).
22. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, (eds.), *British Poetry since 1970* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980).
23. Deborah Mitchell, 'Modes of Realism: Roy Fisher and Elaine Feinstein' in Jones and Schmidt, *British Poetry since 1970* p.128
24. Blake Morrison, 'Young Poets in the 70s' in Jones and Schmidt, *British Poetry since 1970* p.146.
25. Michael Hulse, 'Disbelief, Idols, and Four-Letter Words' in *Antigonish Review*, 71-72, (1987-88) pp. 211-27.
26. Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today. A Critical Guide to British Poetry, 1960-95* (London: Longman, 1996).
27. David Kennedy, *New Relations* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996).

28. Martin Booth, *British Poetry 1964-84. Driving through the Barricades* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p.163.
29. *ibid.*, p.130
30. *ibid.*, p.190
31. *ibid.*, p.190
32. Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.114.
33. Jean Binta Breeze, 'Can a Dub Poet be a Woman' in Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, (eds.) *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 498-500.
34. Booth, *British Poetry 1964-84. Driving through the Barricades*.
35. For a discussion of this debate in relation to *Stand* see Vicki Bertram, *Muscling* In Unpublished Thesis, University of York, 1992, pp.42-45.
36. Alison Fell, *Hard Feelings Fiction and Poetry from Spare Rib* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), p.6.
37. *ibid.*, p.3.
38. Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980)
39. Cath Jackson, 'A Press of One's Own' *Trouble and Strife*, 26 (1993).
40. *One Foot on the Mountain* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1979)
41. Lilian Mohin interviewed by Cath Jackson, 'A Press of One's Own'
42. See for example Carol Rumens, (ed.), *Making for the Open: Post-feminist Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987).
43. Jane Dowson, 'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things' in *Feminist Review*, 62, (1999), pp.6-20.
44. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

45. For example, Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, (eds.) *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* (London: The Woman's Press, 1986); Liz Yorke, *Impertinent Voices* (London: Routledge, 1992).
46. Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry* (London: Pandora, 1987).
47. Sally Minogue, 'Prescriptions and Proscriptions: Feminist Criticisms and Contemporary Poetry' in *Problems for Feminist Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.179-236.
48. Germaine Greer, *Slip-shod Sibyls* (Harmondsworth: Viking Press, 1995).
49. Jane Dowson, 'Older Sisters are Very Sobering Things' p.7
50. *ibid.*, p.7
51. See for example Vicki Bertram (ed.) *Kicking Daffodils* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).
52. Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind' in Dennis Walder, (ed.), *Literature in the Modern World* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1991), p.257.
53. Seamus Heaney, 'Open Letter' in *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchison, 1985) pp 23-30.
54. For example, Paula Burnett (ed.), *The Penguin book of Caribbean verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986); James Berry (ed.), *News for Babylon* (Chatto, 1984); E. A. Markham (ed.), *Hinterland: Caribbean poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1989); Stewart Brown et al (eds.), *Voiceprint: an anthology of oral and related poetry* (London: Longman, 1989).
55. Gillian Allnutt et al, *The New British Poetry* (London: Paladin, 1988).

56. Grace Nicholls, 'Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the 'Realities' of Black Women (aka Maybe This Poem),' *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (London: Virago, 1984).
57. Stuart Hall 'New Ethnicities.' in A. Rattansi and J. Donald (eds.) *'Race', Culture and Difference* (London: Sage, 1992), pp.252-259.
58. Barbara Korte, 'Flowers for the Picking' in Korte, (ed.) *Anthologies of British Poetry, Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies* p1-32.
59. Christopher Ricks, *Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: O.U.P, 1999), Preface.
60. Robert Crawford, 'Poetry, Memory and Nation.' in Korte, (ed.) *Anthologies of British Poetry, Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*
61. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1998).
62. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p.215.
63. See for example the work of Lata Mani, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval –Davies and Sabina Sharkey.
64. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. p.215.
65. Paul Gilroy, 'Diasporas and the Detours of Identity' in Kathryn Woodward, (ed.) *Identity and Difference* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 333.
66. Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Woman and Irish Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1983).
67. Charlotte Aull Davies, 'Nationalism: Discourse and Practice' in Nicki Charles and Felicia Hughes-Freeland, (eds.), *Practising Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

68. See for example Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Oxford: Polity, 1994).
69. Edward Said cited in Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 201.
70. Ian Bell, *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995).
71. Gilroy, 'Diasporas and the Detours of Identity' in Woodward, p.313.
72. Edna Longley, 'From Cathleen to Anorexia' in *The Living Stream* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), p.195.

Chapter 2.

'The contrary passion to be whole': The Poetry of Eavan Boland.

“For,” the outsider will say, “in fact as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.” (1) In *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf challenges the whole structure of a masculine establishment which has appropriated the identity of the nation, and proposes that women should form an ‘Outsiders’ society which takes the whole world as its country. For the Irish poet Eavan Boland, writing more than fifty years later, the feelings of exclusion are equally strong; like Woolf she sees herself as an outsider in her own national literature but rather than reject her nation she sets out to repossess it. The feeling that as a woman she has no country drives her to forge a relationship with nation and tradition. Much of Boland’s poetry is about this ‘dialogue’ with the idea of a nation and a national poetic tradition.

In what could almost be a response to Woolf she sets out her reasons for not rejecting the idea of a nation:

‘A woman poet is rarely regarded as an automatic part of a national poetic tradition ... She is too deeply woven into the passive texture of that tradition, too intimate a part of its imagery, to be allowed her freedom. She may know, as an artist, that she is now the maker of the poems and not merely the subject of them. The critique is slow to catch up.’ (2)

Yet the marginality of the woman poet, she also sees as conferring certain advantages in particular an awareness of the real power of subversion. Boland is critical of the tendency towards locating women's poetry as a separate subculture and feels if the woman poet is not to remain marginalised, it is vital to engage in a dialogue with the idea of nation. The dilemma for the woman poet which Boland delineates in her essay is how to locate herself within a powerful literary tradition in which until very recently she had been an object rather than an agent of change. Boland does not want to eschew the Irish tradition she has inherited but to 'repossess' it and edit in the realities of women's lives. Instead of Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the Old Woman of the Roads, passive projections of a national idea, she wants living and breathing and complex women.

In this essay Boland refers to an encounter she had while a young student at Trinity which is the subject of her poem 'The Achill Woman' from her 1990 collection *Outside History*. It seems to me one of her most important poems in exploring poetry, nationhood and womanhood. The genesis of the poem was a chance encounter Boland had some years earlier while a student at Trinity. Boland borrowed a cottage in Achill to revise and met there an old woman who as caretaker to the cottage carried up water for Boland every evening. She talked to Boland about the Irish Famine and its effects on that area and later Boland writes of the power of that encounter:

'Memory is treacherous. It confers meanings which are not apparent at the time. I want to say that I understood this woman as emblem and instance of everything I am

about to propose. Of course I did not. Yet even then I sensed a power in the encounter. I knew without having words for it, that she came from a past which affected me. When she pointed out Keel to me that evening when the wind was brisk and cold and the light was going, when she gestured towards that shore which had stones as outlines and monuments of a desperate people, what was she pointing at? A history? A nation? Her memories or mine?

Those questions, once I began to write my own poetry came back to haunt me.' (*OL*, 125)

Boland is the Irish intellectual living in Dublin but 'weekending' in the Achill cottage: 'with one suitcase and the set text / of the Court poets of the Silver Age' (3) who connects on some level with this participant in a past which is also Boland's yet whose experience is outside the texts Boland receives in her education at Trinity. The poem shows up the gaps and the irony of Boland's own situation there; part of the establishment yet somehow connected to this woman:

but nothing now can change

the way I went indoors,

chilled by the wind

and made a fire

and took down my book

and failed to comprehend

the harmonies of servitude,

the grace music gives to flattery

and language borrows from ambition-

The poetry of those court poets is implicated in this woman's pain and erased loss. Homi Bhabha describes the 'emblem of the English book' as one of the 'signs taken for wonders' by which the aspirations of the colonised are contained. (4) The text assumes a greater authority than the colonised peoples themselves. When the 'raw' Boland turns away from the woman and back to her 'set text' she unconsciously aligns herself with a literature which was part of a power structure that oppressed women and helped to defeat the Irish nation. The experiences recounted by the Achill woman are not ones acknowledged by the tradition Boland is being schooled in and of which she will become a part. The poem shows up the gap between 'history' and the past, a gap which Boland becomes increasingly concerned with in her poetry. The story the Achill woman tells is not one of the official written narratives and she thus becomes representative of this space between 'history' and the past. This space is often linked in Boland's poetry to a female oral tradition which has been erased and which she explores in such poems as 'What we Lost.' (OH, 43)

The Achill woman then represents a silence in the Irish poetic tradition. These silences, what they come to mean to Boland as a poet and how to articulate them is the central concern of Boland's poetry. The difficulty Boland has here is how to represent the Achill woman ethically without turning her into another literary device. The poetic authority she is heir to is one in which flesh and blood women are transmuted into 'fictive queens' and 'national sybils.' (OL, 135) Critics such as Edna Longley argue that she fails to do this. The 'real women of an actual past' she

accuses, 'are subsumed into a single emblematic victim figure,' one that in Longley's view looks remarkably similar to the Sean Bhean Bhocht or poor old woman of Irish myth. (5) Certainly the Achill woman is not individualised here. Differences of class and material position are conveniently ignored in both the poem and the text. More perceptively, however, taking account of the poem's positioning as the first of a sequence, Weekes asserts: 'The silence of women of the past in history is an "aspect" of their truth, and the silence of the Achill woman is the truth of the young "gesturing" poet's response: to presume to break this silence is an insult.' (6) The Achill woman is not there in the poem as a named subject, a flesh and blood woman, but that is the whole point. If we take the text of the poem as the poem itself and Boland's commentary on it we can see this: 'When I met the Achill woman, I was already a poet, I thought of myself as a poet. Yet nothing that I understood about poetry enabled me to understand her better. Quite the reverse ...' (*OL*, 130)

The poem is less about the Achill woman and more about Boland herself and the poetic tradition of which she is a part. The sequence of pronouns in the poem stresses this. There is a shift from the 'She' of the first few lines through a 'we' to the focus on 'I' in the last sixteen lines of the poem. The poem is about encounters: between Boland and the unnamed woman certainly, between an English poetics of the centre and a representative from the margins, between a powerful literary tradition and an oral tradition whose 'frail connections have been made and are broken.' (*OH*, 43) The poem is also about an encounter between East and West. The setting of the poem in Achill is significant. Although the dichotomy between North and South in Irish writing is the one that captures the contemporary imagination, there is another

duality of place in Irish writing, that between town and country, between Dublin and the West of Ireland. In Irish literature the West of Ireland has always been associated with the original Gaelic civilisation. After the Irish renaissance life in the West represented for many writers a lost Irish identity, a national psyche destroyed by imperialism which was being rediscovered as part of a conscious effort for Ireland to define itself and justify the claim to Irish independence. Set against the West is the East and in particular Dublin which was seen as the gateway for English imperialism. So Dublin has come to represent modernity and 'foreign culture' as against the indigenous culture of the West of Ireland. The young Boland visiting from Dublin with her 'set text' is part of this process. The women, then, can be seen to be representatives of two places, physically and psychically. The most important encounter here, however, is between the older Boland and her younger self - between two stages in the poet's subjectivity. Boland's dialogue with the idea of a nation positions herself as a subject of her poetry, her experience as a poet is part of her source material. In the poem she is the young protégé not yet aware of the costs to her of this apprenticeship, the denial of aspects of her past, and in the prose commentary she is the older and wiser poet revisiting and encountering stages in her poetic subjectivity. Boland situates her younger self as an apprentice to an exclusionary aesthetic one that simplifies and falsifies the past through the power of its language.

Such aesthetics she implies are seductive and did indeed seduce the young apprentice poet. Boland's early success was as a formal lyric poet well schooled in the aesthetics of the 1960s poetry establishments of both Ireland and England. Boland's aesthetic here fitted well with the times and Irish poets of the 60s such as Derek

Mahon and Brendan Kennelly, poets like Boland influenced by Yeats and Kavanagh. She herself looking back on this early writing period sums up her aesthetic as 'an inherited mixture of the British Movement poem - overtones of Larkin, with postures of irony - and the Irish lyric, with postures of mood and melancholy.' (7) What concerns Boland the experienced and established poet is, however, the *ethics* of those aesthetics: 'Who the poet is, what he or she nominates as a proper theme for poetry, what selves poets discover and confirm through this subject matter - all of this involves an ethical choice. The more volatile the material - and a wounded history, public or private, is always volatile - the more intensely ethical the choice.' (OL, 127)

A Wounded History: Ireland's Post-colonial Status.

This wounded history is at the centre of the poetic tradition that Boland sets out to repossess. Kinsella (8) argues that the Irish tradition has always presented an intimate fusion of literature and history. And in order to understand the weight of Irish tradition which Boland engages with we need to locate Ireland in its history as a post-colonial country. In 'The Mother Tongue' Boland writes:

I was born on this side of the Pale.

I speak with the forked tongue of colony. (9)

The 'pale' here refers to the fence which separates the Protestant area of Dublin from the Catholic land which was seen as wild, savage and other giving its name to the metaphor 'beyond the pale.' Despite this damning metaphor it is often difficult to locate Ireland in post-colonial theory and particularly in literary and feminist theory.

For example in feminist texts there is often a chapter on black writing or on third world writing but white 'European' nations who have been colonised by the British somehow don't fit. Mac an Ghail (10) refers to the 'over-racialisation' of Asians and Afro-Caribbeans and the correlating 'de-racialisation' of white minority ethnic groups in recent academic writing. He is specifically concerned with the erasure of the Irish - as the largest labour migrant and ethnic minority group in Britain - from the academic and political map of racism and ethnicity. Indeed some commentators have refuted the reality of Ireland as a post-colonial country. Such accounts have as their dominant conceptual model the process of assimilation in which whiteness, Europeanness, Christianity and belonging to the British isles are all seen as marks of sameness and identification between Irish and English. Sharkey (11) and others, however, show how the racialisation of the Irish as a subordinate group exists in discourse from the medieval period on and Loomba (12) demonstrates how the model of the Irish 'provided a model for slavery and colonialist discourse in Africa and India.' Indeed Beddoes' 1885 'Index of Nigrescence' showed the peoples of Wales, Scotland and Ireland and Cornwall as racially separate from the British. More specifically he argued that those from Western Ireland and Wales were 'Africanoid' in their 'jutting jaws' and 'long slitty nostrils' and thus originally immigrants of Africa. (13) Anthias and Yuval-Davis argue that all Celts and especially the Irish Celts have been considered an inferior often dangerous 'other' in British history. They refer to the terrible conditions of life documented for the exiled prisoners, mainly Irish, who were sent to the Caribbean Islands as slaves before a large number of Afro-Caribbeans were brought there. (14)

Many Irish writers writing in English explore the legacy of such imperialism. The reconciliation between a native Irish identity and a coloniser's tongue has been a subject throughout 20th century Irish writing, both literary and critical. We can see this in Joyce, Heaney and most recently in the works of Friel and other writers associated with the Field Day group. It is a concern of Boland's also. In her poem 'Mise Eire' (15) the emigrant woman says 'a new language/ is a kind of scar/ and heals after a while/ into a passable imitation/ of what went before.' Here Boland echoes Joyce's Stephen Daedalus in the 'tundish' scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when he says about the English dean of studies:

'The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.' (16)

For Boland, however, the language is doubly 'his.' As a woman she is not subject in the Irish tradition. She is not only colonised by the English but by a nationalist Irish tradition also. It is significant that the woman emigrant in 'Mise Eire' 'won't go back to it'. She sees: 'my nation displaced/into old dactyls'. In the nationalist poetic tradition Irish women have also been colonised, not least by exclusion and simplification, and denied agency through serving as nationalised feminine images.

Loomba and others have shown how gender and sexuality are central to the conceptualisation and enactment of colonial relations (17) and how a history of

colonisation can be seen as a history of feminisation. Ellmann in her study of the metaphoric relationship between writing and hunger provides a recent example in the context of the Irish hunger strikes of 1981. When Cardinal O’Fiaich appealed to Margaret Thatcher for a solution to the crisis she replied, ‘Will someone please tell me why they are on hunger strike? I have asked so many people. Is it to prove their virility?’ As Ellmann argues, Thatcher here ‘equates the colonial with the emasculate, figuring political impotence as sexual unmanliness.’ (18) Such a process of emasculation has resulted in colonised people, often long after colonisation has ended, tending to observe or impose strictly differentiated gender roles in order to assert the masculinity and right to power of the (male) subjects.

Irish nationalists have varied in their attitudes to female agency. Ward (19) shows how the interpellation of nationalist women has differed at different stages in 20th century Irish history but nevertheless the dominant metaphor for the nation in 20th century Irish writing remains the woman. The interconnection of gender and national identity then is complex for Irish women because of their inheritance of a ‘liberation’ discourse which has utilised essentialist national metaphors of the feminine. What Corkery refers to as the ‘Aisling convention’ has always been part of the bardic tradition but it took on a new force with nationalism and revivalism. (20) Although the national liberation struggle in Ireland has privileged literature and particularly poetry as a means of reconstructing a national identity, women have been the objects rather than the subjects of such writing and as such have been reduced to a handful of stereotypes, usually a variant on the virgin raped by the colonising British and in need of a manly protector and the grieving mother translating pity into a call to arms

and vengeance. We can see the legacy of this in poets like Seamus Heaney. The following lines are from Act of Union:

And I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with the pain,
The rending process in the colony,
The battering ram, the boom burst from within.

.....

... No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again (21)

The construct of the body of woman as geographical territory has a long history in both colonial and nationalist discourse. In 'Ireland and the Iconography of Rape' Sharkey looks at how the two stages of colonialism which she terms dominant and hegemonic used the language of rape and husbandry - fortunate fall and act of union - to possess territory and rewrite the map. Where the body of the territory and the body of the colonial site was gendered female, the counter hegemony of nineteenth century Irish Nationalists fashioned the male hero as one who liberated the abducted female through repossession. Male identity positions altered in simple and superficially effective ways, the colonial male was now represented as the abuser and the native endeavour deemed chivalric. (22) What remains constant however is the stasis of the identity positions given to the female.

Padraig Pearse's famous 'Mise Eire' is a classic example of the genre popularised by the celtic revival (23) and is satirised by Boland in her own poem of the same title discussed above. In Irish legend 'Miss Eire' was the normal response of the beautiful maidens of the 18th and 19th century 'Aisling' poems on being questioned about their identity. After a series of questions had been put to them by a male poet such as 'Are you Venus or Aphrodite?' the maiden would reply; 'I am Ireland and I am sick since I have no true and manly husband.' The men in Ireland had been feminised by colonialism. The function of this general and idealised Aisling figure is to remind the men that they must repossess her homeland and make her well by fighting the English for her. In Boland's 'Mise Eire' she explores the legacy of this dual colonisation, the alienation she feels towards the language as an Irish woman. Boland replaces the Aisling figure with the history of a single emigrant woman:

I am the woman -
a sloven's mix
of silk at the wrists,
a sort of dove-strut
in the precincts of the garrison -

who practises
the quick frictions,
the rictus of delight
and gets cambric for it,
rice-coloured silks. (*SP*, 71)

Pearse's refrain of 'I am Ireland' becomes in Boland's poem 'I am the Woman.' The idealised myth is countered with the reality of women's lives in colonial and post-colonial Ireland-emigration and prostitution. Instead of 'the songs / that bandage up the history' and 'the words / that make a rhythm of the crime' Boland presents a narrative of loss where the persona is disillusioned with the country she left behind. Instead of the traditional depiction of a pure Irish maiden we have a prostitute who is bought by British soldiers. Instead of mother Ireland we have a mother 'holding her half-dead baby to her/ as the wind shifts East/ and North over the dirty/ water of the wharf.' The style here is deliberately discomforting: the Irish title 'Mise Eire' is followed immediately by the words in English: 'I won't go back to it – ' an assertion of rootedness is followed by a narrative of estrangement. What Boland seeks is 'a new language...' one which recognises the whole past and is able to move on, one which doesn't construct the past in 'A palsy of regrets.' Yet she recognises the loss in this, the compromise that such a language is 'a kind of scar.' She knows the seductions of the traditional emblems and images, the songs of Tom Moore which she had heard her father playing on the piano in their house in London, (*OL*, 49) the simulacra set out in her poem 'Imago' from *The Lost Land*:

My ruthless images. My simulacra.

Anti-art: a foul skill

traded by history

to show a colony

the way to make pain a souvenir. (*LL*, 18)

In 'Mise Eire' Boland does not reject the metaphorical relationship between Ireland and womanhood but subverts it. By challenging the stereotypes and myths of womanhood, she automatically calls into question the Ireland of poetic tradition. Longley argues that the characterisation of Irish nationalism as archetypically female serves to give it a mythic pedigree, the Goddess culture raped by the new male cult whose 'founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson,' and exonerates it from aggressive and oppressive intent. (24) Such a metaphoric relation also implies particularly in the trope of the pure and passive virgin ruined by the English a pre-colonial state of grace - an idyllic pure authentic nation or origin. The evidence is not strong for this ideal certainly in literary terms. Crawford (25) and Jeffares (26) argue that there is no such thing as a pure literary national genre and demonstrate how the traditions of the bardic poem have always been influenced by other cultures prior to the influence of the Anglo-Irish tradition associated with the decline of the bardic order. The *idea* of the 'Irish poem' however has exerted an influence perhaps more significant than its actuality.

The Idea of the Irish Poem.

Although Boland wants to locate herself within an Irish tradition, to 'repossess the nation' she is aware of the dangers of this construct of the Irish poem. In her essay 'Outside History' she writes about the seductions of the Irish literary orthodoxy to soothe ambivalences but uses male poets to show up how relentless the idea of Irishness has been in Irish poetry. As an illustrative example of the dangers to the poet and the poem of this, she writes about the poetry of Padraic Colum and Francis Ledwidge. Colum had been used by the Irish literary revival and in particular Yeats to represent a construct of a 'peasant poet,' to acquiesce in what Boland refers to as

the 'supply and demand' of the Irish Revival. In Boland's view this destroyed the poet's potential. Like the symbolic feminine Colum had been reduced to an emblem in all the poems about land and tenantry and could not make the transition from being the object of the Irish poem to being its subject. 'He wrote Irish poetry as if he were still the object of it.' (*OL*, 140)

As a model for how to avoid this, it is to a tradition outside Ireland that she turns. It is to the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Discussing her 'Requiem' for her son who disappeared in the Stalinist terrors of the late 1930s, Boland takes from this poem 'the connection it makes between her womanhood and her sense of a nation as a community of grief.' (*OL*, 149)

And if ever in this country they should want
To build me a monument

I consent to that honour
But only on condition that they

Erect it not on the sea-shore where I was born:
My last links with that were broken long ago,

Nor by the stump in the Royal Gardens
Where an inconsolable young shade is seeking me

But here, where I stood for three hundred hours

And where they never, never opened the doors for me (*OL*, 149)

What Boland takes from Akhmatova is her alternative sense of nationhood. Rather than commemoration with a statue, it is the voices of the people she queued with outside the prison gates she wants as a memorial.

‘The truths of womanhood and the defeats of a nation? An improbable intersection? At first sight perhaps. Yet the idea of it opened doors in my mind which had hitherto been closed fast. I began to think there was indeed a connection, that my womanhood and my nationhood were meshed and linked at some root. It was not just that I had a womanly feeling for those women who waited with handcarts, went into the sour stomach of ships and even - according to terrible legend - eyed their baby’s haunches speculatively in the hungers of the 1840s. It was more than that. I was excited by the idea that if there really was an emblematic relation between the defeats of womanhood and the suffering of a nation, I need only prove the first in order to reveal the second. If so, then Irishness and womanhood, those tormenting fragments of my youth, could at last stand in for each other. Out of a painful apprenticeship and an ethical dusk, the laws of metaphor beckoned me.’ (*OL*, 148)

As Boland notes such ‘repossession’ is neither a single nor a static act, but a fluid process of de- and re-construction. The poem sequence ‘Outside History’, of which ‘The Achill Woman’ is the first poem, is part of this process.

The Friction Between Different Realms.

'The Achill Woman' is representative of Boland's poetics in several ways. Many of her best poems are about encounters - with Sappho and the woman of the past in 'The Journey,' (SP, 66-68), her young poetic self in 'A False Spring,' (OH, 29), the dispossessed soldiers in 'The Colonists.' (LL, 25) It is the encounters which carry the meaning of the poems, the 'friction between different realms.' (OH, 44) In 'The Achill Woman' there is a point of connection between the two women but the poem is also about difference - class, education, age and social and economic history interact to locate the women in different realms nationally. Meaney argues in this poem:

'...there is a sense in which both of these women are stranded, one outside the terms in which history is articulated, another within them. They talk on the threshold but one goes back out, another back in ... Hélène Cixous, whom Boland cites in *A Kind of Scar*, has argued that in between is the space of women's writing, and Boland's poems move towards it. The in between is left open in the poem, allowing the differences between the women to remain and to define their relationship, allowing the gaps and silences the 'interdict' to occupy the centre of the poem and to question the terms of the poet's authority.' (27)

This reference to Cixous is one which has been made by other critics particularly in relation to her 1975 collection *In her own image* which draws heavily on *écriture féminine*. And in poems such as 'Fever' (SP, 77) and 'The Muse Mother' (SP, 54) we can see her attraction to the notion of an 'imaginary' female language. I would

suggest however that it is the ideas of the critic and post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha that offer greater insight into Boland's poetic project.

In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha writes of his concept of the 'Third Space of enunciation,' the space where cultural identity always emerges and is contradictory and ambivalent.

'The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson so perceptively describes as being written in homogeneous, serial time.' (28)

This is under scored by Boland's commentary on the Achill woman in her prosework: 'A history? A nation? Her memories or mine' (*OL*, 125)

In Bhabha's work the 'in-between' is 'the space that carries the burden and meaning of culture.' (29) It is a space that Boland's poetry is constantly drawn towards:

The Women

This is the hour I love: the in-between,
neither here-nor-there hour of evening.
The air is tea-coloured in the garden.
The briar rose is spilled crepe-de-Chine.

This is the time I do my work best,
going up the stairs in two minds,
in two worlds, carrying cloth or glass,
leaving something behind, bringing
something with me I should have left behind. (*SP*, 83)

Many of Boland's poems are set at dusk, the 'in-between time' between day and night. In 'The Women' the poet/persona returns to the exploration of the relationship between the silences of the past in relation to women's lives and the shaping of the contemporary poet by the images and myths and icons of poetic tradition. The real women 'of work, of leisure, of the night,' who have 'healed into myth.' The lives of ordinary women have been metamorphosed into emblem and symbol in a tradition which she has inherited. The poet/ persona is the bridge between the women silenced and the women mythologised. Although she can escape back into her ordered domestic world she cannot lose the sense of connection:

... leaving something behind, bringing
something with me I should have left behind ...

This sense of herself as the bridge, her life as the staircase between two identities recalls the image of the staircase as liminal space in Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha refers to the artist Renee Green's symbol of the stairwell as a 'liminal space,' one which prevents identities polarising between arbitrary designations such as upper and lower:

'The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.' (30)

Staircases recur in Boland's poetry. For example, in 'Monotony' a woman carrying a sheaf of nappies descends a spiral staircase to 'a well of questions, / an oracle' to ask whether she is 'priestess' or 'sacrifice.' (*SP*, 55) In Boland's poetry she moves between identities, between the constructs of woman and poet, between the influences of a Gaelic Irish tradition and an Anglo-Irish tradition, between myth and silence.

In Bhabha's work the liminal is associated with the hybrid. His analysis of coloniser/colonised relations stresses the interdependence and mutual constitution of their subjectivities. He argues that colonial identities on both sides are constantly in a

state of flux, are unstable and 'agonised' rather than fixed and oppositional. This undercuts both colonising and colonised claims to a 'pure' or authentic identity. Boland's hybridity can be seen as more than simply her Anglo-Irish and Gaelic Irish inheritance. As a woman she moves between her gendered self and her national self, refusing to reject either construct. This is why separatism is not an option for Boland either in feminist or cultural politics. She sees herself rather as a subversive poet moving between the pre-existing structures of poetry and those devalued experiences which have been silenced.

The 'friction between different realms' the encounters on the threshold influence Boland's choice of myths to revise. Boland is attracted to the metaphor of the underworld, another version of her staircase. In the title poem of her 1987 collection *The Journey* Boland makes use of this symbolism. Here she uses and extends the heroic journey motif to explore the loss of women in poetic tradition. She takes as her model Virgil's epic *The Aeneid* and appropriates the form to explore her connection with women in the past. She also uses the medieval dream vision where the reader falls asleep while reading a text and dreams in the context of what has just been read. The genesis of the poem was the experience of nearly losing her infant daughter to meningitis. The persona, sitting in her domestic world at the end of the day, preoccupied with a sick child, is railing against the limitations of the subject matter of poetry wondering why there has never been a poem written about an antibiotic.

... I finished speaking and the anger faded
and dark fell and the book beside me

lay open at the page Aphrodite

comforts Sappho in her love's duress ... (*SP*, 86-88)

Sappho silently guides the speaker down into the underworld to see the suffering of women in the past who had no hope for their young - no antibiotics against the plagues of cholera, typhus etc. Sappho warns the persona against defining women by their work 'not as washerwoman ...' and asks her to recognise her connection with them.

"But these are women who went out like you
when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,
recovering the day, stooping, picking up
teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets -

"love's archaeology - and they too like you
stood boot deep in flowers once in summer
or saw winter come in with a single magpie
in a caul of haws, a solo harlequin."

At the point of her connection with these women, her recovered matrilineage, she is told by Sappho that she cannot 'reach or speak to them' or even bear witness to their lives and suffering:

I whispered, "let me be

let me at least be their witness,” but she said

“what you have seen is beyond speech,

beyond song, only not beyond love;”

This recalls for me Cixous’ account of feminine writing in terms of loving which she expresses in her essay ‘Coming to Writing:’

‘The moment I came into life ... I trembled: from the fear of separation, the dread of death. I saw death at work ... I watched it wound, disfigure, paralyze, and massacre from the moment my eyes opened to seeing. I discovered that the face was mortal, and that I would have to snatch it back at every moment from Nothingness ...

Because of my fear I reinforced love, I alerted all the forces of life, I armed love, with soul and words, to keep death from winning. Loving: keeping alive: naming.’

(31)

Loving becomes a way of witnessing and keeping alive what would otherwise remain silent and annihilated. If we read the poem in this way the descent into the underworld with Sappho as her guide becomes a return to the imaginary to seek a feminine writing, a way of expressing the silences. The journey of the title becomes a search for a new kind of poetic language in which such experiences could be expressed. Boland is often attracted in her writing to the idea of a feminine language but is reluctant to fully embrace this. Here Sappho claims her as her ‘own daughter’ offering her an alternative tradition and poetic model. Yet the ending is ambivalent:

nothing was changed; nothing was more clear

but it was wet and the year was late.

The rain was grief in arrears; my children
slept the last dark out safely and I wept.

Yearning rather than resolution seems to me the tone of the collection. As Sappho tells her pilgrim, 'I have brought you here so you will know forever / the silences in which are our beginnings.' The tradition with which Boland chooses to align herself then, is born of the silences in which women have suffered, the past rather than history.

It is the weight of this silence that Boland takes on in both her poetry and her critical writings. This process began as early as her second collection *The War Horse* published in 1975. We can see her exploration of 'the truths of womanhood and the defeats of a nation' come together in such poems as 'The Famine Road' which parallels a narrative of the treatment and starvation of Irish workers by the British with a woman being told she is infertile. Much of the power and dramatic resonance of the poem comes from the use of dialogue. Both the representatives of the British army and establishment and the anonymous voice, presumably a doctor, are inhumane in their casual and careless tones. The woman's personal tragedy is connected to the casual murder of the Irish nation and the dying out of the 'race:'

"It has gone better than we expected, Lord
Trevelyan, sedition, idleness, cured
in one; from parish to parish, field to field,
the wretches work till they are quite worn,

then fester by their work; we march the corn
to the ships in peace; this Tuesday I saw bones
out of my carriage window, your servant Jones.”

*“Barren, never to know the load
of his child in you, what is your body
now if not a famine road?” (SP, 19)*

Boland was to return to this connection in her later poetry; the grief and loss of the nation as represented by the famine of the mid-nineteenth century and the daily losses endured by women which were not seen as fit subject material for poetry. The paralleling of these two experiences and the connection Boland makes through the imagery of barrenness and emptiness brings together the private and the public in a ‘political’ poem. The reference to Trevelyan who was in charge of the relief operation in the famine locates the poem in a particular historical reality. According to Eagleton:

‘Trevelyan held that the effects of the famine should not be too thoroughly mitigated by British aid, so that its improvident victims might learn their lesson; ... The disaster in Trevelyan’s view had miraculously resolved most of the country’s problems, forcing its warring sects into co-operative action, fostering self reliance, quelling agrarian militancy and modernising the economy.’ (32)

In her essay ‘Subject Matters’ Boland argues that the equation of the political poem with the public poem is one of the weaknesses of the Irish tradition she inherited. (In

the essay she traces this fusion back to the early 19th century poets and founders of the Nation such as Mangan.) In this equation true personal feeling and connection get lost and what we are left with is empty rhetoric. It also diminishes the radical potential of the poem. 'In such a poem the poet would be the subject. The object might be a horse, a distance, a human suffering. It hardly mattered. The public authorisation would give such sanction to the poet that the object would not just be silent. It would be silenced. The subject would be all-powerful.' (*OL*, 178) As an example of her own seduction into this tradition she cites her early poem 'The War Horse'. This poem takes an actual experience, a traveller's horse invading a suburban garden in winter while the teatime news in the house recounts details of the violence going on in Northern Ireland. The poem organises itself around the oppositions of the force of nature and the stylised formality of the suburban gardens. The woman watching from her window is contained, her safety comes at a price, Boland suggests. Her containment shuts her off from the natural world and insulates her. Yet this feels like a loss, what are poets' concerns reduced to now?

But we, we are safe, our informed fear
Of fierce commitment gone; why should we care

If a rose, a hedge, a crocus are uprooted
Like corpses, remote, crushed, mutilated?

He stumbles on like a rumour of war, huge,
Threatening; neighbours use the subterfuge (*SP*, 17-18)

As a young poet Boland felt satisfied with this poem; she had taken private emblems and made them communal and public symbols of violence and suffering. Gradually she realises that what she has left out of this poem is herself, the complexity and contradictions inherent in her own position at that time: 'What I had not realized was that I myself was a politic within the Irish poem: a young woman who had left the assured identity of a city and its poetic customs and who had started on a life which had no place in them.' (*OL*, 179)

The bardic authority associated with the Irish poet was one which women as the traditional objects of the poem- images of nationhood-could not have. Yet, this position on the margins, the position of powerlessness, Boland felt, could have the most radical potential:

'The final effect of the political poem depends on whether it is viewed by the reader as an act of freedom or an act of power. This in turn has everything to do with the authority of the speaker. Paradoxically that authority grows the more the speaker is weakened and made vulnerable by the tensions he or she creates. By the same logic, it is diminished if the speaker protects himself or herself by the powers of language he or she can generate.' (*OL*, 186)

The construct and idea of the Irish Bard as poetic authority remained resolutely male despite the flowering of poetry written in both Irish and English by women at this time. The bard retained a privilege and authority within the Irish poem 'long taken from or renounced by their British counterparts' and the legacy of this remains. As Boland argues: '... whatever the dispossession and humiliation of the outer world,

maleness remained a caste system within the poem.' (OL, 191) Meaney argues that the myth of the Irish artist takes two forms. There is the true son of mother Ireland (Heaney et al.) or the literary subversive in exile epitomised by Joyce. Both stand in relation to a maternal construct which both marshals and undercuts female power. The true son is protected by the nation as mother from colonial ravages but mother Ireland was herself ravaged by colonialism and in need of her son's protection and loyalty. In this Freudian drama the literary subversive is the oedipal exile escaping from 'mother church' even mother tongue. Meaney asks 'what position as speaking and writing subject is available to the Irish woman?' (33)

Interstitial Spaces: Boland's Suburbia.

Boland claims to have found her own position, the centre of her poetics, when she married and moved out of the literary life of Dublin to the suburbs. The location of her poems in suburbia marked a change of style in Boland's writing. She has written about this period as a time of unlearning received aesthetics and beginning to trust her instincts. This experience and shift in location and perspective were crucial to her development as a poet where she became increasingly concerned with the gaps and silences in the Irish poem she had inherited and revered.

In his essay 'The Commitment to Theory' Homi Bhabha discusses the involvement of women in the miners' strike of 1984 as an illustration of what he calls 'the hybrid moment of political change.'

'Here the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are Neither the one (unitary working class) or the Other (the politics of

Gender) but something else besides that contests the terms and territories of both.

There is a negotiation between gender and class, where each formation encounters the displaced, differentiated boundaries of its group representation and enunciative sites in which the limits and limitations of social power are encountered in an agonistic relation.’ (34)

Boland’s hybrid moment is a process of gradually recognising that the Irish tradition to which she was allowed to belong as a poet did not recognise her sexedness. As early as *The War Horse* she began to be aware of the ‘splitting’ between mind and body which had to occur for her to be a ‘poet’ in this hybrid tradition. In essays such as ‘Turning Away’ she equates her body/sexuality with language and form. Looking back on her young self beginning to question the language and forms she had inherited she writes:

‘I could give a voice to the certainties of my mind but not to the questions of my body. Once I had seen myself at that table engaged in the act of history, the work of the poem. Now I saw myself - as if I had stepped outside my body - shrivelled and discounted: a woman at a window engaged in a power of language which rebuffed the truth of her life.’ (*OL*, 114)

Searching for new forms of poetry she writes about the poems she has inherited; the Irish bardic tradition, the English metropolitan poem, Victorian romanticism, nationalism and a Yeatsian modernism: ‘They threatened to take away from me my unproved sense of a country and a language and, with them, my own tentative acceptance of the connection between these and my sexuality.’ (*OL*, 117) Her poetic

evolution is a process of decolonisation, of 'unlearning received aesthetics' but such aesthetics come from her nationalist past as well as its colonialist history. From these dual inheritances she must create a third space. Her poetry is concerned with the search for a form which can give voice to this as yet unarticulated space.

At this time also she became aware of the death of Sylvia Plath and read her poetry. She became interested in Plath not simply because she admired her poetry but because she came to see Plath as representative of the fractures and stresses between the life of a woman and that of a poet. Such stresses found their most famous expression in the 1986 essay, 'The Woman Poet: Her Dilemma' (35) where Boland looks at the tension between the demands of femininity and the role proscribed for a post - Romantic lyric poet. The main dilemma that the woman poet faces is a psychosexual one made so by the 'profound fracture between her sense of the obligations of her womanhood and the shadowy demands of her gift.' (*OL*, 247) Such a dilemma, Boland argues, creates for women an unacceptable conflict, a refusal to bridge the distance between writing poems and taking on the authoritative label of poet.

Maguire, revisiting this essay from the perspective of a woman poet in 1999, argues that there is something about the form of lyric poetry which makes it especially difficult for women to write, namely its associations with the self. She argues that although the self constructed in the lyric is a fiction, it is a desiring subject, an 'I' that 'wants.' In a patriarchal society women are the desired objects rather than desiring subjects and lyric poetry has been the form above all where the status of women as desired objects has been reinforced. (36) This relationship between the

woman poet and the lyric as problematic is a narrative that has been visited by a number of critics from the 80s and 90s. Cora Kaplan writes about it in her 1986 essay 'Language and Gender' where, drawing on Lacanian theory, she argues that women as writers are alienated from the language of poetry at the very deepest levels of their identity - the levels in which they are constructed as speaking subjects. (37)

Maguire argues that: 'the romantic stress on transcendence and the 'egotistical sublime' is radically at odds with any traditional notion of acceptable feminine identity. With the dominance of romanticism and the post-romantic lyric, the always-irreconcilable roles of women and poet - the former constructed around self-effacement and constraint, the latter dependent on self-confidence and daring - are even further displaced.' (38)

Such displacement is explored in poems such as 'Suburban Woman' and 'Ode to Suburbia.' These poems mark a departure in Boland's poetry and embody the 'splitting' she has come to feel. 'Suburban Woman' uses images of war, rape, surrender, defeat and compromise to explore both the violation of the land and history through the creation of suburbia and the defeat and compromise of the woman contained within it. Boland's suburbia is a battleground full of 'lewd whispers,' 'rape on either side' and 'proxy violation.' The poem recalls T. S. Eliot's 'Preludes' (39) in both its structure and its use of language. Whereas in Eliot's poem we have a series of vignettes of urban life, here we have a series of vignettes of suburban life taking us through different stages in the day of an unnamed suburban woman. Eliot was one of many poets who dismissed the lives of women in suburbia - in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' (40) for example - and the structure of

the poem can be read as an oblique comment on the valorisation of the urban in poetry and the dismissal of the suburban as a female space where nothing happens. Underlying the imagery of war and violation of the land, in Boland's poem, is the history of partition:

Haemorrhaging to hacked

roads, to where in back gardens, like a pride
of lions toiled for booty, tribal acres died

and her world with them. She saw their power to sever
with a scar. She is the sole survivor. (*SP*, 27)

Such imagery of violence and territorial warfare was not uncommon in Irish poetry in the 70s, particularly in the work of the Ulster poets but it was usually located in an urban male space. Boland locates such images in the feminine spaces of routine and domestic lives. As with 'Preludes' there is a sense of routine covering something more desperate and yet more visionary. The images of violation continue into the second vignette:

Morning: mistress of talcums, spun
and second cottons, run tights
she is, courtesan to the lethal
rapine of routine. The room invites.
She reaches to fluoresce the dawn.

The kitchen lights like a brothel.

Boland, like Roberts and many other poets of this time, makes use of the myth of Ceres and Persephone here. In Greek myth, Ceres the goddess of grain, agriculture and fertility searches for nine days for her missing daughter Persephone who had been seized by Hades and carried off to the underworld. In her grief for Persephone and her rage at learning that Zeus had sanctioned Hades' seizure of her daughter, Ceres caused all vegetation to cease. At Ceres' request it was granted that Persephone could spend two-thirds of the year in the upper world and one third in the underworld. Thus the year was divided into the seasons of growth and harvest and of winter. The emphasis in Boland's poem is not on the positive aspects of the myth as explored by many feminist poets who have revisioned this but on the sacrifice of Ceres, the loss of her individuality and talent.

The chairs dusted and the morning
coffee break behind, she starts pawning

her day again to the curtains, the red
carpets, the stair rods, at last to the bed,

the unmade bed where once in an underworld
of limbs, her eyes freckling the night like jewelled

lights on a cave wall, she, crying, stilled,
bargained out of nothingness her child...

The ending of the poem takes up another compromise. It began with the meeting of town and country and ends with the woman writer trying to reclaim her writing self from her domestic containment. Ceres here is the poet who weighs her sacrifice of her life as a poet against the birth of her daughter and her life as a mother.

Her kitchen blind down - a white flag -
the day's assault over, now she will shrug

a hundred small surrenders off as images
still born, unwritten metaphors, blank pages;

and on this territory, blindfold, we meet
at last veterans of a defeat

no truce will heal,

The imagery of ongoing conflict over space and territory is sustained throughout the poem. The Suburban woman is split between the demands of her femininity, her sacrifice and the assertion of space needed for her 'craft.' Boland then takes the rhetoric and diction of the contemporary political poem-images of conflict, rape, partition –and transforms them through their location in suburbia. As in the conventional nationalist poem the territory fought over is constructed as female but in Boland's poetry the claims of both sides have validity. Partition for the suburban mother usually means, however, the splitting of and denial of her creativity.

Fluidity rather than fixity, a constant interchange and movement between states is characteristic of 'Suburban Woman' and of Boland's poetry generally. It is also a characteristic of the suburbs in which Boland locates her poetic subjectivity. The location of many of Boland's poems in the suburbs brings us back again to the notion of a liminal space. In post-colonial theory the liminal has come to mean any 'in-between' space in which cultural change occurs - a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states. For Bhabha the liminal and hybridity go hand in hand and both are positive in their emphasis on process rather than stasis. The suburbs are not usually seen as progressive- indeed Bhabha (41) sees them as quite the opposite. However Boland's suburbs are located on the outskirts of Dublin, the threshold between the new urban culture and the old rural spaces, a zone of transition between town and country, between a rural pre-modern past and a metropolitan present. The dichotomies which exist in Irish culture between North and South and East and West both have their origins in the relationship with Britain. The long process of colonialism and cultural imperialism was stage-managed via Dublin and in the 20th century Dublin has continued to play its role as gateway to the west for influences from the East.

In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha refers to a Boundary as the place from which 'something begins its presencing.' (42) Thus Boland herself a 'hybrid' poet chooses to locate her 'presencing' not in the rural poetic or the metropolitan poem but the new and hybrid space of the suburbs. The suburbs are usually referred to in derogatory terms, as indicating a particular mindset. Boland makes in her suburbs,

however, a new poetic space, one in which she can explore the complexity and variety of ordinary women's lives.

In 'Ode to Suburbia' Boland plays with the denigration of the suburb. The monotony and lack of hope is well conveyed by the inversion of the fairy tale imagery, reminiscent of Ann Sexton's 'Transformations.' (43) The opening again recalls Eliot's 'Preludes.'

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days ... (44)

Here in Eliot's poem the urban public space is the poetic sphere explored and valorised; in Boland's poem it is the private suburban space:

Six o'clock: the kitchen bulbs which blister
Your dark, your housewives starting to nose
Out each other's day, the claustrophobia
Of your back gardens varicose
With shrubs, make an ugly sister
Of you suburbia. (*SP*, 30)

The imagery here is of ugliness not beauty, of sameness, monotony, entrapment. Whereas in 'Suburban Woman' the imagery is of violation, here it is of seduction.

The 'shy countryside' is fooled by the plainness of Suburbia and 'falls, then rises from your bed changed....' Boland's depiction of suburbia here is playful but draws on the hostility expressed towards suburbia by poets, writers and critics. The dominance of the city as a cultural space and the connotations of the 'urban' as sexy, happening and contemporary have left the suburban to be the poor relation- all that is not these things. The emphasis in modernity and postmodernity has been the city as space of cultural creativity. For example Berman's analysis of the experience of modernity is grounded in the life of the city. (45) The suburbs on the other hand have been portrayed negatively by artists and cultural critics. Q.D. Leavis writes about the 'emptiness and meaningless iteration of the suburban life' and views suburban culture as 'inflexible and brutal ... it has no fine rhythms to draw on and it is not serious ...it is not only formed to convey merely crude states of mind but is destructive of any fineness' (46)

In poetry where suburbia does appear it is gazed on with contempt. T.S. Eliot's suburban commuter embodies disintegration of the self in 'Preludes' and living death in 'The Waste Land':

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many...' (47)

Or we have John Betjeman's invitation in 1937 to the Luftwaffe, 'Come, friendly/ bombs and fall on Slough'. The bombers were then given specific targets - factories, houses and suburban conformity. (48)

Suburbia has fared no better in popular culture. The main genre which locates itself in suburbia is the television sitcom, not noted for its social criticism. At the time when Boland was writing her poetry the other cultural genre which attacked and vilified suburbia was the punk movement of the 70s. To punk, suburbia was the enemy. Indeed for a consistent imagery of suburbia as negative, soulless and conformist, it is to popular music from the last forty years that we should turn. This treatment of suburbia is closer to Boland's moving as it does between the mundane and the revelatory. The punk album 'The Sound of the Suburbs' (49) presents a suburbia similar to that presented by Boland in her 1980 collection *In Her Own Image*. Indeed Boland's 'Ode to Suburbia' with its articulation of suburban claustrophobia and suburban discontent has similarities to the sentiments produced on this album.

Such despised conformity and respectability was characterised in Western culture as feminine. Medhurst, in his study of versions of suburbia in British popular culture, comments on the way the conformism and respectability of suburbia is feminised in texts such as Dennis Potter's 'Pennies from Heaven' where the gendered model is of 'men who dream of escaping routine and rut, women who unquestionably accept or even at worst embody them.' (50)

Indeed in cultural and misogynist fantasy women's bodies are equated with suburbia. Paul Oliver in his discussion on the imagery of the suburb equates the form of the semi with the female body. '...The swelling bosom of the bay windows combined to communicate maternal warmth. Such curves dominated the necessarily rectilinear

elements in the façade' (51) So the suburbs represent the ambivalent cultural attitudes to the feminine-necessary as a counter to the public, male, urban sphere of creativity but ultimately despised and seen as a place to escape from.

Such ambivalence can be found in Boland's 1980 collection *In her Own Image*. Indeed the following lines from the poem 'Mastectomy,' where the woman reflects on the removal of her breasts, encompass this ambivalence: 'So they have taken off/what slaked them first, what they have hated since.' (*SP*, 36-37) The dark side of suburbia introduced in such poems as 'Suburban Woman' is given its fullest expression in this collection. Here she turns from the formal, crafted lyric to experiments with *écriture féminine*.

The opening poem 'Tirade for the Mimic Muse' attacks directly through violent imagery the patriarchal muse of masculinist discourse and implicitly a poetic tradition and aesthetic which excludes and silences women as subjects.

I've caught you out. You slut. You fat trout.

So here you are fumed in candle-stink.

Its yellow balm exhumes you for the glass.

How you arch and pout in it!

How you poach your face in it!

Anyone would think you were a whore -

An ageing out-of-work kind-hearted tart.

I know you for the ruthless bitch you are:

Our criminal, our tricoteuse, our Muse -

Our Muse of Mimic Art. (*SP*, 31-32)

‘Our Muse of Mimic Art’ recalls and parodies ‘Our Lady,’ another representation of symbolic and ideal womanhood which Irish women have been measured against.

The muse is forced to put aside her artifice, her make-up, and all the masques she has assumed in art/poetry to protect herself and gaze upon a different ‘horror’:

The kitchen screw and the rack of labour,
The wash thumbed and the dish cracked,
The scream of beaten women,
The crime of babies battered,
The hubbub and the shriek of daily grief
That seeks asylum behind suburb walls –

The poet brings herself into the last two verses upbraiding the muse for her own blind following of her which she now regrets.

And I who mazed my way to womanhood
Through all your halls of mirrors, making faces,
To think I waited on your trashy whim!

...

I will wake you from your sluttish sleep.
I will show you true reflections, terrors.
You are the Muse of all our mirrors.
Look in them and weep.

The patriarchal muse to which women writers have looked for definition and reflection is forced now to look at the 'mirrors' Boland holds up to her in the rest of the collection and they are a very different set of images from the hackneyed and clichéd symbols of womanhood the muse has endorsed.

The last line echoes and parodies Shelley's 'Ozymandias': 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' Indeed throughout the poem there are echoes of the canon particularly the romantics. 'Your glass cracked, your nerve broke...' echoes the line 'the mirror cracked from side to side' from Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shallot' who dared to gaze outside of her contained and imprisoned world. Weekes argues that 'trout' recalls the 'silver trout' of the 'Song of Wandering Aengus,' Yeats's tribute to the god of love and to the pursuit of romantic love. Weekes reads it as suggesting that those 'who follow the Muse of Mimic Art attempt to follow the early Yeats, to see and depict the world as did the obvious model, the famous Irish poet.' (52) Weekes may be right here as Boland expresses her feelings about Yeats in several interviews. While she expresses admiration for Yeats and was clearly influenced by him in her early poetry, she acknowledges that the Yeatsian poem which she and other poets of her generation inherited was a poem in which the world was 'compellingly but incompletely politicised.' Although Boland sees gender as part of this she asserts:

'more serious still was the conservatism and insularity which that indicated in the poem itself. I was to find out that- in a very disappointing way-the Irish poem was not the least subversive about gender. In other words it demoted and suspected

women's experience, exactly as the society it occurred in demoted and suspected that experience. I knew enough- even as quite a young poet- to know that there should not be such a correlation between the conservative elements of an art form and a society.'(53)

If Yeats, Shelley and Tennyson are critiqued in the poem, the poet to whom Boland pays homage in terms of style is Sylvia Plath. In its direct address and its short sentences and violent metaphors we can see the influence of Plath, an influence which can be felt throughout this collection.

In His Own Image: Casting off the Male form

All the poems in this collection deal with the effect on a woman's subjectivity of the distortions of female identity in patriarchal culture prefigured by the mimic muse. They also portray the reality of women's lives in contemporary suburbia through poems on domestic violence. Although fiction in the 70s had dealt with the latent violence and frustration of Suburbia - Marilyn French's 'The Woman's Room' (54) is the best known example- such topics were not the stuff of Irish poetry.

Boland's 'Anorexic' for example looks at the self-hatred and alienation from the female body brought about by the actual and metaphorical violence directed towards the female in patriarchal culture. The speaker has internalised the hatred of the flesh and her own sexual female self:

Flesh is heretic.

My body is a witch.

I am burning it.

Yes I am torching

her curves and paps and wiles.

They scorch in my self denials.

How she meshed my head

in the half-truths

of her fevers

till I renounced

milk and honey

and the taste of lunch.

I vomited

her hungers.

Now the bitch is burning.

I am starved and curveless.

I am skin and bone.

She has learned her lesson. (*SP*, 35)

The woman's alienation from her body is shown in the switching of pronouns; 'I vomited / her hungers. / Now the bitch is burning.' The dualistic split of masculine mind from female body has been successfully internalised and the speaker desires to

annihilate her female self completely. She desires a return to the male body, to be the spare rib once again where she will grow 'angular and holy' and escape from the female flesh which is equated with impurity, greed and original sin. Her entry into the male body will make her forget her origins:

in a small space

the fall

into forked dark,

into python needs

heaving to hips and breasts

and lips and heat

and sweat and fat and greed.

The poem is written in three line stanzas until the final one which expands into a five line stanza which mimics the 'fall' from the male body into the female form with its 'python needs / heaving to hips and breasts.' The assonance and alliteration of these lines, the slow, rhythmic emphasis on the last two lines makes the female body sound obscene. The poem like others in *In Her Own Image* works on several levels. There is the literal effect on women's sense of self of masculine constructions of the feminine. Much theoretical work was being produced at this time on women's bodies as sites of struggle. Susan Bordo (55) for example, argues that many anorexics see themselves as having two parts: a male part telling them to control the other 'flabby,' female part. Bordo proposes that these again are symptoms of underlying cultural attitudes: a fear of the demands of the female body coupled with disdain for

traditional female roles. She argues that such an ideology in which women specifically are seen as having insatiable desires that need to be controlled tends to be expressed during periods when women are becoming more assertive and a threat to the status quo. We can also read it as another example of Boland's concern to interrogate the equation in Irish poetry of the nation with the feminine. The effacement of the material body of woman is one of the effects of the metaphorical relationship between Ireland and womanhood. On another level it also explores women's art and writing. As Randolph argues: 'On the level of language and metaphor, the anorexic 'fall' away from the female body, into a narrative of origin beginning and ending in the male body, becomes a model for the woman writing, representing herself within a masculinist discourse.' (56) Through her merging of theme and form here Boland explores the way women writers are encouraged to erase their sex and shape their poetic forms within a masculinist tradition.

To be a poet in Ireland in the 60s and 70s was, as Boland says in her essays, to become masculine, to embrace the world of the mind and erase the world of the body -the splitting that Boland comes back to over and over again in her work.

To produce words, to claim the space of the 'bard' was literally to deny her sexed femininity. In the poem 'A False Spring' the older poet revisits her young poetic self and sees an image of herself 'her mind so frail her body was its ghost.' Boland's speaker here wants to tell her that she can rest 'she is embodied now.' (*OH*, 29) The older poet has rejected an aesthetic that requires denial of the female body.

Maud Ellmann in her study *The Hunger Artists* looks at the enmeshed meanings of writing and hunger in western culture. Ellman's central preoccupation is the

relationship between the labour of starvation and the birth of words and texts. (57) In an interesting twist on Ellmann's thesis Boland's style in this collection is thin-she pares her words down as if literally casting off the 'received aesthetic' she has imbibed.

There have been different meanings attributed to anorexia in Western culture. One meaning is that anorectic women are 'hunger strikers in disguise starving to defy the patriarchal values that confine their sex,' (58) turning their anger inwards and eating themselves up. This interpretation fits well with the tone of Boland's poem and indeed the whole collection. Anger and rage pervades it: 'Now the bitch is burning.' In this context the flight from knowledge can also be read as the rejection of the myths of womanhood perpetuated by the nationalist tradition. A return to the materiality of the body is a way of casting off woman's metaphorical history and Boland's collusion in it. Boland's poem then is an attack on the Irish tradition under nationalism - the woman's body as site of struggle - and what that does to women both in a symbolic and material sense. Images of starvation also haunt the poem -the real starvation of the women in the Great Famine which she returns to in her later collections, particularly *In A Time of Violence*.

Jody Allen-Randolph, in her discussion of this volume as *écriture féminine*, argues that the second half of the volume shifts from the construction of woman as patriarchal victim to a 'reinscribing' of 'female identity from the experience of the female body and feminine pleasure.' Drawing on Cixous's argument in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' she sees these poems as envisioning 'a new aesthetic which reconceptualises the body as a subject for poetry and as a mode of knowing.' (59)

This can be seen in the poem 'Solitary' which celebrates the female speaker's experience of masturbation. The imagery, which is often religious, draws attention to the subversive nature of the poem and to the female body as site of power and spirituality:

Night:

An oratory of dark,
a chapel of unreason.

Here in the shubbery
the shrine.

I am its votary,
its season.

Flames
single
to my fingers

expert
to pick out
their heart,
the sacred heat (*SP*, 38)

The power and spirituality of female sexuality is set against the repressive teachings of the Catholic church which teaches that masturbation is a mortal sin: 'You could

die for this. / The gods could make you blind.' The poem plays with dualistic thinking, valuing 'unreason' and the body and flesh as the site of knowledge:

How my flesh summers,
how my mind shadows
meshed in this brightness,

how my cry
blasphemes
light and dark,
screams
land from sea,
makes word flesh
that now makes me

This refusal of Catholic discourses of female sexuality and the privileging of the sexual body as a site of desire and knowledge is a constant in the work of Michèle Roberts discussed in Chapter 3. In Ireland in 1980, however, such poetic work was rare and Boland paid a price for this.

Boland herself talks of her exclusion from the so-called poetic discourse of the time because of its feminist associations. Indeed as a result of its reception in Ireland Boland began publishing in the United States where she felt the discourses and tensions in poetry were more open and generous.

Ailbhe Smith, in her essay 'Dodging around the Grand Piano,' writes about the way women who have written about sex are ignored in the Irish literary critique. She suggests that 'literary critics are operating like the law, intervening to constrain or outlaw the transgressive excesses of the poet's sexual behaviour.' (60) To feminist poets and publishers such as Smith, *In Her Own Image* was a pioneering collection:

'The process of symbolic embodiment was initiated by *In Her Own Image*, which thus marked a crucial moment in the development of a feminist aesthetic for Irish poets. It articulated what was shrouded – 'dulsed' in shadows, secrets and silence, tore women's sexuality out of the realm of the tacit, and exposed it, angrily, in words and in public. One of the most remarkable and ground-breaking aspects of the collection is its rejection of either romanticism or domestication as solutions for living or understanding. The excision of traditional (and canonical) versions of women's sexuality undertaken here by Boland is a necessary basis for the achievement of self-representation which, in turn, is a crucial moment in the strategic process of self-realisation.' (61)

Yet the romantic and the domestic and the romanticising of the domestic *do* shape many of Boland's suburban poems. If *In Her Own Image* was the text that was labelled 'feminist', the collection *Night Feed* published in 1982 was the collection which led to the labelling of Boland as a 'domestic' poet by many reviewers with all the misreading and reductionism that such a term implies.

The Muse Mother: Embracing the female form.

Although many of these poems were written at the same time as the poems in *In Her Own Image* the style is quite different. The settings of the poems are often domestic interiors but Boland explores them in a lyrical way, incorporating nature and continuing her theme of the limited construction of the female in masculinist discourses of art. What we have in this collection is what Reading describes as the 'revelatory uniqueness of the ordinary,' (62) a space between routine and ritual. For example in 'Night Feed,' the title poem, Boland conveys the feelings of feeding her daughter at dawn. The setting is ceremonial, the tone hushed, intimate and expectant:

This is dawn.

Believe me

This is your season, little daughter.

The moment daisies open,

The hour mercurial rainwater

Makes a mirror for sparrows.

It's time we drowned our sorrows. (*SP*, 58)

The persona here is content, in harmony with the cycle of the natural world and she realises

This is the best I can be,

Housewife

To this nursery

Where you hold on,

Dear life.

This poem can be read in the light of Q. D. Leavis's remarks on suburbia mentioned earlier. 'Night Feed' and many of the poems in this volume celebrate the 'fine rhythms' of suburbia.

The poems in *Night Feed* mark a new resolution for Boland. The splitting and violence of 'Suburban Woman' is absent from this volume. Adrienne Rich has written that 'poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself.' (63) In *Night Feed* Boland's poetic persona and her maternal persona merge - in this volume Boland writes as 'someone's mother.' Yet motherhood is not glorified - the poems present complex and ambiguous responses, epitomised by 'Monotony' or 'Hymn.' The poems emphasise instinct rather than reason. Above all they find beauty and revelation in the ordinary. Boland writes about what she calls the 'Romantic Heresy', a debased form of romanticism which limits what women can write about or encourages them to reject their everyday experiences as not the stuff of poetry or to romanticise their experiences and so render them more poetic but less authentic. (*OL*, 239-254) This concern with the authentic can be seen in her poem 'The Muse Mother' which returns to Boland's concern with how to inscribe the female but in particular the domestic mother into a language and tradition which has excluded and silenced her. Technically accomplished the poem takes a 'moment,' an ordinary everyday image, and freezes it.

My window pearls wet.

The bare rowan tree

berries rain.

I can see
from where I stand
a woman hunkering -
her busy hand
worrying a child's face,

working a nappy liner
over his sticky, loud
round of a mouth ... (*SP*, 54)

Boland has a strong visual sense often depicting moments, interiors or vignettes of daily life in detailed ways invoking light and shade, giving the reader a strong visual impression. At times she lets the vignettes convey the meaning of the poem, at other times like here there is a point of departure where she reflects on the wider significance of the image.

If I could only decline her -
lost noun
out of context,
stray figure of speech -
from this rainy street
again to her roots,
she might teach me

a new language:

to be a sibyl

able to sing the past

in pure syllables,

limning hymns sung

to belly wheat or a woman,

able to speak at last

my mother tongue.

Boland is aware that there is no tradition of this suburban, ordinary woman wiping a child's face in poetry. She would like to 'decline' her, to connect with a lost female tradition but is aware of the danger of appropriating this woman and turning her into symbol as her masculine predecessors have done. Boland here recalls that other poet of suburban sensibilities Philip Larkin. Compare 'Afternoons.' (64)

Summer is fading:

The leaves fall in ones and twos

From trees bordering

The new recreation ground.

In the hollows of afternoons

Young mothers assemble

At swing and sandpit

Setting free their children ...

... Their beauty has thickened.

Something is pushing them

To the side of their own lives.

But whereas Larkin sees the women whose 'beauty has thickened' as powerless against the relentless and uniform cycle of their lives, Boland's 'muse mother' conveys something potentially celebratory if the poet could only 'decline her.'

The lines 'able to speak at last / my mother tongue' evoke again the post-Lacanian ideas of Cixous or Irigaray but also echoes the colonisation of the Irish language by the British. The silencing of the 'mother' connects the two.

This sense of disarticulation from language is what connects the losses that Boland explores in her poetry. This sense of herself as sexless and stateless is explored in her essay 'Turning Away.' (*OL*, 117) It also positions Boland's poetry in both a feminist and a post-colonial mode. The centrality of language and representation to identity formation and the search for a linguistic authenticity to offset the inherited sense of disconnection are central to both. The fantasies of a return to a primal/pre-symbolic language and the return to a pre-colonial language are explored in Boland's poetry, but she ultimately eschews this strategy as too simplistic and not taking into account the complexity of her own hybrid position.

The Muse Mother: Boland As Feminist Poet?

The reviews of both *Night Feed* and *In Her Own Image* illustrate the equivocal reception of Boland's poetry and her relationship to mainstream feminism.

Although *In Her Own Image* in particular was reviewed as a 'feminist' text, Boland has always been ambivalent about the relationship between feminism and writing poetry. Although she is concerned throughout her work with putting female experience into the Irish poem, in many interviews she goes out of her way to disassociate herself from the label of 'feminist poet.' For example in an interview with Randolph she states:

'Feminism is an enabling perception but it's not an aesthetic one. The poem is a place - at least for me - where all kinds of certainties stop. All sorts of beliefs, convictions, certainties get left on that threshold. I couldn't be a feminist poet. Simply because the poem is a place of experience and not a place of convictions - there is nothing so illuminated and certain as that sort of perspective in the poems I write. My poems have nothing to do with perspective: they have to do with the unfinished business of feeling and obsession. But outside the poem, feminism has been a vital, enabling way of seeing the climate in which I write the poem. It shows up the obstructions, the operations of power...' (65)

Yet the rejection of a feminist aesthetic sits uneasily with Boland's concern with aesthetics in Irish poetry. Elsewhere she advocates what she terms humanism rather than feminism. She talks of the need to 'humanise' female experience rather than 'feminise' it, to broaden the scope of what constitutes the human and thereby change poetry. (*OL*, 245) For Boland female experiences stand as metaphors for whole areas of human experience erased from the tradition, silences that are there throughout human experience. Vicki Bertram argues that Boland's project ultimately fails because 'humanism occludes gender difference and imposes a masculine subject.'

(66) Boland's metaphors therefore, Bertram argues, collapse back onto their female subjects. Certainly if the critical reception of her work is anything to go by this equation of the feminine with the human has been missed. A comparison of the reception of Boland's poem 'Anorexia' discussed above with Paul Muldoon's later poem 'Aisling' (67) demonstrates this. Muldoon's poem asks whether Ireland should be symbolised by the disease 'Anorexia':

Was she Aurora, or the goddess Flora,
Artemidora, or Venus bright,
or Anorexia, who left
a lemon stain on my flannel sheet?

Nationalism is here presented as a destructive neurosis with a false self-image. Muldoon's poem takes the hunger strikers as its context. Boland takes the violence done to women materially and symbolically through an aesthetic tradition which denies their flesh and blood reality. Although Muldoon's poem was written later and is arguably the lesser poem, it stands for a wider metaphor in a way that Boland's is not allowed to do. For example, the critic Edna Longley uses Muldoon's poem in her essay 'From Cathleen to Anorexia' which explores the changing way in which Ireland has been symbolised in poetry. (68) The protest of the hunger strikers is political male and 'national', the death of hundreds of women from anorexia is still relegated to the private and particular. Boland's poem, I would argue, is about what the national tradition has done to women in a much wider context but this context was usually ignored by her critics. The woman poet who writes from the female body or from feminine experience, it seems, cannot speak for humanity.

Boland advocates a subversive rather than a separatist stance. She criticises what she sees as a separatist impulse in feminist poetry typified by the critical writings of Adrienne Rich which plead with the woman poet to 'discard the complexities of true feeling for the relative simplicities of anger.' (*OL*, 245) As with nationhood so with gender. She wants a dialogue with the masculine tradition rather than to cast it off. What she does recognise, however, is that some of the silences in the Irish poem have already begun to be remedied by male poets and that she is part of that tradition whether she wants to be or not. What is significant to Boland is the importance of dialogue not only with other poets and traditions but also with herself and this self reflexivity is very much a part of feminist writing and politics of this time. Although she may not regard herself as a 'feminist' poet, her work has been shaped by and within the discourses of feminism.

Boland started publishing with the feminist press Arlen House and throughout the 80s ran workshops for women who wanted to write poetry. The process and interaction of these were important for Boland and she writes about them as a defining and radicalising moment. (69)

Boland is not easily pigeonholed. She embodies contradictions. Individualistic and bardic at times, she sees herself as representative of a poetic tradition. When Sappho addresses her as 'my own daughter' in 'The Journey' we are not surprised. Boland never questions the basic premise of a national literary tradition nor her right to have a place in it. What she aims to do is to 'repossess' and change it:

'I have come to believe that the woman poet is an emblematic figure in poetry now in the same way the modernist and romantic poets once were. And for the same reasons. Not because she is awkward and daring and disruptive but because - like the modernist and romantic poets in their time - she internalizes the stresses and truths of poetry at a particular moment. Her project therefore is neither marginal nor specialist. It is a project which concerns all of poetry, all that leads into it in the past and everywhere it is going in the future.' (*OL*, 235)

Here she is close to Eliot's ideas in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' (70) where he argues that a tradition is not a static entity. It is a contested space and one which will shift and reconstruct itself in line with the contemporary values, literary and political. Here Boland emphasises the power of the woman poet writing in contemporary Ireland to rearrange the given tradition. She wants then to rearrange the canon rather than reject it. Yet her workshops and what has been regarded by some critics as her 'essentialism,' her focus on the connecting power of motherhood, positions her at times in a communal and woman - centred camp associated with a more radical feminist poetics. Privileged in class terms and educationally and accepted as part of a poetic establishment, (71) yet derided and forced to publish outside Ireland because of the controversial nature of her themes. Innovative and experimental she refuses to be claimed by any particular camp. Yet all these experiments with form are about interrogating the metaphoric relationship between her Irishness and her womanhood - about the search for a language and form which will express the truth of her life, about what she calls in one poem 'the contrary passion to be whole.'

the lingua franca of a lost land.

A dialect in which

what had never been could still be found:

That infinite horizon. Always far

and impossible. That contrary passion

to be whole. (*LL*, 29)

That 'contrary passion to be whole' - to have a sex and a state is what drives

Boland's explorations with form and can be used to explore Boland's complex relationship with a female tradition.

Sexless and Stateless?

In her prose memoir *Object Lessons* Boland writes about her early development as a poet and reflects on this from her current subject position. In an essay entitled 'In Search of a Language' she documents the attraction to her young teenage self, a girl in search of a nation, an identity, of the classical models of poetry such as Virgil. It is an attraction to formalism and the rational and could almost be a description of the symbolic order. Writing of the Gaelic poetic tradition she says:

'The paradox of those traditions, with their sense of exclusiveness, was that I saw the power of language more clearly. I sensed a force that could heal wounds and soothe indecision. In the great systems of syntax I was just beginning to understand and in the faltering poems I wrote in the last light, I found a temptation to look for a place

between the words themselves where I could forget girlhood and its longing, forget the dislocation of a childhood, clothe myself in an old and inherited sense of possession and so divide myself from the frailties which so far were all I knew of my self.' (*OL*, 81) or 'More and more often, I saw how to take the unreason of one language and make it safe in the grammar of another. Language as exposure became language as protection.' (*OL*, 85)

Boland never negates the masculine tradition although in collections such as *In Her Own Image* and *Night Feed* and in many of the later poems such as 'Fever' she uses language to expose rather than protect - to expose the wound rather than heal it. In 'Fever' the words and the voice of the speaker threaten to break out from the controlled form. The length of the lines and the discordant sounds threaten the formal arrangement. This power, Boland suggests, is also linked to the repressed female language:

as if what we lost is a contagion
that breaks out in what cannot be
shaken out from words or beaten out
from meaning and survives to weaken

what is given, what is certain
and burns away everything but this
exact moment of delirium when
someone cries out someone's name. (*SP*, 77)

The female language here subverts the masculine discourse but it never replaces it.

The yearning for a different language in poems such as 'Fever' or 'The Muse

Mother' is paralleled in Boland's desire to connect with a female past or tradition.

Ellen Mahon (72) reads her collection *The Journey* as a series of woman-centred

poems in which Boland eventually recognises Sappho as 'mother.' The persona

/voice in the sequence makes connections with women represented in painting in

'Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening,' (SP, 72) with her grandmother in 'Fever,' with

her own past self in 'The Bottle Garden,' (SP, 80) with the women lace-makers of

the past who literally lost their sight making lace clothes while she metaphorically

searches for this 'lace,' this feminine aesthetic, this evidence of women's creativity

in language. (SP, 79)

Like Virginia Woolf, Boland expresses a desire to connect with other female poets.

In one poem in the sequence 'Object Lessons' Boland positions herself as part of a

female poetic continuity not through the connection of language but through the

'room' and its 'objects.' Boland uses feminine imagery and a romantic construction

of the isolated poet with the room of her own.

I wonder about you: whether the blue abrasions

of daylight, falling as dusk across your page,

make you reach for the lamp. I sometimes think

I see that gesture in the way you use language.

And whether you think, as I do, that wild flowers

dried and fired on the ironstone rim of

the saucer underneath your cup, are a sign of

a savage, old calligraphy: you will not have it. (*OH*, 12)

Boland is searching for some community, some process of which she is a part. There is a real yearning in the poem for connection and affiliation. The whole sequence 'Object Lessons' focuses on artefacts giving the poet some connection with her past and the inadequacy and absence of a language to convey those connections.

Boland certainly sets herself up as a pioneer:

'As an Irish woman poet I have very little precedent. There were none in the nineteenth century or early part of the twentieth century. You didn't have a thriving sense of the witness of the lived life of women poets, and what you did have was a very compelling and at times oppressive relationship between Irish poetry and the national tradition.' (73)

How true is Boland's claim here? Although women have always been writers in the Irish tradition, - a number of anthologists have commented on the unusually large number of women who wrote in Gaelic - many of those writers have been largely erased by mainstream anthologies. Because of the influence of Gaelic, there is certainly a lack of Anglo-Irish women poets for Boland to connect with. Meaney, (74) however, criticises her for not looking very hard for her literary foremothers. She notes her dismissive comment on Emily Lawless in *A Kind of Scar* and calls on

Boland's own involvement with Arlen House, responsible for republishing the work of many Irish writers. Referring to A.A. Kelly's anthology of Irish woman poets, (75) she attacks Boland in *A Kind of Scar* for coming close to deference to the cult of the great man, the poetic personality, a deference that she argues feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar were also guilty of. Many of the poets published in Kelly participate in the construction of the myth of mother Ireland and so would not be seen by Boland as natural literary foremothers. Nevertheless, Boland here could be seen as close to Bloom's paradigm and Gilbert and Gubar's development of it in relation to women poets in *No Man's Land*. (76). Dowson, (77) however, in her discussion of contemporary women poets and the female affiliation complex advocates Boland as a model in her specifically female negotiation with male tradition. She sees Boland as representing a fourth line of artistic development against the three lines offered by Freudian psycho sexual models- namely aesthetic frigidity, assuming a masculine identity and writing as a man, or identifying herself as feminine. Drawing on Boland's plundering and appropriation of the male traditions and forms she sees this as a common aesthetic in women's poetry which needs to be theorised if women are to identify themselves with one another. Dowson's main concern in her essay is to avoid the pattern of the last three hundred years where women publish but disappear to subsequent generations, a pattern which is present in Irish women's writing.

The importance of constructing a matrilineage has been a key aspect of feminist studies both in Western feminism and also in non-Western and Gaelic cultures in terms of an oral tradition. It is to an oral tradition that Boland looks for women's narratives and in this she is closer to non-Western cultures. The importance of the

oral tradition and its connection with a female continuity is explored in 'What we Lost.' (*OH*, 43) This poem creates a female domestic world in which the woman who is the poet/persona's maternal grandmother tells a story to a child - the poet's mother - as she mends linen in the kitchen:

Believe it, what we lost is here in this room
on this veiled evening.

The woman finishes. The story ends.

The child, who is my mother, gets up, moves away.

The woman's story, the poet's maternal history is lost and through the imagery of interiors/garments etc. the world of the feminine contained in the objects - they 'talk.' Similarly 'The Photograph on my father's desk' (*OH*, 37) uncovers the silence of the poet/persona's mother or paternal grandmother. The silence of the women is expressed through the metaphor of a wound:

The woman
holds her throat like a wound

These images of pain, scars and wounds recur throughout the sequence. The poet does not want to heal them by falsification or myth. This is what the Irish poetic tradition has done to the body of women and the poet. In a critique of post-colonial revisions of Irish literature she asserts:

'In the search for a wholeness and coherence that could stand against the fragmentation of colony, this is also a literature that reached for inventions that are all too accurate a mirror of the romanticisms and self-inventions of an oppressor. This is a literature whose claims to coherence became at times - but chiefly in the retrospect of the critique - an act of self-regarding power. And, in the process, this is also a literature that - through iconic images and nationalized feminine images - colonized women by exclusion and simplification.' (78)

As an illustrative example of what such revisions have done to women writers she uses the example of the revisions of the context of the poem 'The Ballad of Art O'Leary' by the Irish writer Eibhlin Ni Chonaill. This was a powerful oral poem located in a tradition of Irish women lament poets which was transmogrified into a written romantic ballad in part by Irish revivalists who, in order to counter colonial stereotypes of the Irish as brutish and ignorant, translated it into 'a text of marital devotion among noble and high-minded people.' What she is most concerned about here is the way that a rich oral tradition, a performance rather than a literary art, part formula, part innovation has been translated by 'history' into something else. The meaning of the poem and the representation of the writer have been colonised in a way that erases their connection with a communal art developed and practised by women. Boland recognising herself as both subject and object here, searches for a way to address the silences.

'The silences in which are our beginnings'

One of the most problematic silences for Boland in the Irish tradition and particularly the literature of the Celtic Revival is the editing out of the terrible

realities of the great famine. This is one of the points in the poem 'The Achill Woman.' When the young Boland turns from the words of the Achill woman that evening she is colluding in what Eagleton calls 'some sort of national literary repression.' Eagleton in his discussion of the representations of the famine notes this evasion particularly in the writers of the literary revival. Although the non-representational form of much of that writing made the depiction of historical realities of the famine less likely, Eagleton argues that there is 'something recalcitrant at its core which defeats articulation, some 'real' which stubbornly refuses to be symbolised, nature disrupting history.' (79) The Irish poet Brendan Kennelly explores the literal silence of the countryside during the famine in his poem 'My Dark Fathers' (80):

Upon the headland, the encroaching sea
Left sand that hardened after tides of Spring,
No dancing feet disturbed its symmetry
And those who loved good music ceased to sing.

As early as *The War Horse* Boland takes on that trauma but it is in her later poetry that she explores it fully. In *Outside History* she returns to her favourite classical myth, Ceres and Persephone, another myth that deals with being between two worlds. This myth has been attractive to many female poets who have revisioned myths as part of a strategy of reclaiming language and I shall consider Michèle Roberts' treatment of this myth in Chapter 3. In her later poetry the blight of the land and the mother grieving for her lost child become for Boland potent images of the famine. In 'The Making of an Irish Goddess' the connections between the myth and

the Great Famine of the nineteenth century are made explicit. Unlike Ceres who went to hell unchanged, eternally young, the speaker of the poem asserts:

But I need time -
my flesh and that history -
to make the same descent.

In my body,
neither young now nor fertile,
and with the marks of childbirth
still on it,

in my gestures -
the way I pin my hair to hide
the stitched, healed blemish of a scar -
must be
an accurate inscription
of that agony: (*OH*, 31)

In the woman's face and body can be read her history, individual and social and to reject these signs is to reject one's history, to place value on only one portion, youth, of a woman's life. That 'history' refers to Ceres' original grief but it also looks forward to 'that agony' later in the poem, the private history of Irish mothers in the time of famine:

the failed harvests,
the fields rotting to the horizon,
the children devoured by their mothers
whose souls, they would have said,
went straight to hell,
followed by their own.

The famine itself seems to re-enact the blight imposed by Ceres' cyclical grieving. The gesture of the poet/persona searching for her daughter in the distance unites myth and history: 'holding up my hand/sickle shaped, to my eyes.' The sickle-shaped cupping of the hand recalls Ceres as the Goddess of harvests and the anxious peering through the twilight recalls her search for Persephone.

To understand what Boland is doing here we need to consider her own comments on the relationship between myth and history. In 'The Woman The Place The Poet' she explores the connection between her own position and 'place' now and the women who were the inmates of the nineteenth-century workhouse, managed by her great-grandfather and located some hundred miles away from her present location in the suburbs. Through a literal journey and an exploration of both landscapes she comes to realise that:

'myth is instructed by history, although the tradition is full of poets who argue the opposite with force and eloquence. In my case, to paraphrase the myth, I gradually came to know at what price my seasons - my suburb - had been bought. My underworld was a hundred miles southwest. But there, too, the bargains had been

harsh, the outcome a terrible compromise. The woman I imagined - if the statistics are anything to go by - must have lost her children in that underworld, just as I came to possess mine through the seasons of my neighbourhood...' (*OL*, 174)

This seems to me an important connection and one which is crucial to feminist theorising on difference. As women our histories are not parallel but interconnected. Boland recognises that her identity in the present is one located by relations of hierarchy and power in the past. Her connection to these women is not as Neil Sullivan (81) suggests a 'mystical' one but an informed political one. She is not universalising women but using the myth as an entry point into exploring the suffering of women at one particular specific point in Irish history.

The Ceres and Persephone myth allows her identification/empathy with both characters- the mother whose intense love for her daughters and the daily minutiae of that passion connects with Boland's own life as a mother in the suburbs, explored in such poems as 'Night Feed' (*SP*, 58) or 'Hymn' (*SP*, 60) and the daughter who is between two worlds. These two worlds are not simply the dual heritages of post-colonial Ireland but also the world of the past and her present, the world of the mother and the world of the poet:

... leaving something behind, bringing
something with me I should have left behind ...

Boland is also the daughter Persephone who once having moved into another world realises the impossibility of going back to that pure and authentic state.

The ambivalence of this loss is what Boland explores from the perspective of a woman in post-colonial Ireland. In 'The Mother Tongue' she writes:

I was born on this side of the Pale.

I speak with the forked tongue of colony.

But I stand in the first dark and frost
of a winter night in Dublin and imagine

my pure sound, my undivided speech
travelling to the edge of this silence.

As if to find me. And I listen: I hear
what I am safe from. What I have lost. (*LL*, 30)

She cannot go back to what she was despite the seductiveness of a myth of origin; there can be no return to the old images and symbols, to the grieving mother Ireland. The underworld / the darkness can be seen in nationalist imagery to represent the British but it is now part of her seasons- part of her history. This myth then connects Boland's present life in the suburbs with her political and social history; with the Irish famine and the women who suffered permanent loss of children, the women in the Clonmel workhouse whose stories do not exist in the poetic tradition.

In 'The Lost Land' sequence of poems she makes the connections much more explicit. In the title poem she moves from personal reflection on her own daughters' absence to the emigrant ships of the past, where women left those they loved in order

to survive. The references to the underworld connect the migration with Boland's feelings about her daughters through the reference to Ceres and Persephone. The point where myth and history meet is in her present:

I imagine myself
at the landward rail of that boat
searching for the last sight of a hand.

I see myself
on the underworld side of that water,
the darkness coming in fast, saying
all the names I knew for a lost land:

Ireland. Absence. Daughter. (LL, 37-38)

Out of Myth Into History?

In her 1990 sequence 'Outside History' Boland writes:

I have chosen:

out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,

those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead. (*OH*, 45)

Meaney argues, however, that in not taking into account differences such as class, material resources etc. she universalises women and so does end up mythologising and dehistoricising them. Indeed the connecting factor is often motherhood as in the poems discussed. She relates Boland to Kristeva's concept of woman's time -cyclical time and monumental time as bearing a special relationship with feminine subjectivity. She argues that although Boland's poetry sets out to confront the events of history, the 'human truths of survival and humiliation,' that confrontation is 'framed and to some degree undercut by the insistence on women's experience as having, in every place and time some common factor. 'Womanhood' in this formulation transcends history' (82)

This is a fair criticism but we need to recognise Boland's sense of connection here. Her private feelings and experiences as a mother are what allow her to make a connection with the women of the famine; the point at which her personal experience intersects with her historical consciousness is the point of entry to her experience in the poem. This is her legacy from Yeats. Although she is critical of him for what she saw as his gender conservatism in the political poem, she admired Yeats for his way of putting his private experiences and feelings into the political poem. Like Yeats, she does not want to remain omniscient, outside the poem, an observer:

'I do not believe the political poem can be written with truth and effect unless the self who writes that poem - a self in which sexuality must be a factor - is seen to be

in a radical relation to the ratio of power to powerlessness with which the political poem is so concerned. This relation, and the way it is construed, are now visibly altered in the Irish poem. One of the characteristics of the political poem - the accruing of power by the speaker in the poem in the face of a perceived powerlessness outside it - has been subverted. At a downright and sensible level, the sense of power a woman might have in an Irish poem today will not just be political; it must also be politicized. In other words, her sense of power inside the poem must be flawed and tempered not just by a perception of powerlessness outside it but also by the memory of her traditional and objectified silence within it.' (OL, 185-186)

Boland is aware of the interconnections of her world with the women in the Clonmel workhouse. As a mother she has a keen sense of the meaning of a loss of a child. Boland *does* specifically address differences between women in her later poems. In her collection *In a Time of Violence* differences of class and material position as they intersect with race are explored in the poem 'March 1 1847. By the First Post':

*...Our picnics by the river –
remember that one with Major Harris? –
our outings to the opera
& our teas
are over now for the time being.
Shall I tell you what I saw on Friday,
driving with Mama? A woman lying
across the Kells Road with her baby –
in full view. We had to go*

out of our way

to get home & we were late

& poor Mama was not herself all day. (ITV, 7)

‘In a bad light’ parallels the Irish seamstresses who lost their sight so that other women could emigrate in ‘dresses made of French silk.’ The narrator is reminded of this by the artefact of a doll in a museum dressed in such ‘finery.’ What is not there in this artefact is the suffering of the Irish seamstresses:

... We are sewing a last sight of shore. We are sewing
coffin ships, and the salt of exile. And our own death in it. For
history’s abandonment we are doing this. And this ... (ITV, 8)

There is a connection in these women’s histories, their stories interweave as do their fates but they are unaware of this relationship.

Her later poetry such as *In A Time Of Violence*, her 1994 collection and *The Lost Land*, published in 1999, are much more concerned with the political and social upheavals of the last two centuries in Ireland. They could be read as part of her move from myth to history. Although more outwardly political and ‘public’ volumes, the poems still take the personal as a point of entry where the poet /persona is trying to make a connection with her past through some feeling or event in the present. Boland returns to the famine of the nineteenth-century and its effects as a way of realigning or recasting the metaphor between the defeats of a nation and the truths of womanhood and of honouring the story of the Achill Woman erased by the

Irish poetic tradition. The first poem in the collection *In A Time Of Violence* is called 'That the science of Cartography is Limited'

- and not simply by the fact that this shading of
forest cannot show the fragrance of balsam,
the gloom of cypresses
is what I wish to prove. (*ITV*, 5)

The poem deals with what maps erase and represent in historical as well as geographical terms-the power relations and the suffering that went into the demarking of boundaries. What maps erase and smooth over is a theme taken up by other contemporary Irish writers most notably by Friel in his play *Translations*. (83)
The poem makes a sharp political point, the contribution of the British to the death toll of the famine, but does so in a gentle way - the reader is eased into the poem by the positioning of the poet/persona and their personal evocation of loss:

When you and I were first in love we drove
to the borders of Connact
and entered a wood there.
Look down you said: this was once a famine road.

This is the power of Boland's poetry -to lead the reader in gently yet the sense of grief for what is lost/ has never been lingers and haunts the reader. Despite this gentle and seductive entry into the poem Boland's depiction of the famine is

politically radical. She depicts it as a matter of economic and political relations rather than simply a catastrophe of nature:

in the second winter of their ordeal, in

1847, when the crop had failed twice,

Relief Committees gave

the starving Irish such roads to build.

Where they died, there the road ended

Many accounts of the famine in history, from Irish writers as well as British, have ignored the social causes and focused on it as an act of nature and in some cases an act of God. Boland does not collude in this. As Eagleton and others have recently noted 'the hiatus in the 1847 relief operation...sent many to their graves.' (84)

The dispossession and displacement caused by the remaking of the map of Ireland is an idea that recurs throughout her later poetry. In 'In which the ancient history/ I learn is not my own' the poet/persona is a schoolgirl in England in the 50s learning an imperialist history and geography. Suddenly the schoolgirl has an urge to find her history and to speak out loud the sounds of the place-names:

Suddenly

I wanted

to stand in front of it.

I wanted to trace over
and over the weave of my own country.
To read out names
I was close to forgetting.
Wicklow. Kilruddy. Dublin.

She revisits this idea in 'The Colonists' from her collection *The Lost Land*. The vision she sees is images of dispossession - the erasure of identity created by the colonists remaking of the maps and their renaming. What is most significant here is the effect this image of the past has on her sense of identity and its fragility in the present:

Then they faded
And the truth is I never saw them.
If I had I would have driven home
through an ordinary evening, knowing
that not one street name or sign or neighbourhood

could be trusted
to the safe-keeping
of the making and unmaking of a people. (*LL*, 25-26)

Although these later collections are concerned much more directly with the legacy of British imperialism in Ireland, the 'violence' referred to in the title of the 1994 collection is as much to do with the violence done to women in the Irish poetic

tradition as the nineteenth-century famine and conflict. The 'maps' of the text which erase Irish history can also be read as the map of poetry on which women poets are not found. Irish women have been victims of a political and economic power game but they have also been victims of a linguistic one and the poet recognises the seduction of this linguistic violation. In 'Beautiful Speech' the poet/persona looks back reflexively on her early lyric poetry and the way she learned the rhetoric of an 'oppressor's language.' The temptation of using words to occlude and to obscure and the shadow side of language is connected to the way the language and texts of the powerful, both coloniser and nationalist, disguise the reality:

imagine words such as *hate*
and *territory* and the like - unbanished still
as they always would be - wait
and are waiting under
beautiful speech. To strike. (*ITV*, 13)

Diaspora Identification: Boland's Imagined Communities.

Although Boland takes the Great Famine and the colonisation of the Irish by the British as themes here, the violence done to women by the reduction of their human agency is not limited to one group or nation. This is suggested by her use of classical and Irish myth and her references to Europe. For example the disenfranchised and the dispossessed appear in such poems as 'The Huguenot Graveyard at the heart of the city.' Boland makes connections with individuals and groups who connect with her own sense of loss. It is through language that this connection is made sometimes shadowy as in 'In Exile' (*OH*, 40) sometimes more directly as in 'Huguenot':

... Say: *they had another life once.*

And think of them as they first heard of us:

huddled around candles and words failing as

the stubborn tongue of the South put

oo and an to the sounds of Dublin,

and of their silver fingers at the window-sill

in the full moon as they leaned out

to breathe the sweet air of Nimes

for the last time ... (*ITV*, 31)

Exile and displacement are central themes in Boland's most recent collection, *The Lost Land*. The encounter between different realms which shapes this collection is that between past and present. Some critics such as Aijaz Ahmad have contested the use of 'post' in post-colonialism stressing 'the articulations between and across the politically defined historical periods, of pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence cultures.' (85) This connection can be seen in Boland's poem sequence 'Colony'.

The aftermath of Colony and in particular the psychic legacy of colonisation on those who come after is the focus of the poems in this sequence. In 'Daughters of Colony' the poet/persona again connects to the women of the past, dispossessed and uncertain of where they belonged:

I put my words between them

and the silence

the failing light has consigned them to:

I also am a daughter of the colony.

I share their broken speech, there other-where-ness.

No testament or craft of mine can hide

our presence

on the distaff side of history.

See: they pull the brims of their hats

down against a gust from the harbour.

They cover

their faces with what should have been

and never quite was: their home. (*LL*, 16-17)

This poem, like others in the collection, deals with the emigration which has so depleted Ireland's population at points in its history and created a significant Irish diaspora. In her concern with this she moves away from the construct of nation as limited 'territory' to envisage a more global 'imagined community' from the past as well as the present. She envisages herself as part of this wider community.

In these poems Boland is searching for the 'abyss, made out of air, impossible to measure, created of whispers, tears and silences, that is so difficult to manage.' (86)

Boland refers to this 'abyss' as that distance between the past and history. In her essay 'Daughters of Colony' (87) Boland warns of the dangers of the post-colonial revisions of history and literature which don't take account of the silences of the past.

Like Cixous, Boland views language as compensation for and a means of living and inscribing loss. In 'From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History' Cixous writes: 'At a certain moment for the person who has lost everything, whether that is, moreover, a being or country, language becomes the country. One enters the country of languages.' (88) The poems in this sequence express loss of different kinds - the persona takes on the exile and suffering of the past even in her dreams and visions. She is haunted by the past, the 'human pain' and the 'ghostly weeping.' All she can do is 'put (her) words between them/ and the silence.' In 'A Habitable Grief' she writes:

This is what language is:
a habitable grief. A turn of speech
for the everyday and ordinary abrasion
of losses such as this:

which hurts
just enough to be a scar.

And heals just enough to be a nation.

Unlike many women poets writing in Ireland today, from both sides of the divide, Boland still feels the need to engage as a woman with the idea of nation. Her poetic development has been a process of decolonisation-of casting off the 'set text' of poetry from both the colonisers, the English, and from the Nationalists, the Irish, who have colonised women by exclusion and simplification. Boland's quest as a writer has been to find a form and a language in which she has both a sex and a state, and in this way to recast the concept of what it means to be an Irish woman living in a post-colonial country in a global age. Her poetry while recognising the specifics of Ireland's past and trying to find a language to explore this, avoids neo-nationalist and insular rhetoric. By taking as poetic models not only Irish and British poets but Russian models such as Akhmatova and American models such as Plath and Rich (89) Boland writes from an internationalist perspective but one that recognises and engages with the specific constructs which have shaped her. Her concern with a particularly female diaspora also gives her a different sense of an imagined community. It offers a basis on which to reassess national identity as exclusive and absolute-belonging to genealogy or geography and to imagine a more complex account based on contingency, indeterminacy and interaction . In *The Lost Land* Boland displays what might be termed a diaspora consciousness. Although writing in Ireland her sense of connection with those women who were forced to emigrate, her own experience of an Irish childhood in England, and her own sense of exclusion from Irish history give her this consciousness of being part of a wider displaced community. Although she recognises the attractions of a fixed unified identity-the contrary passion to be whole -she ultimately rejects this for identification with the spaces in-between. Her poetry arises from a series of encounters between different realms: British and Irish, public and private, east and west, town and country,

woman and poet and past and present. In this way her reconfigured nation is one based on continual movement rather than the fixed poetics of soil and blood. In its emphasis on the effect of the past on the present, Boland's poetry also asserts Bhabha's claim that the present can no longer be envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past or future: Boland's work can be seen as representative of what Bhabha calls the 'borderline work of culture.' 'Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The past-present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.' (90)

As Boland puts it in 'Witness':

Out of my mouth they come:

The spurred and booted garrisons.

The men and women

they dispossessed.

What is a colony

if not the brutal truth

that when we speak

the graves open.

And the dead walk?

Notes

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2. Eavan Boland, 'Outside History' in *Object Lessons* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.147; hereafter *OL*. All further references will be in the text. This essay first appeared as a LIP pamphlet called *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*. (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989.)
3. Eavan Boland, 'The Achill Woman', *Outside History* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990); hereafter *OH*. All further references to this collection will be in the text.
4. Homi Bhabha, 'Signs taken for wonders' in *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1, (1985).
5. Edna Longley, 'From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands' in *The Living Stream* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1984), p.188.
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8. Thomas Kinsella, *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford, O.U.P., 1986), p. xxvii.
9. Eavan Boland, 'The Mother Tongue', *The Lost Land*. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998); hereafter *LL*. All further references to this collection will be in the text.
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11. Sabina Sharkey, 'A view of the present state of Irish Studies' in Susan Bassnett, (ed.) *Studying British cultures* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 113-134.

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15. Eavan Boland, 'Mise Eire', *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989); hereafter *SP*. All further references to this collection will be in the text.
16. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 189.
17. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998).
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20. Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland* (Dublin, 1925).
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22. Sabina Sharkey, *Ireland and the Iconography of Rape*. Irish Studies Centre Occasional Paper Series no.5. (London: University of North London Press, 1992).
23. Pádraig Pearse, 'I am Ireland,' *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse*. Ed. by Brendan Kennelly, (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1981), p. 295.
24. Longley, *The Living Stream* p.189.
25. Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
26. A. Norman Jeffares, *Anglo-Irish Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982).

27. Gerardine Meaney, 'Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity: Eavan Boland and Irish Women's Writing' in *Women: a cultural review*, 4, 2 (1993) pp. 136-153 (141).
28. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994.), p. 37.
29. *ibid.*, p. 5.
30. *ibid.* p. 4.
31. Hélène Cixous, 'Coming to Writing' trans. by Deborah Jensen in '*Coming to Writing*' and *Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 2.
32. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 16.
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39. T. S. Eliot, 'Preludes', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).
40. T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*.

41. See Homi Bhabha, 'Bombs away in Suburbia' in Roger Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (London: Routledge, 1997) where Bhabha talks of the culture war going on that seeks to 'suburbanise' the soul of America - traditional and conservative embodied for Bhabha in the rhetoric of politicians such as Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole.
42. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. p. 5.
43. Anne Sexton, *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971).
44. T. S. Eliot, 'Preludes', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, p. 22.
45. Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Verso, 1982).
46. Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 211.
47. T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*.
48. John Betjeman, *Collected Poems* (London: John Murray, 1970), p. 24.
49. Various artists, *The Sound of the Suburbs* (Sony Music (UK) Ltd., 1982).
50. Andy Medhurst, 'Negotiating the Gnome Zone: Versions of Suburbia in British Popular Culture' in Roger Silverstone (ed.), *Visions of Suburbia* (Routledge: London, 1997), p. 241.
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53. Randolph, 'An Interview with Eavan Boland'.
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55. Susan Bordo, 'Anorexia nervosa: psychopathology as the crystallization of culture' in *Knowing Women* edited by Crowley and Himmelweit (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), pp. 90-109.
56. Jody Allen-Randolph, 'Écriture Feminine and the Authorship of Self in Eavan Boland's In Her Own Image,' *Colby Quarterly*, 27, 1 (1991) pp. 48-59.
57. Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists*.
58. *ibid.*, p. 2.
59. Randolph, 'Écriture Feminine and the Authorship of Self'.
60. Ailbhe Smith, 'Dodging round the Grand Piano' in *Kicking Daffodils* edited by Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 57-84.
61. *ibid.*, pp. 77-78.
62. Peter Reading, Review of Selected Poems, *Sunday Times*, 11th June, 1989, p. 14.
63. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 36.
64. Philip Larkin, 'Afternoons', *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 44.
65. Randolph, 'An Interview with Eavan Boland'.
66. Vicki Bertram, *Muscling In*. Unpublished Thesis, University of York, 1992.
67. Paul Muldoon, 'Aisling', *Quoof* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 39.
68. Longley, *The Living Stream* p.173-195.
69. Randolph, 'An Interview with Eavan Boland'.
70. T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 13-22.
71. She was one of only three women poets to be included in the controversial *Field Day Anthology* of Irish writing.

72. Ellen M. Mahon, 'Eavan Boland's Journey with the Muse' in *Learning the Trade: Essays on W. B. Yeats and Contemporary Poetry*, edited by Deborah Fleming (West Cornwall, Conn: Locust Hill Press, 1993), pp. 179-194.
73. Marilyn Reizbaum, 'An Interview with Eavan Boland' *Contemporary Literature*, 30 (1989), pp. 471-79.
74. Gerardine Meaney, 'Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity: Eavan Boland and Irish Women's Writing' p. 144.
75. A. A. Kelly, *Pillars of the House: An Anthology of Verse by Irish Women from 1690 to the Present* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1987).
76. Gilbert and Gubar argue that with the establishment of a women's tradition or canon women writers are now experiencing anxiety about powerful literary mothers which produces an 'affiliation complex.' In the Freudian psychic model the 'normal' path of psychic development for a girl is to reject the mother and turn to the father as source of power and authority. In the past women had to affiliate with a patriarchal literary tradition. The arrival of powerful literary mothers on the scene not only suggests for the first time the vulnerability of the once great literary fathers, but also anxiety about the possible castrating power of the mother.
77. Jane Dowson, 'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things' in *Feminist Review*, 62, (1999), pp. 6-20.
78. Eavan Boland, 'Daughters of Colony: A Personal Interpretation of the place of Gender Issues in the Postcolonial Interpretation of Irish Literature.' in *Eire-Ireland*, 37, 2-3 (1997), pp. 9-20 (20).
79. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* p. 14.
80. Brenden Kennelly, 'My Dark Fathers' in *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 353-354.

81. Neil Sullivan, 'Righting Irish Poetry: Eavan Boland's Revisionary Struggle,' in *Colby Quarterly*, 33, 4 (1997).
82. Meaney, 'Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity' p. 142.
83. Brian Friel, 'Translations' in *Selected Plays*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).
84. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* p. 24.
85. Aijaz Ahmed, 'The politics of literary postcoloniality', *Race and Class* 36, 3 (1995).
86. Eavan Boland, 'Daughters of Colony' pp. 13-14.
87. Eavan Boland, *ibid*.
88. Hélène Cixous, 'From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History,' translated by Deborah Carpenter, in *The Future of Literary History*, edited by Ralph Cohen, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 19.
89. Boland writes of her admiration for Rich and her influence in several pieces. See, for example, Deborah McWilliams Consalvo, 'An Interview with Eavan Boland' in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters*, 81, (1992) pp. 89-100.
90. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* p. 7.

Chapter 3.

Michèle Roberts: Healing the Splits

In Michèle Roberts' 1992 novel *Daughters of the House* there is a point at which the teenage Léonie travelling with her mother across the Channel from England to France feels the two parts of herself and her dual identity connect:

'For as they left England so they left the English language behind. Familiar words dissolved, into words and salt spray, ploughed back into foam, the cold dark sea in whose bottomless depths monsters swam, of no known nationality. Halfway across, as the Channel became La Manche, language reassembled itself, rose from the waves and became French. While Madeleine snored in the bottom bunk Léonie fought to keep awake, to know the exact moment when, in the very centre of the Channel, precisely equidistant from both shores, the walls of water and of words met, embraced wetly and closely, became each other, composed of each other's sounds. For at that moment true language was restored to her. Independent of separated words, as whole as water, it bore her along as a part of itself, a gold current that connected everything, a secret river running underground, the deep well, the source of life, a flood driving through her, salty breaker on her own beach, streams of words and non- words, voices calling out which were staccato, echoing, which promised bliss. Then the boat churned on. It abandoned English and advanced into French.' (1)

Like Roberts, Léonie is, or believes herself to be at this point in the narrative, of dual identity, both English and French. Also like Roberts she splits her early life between

both countries. The description here of the moment of connection when ‘true language’ is restored to her is a moment of unity, of wholeness when instead of being either English or French she is at that moment *both*. The moment does not last. When she disembarks the next morning and climbs into her uncle’s car she feels like a ‘foreigner’ once more.

This desire for total integration, for unity and connection that Léonie momentarily feels here is fundamental to Roberts’ writing. The reconciliation of Roberts’ own French and English identities and languages, I would argue, is central to all other desire for connection and reconciliation in her work. This desire to integrate both sides of herself, her French side and her English side, often manifests itself in a desire to express both the masculine and the repressed feminine in language. In Roberts’ description of the moment halfway across the channel when the walls of water and of words meet we have an echo of Kristeva’s semiotic, (2) the moment when the lost mother is restored to language. That moment occurs again in the novel but in even stronger Kristevan imagery. After the death of her aunt, Léonie sees a vision of a red and gold madonna:

‘Something was restored to her which she had lost and believed she would never find again. The deepest pleasure she had ever known possessed her. It started in her toes and across her shoulders and squirmed through her, aching, sweet.

Then she remembered it. A language she once knew but had forgotten about, forgotten ever hearing, forgotten she could speak. Deeper than English or French; not foreign; her own... The secret language, the underground stream that forced through her like a river, that rose and danced inside her like the pulling jet of a

fountain, that wetted her face and hands like fine spray, that joined her back to what she had lost, to something she had once intimately known, that she could hardly believe would always be there as it was now, which waited for her and called her by her name.' This moment also does not last. 'Time stilled, and suspended itself. In the cool drizzle. Then, with a jerk, the world went on again.' (*Daughters*, p.86)

The moments are represented in similar images linking, I would argue, both the reconciliation of Léonie's French and English identities with the sense of fullness and jouissance that she experiences as she connects with the lost maternal. Both are moments when her full self is given expression, when she is not estranged from one language and one part of herself. The Channel/La Manche comes to represent for the character here not just a journey outwards but also a journey inwards to the watery depths of the unconscious and the pre-oedipal, to the repressed and foreign parts of oneself. The Channel connects not just two different countries and cultures but two heritages, two spheres, both important parts of Léonie's identity.

For Michèle Roberts, also, both these heritages are important. Roberts is the daughter of a French Catholic mother and an English Protestant father. She grew up in a north London suburb but spent periods of her childhood in Normandy with her mother's family and her education and girlhood were deeply influenced by her mother's French Catholicism. She has continued to spend time in both cultures and now lives in the Mayenne while spending periods of time in England. She has thus continued to split her life between France and England. All of her writing engages with these two places. Both France and England are present in her novels, poetry and plays as real physical landscapes: *Daughters of the House* is set in a rural village

near Paris, *Flesh and Blood* moves through time and space from England to France and indeed Italy and Greece. In her first novel *A Piece of the Night* her heroine, Julie, moves between the two countries, and in her most recent novel *The Looking Glass* the action takes place around Étretat, the Normandy home of her maternal family. (3) Her poems are harder to pin down in terms of a real physical location, however here too poems have their starting point in Mayenne, Paris and the Étretat of her childhood as well as London and Wales. Just as Roberts has split her life between France and England, so in her fiction rarely do all the events of the novel take place in one sphere. Characters move between England and France, the channel serving as a metaphor for connection as in the quote from *Daughters of the House*. In her novel *Fair Exchange*, (4) for example, loosely based on the story of the affair between the poet William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon, cross channel longing and desire permeates the novel. Significantly it is the English Jemima who becomes the lover of a French revolutionary while French Annette falls for the English poet. Both women produce daughters who, like Roberts herself, are both French and English.

It is, however, the symbolic and psychic associations connected to the physical geography of both countries that resonate in her writing. In her collection of short stories *During Mother's Absence* the title of the specifically autobiographical 'Une Glossaire/A Glossary' gestures towards the idea of the need for translation, the need to carry oneself across, to find a way forward in one script of expressing the 'other' and the losses this entails. The first entry in her glossary is significantly 'absence'. The sea is invoked again, here representing death and obliteration of the memories of her early years and her maternal French family: 'Into the face of this loss I cast my

words, pebbles thrown into the sea. I'm going to write a sort of geography. To reclaim the past. The waves race backwards through my fingers, and I can't hold onto them. I lick the salt on my hands, and set myself to remembering.' (5) France as represented in this piece is almost presymbolic, a rural and female world of food and plenty. Some of the entries indicate the meaning of France and her French heritage for Roberts. The entry for 'Français' reads 'French. The French language. My mother's tongue. My mother-tongue, that I take in along with her milk. The language of my childhood in France ... My tongue lapping at pleasure ... '(6) The images here and the association between mother's milk and the first language echo the ideas of Hélène Cixous. (7) Food, a staple of Roberts' writing, also appears here frequently in entries for 'artichauts', 'beurre', 'camembert', 'crème', 'pain bénie des hommes', all signifying nurture, richness, oral pleasure and sensuality.

France then is the realm of the maternal, the imaginary, represented often in images of the sea, *la mer* in French having the same sound as the word for mother - *la mère*. Here her father is the eternal outsider, *l'étranger*: 'Dad's an Englishman. An outsider,' (8) she writes in the entry under 'grandpère', always made to feel like a foreigner. And Roberts although part of this family and community is also an 'outsider': 'I'm part of this huge enduring passionate family; yet my life in London also makes me an outsider.' (9)

England becomes the land of the father, the realm of the symbolic, the rational and the modern. Both worlds coexist in Roberts' writing.

The desire to experience that moment midchannel when true language is restored to her, when part of herself is not foreign or 'étranger' is I would argue central to

Roberts' writing. This quest for connection, for wholeness, for a way to heal the splits within ourselves and culture manifests itself in different ways which I want to explore in this chapter. Although my focus here is on Roberts' poetry, I shall also make use of her novels and short stories. Even when writing within the convention of realist fiction, Roberts' style is highly poetic particularly in her use and development of metaphor. Like many other contemporary female writers she crosses generic boundaries and forms and resists easy categorisation.

Roberts has also had a significant presence within the U.K. feminist publishing scene and more recently in the mainstream literary world as a commentator and reviewer and has published a number of non-fiction essays on literature, art and feminism. In this she is more French than English. In her engagement with both theory and fiction, often experimenting with form and language in fiction and poetry to explore theoretical ideas, Roberts can be seen as part of a French tradition. As Elaine Showalter recently commented: 'Simone de Beauvoir is a groundbreaking novelist as well as a theorist, and Kristeva and Cixous have done both as well.' (10)

This engagement with theoretical ideas in her fiction and poetry is an area I want to explore in this chapter. In her novels Roberts draws on patriarchal texts, in particular biblical myths and religious narratives. Her poetry too, although less obviously, engages with ideas from Freud and Lacan and the reworkings of Lacan by Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva and to a lesser extent Luce Irigaray. It seems to me that Roberts' writing is also informed by the writings of Melanie Klein and so I will also consider the relevance of Klein and one of her followers, Donald Winnicott, to a reading of Roberts' texts. Much has been made of the irreconcilable differences

between these two strands of psychoanalysis but Roberts' writing engages with both. One of the difficulties for me as a critic reading Roberts' work is not being sure of the point at which I am imposing my own theoretical readings on Roberts' work and how much as a novelist or poet she consciously engages with such work. Although this is not unique to Roberts' work, her conspicuous engagement with theory makes the boundary between writer and critic less clear. I have therefore drawn on some of her essays about her own writing practice to illuminate this distinction. However, perhaps such a distinction itself is problematic as Roberts' creative work is about breaking down clear cut distinctions between self and other and valuing loss of boundaries over clarity and ownership; her use of intertextuality in her work can be read in this way.

Kristeva defines intertextuality as the 'transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another' She asserts that such transposition:

'specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of thethetic – of enunciative and denotative positionality. If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality), one then understands that its 'place' of enunciation and its denoted 'object' are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated.' (11)

Kristeva also asserts that texts also include the text of the writer's unconscious. Such intertextuality, I would suggest, can be seen as part of Roberts' strategy to dissolve boundaries and to heal the split between literature or creative activity and theory.

Roberts herself has written of the need to reconcile this split. In an article published in 1979 Roberts explores the relationship between writing fiction and poetry and the politics of the women's movement. One of her key concerns here and one which is a constant theme in her essays is the difficulty of writing about art in a language system which privileges logic or theory; that which is 'not art':

' ... I think that art works in a different way and on a different level from theory, neither replacing it or being replaced by it. Yet, traditionally, people trying to explain this are forced to do so in ways sanctioned by theory: the rigorous application of concepts, the advancement and testing of a thesis in ways seen to be 'scientific,' 'objective,' or 'rational'. Western philosophy generally has suffered from an imposed split between the object of knowledge and the knower of it. This manifests itself, for example, in the division that is felt to exist between scientific observers and the teeming chaotic world they survey from the heights of their knowledge and then subdue into order through the application of their concepts. Nothing which cannot be tested in the laboratory or through logic exists. This - conveniently - eliminates a mass of troublesome things like feelings and relationships, things which occur between people and are not isolated items.' (12)

Roberts sees literature and art as essential to a feminist politics because it is concerned with conflict; with what is 'between.' Drawing on the ideas of Freud and Althusser she argues that 'conflict' is central to change and to serious art. Roberts also draws parallels between women and art in terms of their construction in patriarchy. Art has traditionally been seen as 'not-theory, as not-science, as not-true' and this has given it a certain freedom. Women have been labelled as 'not-men, as

not-actors, as not- rational' and as such have both been able and forced to explore being emotional, intuitive, loving and supportive. Both women and art, she argues, are equated with the unconscious in male displacement.

Roberts' ideas here echo Irigaray's analysis of the position of woman within culture. Irigaray argues that since patriarchal men are still unconsciously merged with the mother they have projected onto women all that they need to deny in themselves in order to protect themselves from conscious awareness of this continuing dependence on the female. One of the effects of this is the over- valorisation of logic and reason which is privileged in the symbolic. Irigaray argues that women must use their creativity to construct a new female imaginary which has the potential to transform the symbolic. She envisions the transformation of existing structures of thought through the presence of two imaginaries; one related to the mother and women as themselves and a transformed male imaginary no longer dependent on projection onto the female. In a similar way Roberts advocates a 'double syntax.'(13)

'...Where conscious thought strives for utter clarity, unconscious thought relies on ambiguity, opacity, mystery. Literature playing with both modes, not only reveals contradictions through its content but begins to heal splits through its structure and devices.' (14) These ideas are given concrete expression in Roberts' poetry. The poems are full of 'serious' and iconoclastic references to religion, myth, literature and play intertextually with psychoanalysis. Yet the poems do not work on an abstract intellectual level; they are grounded in feeling and the physical world. To 'read' them we need to surrender ourselves to her surreal landscapes, her rhythm and her celebration of the sensual. Roberts explores in her poetry the interconnectedness

of everything. Metaphor, sound, unusual juxtapositions all combine often in a surrealist excess of jouissance.

Here is the poem 'praise blue.' The social world of the poem is a market stall in Italy but in her description the colour blue signifies a variety of sensual experiences and desires which the speaker doesn't separate herself from but merges and surrenders herself to:

Blue torrent of plastic crates
under the market stalls
of Sant' Ambrogio.

Blue swollen and tight
as aubergine skins: rain
of shiny truncheons.

Blue bursts in my mouth:
juice avalanche of trays
of muscat grapes.

Blue mountains of dusky plums
patched with black. Sweet bruises
fat as eggs.

Blue shoots off in all directions:

violet tips of cream turnips
mauve asters and radicchio frills.

My blue cotton dress with white
spots, my navy espadrilles
let me fit in.

The sky wraps it up.
Ink shadows under the eaves
at noon. I dissolve in blue

with just one cigarette
called MS Blu
its blue steam writhing. (15)

This dissolution of boundaries, this loss of self, is not seen as threatening to the subject of the poem, rather it is an ecstasy, a sublime loss. The sexual imagery of the poem is not new - plums as female genitals pop up here and there in western art- but it is the connotations of both the male body 'rain of shiny truncheons' and 'Blue shoots off in all directions: violet tips of cream turnips' and the female body: 'Blue mountain of dusky plums/patched with black' which are unusual in a poem. Male and female sexuality are celebrated and merge with the natural and vegetable world. The poem is almost orgasmic in its celebration of the senses and the loss of control and self ending with the post-coital cigarette 'its blue steam writhing.' Yet there is

some return to the social and symbolic. Her blue dress and her navy espadrilles 'let me fit in'.

The celebration of the sensual/physical world through a hymn of praise to the colour blue illustrates another split that Roberts is concerned to heal, that of the religious and secular. Roberts grew up steeped in her mother's French Catholicism and it has had a profound influence on her writing. I will discuss this aspect of her work in more detail later in the chapter but it is significant that blue is the colour most associated in Catholic iconography with the ideal feminine, the virgin Mary, the antithesis of the material and sexual world. In Roberts' short story 'Charity' the female narrator says 'God has no colour because He's an invisible spirit, but everything connected with Our Lady is blue.' (16) In Roberts' hymn of praise she restores the sexual and material to the colour and celebrates rather than denies the male and female body. The violence of the metaphor 'rain of shiny truncheons' and 'shoots off in all directions' also suggests the more colloquial associations of 'blue' as in pornographic. The poem can be read almost as an experience of making love, the excess of imagery building to a climax, the moment of jouissance, where the wall of words and water meet. The key to Roberts' technique here is her use of metaphor. The colour blue here connects disparate objects and experiences, opening things up, confusing and merging categories and dissolving boundaries.

This breaking down of boundaries, this entering in can be seen throughout her work. In her collection *Psyche and the Hurricane* it occurs in different forms. From the more commonplace parallel of a landscape journey interspersed with a woman

giving birth in 'The Road to Trento' (*PH*, 20-21) to 'The Broken House' where the inhabitant initially separate becomes the house itself:

My sky torn down I'm
open-mouthed to the rain.
Pigeons shit in the bath.
No more floor: feet lost
in broken bricks I am
walled in air
bleak
as a marriage
I can't make
or mend. (*PH*, 24)

In 'Driving to Hereford', a poem which seems to be an elegy for loss, a suicide, the journey takes the narrator: 'across the Wye/ stitches up/old warring borders: England/Wales.' The poem plays with metaphors of healing and repairing against division and splitting. Imagery of stitching, of healing the splits is returned to again in the poem where the person being mourned is addressed:

In the hospital
you stitched up the lips
of wounds. Then
hitch-hiked a ride
back, stuck

your lips to the car's

udder, and sucked. (*PH*, 40-41)

This is a sudden and shocking image because of its quietness and its seductive sound; the assonance emphasising the reversal of the nurture suckling image created by the juxtaposition of car and udder. In this case the desire for nurture leads to death. As in the Channel dividing England and France water here is again used as a metaphor for both separation and connection. The river Wye breaks through the borders of England and Wales: 'like a birth' which separates and divides. Imagery of water returns in the reference to Charon who in Greek myth ferried the souls of the dead across the river to the underworld. So the water here becomes a movement towards death. Water/sea is both the waters of birth but also the return to death and unconscious obliteration. The metaphor of boundaries, of healing the splits is tied up with women's position in society and construction in language. The poem finishes with the lines: 'You held all your words/ down. Swollen. Then you dived in.' The inability of the subject to reconcile their feelings with the available language leads to dissolution and death.

In this poem the narrator is outside describing, separate -in other poems such as 'praise blue' or 'The broken house' the narrator enters into the experience being described. Indeed it is no longer simply described but 'felt'. This concern with how the poems are felt extends to the reader also and Roberts sees it as part of her political project: 'Self-expression as well as analysis is part of the feminist project...The effect that reading a novel or poem produces is sometimes hard to put into words because it is felt and feeling in our society is second to rationality to the

control of experience through words.’ (17) Roberts exhorts us to let go of that control and let ourselves be open to the experience of the world through her poetry.

Writing as Reparation.

In an essay which discusses T. S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Roberts describes the differences between her own approach to writing as a woman and the tenets outlined by Eliot in his influential essay. While she finds limited points of connection with Eliot, the notion of the poet’s mind as a receptacle for all kinds of impressions, thoughts and sensations which can’t be separated from each other is one point of connection, she takes issue with Eliot’s notion of the importance of ‘impersonality.’ Eliot wrote ‘The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.’ (18) Roberts critiques impersonality as a masculine doctrine, tied up with denial of the feminine. Unlike Eliot, Roberts advocates a connection between the person who suffers or experiences bliss and the person who writes the poem and this connection occurs *during* the process of creation. For Roberts personal memory is crucial to creativity. She sees writing as connected to re-membering and reparation. In this essay she outlines her own aesthetic:

‘Having found out that memory and the imagination are crucially linked inside some kind of ‘inner space’ I have come to see that the process of creation involves the process of repairing. Remembering is re-membering (as Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich and Melanie Klein, all in their own ways, have pointed out). I have come to see how my ‘outer’ search for a tradition of poetry-writing in which I can belong and feel

welcome, which I can help to make fuller and more representative by my reading and studying, has been matched by my 'inner' search, my quest to re-member ... to find what I lost, to re-energise, mend, put back together, something beloved and important that has been missing or damaged or destroyed. A body. A body of knowledge. A body of love.' (19)

For Roberts it is the image of the mother 'the absent one gone underground' that connects the inner and outer worlds.

Here Roberts invokes the work of Melanie Klein and Klein's work on creativity seems to me apposite to Roberts' description of writing as reparation. Klein argued that all creative activity can be seen as an attempt to recreate the lost object, the mother. The notion of creativity as 'reparation' is expressed in her essay 'Infantile anxiety situations reflected in a work of art and in the creative impulse' where she illustrates the workings of reparation through the development of the artist Ruth Kjar.(20)

In Klein's work the focus is on the pre-oedipal phase and the significance for the baby of its relationship to the mother's breast. The baby creates an identity through introjection and projection, internalising and externalising good and bad objects, primary amongst which is the mother's breast. She argued that there are two phases that the baby moves through in constructing an identity. Firstly there is the paranoid-schizoid position where the baby totally vulnerable and dependent on the mother fears retaliation from her (being devoured, poisoned etc.) because of the splitting of and projection of its own destructive phantasies onto her. As the baby develops in

the second quarter of the first year, it is gradually able to perceive and take in the mother (or its primary carer) as a whole person. It learns to integrate both loving and hating experiences and accept their co-existence in the same person. Although the baby may continue to feel empty and hostile about the mother's independent existence, its fear of retaliation is gradually replaced by feelings of guilt and ambivalence leading to the mourning of the depressive position where the baby can creatively make reparation and establish individuation. In Klein, the baby's feelings of guilt and anxiety arise from the baby's phantasised murderous attacks on the mother. (Unlike Freud where the guilt comes from fantasies of murdering the father.) If the baby can repair the damage to its external world (the mother) and its internalised objects through loving reparative feelings, its inner world can be transformed by repopulating it with good objects and the mother can be restored and repaired. The child negotiates the depressive position successfully and achieves the necessary separation from the mother. By learning to integrate good and bad qualities in the same person, the baby can begin to give up its crude binary phantasies of love and hate and recognise a more complex reality. This creates a more integrated self. Klein took the view that most of us never entirely resolve the depressive position throughout our lives. Indeed her work stresses 'positions' rather than phases of development to emphasise that both infant and adult can oscillate between psychical structures throughout life.

This creation of an integrated self rather than a split self is central to Roberts' writing. It is often played out through the metaphor of the twin, a recurring motif in Roberts' work which I shall discuss in detail later in the chapter. In an earlier essay in 1983 Roberts again cites Klein in explaining her need to write. 'I know that I write

out of the experience of loss; the earliest experience of that is the loss of my mother. Loss is an emptiness filled with terrifying feelings: burning hate, sizzling despair, rage that tears you apart.’ (21) The phrases Roberts uses here echo Klein’s description of the infant’s paranoid – schizoid position. The need to make reparation and restore the mother in the depressive phase, to make her a good object again, is according to Klein an important factor in the creative impulse.

Roberts’ use of this aspect of Klein’s work, the need to make reparation for the infant’s murderous fantasies towards the mother, connects with the use made in her work of the post-Lacanian writings of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray. Klein’s infant splitting of the ‘bad breast’ becomes in a post-Lacanian reading culture’s denigration of the feminine, the ‘murder of the mother’ that both Irigaray and Kristeva write about. (22) Although Kleinian psychoanalysis is often set against the post-Lacanian theories of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, Roberts’ work draws on both. Roberts is interested in the effects on us of the early mechanisms of splitting and the need for reparation to heal both the mother and the self. To do this, however, Roberts has to *find* the split off mother, the repressed feminine, in language, and here she draws on the ideas of theorists such as Kristeva. Both Klein and Kristeva in different ways suggest that destructive responses to identities perceived as different stem from an inability to recognise and accept our own ‘other’, the difference within ourselves which we unconsciously hold in contempt. Whereas the Freudian based work of Kristeva focuses on the divisive effects of the child’s symbolic castration by the father, Kleinian theory describes the same phenomenon as the splitting and projection of inner ‘bad’ feelings out onto external objects/others.

To find the repressed feminine in language is central to Roberts' purpose and the creation of an integrated self. Her way of connecting and finding the repressed feminine is through the unconscious and in her essay 'On Imagination,' she draws on post-structuralism and Lacanian theory to argue that out of the loss of the mother's body, the chaos engendered by absence, 'we learn to create something beautiful: our words, later on our gifts, later still our works of art. We recreate the mother inside ourselves, over and over again.' (23) What writing gives back she argues is 'the maternal body, my mother's body, alive and warm and generous, an image of that body which says that is how she was, that is how we were, once, together. Blissful mutual giving and taking. What the French call *la jouissance* and what the French feminist writers like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous say we find again through writing and reading.' (24) Writing for Roberts is a way of reconnecting with the lost mother but in order to do this we must open ourselves up to the world, the boundaries between the conscious rational and the unconscious must be broken so that the wall of words and water can meet. Roberts' invocation here of Cixous and Kristeva is, I think, significant. For Kristeva poetic language is the space where such fusion is most possible. Poetic language is associated with loss of control, with the French concept of '*jouissance*,' with language as a feminine pleasure recalling the baby's blissful babble at the maternal breast. Roberts' poetry, I would argue, intertextualises Kristeva's ideas in quite a conscious way.

For Kristeva the opacity of the body makes itself felt through the semiotic mode of discourse, that pleasurable call and relation to the mother's body which has not been repressed by the patriarchal symbolic order and whose drives, feelings and affects return to language in the form of alliteration, rhythmic pulsations and enigmatic gaps

in sense, what had been lost since castration and the mirror stage. In *Flesh and Blood* a chapter headed 'Anon' gives us the best sustained example of Roberts' technique in recreating the mother in language. It also illustrates the poetic nature of Roberts' fiction:

'mamabébé love you are here with you together us now over and over so non-stop
mamabébé so wanting you born this love us so close skinskin talking heartbeat
belonging with you allowed love home flesh my mamabébé our body singing to our
so beautiful love listen mamabébé listen:

swimming in our waters we listen
to our heartbeat

we is one whole undivided
you/me broken now mended
you/me restored mamabébé
our body of love pickedup putbacktogether
repaired
made whole again
by these us-hands
mamabébé
listen our bodysong ...'(25)

The style here is musical, fluid, playful, privileging sound as well as sight, deliberately anti-logical and anti-patriarchal. It embodies the characteristics of

Cixous' *écriture féminine* and Irigaray's *parler femme* as well as Kristeva's semiotic.

(26) Kristeva links specific drives with particular vowel and consonant articulation.

The repeated 'm' of 'mama' she constructs as 'labial, nasal liquid' signifying orality and a desire for fusion with the mother. (As against the 'p' of papa for example signifying destructive anality.) She writes 'the phonemes reclaim what the sounds have lost in becoming sounds of a given language: they reclaim the topography of the body which reproduces itself in them.' (27) The novel from which this chapter is taken begins with the line 'An hour after murdering my mother I was in Soho' and plays with unconscious fears and desires about destroying and repairing the mother's body.

The Mother Tongue.

Kristeva's development of Lacan's narrative of loss-namely that the semiotic visits language with a compensatory maternal presence, so that instead of incorporating food from our mother, we are sustained by language instead- echoes through Roberts' work. In 'Tales of Love' Kristeva refers to the displacement of hunger onto the psychic level so that we may experience 'the joys of chewing, swallowing, nourishing' with words. (28) Not surprisingly then food is a common motif in Roberts' work which takes us back to the early hunger for the mother. Sceats has argued, writing specifically of her novels, that Roberts' women are 'hungry with grief and desire, replaying birth nurturing and separation as a means to reconciliation and autonomy and learning along the way to give voice to their hungers.' (29)

We can see this enacted in Roberts' poem, 'The day the wall came down.' (*PH*, 74-77) The metaphor of the Berlin wall, a high man-made boundary to separate and

divide what once was unified, is used to explore the reconciliation of the narrator with her twin sister. The narrator meets her twin sister and reflects on what separation meant: 'To keep myself in/I had to keep you out:/our free air hardened to glass unscratchable.' The poem abounds with metaphors of feeding, signifying both desire unable to be sated but also nurture and connection. In Roberts' poetry food is nurture and sensuality but also the devouring m/other and world:

The times were un-nourishing.

There was one too many:

it was you or me.

You thinned yourself.

down to bone

broth. Your hair fell out.

your toes and fingers turned blue.

I was white fat, pork belly

I was mash and grease.

The coming down of the wall occurs during lunch which

eats up the afternoon

and we chew over

the babies you've got

and the baby I dreamed I'd steal

and you feed me advice fresh
and gritty as pepper, necessary
as salt

my sister in black and silver
your breath close, your
face flushed with wine

and we taste garlic, spaghetti
anchovies, broccoli
hot with red chillies

and what has divided us
comes down

the work of our mouths
desirous
eating, meeting.'

The pronouns 'you' and 'I' have become 'we;' hunger for the mother's breast no longer drives them, splitting them apart. Now both women can experience mutual desire and satisfaction. Returning home after the meeting the narrator feels herself in a new part of the city where everything looks new and possible, fertile and alive. Roberts' strange surreal imagery works well here to convey the freedom and

excitement of the world seen anew. Inky irises ‘unfurl their blue fur tongues/
anemones in mud-coloured ruffs/open their fat black eyes.’

The splitting of the self into the fat and thin, the self who is sated and full and the self who is hungry and wanting, recurs throughout Roberts’ work. In *Daughters of the House* it is the two cousins, who later discover they are really twins, who play out this split. Léonie the materialist, the ‘fat’ one can be read as representing the maternal, the feminine, and Thérèse, the thin one who abjects the mother’s body and turns to life in the convent stands for the law of the father. By the novel’s closure both have learned to embrace the ‘other’ denied part of their self.

In the female world that Roberts creates women are the nurturers and hence all represent potential mothers. In ‘Magnificat’ she celebrates a relationship with a woman who saves her after the end of an affair with a man.

oh this man

what a meal he made of me

how he chewed and gobbled and sucked

in the end he spat me all out (30)

Nurturing and healing arrives in the shape of a woman. Roberts mixes religious and domestic language to envision the power of female connection:

you arrived on the dot in the nick

of time, with your red curls flying
I was about to slip down the sink like grease
I nearly collapsed, I almost
wiped myself out like a stain
I called for you, and you came, you voyaged
fierce as a small archangel with swords and breasts
you declared the birth of a new life
in my kitchen there was an annunciation
and I was still, awed by your hair's glory

you commanded me to sing of my redemption.

The 'salvation' is a peculiarly female one. Like most of Roberts' significant moments of communion, it doesn't occur in a church but in a kitchen, a female space of warmth and food often equated with the mother's body. In the novel *Impossible Saints* Saint Josephine fantasises about a house she would build for single women. Significantly the kitchen of Josephine's fantasy house would be the chapel and the altar the table on which they prepared food. 'Mass would be a question simply of cooking a good dinner'. (31) The archangel in this poem has both swords and breasts, representing both the male and female principles. 'I was a child again, pyjamaed/ in winceyette, my hair plaited, and you/ listened, you soothed me like cakes and milk, and I poured /it out, I flowed all over you / like wine, like oil, you touched the place where it hurt...' The bodies merge and healing comes through connection, recalling the nurture of the mother who Roberts acknowledges exists in all our desires. Roberts has said that the three main topics in her writing are food, sex

and God (32). Here in her use of metaphor all three fuse and interconnect. The unity we search for through religion, a displacement perhaps for our hunger for the mother, comes through the body of another woman. Again as in ‘The day the wall came down’ food represents both sustenance and bliss and also destructive greed recalling unfulfilled hunger.

Women as the source of food, nurture and creativity is celebrated in Roberts’ writing but even more celebrated is women’s hunger and appetite, something culturally denied them. Both aspects co-exist in her poem ‘bangkok breakfast’ which shows the ambivalence towards the female/ mother-a powerful sustainer of life yet culturally powerless and hungry:

the monk
stands
under a flowering tree

prodigal with sweetness

women come women go
and come with earthen pots
to fill his, thus their own
torn flesh of priestlessness

.....

food
and beggar both they give

men and children suck
for their salvation ... (*AS*, 1)

The women are part of nature, connected to the flowering tree which shelters and protects the monk, sustaining him like their food but he is culture and therefore fed and valued. Their 'coin of vile body' is part of the cycle of nature but they remain hungry subsisting on the monk's 'spare shadow.' In other poems the female personae give voice to their physical/sexual appetites. In 'The Official Dinner' the persona watching the self-important behaviour of the male senators turns to her own meal:

I shut my mouth, biting on
grilled aubergines
delicious flesh and crackly
blackened skin.
It slips down easily. (*PH*, 15)

In 'Flying to Italy',

The Alps are a college of grand-
mothers in white caps. Massed
profiles rear up, as pure
as nuns (*PH*, 13)

The extended metaphor is continued and developed but these are not benign, pure old ladies. They are devouring and cackling with sexual appetites ready to 'cherish

/the flesh of businessmen'. Pragmatic rather than malevolent they 'teach young wives and other/ survivors how to carve up/ the sun-dried dead, and eat.' This is a Hansel and Gretel world rather than any simplistic association of ancient woman with benign nature. The grandmothers are sexualised; they have appetites and hunger. Female nature and appetite can destroy the 'tin carrycots' of culture.

Incorporating the Mother

The continued adult need for 'incorporation' arising out of the baby's early experiences of the mother's milk or breast is common to psychoanalytic perspectives although the meaning and importance of orality differs within these perspectives. For Freud the baby's pleasure at the satisfaction of her/his hunger was referred to as a self-preservation instinct. This experience is then displaced onto the sexual/psychical plane where it is experienced as the pleasure of incorporation-the 'goodness' of the mother's breast which gives the baby its earliest sense of identity and security. As adults we continue to bolster ourselves with oral substitutes: when this becomes destructively addictive, Freudians diagnose a failure of mothering. Ellmann argues that despite Freud's privileging of sex, it is actually food that is the 'repressed' because 'the act of eating represents the primal violation of the ego'. (33) She argues that our first experience of feeding is force-feeding, 'as infants, we were fed by others and ravished by the food they thrust into our jaws. We eat therefore to avenge ourselves against this rape inflicted at the very dawn of life...' (34) She takes issue with the equation of hunger with instinct and sex with culture and argues for a more complex reading of hunger as always more than the biological demand for nourishment, in particular bound up with the establishment of the self and identity. Ellmann sees Klein's work as the most resonant with the cultural meaning of food

and incorporation. For Klein, as we have seen above, the breast/introjection is even more central in the baby's development but it has a different meaning and is never displaced by the penis as in Freudian theory. The basis of object relations theory is the creation of identity through the incorporation of others into the self and as Ellmann argues, Klein's work 'provides the richest psychoanalytic theory of ingestion, for her imagination seems to be consumed with the idea of cannibalism'.

(35) Here is Klein discussing splitting processes in relation to the object:

'The destructive impulse projected outwards is first experienced as oral aggression. I believe that oral-sadistic impulses towards the mother's breast are active from the beginning of life, though with the onset of teething the cannibalistic impulses increase in strength – a factor stressed by Abraham.' (36)

For Kristeva the semiotic visits language with a compensatory maternal presence, displacing our early incorporation of the mother's breast into language. Roberts plays with these ideas on oral gratification where we comfort and bolster ourselves with food as pleasurable substitutes for the mother's breast. Hunger and the desire to incorporate the m/other is taken to extremes in her novel *Impossible Saints* where the uncorrupted body of Josephine is progressively consumed by the pilgrims who come to look at her.

'Some of the faithful were feasting on Josephine. Taking bites out of her. They scurried off with little chunks of her flesh concealed in their cheeks or under their tongues. The sisters watched them scamper furtively away, then discovered their little excavations. The fingernails of the left hand, the toenails of both feet, the

eyebrows, the eyelashes, the end of the nose. Someone had torn open the habit and bitten off the nipples. Someone else had nibbled the earlobes. The mouth was badly bruised.’ (IS, 14)

Roberts plays here on the Catholic meaning of the Eucharist where what is consumed at communion is the actual body of Christ rather than a symbol for it. Later on in the novel, Sister Maria by way of conservation covertly prepares a heavy ‘pork’ stew made of Josephine’s remains to be packed into earthenware jars and sealed with fat.

In terms of breaking down boundaries of self and other, inside and outside, food then has a special status. Physical boundaries and thresholds are clearly crucial to food. Uneaten food is other, part of the world outside, but its status changes as we ingest it. Cixous theorises ‘As soon as we embrace, we salivate, one of us wants to eat, one of us is going to be swallowed up in little pieces, we all want to be eaten, in the beginning we were all formerly born-to-eat, wolfing it down, eating like a horse; we are starved full of whetted appetites.’ (37) In Roberts’ writing food and sex are interconnected through metaphor. In *Flesh and Blood* for example Félicité reacts to Albert’s preparation of chopped meat.

‘A rush of dark air reached Félicité at the corner table where she sat, the smell of chops frying, sizzle and sputter as drops of blood jumped out into the hot fat, a stifled cry, a giggle. She could imagine the rest of it. Two white hands casting the red chops marbled with fat into the black pan, two red lips parted, the meat seared and scorching as the juices caramelized, Albert’s hand diving under her lifted skirt, a

splash of cognac over the chops, then Albert reappeared with a smoking silver dish piled with cutlets and a bottle of wine tucked under one arm. Félicité smiled and smiled as she took up the spoon and fork and dug the silver prongs through the crackling skin into the red flesh underneath.' (*FB*, 39)

In 'Tourists on Grisedale Pike' the narrator celebrates sexual pleasure through images of height, of falling, of letting go. Having got to the top of a mountain the narrator kisses her companion:

I tested *vertiginous*
on your mouth's
taste of garlic and olives
and held on
to the view of no lack
all the way down ... (*PH*, 66-67)

The senses intermingle: language is translated into a physical sensation, a taste, a kiss, collapsing the linguistic and the physical in sexual release and celebration. The narrator feels 'no lack'. Roberts' words here recall Cixous. In 'First Names of No one' Cixous celebrates texts which go beyond the 'limits,' beyond lack, castration, the Law and death. 'But the limit is also a vertiginous peak, from which elsewhere, the other, and what is to come, can be seen.' (38) In Roberts' poem the erotic is projected on to the landscape in metaphors of desire and consumption:

the graphite mine

sinking its rusty teeth
in the valley's side
geese plumping up nicely
in orchards, the kestrels
choosing their prey, poised over
the fat mound of Swinside Hill.

Roberts' work then abounds with descriptions of food; sensual, material and at times disturbing. This is part of her French heritage and we see this tradition in writers such as Colette and more recently in writers like Claude Tardat and Alina Reyes.
(39)

Food is also used in more direct ways to explore her dual heritage -it is a cultural marker, symbolising inclusion or exclusion of desire/belonging. Sceats, in a study of food in contemporary women's fiction, argues that the contrast between the French and English traditions reappears several times in Roberts' novels. (40) She cites 'A Piece of the Night' where Julie Fanchot compares the sauces, stocks, wines, eggs and cream of her childhood with the pork pies, fish and chips, bread pudding, haddock and greasy sausages she experiences at Oxford. Here it is the high minded contempt of the Oxford Scholars for food that she remarks. The richness of French rural food contrasts sharply with a cultivated English asceticism. Later in the same novel though, when Julie returns to England, her thoughts are of 'eggs and bacon and hot tea: home.' (41)

France is associated with the mother and the physical fulfilment of hunger. Food is a nostalgic presence in Roberts' memories of France. In 'Une Glossaire/A Glossary' several entries deal with food which is rich and nurturing. As Sceats argues, the insecurity and divided loyalties of a bilingual or bi-nutritional upbringing in two countries are acutely illustrated in *Daughters of the House* by the conversation between Léonie, Victorine and Thérèse over the making of potato soup, gougère and a cake for supper. (42) Food is a signifier of belonging and Léonie, desperate to belong, to be French, to shut off her Englishness, is reminded of her despised ethnicity through the symbol of food.

'French cakes, Léonie mused: aren't as good when they come out of the oven as English cakes. No currants and raisins. No icing. No hundreds and thousands or anything.

French cooking, Victorine asserted: is the best in the world!

Her blue eyes narrowed to marble chips. She pushed back a long fair curl with one hand. She whacked butter and eggs with her wooden spoon.

Suet pudding with slabs of butter and white sugar, Léonie recited: fried eggs and bacon, fish and chips, kippers, marmalade, proper tea, Eccles cakes.

Thérèse flicked a piece of muddy potato peel across the table.

Everyone knows that English food is terrible, she stated: soggy boiled vegetables in white sauce, overcooked meat, I don't know how your mother could stand it, having to go and eat stuff like that. She stopped being really French, everyone says so. The English are just heathens, aren't they Victorine?

Heathens was a word Victorine applied to foreigners. Who were not Catholics.' (*Daughters*, 46-47)

Food and physical sensuality are also associated with creativity. In the witty short story 'Taking It Easy' an English woman writer who survives on apples, crispbreads and salad for lunch gets writer's block and borrows a house of a friend in France for two weeks where she enjoys the food and sex and idleness that her life in London prohibits: 'For breakfast I had exactly what I fancied: two fat croissants with apricot jam, a piece of baguette with butter and camembert, a bunch of muscat grapes, and several cups of black coffee with sugar. I consumed this feast very slowly while lying in bed.' (43) The story abounds with such descriptions and celebrates creativity through the sensual and the material feeding of the body rather than the discipline of the mind. Roberts herself writes of the relationship between writing and food for her: 'Writing feels like pulling something out of my insides...I've lost part of myself, I become hungry. Meals are fuel and reward. I also find that cooking myself a quick but delicious lunch, to be eaten at the typewriter, will get me through my writer's block of the morning and produce pages of writing. I eat with one hand and type with the other. The mother in me feeds the baby in me.' (44)

The richness and complexity of French rural gastronomy and the sustenance and love equated with it is a haunting absence in the poem 'America assaults my mouth' where all that is modern/post-modern is imagined through food. At the start of the poem the persona flies to America. Significantly it is not the sea imagery of the channel associated with return to France and the sustenance of the mother, but plane-images of air associated with the masculine- where a 'rouged hostess' 'doles out sweaty/ fettucine, beef shavings in glue sauce.'

The kitchen's clean machines
process the flesh coolly as hospitals.
Racks of knives and pans; fruit
and veg packed like wounds in gauze and ice.
Coffee beans in a glass jar: black
polished wooden beads that
slide through my hands, a broken rosary.
Our host invokes bones: risotto
With marrow, osso buco, boiled broth.
His wife hands ladles. (*AS*, 43-44)

The imagery is one of communion but sanitised. The coldness and alienation of this world is developed in the final two verses, the faculty club where everything is processed and weak, where the 'mouths of baby-faced men' eat bacon and eggs 'fried sunny side up.' Food has lost its meaning and its connection with nature, with flesh. The only reference to the natural world in the poem is the fingers of red blossom which tap at the window pane-even nature here is polite and distant- of the café 'cut from onyx and formica' where in lines reminiscent of *The Fire Sermon* in 'The Waste Land' (45):

Sunburned youths gobble sfogliatelle with ricotta
discuss real estate, singles computer dating parties
with silk-clad girl execs spooning in Sweet'n'Low.

The persona, the 'foreigner' here also eats a typically American dish 'a muffin stained with blueberries' but it is not the comfort and sustenance of the past that it fills her with but fear of the future. The eclectic dishes and foods represented here, which sound exciting, are all somehow reduced to the bland processed consumer and speed driven world. They are disconnected from their origins and therefore do not offer lasting nourishment or pleasure.

This poem is significantly placed after a prose poem 'On Boulogne Sands' in Roberts' collection *All the Selves I Was*. Here based on a painting by Philip Wilson Steer is an opposite world- French children play on the sand while watched by their English governess. In the closing lines 'Soon it will be tea-time: lemonade in tin cups, fresh bread and bitter chocolate. The wind blows sand into her eyes, salt onto her lips.' (AS, 41) The food here evokes childhood nurture, sensual pleasure, the past.

Desire for the Mother.

The collection which engages most directly with the mother and what she means to us is her first solo collection *The mirror of the mother*, published in 1986. (46) All the poems in this collection explore the powerful meaning invested in the symbol of the mother. Many of the poems are concerned with attempts to find the lost mother in friends, lovers, grandmothers and other surrogates. Roberts' engagement with the psychoanalytic and particularly the ideas of Lacan is apparent throughout this collection. This is illustrated in her poem 'women's entry into culture is experienced as lack' where she takes issue with Lacan's phallogentric thesis on women's negative entry into language and culture.

he wishes he were a
one of those able to
dance and shake
breasts and belly and hips
loose, a
not-himself, nothing but

he wishes they did not have a
hiding from it in his bed stillness
he bruises easily
he wishes he was still a little boy
so that he did not have to face them
telling him he is an oppressor
he needs them to scold him
darling oppressor
if he were a

he would join the movement
but at least his friends
are always who struggle
he has nothing to do but
help them out of
silence, he has
nothing else to do

with oppression

he wishes they had a too

so they could all just be friends. (*MM*, 27)

Through her use of form and space here, Roberts literally creates 'lack' making the sign for woman unrepresentable in language. However by writing the poem from a male perspective and leaving a gap to signify the word penis, she challenges the primacy of the phallic signifier and repositions envy as that of the 'breasts and belly and hips' rather than the penis. The poem celebrates women's multiple and fluid sexuality. Roberts' poem also reclaims language, putting women into culture and history as embodied women with desires. The title of the collection itself evokes Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage' where at around the age of six months the baby sees an image-usually the mother-that it believes to be itself and falls in love with this apparently ordered image that contrasts with its undifferentiated feelings of chaos. It believes this image to be itself but in reality it is always an 'other.' With this changed awareness of self comes a growing awareness of 'lack', an awareness that we are in fact separate from our mother, a feeling that is the genesis of desire and that all of us keep trying to fill but never can. We think the phallus as the primary signifier will fill the gap but this is an illusion, a symbol and a symbol of the lost mother not the penis. The real subject of desire for both girls and boys - the mother- is thus always beyond consciousness - projected onto a multiplicity of different objects, even, Roberts suggests, political ideologies. In 'Irish prisoners of war' the cause for which the prisoners starve and hunger is equated with a loss of mothering:

wild men, naked on the blanket
wild women, starving for what
new mothering? (*AS*, 11)

In 'New Year's Eve at Lavarone' Roberts uses the quest format to search for the 'myth's heart.' The time is New Year's eve, a pagan festival and a time of hope and new beginnings. In images reminiscent of Hoffmann she creates a fairy- tale landscape, covered in snow where nothing is quite what it seems- a 'magic tree' is 'ribbed/ solid with icicles, dripping/ candles of water.' Logs covered in snow are laid out 'like dead brides.' Through this the subject of the poem is led by:

Our narrator, the man in the red woollen cap
leads us to the myth's heart. He scrapes with his
stick in a white dip, exposes a perfect circle
of glazed grey ice. He uncovers the mirror
of the mother, she who goes away
comes back, goes away. Her cold eye blinks
unblinks. Our kiss on her round mouth is chalk,
inscribes us on her body's blackboard: want, want. (*AS*, 38-39)

The mother that the poet and her companions have been searching for is frozen, devoid of life and emotion. She is an illusion, a 'want' that is unable to be filled. Separation from the mother is necessary, Roberts implies, but it is never complete:

this women's work is thrifty and grim:

learning to save myself, learning to live
alone through the long winter nights
means so much unknotting, unknitting
unravelling, untying the mother-chord
-so much undoing. (AS, 17)

Many of the poems in this collection draw on myth and Roberts' use of the fabular. This aspect of her writing is often characterised as part of her French heritage yet at the time she was writing, revisioning myth was part of the politics of cultural feminism in both Britain and America. Many writers of the 70s and 80s used fairy tale and myth to explore constructions of gender and to 'revision' new gender possibilities. Waugh (47) explores the different manifestations in literature of this period of the search for spiritual meaning in the post-enlightenment rationalised social order. The sacred was addressed throughout literature in interesting ways outside the framework of orthodox religious belief. She posits Hughes as the representative poet of the 70s concerned with the primitive animal world of our repressed instincts and darkness internalised by the rational secular society. For many women writers in the 70s and 80s, it was the use of myths which seemed to offer fertile ground for exploring the limited construction of woman in culture and the possibility of moving beyond this to envision new political and social formations. As Humm (48) argues second wave feminism took shape in a utopian mode with texts such as Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (49) envisioning new ways of organising reproduction which would radically change women's relationship to the existing order. The rise of cultural feminism and texts such as Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (50) both created a new women's

language in order to describe new social forms of organisation and new ways of envisioning the political. Humm argues that this concern with utopias and women's identity was inextricably linked to questions of literary authority and many key texts of literary criticism in the 70s explored the possibilities of myths and other forms of fantasy writing as a way out of the limited constructions of women in traditional literary canons.

Myths are attractive to writers for a number of reasons. They are simultaneously private and public. They have a status as belonging to high culture, handed down through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority. At the same time, 'myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation- everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed or abominable' (51). So myth embodies the western constructs of male and female. Part of the power of myth is this ability to reveal the shadow side of human desires and actions and so it is a fertile source for a writer like Roberts who is interested in the whole person, the dark side as well as the light. Many of the texts utilising myth and fantasy were also concerned with spirituality and the search for aspects of a goddess culture. The theory of female power in religion as well as in other areas of pre-history and culture was attractive since, if women were not subordinate in the past we have proof that they are not so by nature. The rise of ecofeminism in the 70s and its emphasis on the connection between women, nature and spirituality also gave impetus to the exploration of the mother goddess in pre-history. Women poets utilising myth and fairytale during this period are too numerous to mention. Ostriker (52) and Yorke (53) have explored the different strategies employed by American poets using this material but in Britain and Ireland

poets contemporaneous with Roberts such as Liz Lochhead in 'The Grimm Sisters', Sumniti Namjoshi in *Feminist Fables* and Michelene Wandor's 'Gardens of Eden' have reworked myths in interesting ways. (54)

In her first solo collection of poems, *The mirror of the mother*, the myth which she chooses to revision in a sequence of poems is that of Persephone and Demeter. The background to this myth is discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to Eavan Boland's treatment of it. The myth of Demeter and Persephone is an attractive one for feminist writers. Adrienne Rich has written of it in *Of Woman Born* (55) and Susan Gubar explores its power in 'Mother, maiden and the marriage of death' (56) where she argues that women use this myth to redefine, reaffirm and celebrate female consciousness. Feminist philosophers and ethicists such as Carol Gilligan and Annette Baier are also attracted to this myth, reading in it a defense of the human practice of caring for and empathising with others. (57) Demeter loves her daughter deeply and is willing to fight to preserve her connection with Persephone. She imaginatively recreates Persephone's loneliness and is determined that her daughter not slip away and be forgotten. The myth also emphasises the way caring for particular people and caring for the world are intertwined. When Demeter's bond with her daughter is severed the world at large falls into disarray. The myth has thus often been used to represent an alternative female or feminine ethic against a male ethic which privileges a principled universalistic mode of reasoning. Such feminine ethics were associated in the U.K. with cultural feminism and in France with theorists such as Cixous and Irigaray, both of whom have drawn on this myth in their writings. In *Sexes and Genealogies* Irigaray stresses the exclusion of the mother-daughter representation from the symbolic and cites this myth as one example. (58)

She notes how the dominant dyads in our culture, in religion and psychoanalysis for example, are father and son or mother and son. She takes issue with both Freud and Lacan's accounts of sexual difference which are dependent on the phallus as marker of sexual difference and therefore define women always in relation to men - as lack. Women are subjected to a logic of the same that collapses the two sexes into one by measuring both men and women according to male standards. Irigaray argues that it is vital to transform the symbolic if women are to transform their status and she advocates as part of this strategy the privileging of representations which focus on the mother/daughter relationship. (59) Theorists have also read in the myth the way that women are invisible to the male power structure. Demeter does not know what has happened to her daughter and Zeus and Hades do not consider how Demeter and Persephone may feel about the deal they strike.

The mysteries of Demeter and Persephone were celebrated as a cult annually at Eleusis and indeed survived as the most revered Greek cult until the end of paganism. Pomeroy (60) details the involvement of women in this cult and argues that given the emphasis of the mother goddess and son-consort dyad through antiquity, especially in the Middle East, the appeal that a unique religion centring on a mother and daughter relationship had for the Athenians is quite remarkable. A less documented festival celebrating this myth but one that was strictly reserved for women was the Thesmophoria, which was held in autumn in order to ensure the growth of the seed grain by means of fertility magic. Details which survive of this suggest a parallel to the crucifixion and rebirth in its three day structure of offering up, fasting and mourning, and rebirth or 'fairbirth' from the Greek 'kalligeneia'. One

hypothesis for the existence of exclusively women's festivals is that they were survivals from a matriarchal period when all religion was in the hands of women.

In Roberts' sequence the original story is maintained. The poems shift between the perspectives of Persephone and Demeter but Roberts also draws on post-Lacanian psychoanalysis in the daughter's description of the desire for return to the mother and the impossibility of that return to the original state:

last winter I fled from him
back north to the speechless
waterfall, back to immaculate ice; I
preferred white perfection, I
preferred to remain intact; I sang this
loudly enough for him to hear. (*AS*, 20-22)

Such imagery as 'speechless waterfall' and 'white perfection' recalls Irigaray and Cixous and the immaculate ice recalls Lacan's image of the mirror, foregrounded in the title of the collection and explored in detail in the poem 'New Year's Eve at Lavarone.' The mother accepts her return to the underworld, resigns herself and even gives the daughter her blessing.

this spring my lover
came for me again; this
time my mother did not
hold me back; she blessed me; she

suggested it

was about time; then she released my wrist

The poem represents Persephone's hunger to return to the mother, the 'lost body, lost light, lost voice' but the last verse seems to accept the necessity of entering the symbolic. Roberts uses the twin metaphor that recurs as a motif in her work:

also there are nights
when his black coal head
lies next to mine, nights when my heart
drums as the twin of his, my breath and blood
in tune with his, learning to sing
of friendship; a difficult, a new
benediction.

This last section reminds me of Cixous's fictional work 'Dedans': 'Inside' where the persona confronts the figure of death.

'Come, says he, let's away to prison, we two alone, without her without them, alone
I will make you alone, alone you will make the night with your lips on my eyes and I
shall see you beyond walls and time. If you will have me I will hold you in my arms
and we shall create new tales. If you won't I shall ask your forgiveness. You will be
up above and down below and I shall be inside. Outside, the mystery of things will
dry up, under the sun the generations will wash up worlds over words, but inside we
shall have stopped dying.' (61)

Susan Sellers argues that Cixous' text stresses the paradoxical nature of the human situation. Separation brings loss yet the language this produces offers the possibility of inscribing and vanquishing loss. (62) In a similar way Roberts' Persephone, separated from her mother, can find in the realm of the underworld 'a new benediction'. The sequence ends with the poem 'Persephone gives birth' where the cycle of loss and regeneration is set to begin again.

The representation of the myth is modernised in Roberts' use of tone and particularly in the perspective of the daughter Persephone. In 'Persephone pays a visit to Demeter' Roberts uses the Jungian archetype of the house to explore the feelings between mother and daughter. The poem ends with the lines:

I'm like one of those boats down there.
siren bawling with grief: I'm going back
mother, this time I really mean it
I'm really going. (*AS*, 27)

The sequence does not present the two worlds of winter and spring, of Hades and Demeter, in simplistic ways. In the first poem in the sequence the sexual relationship between Persephone and Hades merges the active and passive metaphors in a pagan fusion of landscape:

my lover is a dark man
we embrace in the garden, in the grave; his

twisting root is clotted with my black earth
as I break open, and take him in. (*AS*, 20)

In the poems the imagery of the landscape of the underworld suggests the womb and the shadow side of the feminine as well as the forces of darkness: 'Shall/I be born from these water corridors.' Demeter as an earth goddess is also in myth associated with death as well as transformative regeneration. Patiently awaiting the return of her daughter in 'Demeter keeps going,' she keeps herself busy nurturing the harvest:

She regrets the spoilt fruit, but
labours doggedly on, stocking the hollow
bellies of oaks. Then, larders full
she packs down leaf mould, rotten
nuts in a compost dance: death is no waste... (*AS*, 25)

Roberts also explores the ambivalence at the heart of the mother/daughter relationship- the desire to remain attached which co-exists with a need to separate and be independent. Growth and development must involve this. In many versions of the myth, Persephone chooses to remain separate from her mother. Zeus decreed that Persephone could return to the mother only if she refused all food. Persephone opts to eat some pomegranate seeds, providing nurture for herself. We could then read the myth as pointing to the need to break ties with the parent to find other sources of nurture. The seed must separate from the parent organism and lie dormant for a time drawing strength from the earth, after which it can bloom forth independently into the daylight.

The poem again draws on the state of existing in two spheres, two countries and the effects of moving between these two spaces, never feeling completely whole or at home in either, never quite reaching that moment mid-channel where true language is restored. In her novel *The Wild Girl*, which tells the story of Mary Magdalene, the young Mary feeling homesick and longing to see her mother comforts herself by visiting the temple of Demeter and Persephone. (63)

The final poem in the sequence finds Demeter rushing to her daughter who is about to give birth:

in the enormous field
tight with corn, the stiff
jostle of stalks, gold arrows
pouring over the hill, heads pressing
Demeter's waist, their heavy tips
cutting her hands that she holds
up and out, hostage
to the harvest and the heat

she beats a path through
she parts the gold waves
she hurries
the cornfield resists

in the churchyard

Persephone in her bone nightgown

squats down (AS, 28)

The cycle of unity and separation continues.

The Masculine Principle: Le Père.

Unlike ethicists such as Gilligan who read the myth as the possibility of a new female ethic, (64) and Irigaray who sees Hades abducting the daughter from her mother as a wholly negative symbol for patriarchal culture, (65) Roberts does not advocate a loss of the symbolic. She seems here to echo Kristeva's argument that women need both the imaginary and the symbolic positions in order to speak with a meaningful identity. This is suggested by her use of the twin metaphor that recurs as a motif in her work: 'nights when my heart / drums as the twin of his, my breath and blood / in tune with his'.

While Roberts' stance is significantly different from Kristeva - particularly in relation to feminism and lesbianism-she does seem to advocate the need for woman's language to exist within a mediating symbolic. In her analysis of the position from which women can speak Kristeva sees particular problems in positing a woman's language. She warns that women need the language of the paternal, symbolic order to protect themselves from the merged identity with the mother which in its complete return to infantile fusion will ultimately result in regressive states of madness and hysteria outside the symbolic. Equally problematic is speaking from the position of the mother within language and the symbolic as a feminine position. In this case the

woman risks merely reimposing, in the opposite form of a female symbolic, the truth claims of the phallus. For these reasons, Kristeva argues that women should employ a double discourse which reflects the real state of all identity; fluid, incorporating both masculine and feminine and existing both outside and inside the boundaries of the symbolic. She argues that women should be active and assertive (in the domain of the phallus) but they should also question and challenge these assertions which must never rigidify into the fixed symbolic. Women's position should be a continual movement between order and disorder. (66)

Roberts seems to advocate the need for the symbolic. In her poem 'madwoman at Rodmell', a poem written for Sylvia Plath, Roberts represents both the bliss of a receptivity to nature, to a place outside culture and the danger of losing all defences:

she strolls in the valley, alone
her ears scan the warning
twanging of birds
her boots plop and suck in the mud's grip

the sky is a cold gold spoon
sun tart and sweet
in the cup of hills licked
clean by the gulp of cows
- at the cup's lip, the foam
and crust of milk, a swell of clouds
and yellow plums; leaves curl

like the peel in marmalade

the world is her mouth

a sour swill of yells

trees scar, and suddenly

redde; bright berries of blood and teeth

hang in the hedge; the bad

baby is out; she

bites through the net; she swarms

free, fizzing; she thunders like bees in a box

maddened for honey, and her mama

her lips clang shut on mean rations:

she swallows the river

and mourns on down, a thin bellyful (*AS*, 10)

Symbiosis or fusion with the mother/nature is represented through images of feeding, hunger and desire as projected onto the natural landscape in imagery and rhythm which recalls Plath's own style. Yet this fusion can collapse us to a regressive state of madness and hysteria outside the symbolic. The reference to the 'bad baby' recalls Klein's essay 'Envy and Gratitude' (67) and the processes of splitting and paranoia associated with the paranoid schizoid position discussed earlier: 'Trees scar, and suddenly redde'. At this point the positive identification of nature as nurture and satisfaction seen in childlike images and sounds gives way to

nature/mother as destructive and withholding: 'mean rations' and 'a thin bellyful'.

The masculine principle has its place.

In the poem 'Going into Cornelissen's, Great Russell Street' an orgy of colours attacks her senses in a shop:

Then an ampoule of orange henna
jazzed with saffron
yellow as wet sand
a staff of coffee, of pain brule
dissolved to contralto
rose, to
a screech of lime sorbet. (*PH*, 57)

Senses intermingle in a fluid and multiple way. This synaesthesia is part of Roberts' transgressing of boundaries within the self. Yet there is recognition of the need here for the intellectual, the rational, the symbolic of classification. The bottles are classified 'to render it bearable.'

Unlike the work of Kay and Boland where fathers are shadowy or absent, fathers have a significant presence in Roberts' work. Often embodied as priests they are forbidden objects of desire. However in Roberts' work this taboo is broken and both fathers and daughters commit incest. In *Impossible Saints*, for example, Saint Thais is the young girl who acts out the desire for her father and is banished and left to die in the bottom of a well. (*IS*, 163-174)

In an article on father /daughter relations Roberts writes 'To be free of your father, you have to admit you love him, Really love him. In an ideal world, your father would be able to admit, in words, not deeds, that he felt the same way. But in this world these conversations have a way of never happening.' (68) In her poem 'A harvest journey' Roberts affirms the significance of the father/daughter relationship. In this poem the persona of the daughter identifies with the father through shared activities:

I helped my father pick and chop
apples and onions for chutney
prune the beech tree
with ladder and long shears.
He coughed rough spittle
into his handkerchief. My
mother complained the tall
branches were cruelly
lopped, that Dad's leeks
had wooden hearts. The string beans
quarrelled with the runners, the pot
clanged while the iron hissed.
I cooked omelettes, a sort of blessing. (*PH*, 50-51)

Significantly food which is so often equated with the mother in Roberts' writing is here associated with the father. The mother is outside this bond, critical and

complaining. The mother's attack here on the father which contradicts the warm and nurturing presentation of him by the daughter reflects back on the mother herself constructing her as the one with the 'wooden heart'. The poem concludes with the strong affirmation of the daughter/father love. The mother here is the outsider reinforced by the different ways the narrator names them. She talks about 'Dad' and 'my mother,' one intimate the other detached.

the smile and frown
of Dad in his old brown sweater
bringing bowls of spinach
and lettuces in.

Roberts' advocacy of both the masculine principle and the feminine principle is clear in her celebration of a bisexual practice of writing. Roberts writes love poetry to men and women. In her representation of the erotic she celebrates both the masculine principle and the feminine one.

'The best writers and the most generous readers, I'd suggest, have not androgynous but bisexual imaginations. That's to say they resist simplistic 'either/or' categorisation in favour of 'and'. You don't have to choose between identifying solely with masculine or feminine experience, as you don't have to deny that these words matter. You can explore both. You don't have to believe in realist fiction at the expense of the unconscious life; they fertilise each other.' (69)

Roberts locates this image of the bisexual imagination in the memory of her parents, one English Protestant and one a French Catholic 'so different in their culture and religion and language, yet their books all tumbling together in the big bookcase and their words tangling and dancing at family mealtimes. This imagination is something very alive and active and sexy going on in the mind. Not static. Not transcendent.'

(70)

This communion of male/female can be seen throughout her work. In 'Magnificat' she celebrates a relationship with a woman who saves her after the end of an affair with a man. In 'praise blue' the moment of *jouissance* experienced by the narrator embraces both male and female sexuality. In 'judith and delilah and me' she explores the erotic through the celebration of surrender; of giving up her body in a celebration of difference:

samson carrying gates is lonely
lay your hands upon
my gates, grasp
my hair, bury
your sword, your fingernails
clotted with sweet wax
taste
the honeycomb
between my lion's jaws (*AS*, 2-3)

The language is direct and erotic, the tone is playful and ironic. She seems to be acknowledging the power of male need for the female body and the power that gives women. In 'the big man' she uses metaphor to celebrate her desire in all its aspects- the big man is her circus performer, her spectacle: she calls the tune and makes him perform for her. Yet the desire expressed is a celebration of the male and female, the active and passive. The use of rhythm and imagery in the final lines is celebratory. The lines recall Plath.

I am a bee hauling honey out
a fly tickling a slow fish. (AS, 4)

This bisexuality is not the androgyny associated with writers like Virginia Woolf to whom Roberts has at times been compared but the sensuous bisexuality of a writer like Colette, who Roberts herself acknowledges as an influence in her choice of subject matter. (71) In her private life Colette, like Roberts, lived as a lesbian for a number of years while also having two marriages. But in her writing her sensuality comprised everything beautiful, not just men and women but animals and plants also. This difference between bisexuality and androgyny is important. Both bisexuality and androgyny were related to the Greek myth of Hermaphroditus. The legend goes that the nymph Salmacis fell in love with the beautiful son of Hermes and Aphrodite and in answer to her prayer never to be separated from him, the Gods combined their sexes. Hermaphroditus himself was a semi-God, and venerated as such. Androgyny has retained the ancient flavour of myth and religion and is often associated with creative energy and in particular writers such as the Bloomsbury group. The concept of androgyny is also related to physical appearance where bisexuality is not.

Whereas the word androgyny only applies to human beings, according to Darwin bisexuality is apparent in the whole of nature. (72)

In *The Visitation* the central character Helen, significantly also a twin with a masculine brother/other, expresses the feeling that she has to become androgynous in order to create: 'Helen gets up and checks her appearance in the mirror over the mantelpiece. Her eyes are anxious, her shoulders hunched. Her body hides itself within a vast old boilersuit. To write, Helen always feels she has to cancel her body out, become pure mind. Genderless, transcendent, like a man.' (73) Significantly this paragraph follows a reference to Helen's mother, the aptly named Mrs. Home who has devoted her life to her family. Describing her exhausting and demanding week caring for her family, Roberts writes, 'She creates endlessly, she weaves the fabric of the home out of her very self, like a silkworm producing the gold thread from its marrow before it dies.' (*The Visitation*, 99) The positioning of these two paragraphs suggests that Helen needs to embrace the mother's body as a way forward in her own writing. The mother and the writer/artist need to be reconciled not held separate as western philosophy has done. In *Sorties* Cixous distinguishes between what she calls two bisexualities but she is in fact, I would argue, marking this difference between androgyny and the kind of bisexuality that Roberts advocates and her writing embodies. Cixous writes:

'To this bisexuality that melts together and effaces, wishing to avert castration, I oppose the *other bisexuality*, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogentric Performing Theater, sets up his or her erotic universe. Bisexuality – that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of

both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the non-exclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this 'permission' one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body.' (74)

Roberts' bisexuality is then the location within the self of a split, an unstable division between contradictory elements which simply co-exist. The effect of this split is the creation of a mobile subject, containing both the masculine and the feminine. This self, the meaning of which may at moments be fixed, contains within it the potential always of moving on- accepting rather than repressing the other of the I within discourse.

Roberts also intertextualises ideas from Jung throughout her work. Jung incorporated the hermaphroditic legend into his archetypal images of which the animus and the anima are the principal protagonists. They stand for the hidden other-sexed self and symbolise undying wishes and ideals common to all of us. The animus is the male aspect in a woman and the anima the female one in a man. They represent the most powerful forces in the life of both sexes. It is the man's anima which drives him to search for his love partner who corresponds to the female part of the self and a woman's animus longs to find her own male self in the person she loves. The soul-image which balances Jung's 'Persona' is an archetype which can represent the whole of the unconscious. It is inherited, collective and ageless. Jung's work was concerned with images of woman as devourer and destroyer as well as protector, concepts which came into psychoanalysis through the work of Melanie Klein and which we meet again in Kristeva's work. Indeed Jung's archetypes can be compared

to the internal objects of Kleinian psychoanalysis. Like Klein, Jung's early work shared many of the tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis, however this initial union gave way to conflict. At a theoretical level the two were in disagreement over Freud's theory of the sexual aetiology of neuroses. Jung disagreed with Freud that repression always had a sexual basis. There were also irreconcilable differences regarding religion. Freud was anti-religion whereas Jung recognised the significance of the spiritual and sacred to both individuals and society and indeed wanted psychoanalysis to be the new religion. Jung saw the unconscious as being the home of creativity and as having a teleological function and this is clear in Roberts' work also. The unconscious compensates tendencies in the conscious mind thus helping the individual achieve integration and wholeness. (75)

Jung's stress on the creativity and inherent meaningfulness of the unconscious and his integration of spirituality were attractive to Roberts, as was his use of feminine archetypes. In an essay written in 1983, Roberts discusses the attraction of Jungian feminism:

'I discovered four archetypes which exist within the female psyche: the virgin, the mother, the companion to men, the sibyl. Most of us don't express these aspects of ourselves all at once; we tend to express one or two, to bring out the different aspects of ourselves at different moments in our lives ... For a long time I thought they were all at war in me ... Now, I begin to recognise the virgin as the lesbian/independent woman who is sexual, free, maternal; the mother as the woman who listens and receives and so conceives not just physical pregnancies but also spiritual ones (conversations, ideas); the companion to men as the vibrantly sexual women whose

business is not necessarily to do with marriage and the bearing and raising of children; the sibyl as the woman who periodically needs to withdraw into what can be seen as depression or even madness but who is in touch with ancient memories, inspiration, who is an artist. This system of imagery helped me to see that sexuality and spirituality can be connected, need not be at war.' (76)

Like Roberts the reconciliation of opposites is a theme which runs through all Jung's work. In his writing on individuation Jung uses the image of coniunctio-male and female conjoined-to symbolise the birth of the new self. (77)

Similarly integration and rebirth are often played out in twin metaphors in Roberts' work, where the 'other' represents repressed or split off aspects of the self which one has to embrace or acknowledge in order to move forward. For example in *The Visitation* the heroine has a twin brother who represents the masculine side of herself. Quite often the twin metaphor is enacted through parallel lives as in *Fair Exchange* and in a more complex narrative in *Flesh and Blood*, where the characters at times change both sex and country.

From Plato onwards twins have denoted both union and separation; an extension or mirroring of the unity of the pre-symbolic, a oneness/wholeness that has been split in order to grow and thrive. In *The Visitation* the opening page begins the painful separation:

‘The first thing that she sees is an enormous pale face, close to her own. Not having seen her own face yet, she sees the other’s. It swims, flat and round, like a mirror with fins. Like a moon at the bottom of the sea. Blank. White. Shimmering.

They touch one another through curtains of skin. They dance in the womb, within their separate sacs, tumbling gracefully over each other like Chinese acrobats. They stretch out their tiny arms, and waltz in slow motion in their world of darkness and fluid. Two loving punch-balls, each a balloon for the other.

Their mother’s body divides them. It calls them out. From their happy room where they float and kick like waterlilies swaying on stems, they are expelled. The world, their underwater cave, is after all the belly of the whale. Twin Jonases, they shiver, unable to distinguish between earthquakes, indigestion, death. The walls of their sanctuary contract. A disaster is set in motion.’ (*The Visitation*, 3)

Both Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis argues that in order to separate we deny certain aspects of ourselves which are projected onto a m/other. In her use of the twin metaphor, I would argue Roberts explores the cost of such a split and the need for integration and healing to be creative and fully alive. By the end of *The Visitation* Helen, who has grieved all her life for the lost unity with her twin, achieves some understanding and insight.

‘The twins lodge simply, deep inside her, as images of different parts of herself, as needs for different sorts of activity. She begins to smile with delight at this recognition of what makes herself: wholeness dependent on twin capacities and twin needs. Out of the tension, the meeting between the two, she forms the synthesis of who she is today.’ (*The Visitation*, 175)

In *Impossible Saints* there is a telling passage where sister Josephine, the central connecting figure of the narratives, describes how she wants to set up houses for single women to live in: 'Each house would be a double house, looking two ways, with one entrance on one side and one on the other ... Two houses together, back to back; two bodies joined by a single skin. But there would be ways through, from one to the other, for those who lived there and had the keys to the communicating doors.' (IS, 192) One side would be a type of convent but without Catholicism, allowing space for the spiritual and solitude. The other would be for the social, the life of the body and the senses. The house that Josephine envisages unites the spiritual and the sexual and puts the earthly body back into religion as a celebratory force rather than as something to be denied.

In various interviews Roberts has talked of her sense of being a twin and of how it may have given her early awareness of the other. 'There were always the two of us. We were 'the twins' ... To say 'I' was to include 'you' and 'she.' She writes of how it also made her woman centred:

'When we were tiny girls, we often shared a bed at night and cuddled each other. That early closeness ...strong loving friendships with women were important...The feminist concept of sisterhood has always meant a lot to me because I started experiencing it so young with my twin. It allows for competitiveness and envy too. Sisterhood is alive and active, not perfect and dead.' (78)

Juliet Mitchell, in a recent study of hysteria in culture, rereads Freud's Oedipus Complex by inserting the experience of sibling relationships and their lateral heirs in peer and affinal relationships into our understanding of human psychic development. She argues that the intense love and hate for a sibling, a lateral relationship of sameness and difference, uniqueness and replication, is experienced as catastrophic for the infant because it threatens her/him with non-existence: 'An actual sibling is the concrete embodiment of a general condition in which no human being is unique – he can always be replaced or repeated by another.' (79) Mitchell argues that the focus on the intergenerational model of parents and children has repressed the intensity of the love- hate relationship between siblings and its consequences for adult lateral relationships. In Roberts' writing such intensity is acknowledged. In 'The day the wall came down' discussed earlier the narrator recognises both intense rivalry - 'There was one too many: / it was you or me' - but also intense love:

my sister calling for
me through the cold
years, the

tapping
of the axes
of love.

In *Daughters of the House*, the adult Léonie is waiting for the arrival of her cousin/twin Thérèse:

‘Léonie was waiting for Thérèse to arrive. She longed for her, like a lover. Her mind bristled with knives. She imagined the edge of the blade, silvery and saw-toothed. Its tip vanishing into Thérèse’s soft flesh.’ (*Daughters*, 3)

In certain religions the twin metaphor suggests the unease of division and the possibility of healing. As Farmer writes, ‘One is the number of God, of precreation. Two is the number of creation- the point where the creator splits her-himself to make the universe and in due course its inhabitants. But within the split lies the possibility not only of good but also of evil. The medieval church deeply distrusted the number two- it was the number of woman: who divides man. It was the number of the devil likewise.’ (80) In *Daughters of the House* a short chapter is given over to Léonie’s musings on the difference between one and two which echoes this philosophy. In a reflection of when does one become two, Léonie expresses her unease with the number two and thus Roberts’ unease with the binarity of Western thought.

‘Two was an odd word anyway. It did not express twoness. It was as short, round and compact as one. Léonie’s formula was: one magpie in the same field as another magpie, both in view at once, makes two magpies. She preferred saying one-and-one to two. She knew what she meant. Two was blurry and made her anxious.’

(*Daughters*, 97)

At the end of the chapter Léonie thinks about the two visions of Mary seen in the woods, Thérèse’s traditional spiritual Madonna and Léonie’s red and gold lady, the ‘coloured’ one who represents in the text the repressed, the foreigner, the body, the

abject. How to integrate these two visions, the Madonna and whore, the Virgin Mary and the Mary Magdalene, is a central concern of Roberts' writing.

Healing the Splits: Religious and Secular.

The dualisms which pervade and underlie religious thought are one of Roberts' central themes in her writing. The influence of French Catholicism pervades her work. In its sound and rhythm her poems often echo biblical texts and prayers. Her use of religious metaphor in a material and worldly context invites comparisons with John Donne. Her novels and short stories are full of priests and nuns and religious festivals and rituals. Many of her early novels such as *The Book of Mrs. Noah* (81) and *The Visitation* deconstruct and rewrite patriarchal religious myths.

In 'Stabat Mater', Kristeva argues that only the church has provided women with a discourse which satisfies the suffering, the anguish and the hopes of mothers. (82) In her essay 'The Flesh Made Word' Roberts also suggests one of the attractions of Catholicism for women: 'The great thing about the Catholic tradition is that, though it oppresses women horribly by naming them as semi-devils, it simultaneously gives them a visible place, unlike Protestantism which simply ignores them. Femininity is so powerfully contradictorily present in the Catholic church that you can't ignore it.' (83) Kristeva also suggests a similar distinction in her idea that the blossoming of feminism in Protestant countries may in part be the result of a 'lack in the protestant religious structure with respect to the Maternal.' (84) Catholicism becomes then for Roberts a way back to the mother.

Religious language and metaphor pervades Roberts' poetry. We can see this communion in 'The return' (*PH*, 61-62) where the poet as prodigal daughter returns to the Anglican cathedral of her father which she had scorned. Unlike the grandeur of the Catholic church with its incense and rituals, his religion consists of 'prim hats/and habits' 'grenadier parsons' and a 'teapot God.' The return to the Anglican cathedral also suggests a return to the father on another level. The daughter who 'scorned' his country and his house now returns older and wiser with her 'battered heart,' and seems to have reached a new understanding of her father.

My father leaps up
in the high space
and the mother I thought was lost
ricochets
round him. Strong
arches and vaults of flesh
enclose them. These
two make the sculpted air.
They are the architects. This
design is their dance.

The return to her father also gives her back the mother she thought she had lost. The poem could be read as a recognition of the need for the symbolic, the law of the father. In the closing lines the daughter invokes the Christian creed:

I believe in the big ribbed boat

of the upturned church.

I believe in the body:

the house

the man and woman build

with the sweat of love.

This could be read as a reactionary poem but that would not take account of Roberts' playful use of metaphor. The body celebrated here is the immanent body created in the 'sweat of love.' This is a coming together of the masculine and feminine, the French and English, the spiritual and sexual, the conscious and unconscious. In its use of imagery and register this poem, like much of Roberts most accomplished work, merges the religious and the secular.

In 'A psalm for Easter' (*PS*, 73-78) she interweaves images and language from biblical stories with images of a woman giving birth. In her poem the Christ crucified is the woman giving herself up to pain and extremes (death) in order that new life can arise. The religious invocation is clever and consistent. The hospital bed with the woman spreadeagled is described in imagery of crucifixion.

They hung you, my daughter
on a metal cross.

From your precious wound
your blood fell out

thickly, collected in a bucket.

This parallel is reinforced throughout the poem with phrases like 'You thirsted. We laid/our wet fingers against your lips' and 'You doubted. You disbelieved.' The speaker in the poem both witnesses the birth and supports and cares for the woman during and after labour. She becomes the woman's absent mother:

you cried out in Arabic and French

your mother-tongue, and mine

sometimes for your mother

and sometimes for me.

Yet through witnessing the sacrifice of the body, the poet/persona gets in touch with her own lost mother and all that that represents in mythic and psychoanalytic terms:

You gave to me.

You made me remember

my mother

how love

lugged her across the water

and made her strong

how she gave herself up

how she let life rip her
apart, in the name of love ...

The reference to 'across the water' here suggests both the biblical seas and also the channel between England and France which Roberts' own mother crossed for 'love.'
This connection within herself, this knowledge that has come from watching the body of another gives her a rebirth.

On the morning of the third day
love rose up early
inside the tomb

Love breathed in my ear
and lifted me.
Love set me upright.

Then love rolled the stone away.
Then love opened my mouth.
Then love made me rise.

And I, who had died in this life
was born back into it.
I, who had died, was risen.

And she who I had been searching for

was there. She was with me.

She was love's body:

alive

made whole again

in me.

This connection with the maternal could also be the love of another woman, the lost m/other 'alive/made whole again/in me.' This loss of self also releases her language, her 'dead words,' from the sealed tomb. The connection with the mother creates a new symbolic. The poem again echoes Klein and the construct of creativity as 'reparation.'

how I thought I broke her, being born

how I wanted to break her again

and make her mourn

how I too was broken ...

and elsewhere in the poem

... how the daughters

must find and tend

the broken body of love

must mend it, must make
reparation

The American poet Robin Morgan in her work 'The network of the imaginary mother' (85) plays similar games. A passage describes the act of nursing as simultaneously personal and political. 'Take. Eat. This is my body ...' spoken not by the god/man of the gospels but by a nursing woman to her son and by extension all children. Biological fact and spiritual significance here become indistinguishable. Ostriker (86) cites examples in American poetry from this period of poems which explore through descriptions of labour and birth a female death and resurrection pattern. In Toi Derricote's *Natural Birth* she argues that the death and resurrection pattern of the labour experience described is one possible source of that universal theme in pre-Christian and Christian religion.

In her poem 'winter sacrament' Roberts fuses the language of communion sacrament with the desire for return to the mother through incorporation of the other.

in bed, I shiver and fast
in a snowfield of sheets
lonely for you, my absent guest
our snowflake bodies
melting on each other's tongues
- the true communion (AS, 16)

The body of Christ dissolves into the body of woman - we have again in the final lines the interconnection between spirituality and sexuality, diminishing the hierarchy constructed between man and woman and simultaneously dismantling the inherent dichotomy between man/soul and woman/body. The symbol of communion where the bread and wine become through transubstantiation not just the body of Christ but also his Word become for Roberts the maternal body and language.

Roberts is no longer actively Catholic but that early indoctrination and the effects it had on her permeate all her writing. She writes about her perception of God in relation to that of both the established Protestant and Catholic religions. Both Catholic and Protestant religions have repressed the female body, and the messiness of the real physical body: 'bodies that retch, leak, menstruate, piss and shit, vomit, come ecstatically, are not supposed to exist inside a church and are generally not welcome.' (87) This is related to Kristeva's notion of the abject which is central to her presentation of the unconscious imaginary. The abject is the repressed female body, the baby's pre-oedipal experience of its own and its mother's bodily products which has to be expelled by the infant to create space for identity in the symbolic. Abjection then is a process which bases or subtends all identity, but is outside symbolic or cultural representation. With the onset of the castration complex and the discovery of sexual difference, this disgust becomes translated into a connection with the feminine as abject. For Kristeva the pre-oedipal mother is abject and necessarily hated. (88) Survival of the omnipotent mother means matricide-killing her in fantasy so that separation can take place in reality. The opening lines of Roberts' novel *Flesh and Blood* play with this idea: 'An hour after murdering my mother I was in Soho.' (FB, 1) The need for separation from the mother leads to the abjection of the

maternal body. Even after the process of separation is complete and the subject is established in the symbolic, the mother's body is still considered a phobic object because it represents the presymbolic fusion of mother and child and therefore threatens the autonomy of the subject. The unstable nature of abjection (removed and not removed, self and not self, attraction and repulsion) threatens disruption, giving rise to self-disgust, guilt, a sense of impurity and insecurity lest the abject break back in. Fear of the maternal body is transferred to women in general and results in misogyny. Kristeva identifies three categories of the abject-oral disgust, which enacts a rejection of the mother and thus a refusal of life, repugnance towards bodily waste, which suggests an inability to accept the body's materiality, its rhythms and mortality and revulsion from signs of sexual difference, encompassing the taboo against incest and horror at menstrual blood. What is threatening is the transgression or potential transgression of boundaries, the tainting of the 'clean and proper' body, the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.

Kristeva herself in 'Stabat Mater' returns the mother's body to religious discourse. In a parallel text she sets out an intellectual analysis of the cult of the Virgin Mary with an impressionistic account of her own experience of maternity. (89) The bodily reality of motherhood breaks into the formal discourse closing the gap between theory and practice. In a similar way Roberts returns the real physical bodies to religious discourse. Passion is not something only to be experienced by a rejection of the body but by embracing the corporeal, the abject. In Roberts' work the abject returns through images of incorporation, bodily wastes and the incest taboo. In *Flesh and Blood*, for example, the teenage Frederica makes a shrine to 'Our Lady' using relics from the abject of her own mother: 'One of her handkerchiefs I took from the

box in the bathroom, a pink one, with a crust of dried snot in the corner. A piece of cottonwool...clotted with yellow wax. Some of her toenail clippings ...' (FB, 22) In contrast to the denial of the pleasures of appetite invoked by the church - the fasting of the saints for example – Roberts gives us incredibly sensual and physical descriptions of food and appetite. 'The Bishop's Lunch' for example consists of 'rabbit paté, scented with juniper...roasted pigeons with apples and calvados, the sliced potatoes and leeks baked in cream, the poached eggs in sorrel sauce...the figure of an angel sculpted from choux buns stuck together with caramel and then coated with dark bitter-chocolate cream.' (90) Hence Roberts' priests and nuns have physical as well as spiritual appetites and the two fuse. *The Wild Girl* is the most sustained example of this fusion. This unites through the story of the 'other' Mary, Mary Magdalene, the constructs of virgin and whore. In Roberts' version Christ himself has sexual appetites. (91) What Roberts is about here is the reintegration of corporeality and spirit. Roberts' idea of God is immanent and links to her sense of connection. For her, fusion with the divine is a physical reality:

'Each of us participates in the Creation, the dance and flow of atoms of which the modern physicists speak, which goes on *now*, isn't over once and for all ... God is the force that grows us and wants us to flourish. God is our eating and drinking and gardening and love-making. God is the energy in our bodies, their knowledge and suffering and love.' (92)

Healing the Splits: Nature and Culture

This 'force' and mutuality is explored also in Roberts' representation of nature.

Roberts' critique of the relationship between women and nature is not the essentialist

view of cultural feminists such as Susan Griffin and Adrienne Rich nor is it the romantic sublime of Wordsworth and the male romantics. The romantic sublime denies the flesh in favour of the spirit. Roberts' 'sublime' is characterised not by transcending the body but by letting go, by opening up the body and dissolving the boundaries between self and other. Writing of Roberts' presentation of the relationship between women and nature, Bertram says:

'The intimate telepathy between the two does not replace or obliterate autonomous selfhood. In her poetry the woman's body strains out towards the world beyond, hovering on the brink of dissolution into it. Letting go is the route to the sublime and is an act of courage and faith. It means losing a sense of self, of identity, uniqueness and individuality, but it is through this surrender that Roberts envisages the possibilities of the sublime.' (93)

Ostriker, (94) writing of the revisionist mythmaking of much recent women's poetry in America, draws attention to the social, political and philosophical values undermined in such poetry. One of these is the faith that the cosmos is - must be - hierarchically ordered with earth and body on the bottom and mind and spirit on the top. In the same vein, women writers are not concerned with immortality and this is often mockingly deconstructed as a corollary of male aggressiveness and need for control.

We can see this expressed in Roberts' poem 'In the Tradescant garden, Lambeth.' (*PH*, 44-45) The narrator and her friend walk round the memorial garden named after two famous 17th century royal gardeners, father and son collapsed into one in

the poem. Their memorial garden reflects their control and separation from the natural and vegetable world. Every thing is separated, classified, ordered according to the rule of logic and given classical names.

The Queen's man in his tomb
the scholar, the connoisseur
is a collection of dry sticks
spelling a hexagram of hope ...

Death, presided over by the grandmothers pouring tea from funeral urns, separates him from the earth in his tomb and gives him the illusion of transcendence. His wife Hester however represents a different model of life after death; forgotten, 'misaid':

Hers is the dirty
alphabet of earth, the
dance of atoms and
of meanings, a
translation
between words not worlds: her
truth is vegetable, her
sex linguistic.

The famous gardener seems to have transcended death - he has a memorial garden and his bones are preserved. However it is his wife Hester, Roberts suggests, whose organic alphabet contains the seeds of its own regeneration and that of the garden.

Her language or script is fluid, organic, continually evolving unlike the patriarchal 'script that writes/that separates.' In Roberts' poetry the 'vertical standard' is subverted. The body is not assumed to be morally or metaphysically inferior to some higher principle. Roberts does not imply that this is wholly a female way of perceiving - the 'dirty alphabet of earth' is open to women and men: it is more likely however, given the psychic engendering of women, to be female.

Many of the nature poems explore a pagan sensuality often using religious register to encode the natural world. In 'In the New Year' a journey from Devon and the radiance of the landscape cause the persona to weep:

It all heaved up in me:
love, sobs, knowledge
the closeness of hedges and grass
how the one body was both of us.

In London
cold beads of water
marbled the indigo glass night.

The hyacinths
unclenched blue fists.

You delved in, rooting
me till

our dark body sparked with light. (*PH*, 70-71)

The earth as metaphor for the female adorns mythologies of countless cultures. Poetry abounds with such images. Indeed feminism itself in the philosophies of ecofeminism argues for a rejection of technologies and the modern world in order that women can realign themselves with their true and essential source of strength: a pre-patriarchal affinity with nature. In its emphasis on the spiritual, ecofeminist philosophy is relevant to Roberts' representation of the natural world. Mies and Shiva describe this spiritual element:

'Some call it the female principle, inhabiting and permeating all things - this spirituality is understood in a less 'spiritual', that is, less idealistic way. Although the spirit was female, it was not apart from the material world, but seen as the life-force in everything and every human being: it was indeed the connecting principle...This sensual or sexual spirituality, rather than 'other-worldly' is centred on and thus abolishes the opposition between spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence. There is only immanence but this immanence is not inert, passive matter devoid of subjectivity, life and spirit.' (95)

We can read Roberts' poetry in the light of the critic Estella Lauter who argues that women poets today are collectively generating a new myth of the relationship between consciousness and the natural order which involves neither subservience nor special status for the human - it neither abandons the idea of consciousness nor assumes that consciousness precipitates a loss of naturalness. (96) This takes us back to Roberts' original comments on the importance of 'feeling.'

The Foreign Body.

This sense of immanence is central to Roberts' ideas on imagination and creativity. Imagination and creativity must always be integrally linked to the experience of the self as embodied, the sensation that we exist within our own body and not outside it. Roberts herself, like many women poets, has had to learn not to despise and reduce the body. She writes:

‘When I was young how ardently I longed to know God by personal revelation, to see visions like the saints did. Later I transferred this longing to the writing of poetry- and indeed did experience bliss when a poem came, though I know now that this is a feeling rooted in the body, the bliss of giving all joyfully that the baby feels, when shitting for example! When I was younger and split the spiritual so severely from the physical I couldn't tolerate knowing that.’ (97)

Western literary theory sees the artist as transcending the body and indeed the personal. In ‘Restoration work in Palazzo Te’ (*PH*, 42-43) Roberts revisions myth to explore through her heroine Psyche the ways that male culture and language have exiled the female body. Like Demeter and Persephone, the myth of Psyche is much used in feminist revision. Psyche because of her beauty has alienated Venus the Goddess of love who sends her son Eros to punish Psyche for her beauty by making her fall in love with someone unattractive. He falls in love with her himself and marries her but visits her only at night because he has ordered her never to attempt to see his face. Psyche invites her two sisters to her sumptuous palace and they, eaten up by envy of her, tempt her to break the taboo by telling her she is married to a horrific serpent who is planning to consume her and the child she carries in her

womb. Taking a lamp, Psyche gazes on her husband who awakes and rushes off reproaching her for her lack of faith. The myth then is one of forbidden knowledge and female curiosity. In Roberts' poem, Psyche breaks free from a painting of herself in order to revision it. Roberts' tone here is ironic and detached. The modern day Psyche wears a white vest 'against her golden shoulders' and has overalls tied round her waist. Wielding her bucket she starts to do restoration work on her own 'text' and chips away at her own 'body' equipped with her photo map and her pentel pen. Significantly it is to her sisters she turns first caressing their 'eyes with a wet sponge' emphasising the nurturing and relational aspects of her project. As part of her project to create a new model of the feminine subject she is commanded to 'Return to that house of desire/ made flesh.' Having broken out of the symbolic, she must return to the mother's body in order to understand her own bodily desires.

She stares at the dream. Level after level
of images fall past. She clammers up
four ladders of narrative
till she swings free
in the vault of darkness, the
silence between sentences. (*PH*, 42-43)

The poem makes myth concrete. Beneath Psyche's enquiring hands the myth crumbles:

Now she is close to the invisible god:
pressing her ear to a deep crack

she hears him breathing.

Leaning over him, daring and disobedient

she hoists her lamp, clips it

to a metal strut, switches

the beam of her love full on

At this point the story breaks up:

the wall stutters, incoherent

in a litter of paint flakes.

She records that the presence of the male body

in the text disrupts it.

Her desire here is not to destroy the myth but to restore it, to find the text of herself in what is absent. In its celebration of the 'silence between sentences,' its 'listening for disturbances / below the surface,' the disruption in the text of the male body, Roberts is alluding in an intertextual way to the ideas of Cixous, Irigaray and *écriture féminine*. It is significant here that *Psyche* explores the male body through touch with 'questioning hands' and 'fingers pattering', rather than through the gaze. Irigaray has associated vision with the masculine and touch with the feminine. (98) To restore her own 'body' to the text, *Psyche* has to cast off centuries of patriarchal images and narratives and only then will she swing free 'in the vault of darkness.' As the repressed of culture, the female body is equated with the darkness of the

unconscious and it is here that she will find her desire. The poem then can be read as an allegory for the female writer or artist representing herself and breaking free from the myths which have restricted her through a return to the first object of desire, the mother's body, her first home.

Woman As Exile.

A common theme in Roberts' work is that of exile/homelessness. Roberts' heroines are often homeless, searching for a place to belong. In *Daughters of the House* the form of the text is an inventory of the house from which both women feel at times exiled. In *The Looking Glass* the heroine is an orphan for whom a house comes to represent the mother /pre-oedipal. 'Everything in that house was beautiful, to me, because I looked at it with love; the house held me; and I held the house inside me at the same time.' (99)

In *The Visitation* there is a moment when Helen leaves her flat to go to an off license without changing her slippers-without signifying the shift from home to street, inside to outside. Aware of the stares of people she writes:

'The homeless are found frightening and offensive by those who do have homes. They represent litter and mess, the blot on the shining white conscience. They are unable, the male tramps, the female vagabonds, to tidy themselves neatly away into glass, steel, concrete boxes. They will be swept away, if found lurking messily on street corners, by the police, the cleaners of the state. Keep off the streets, the police say sternly to women alone, the unemployed, homeless people, blacks: and you will be safe. Rot inside, and do not dare to possess the city as your own. Otherwise you

will be flushed down side streets by hoses, sprayed with gas and rubber bullets as though you are cockroaches, punished by fascists with clubs, by rapists with knives.’
(*The Visitation*, 78)

The Homeless here represent an abject, waste which needs to be ‘swept away.’ Helen too is homeless staying in a succession of other people’s homes, eventually graduating to the use of her twin brother’s flat. Yet for Helen boundaries between inside and out are not threatening, indeed like most of Roberts’ heroines she embraces them. She describes eating breakfast on her balcony:

‘This is her favourite place to sit. The distinction between outside and inside the house is blurred. She is still of the house, and almost of the garden, yet belonging totally to neither. She shares the privacy and the enclosure of the house with the openness and vegetation of the garden; she is the point at which they meet and overlap.’ (*The Visitation*, 148)

In Roberts’ poetry the house is often a metaphor for the self or the lost mother or mother substitute. In ‘The Broken House’ the suffering of the persona is presented through the metaphor of a house decaying:

My sky torn down I’m
open-mouthed to the rain.
Pigeons shit in the bath. (*PH*, 24-26)

The metaphor of the house again features in ‘home alterations.’

Your kitchen's gone

torn off like an arm

chewed up then

spat out in concrete.

Death whistles

stripping you down

to your foundations. (*PH*, 84-85)

In 'house-hunting in the Mayenne' the narrator equates the home and belonging
with the body of her lover:

you're my house

as I am yours

founded on rock

the hillside at our back

diving inside

soft walls of flesh

we open up

rooms of secret words

pungent

scarlet

hot (*AS*, 120)

The reference to the 'soft walls of flesh' recall the maternal body, the original home to which we all desire on some level to return.

In psychoanalytic terms all subjects are estranged, are homeless because of the sense of loss engendered by separation from the maternal body and entry into the symbolic. Language speaks from the place of the 'Other' as Lacan reminds us, the place where we are not. Language is at once our home and the agent of our homelessness, responsible for our separation. Some writers have expressed the particular status of women as exiles. Irigaray sees woman as always exiled from herself. Unlike man she cannot recuperate her first love object, the mother, through displacement. (100) Kristeva stresses the particularity of women's status as foreigners because estrangement dramatises the sense of alienation women feel in the symbolic. That is, Kristeva sees all women as foreigners, strangers, exiles or aliens in terms of their particular relation to and position in the symbolic order. In 'A New Type of Intellectual' she writes:

'A woman is trapped within the frontiers of her body and even of her species, and consequently always feels *exiled* by both the general clichés that make up a common consensus and by the very powers of generalization intrinsic to language. This female exile in relation to the General and to Meaning is such that a woman is always singular, to the point where she comes to represent the singularity of the singular – the fragmentation, the drive, the unnameable.' (101)

This sense of woman as exile within the symbolic is suggested in Roberts' poem 'Temporarily resident.' (PH, 35-36) A woman describes feeling that she's 'living in

the wrong house' sitting upstairs, ignored while she listens to the noise of the television and telephone downstairs.

Stuck in the speechless lodgings

I hold my breath

to make the evenings pass

She can't even find solace in the kitchen, because 'a foreign body' blocks her way.

The woman is silenced but we get the feeling she wants desperately to speak. Later on in the poem her 'mouth kisses a cigarette/ so as not to embarrass' She is not recognised as a subject by the academics 'tight-lipped as wallets' who don't notice her eyes. She is

Paid mother, paid midwife

paid muse

to others' words.

The poem can be read as a statement of women's sense of alienation within language and the masculine symbolic, silenced and marginalised but unable to return to the pre-symbolic, the mother, represented here as elsewhere in Roberts' work by the metaphor of the kitchen. The foreign body who blocks her way is the masculine body of language and culture. Roberts is suggesting that the woman must inhabit the space of the mother also, the kitchen downstairs, before she can feel at home in culture.

The position of woman as exile, as foreigner, as temporary resident has its potentiality however. As Kristeva also says in the essay discussed above, 'Writing is impossible without some kind of exile.' (102) To escape what she calls the mire of common sense and undermine the law of language, to revolutionise thought and transform the symbolic, one must be in some sense an exile. The woman writer then is well placed to transform language.

In *Strangers to Ourselves* Kristeva writes: 'Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognising him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself... The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.' (103)

Roberts, through her writing, attempts to confront the 'foreigner' who lives within us. This can be the 'other' of sexual or of racial difference. In her use of poetic language she deconstructs dualisms and problematises binaries, embracing what is other, what is abject, recognising the divided subject within herself. Kristeva's theory of abjection has been used to analyse racism and xenophobia. Foreigners are often constructed as dirty: often this is a repugnance with what they eat or their toilet habits. English attitudes to the French have often constructed them as dirty and unhygienic while a colloquial phrase for menstruation in French is *les Anglais*. In *Flesh and Blood* Roberts writes:

‘The redness was red like her period. At home, when what some girls called *les Anglais* and some *her flowers* arrived each month, she used rags from old sheets, torn up, to staunch the flow, which she had always secretly liked.’ (FB, 54)

France has always represented for England the ‘other’, attractive and repellent. Roberts herself describes nineteenth century British cartoons of the proposed channel tunnel which represent it as the gaping mouth to hell, ‘on occasion a mouth transformed into the devouring *vagina dentata* of the deepest male insecurities.’ (104) Nineteenth-century novels equate France with moral corruption and danger but also with sexual passion. In recent years there has been something of a sea change. Writers such as Rose Tremain, Pat Barker, Gillian Tindall and others are setting novels in France. Peter Lennon sees this due in part to a nostalgia and desire for the rural life which Britain has lost due to its successful and swift industrial revolution. (105)

Literature has the function of both unsettling, estranging the reader and providing catharsis. It provides a psychological space between inner and outer reality where the interplay between the two may be negotiated and recognised.

I have drawn on the work of Melanie Klein in analysing Roberts’ texts. A follower of Klein was Donald Winnicott and his notion of the transitional or potential space seems relevant to Roberts. Building on the work of Klein, Winnicott uses the concept of the transitional space to explore the way in which the child who has experienced what Winnicott famously refers to as ‘good-enough mothering’ is enabled to make the delicate transition from a merged identity with her to one which

is separate from her in the external world. Winnicott argues that the traditional division between inner and outer world in psychoanalysis doesn't adequately represent our psychic experience. He suggests we need to include a third state of intermediate experience, a state where our inner phantasy and outer reality both exist but which, of itself, is neither of these. This is the place where the subject and object are able to merge into one. Winnicott makes the point that the infant must be able to distinguish between phantasy and reality before this state can be achieved. It is also a home or resting place for the individual involved in the continuous task of trying to keep inner and outer reality separate but interrelated; where the interplay between the two can be negotiated. We experience it when we daydream or when we listen to music or lose ourselves in some artistic activity: 'The intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.' (106) It represents a state of living neither in a perpetual state of phantasy nor a perpetual state of imprisoning rationality. This third space, I would argue, is what Roberts achieves in her writing and calls on us to enter when we are reading.

By opening herself and her words up to the unconscious, by embracing the watery depths within herself, she invites the reader to do likewise. For a reader of English literature for whom France has often occupied the place of the 'other', her writing offers a kind of translation - a carrying across the waters of the Channel. As Roberts asserts:

‘The waters of the imagination transform us and our emotional geography, so that she who was a stranger becomes a neighbour and what was foreign becomes the place where we are most truly at home.

Our homeland is the imagination, also called Britain, also called Europe: the land under the sea full of secrets, slippery with dancing and darting words.’ (107)

Notes.

1. Michèle Roberts, *Daughters of the House* (London: Virago, 1992) p. 35-36; hereafter *Daughters*. Further references will appear after quotations in the text.
2. Julia Kristeva, ‘Revolution in poetic language’ in Toril Moi, (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
3. Michèle Roberts, *Flesh and Blood* (London: Virago, 1994); *A Piece of the Night* (London: The Women’s Press, 1978); *The Looking Glass* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 2000).
4. Michèle Roberts, *Fair Exchange* (London: Virago, 2000).
5. ‘Une Glossaire/ A Glossary’ in Michèle Roberts, *During Mother’s Absence* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 133.
6. See for example Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ in Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron, (eds.), *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), pp. 245-264.
7. Roberts, ‘Une Glossaire/ A Glossary’, in *During Mother’s Absence*.
8. *ibid.*, p. 164.
9. *ibid.*, p. 177.
10. Elaine Showalter, *The Guardian*, May 11, 1999.

11. Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in poetic language' in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 111.
12. Michèle Roberts, 'Writing and (Feminist) Politics' in *Women's Studies Int. Quart.*, 2, (1979), pp. 215-218 (215).
13. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* trans. C. Porter and C. Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 33.
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24. *ibid.*, p. 20.

25. Michèle Roberts, *Flesh and Blood*, pp. 109-110; hereafter *FB*. All further references will appear after quotations in the text.
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Chapter 4.

Where do you come from? Strategic Identities in the Poetry of Jackie Kay.

Where do you come from?

‘Here,’ I said, ‘Here. These parts.’

These lines come from the poem ‘In my country’ (1) where the black speaker asserts her right to belong to Scotland in the face of the questioner’s ignorance and racist assumptions. The assumed context of the poem is a black woman having to explain her ‘origins’ to a white speaker. The reader assumes the setting is Scotland partly because this is a recurring context in Kay’s poetry but also because of the accent and emphasis of the final line, ‘These parts’, a particularly Glaswegian phrase. This issue of being a black Scottish woman and the trouble society has with this identity is explored in much of Kay’s work. However in the poem ‘So you think I’m a Mule’ Kay asserts a different identity and offers a different response to the question ‘Where do you come from?’ Here she offers her own retort to those who construct her as ‘mulatto’ and she claims a political identity as ‘black’. In doing so she challenges the racist construction of her identity by insisting on the collective power of black women to fight such ways of being identified. Her identity in this sense is about women’s political ability to define their own lives, and to produce their own definitions of what it means to be a black woman. She also provides another definition of ‘home’:

and if we know no home
we know one thing:
we are Black
we're at home with that. (2)

What these differing responses show is the shifting and contingent nature of identity and of 'home' in Kay's writing. Home can be a place or a colour or neither of these. It can mean family, nation, 'race', history or the body. Is home fixed or always shifting and relative? Is it always dependent on who is asking the question: 'Where do you come from?' This question is one that Kay herself has internalised and asks throughout her writing. As the daughter of a white Scottish mother and Nigerian father, adopted by white working-class parents and as one of the few openly lesbian poets in Britain it is a question she has had to confront often.

Kay's poetry and writing has concerned itself with challenging such assumptions not only about the relationship between place and 'race' but also about expectations of sexuality, mothering and other facets of identity. Reviewers and critics of Kay's work have also engaged in cultural reductionism, tending to emphasise one aspect of her heritage over others. For example there has been a tendency to critique her style in terms of its black elements while ignoring the Scottish cultural influences. (3)

While this is a reading that fits well with the political emphasis on blackness in her work and the centrality of Britain's relations with Africa and the Caribbean in post-colonial theory, I think such a reading is reductionist and does not take account of the strategic nature of identity which Kay's work explores.

In his influential essay 'New Ethnicities', Stuart Hall writes of what he sees as a shift in black cultural politics from a position of embracing a collective black identity as a way of positively resisting the marginality and stereotyping of so much non-white culture to what he calls the end of the 'essential black subject'.

'The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity.' (4)

Hall suggests a recolonising of the term 'ethnicity' from its use within contemporary British discourse where he argues it serves to disavow the realities of racism to a more positive conception:

'... a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' or film-makers.' (5)

This politics of ethnicity 'predicated on difference and diversity' is a central feature, I would argue, of Kay's work. In her early poem 'Kail and Caliloo' she writes in colloquial Scots of the difficulty of fitting into the categories sanctioned by society.

you know the passport forms
or even some job applications noo-a-days?
well, there's nowhere to write

Celtic-Afro-Caribbean

in answer to the 'origin' question;

they think that's a contradiction

how kin ye be both? (6)

Her strategy here of writing partly in Scots dialect, of using the linguistic markers of Scottish national identity emphasises her ontological reality of being both. The poem also acknowledges the influence of women from both cultures on her poetic development:

Liz was my teenage hero

OCH MEN and her stop and start rhythm

I'd never heard of Audre Lord then. (7)

Hall acknowledges that this shift in black cultural politics is not straightforwardly chronological with one moment replacing the other and in Kay's work too, as in the different responses to the same question in the poems discussed above, she recognises the need for what Spivak refers to as 'strategic identities.' (8)

In this chapter I want to explore the different ways in which Kay's writing interrogates and explores identity construction and the different strategies she uses as a writer to upset established categories, raising questions about the way we casually assign cultural values. Although I will be drawing on all Kay's published writing my focus will be on the poem sequence 'The Adoption Papers'. *The Adoption Papers*

was Kay's first published collection of poetry in book form. It received several awards and nominations and established Kay as a more mainstream poet. (9)

Although published by Bloodaxe in 1991, the poem sequence called 'The Adoption Papers' was broadcast in BBC's Radio 3 series 'Drama Now' in August 1990. It is therefore roughly contemporaneous with Hall's work. It is significant too that the work was received initially in performance rather than on the printed page as most poetry collections are. It highlights the dramatic features in Kay's poetry and the centrality of the voice. Kay has also written for stage and television and there is considerable merging between her poetry and her drama. The performative aspect of the sequence and Kay's work is one area I will explore in relation to her location as a poet, as it is an aspect that is often ignored in critical reviews of her work.

As a poem sequence, 'The Adoption Papers' (10) explores in a concentrated and coherent narrative this issue of where do you come from? Through the reaction of three contrasting narrative voices it explores the story of the adoption of a mixed-race child from the different perspectives of the birth mother, the adoptive mother and the child herself.

'The Adoption Papers' is often referred to as an autobiographical sequence. There is a danger in this. While many of the events depicted in the sequence are based on Kay's life, we cannot assume the poet and the woman represented in any one poem are the same. Indeed Kay adopts a multiplicity of voices in this collection including that of the gay working class miner in 'Close Shave' (AP, 56) and a dialogue between two male lovers infected with HIV in 'Dance of the Cherry Blossom.' (AP, 50-51) Nonetheless at readings of her work, Kay very much locates the text in terms

of her own life and indeed at some readings she brings her adoptive mother with her. She invites identification. She thus rejects the emphasis on the depersonalised and abstract in much of the poetry of the period lauded by the poetry establishment. For previously marginalised groups of writers such as black women or lesbians in Britain, the so-called death of the subject and the post-modern dismantling of narrative positions arise at the moment when such voices are beginning to speak with confidence. To foreground the personal as Kay does in 'The Adoption Papers' is to resist and contest the idea that intellectual excellence requires depersonalisation and abstraction and it is thus an important political text for making visible the complexities of claiming a subjecthood in a racist and homophobic state.

In 'The Adoption Papers' Kay attempts to give voice to her two mothers - her birth mother and her adoptive mother - and herself. Kay distances herself slightly by the technique of creating three contrasting narrative voices, thus she tells her own story in 'The Adoption Papers' but she also creates new stories and new voices with which to tell them. One of the three voices in 'The Adoption Papers' most closely resembles Kay's, the voice of the daughter who is like Kay, both black and white. The same story is told from these three different perspectives.

The use of different voices to challenge stereotypes and expectations is a central strategy of Kay's work, as we have seen in the two introductory poems discussed above. While in performance it is easier to distinguish the different voices, on the printed page Kay uses different fonts to distinguish them. This is necessary because although the voices have particular 'accents' they constantly merge and interact losing their separate identities. As if to counteract this Kay gives a chronological

structure to the sequence. She frames the poems within a sequential narrative which is appropriate to a novel or a traditional autobiography in its linear and temporal structure. There are even chapter headings to each poem. There are three parts and each part represents a specific period of time in her conception and life spanning thirty years. Yet this narrative framework is constantly subverted by the internal organisation of the poems themselves which have their own shifting and merging interplay of time and space.

Kristeva's notion of the two modalities contained within language is useful in reading Kay's structure. The symbolic mode is that which the child directs towards the object world of other people and things. Here separation is privileged in the urge to master and control through the act of defining what is other, separate and potentially threatening to the self. The semiotic mode derives from the rhythmic, libidinal pre-oedipal memory with identification and continuity with the m/other privileged. The dialogic interaction between these two modalities produces language as generative process rather than fixed structure. As Kristeva argues 'Writing is upheld not by the subject of understanding, but by a divided subject, even a pluralised subject that occupies....permutable, multiple and even mobile places.'

(11)

This subversion of logical structure highlights the inadequacy of formal structures of representation to contain the complexity of the subject's life and aligns the work with both feminist and post-modern strategies of representing the self. However it would be a mistake to see Kay only as a playful postmodernist celebrating the multiplicity of identity. Her own material experience of the interactions of race,

gender, sexuality and geographical location make her wary of embracing identity as wholly performative. As another black writer, Toni Morrison, argues the postmodern dissolution and loss of self is part of the black woman's heritage in the West: 'from a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with 'postmodern' problems in the nineteenth century or earlier.' (12) While Kay recognises in her writing the fictional nature of our identities, she is also aware of the need for those fictions to give us a sense of ontological security.

Where do you come from? Maternal Origins.

The central questioning of identity in the narrative focuses on the issue of genetics versus environment and this is expressed most fully through the concept of what I will call maternal origins. This interrogation of nature versus culture is foregrounded in the opening lines of the poem where the adoptive mother feels a failure in the eyes of society because she can't reproduce 'naturally.'

I always wanted to give birth
do that incredible natural thing
that women do - I nearly broke down
when I heard we couldn't,
and then my man said
well there's always adoption
(we didn't have test tubes and the rest then)
even in the sixties there was
something scandalous about adopting,
telling the world your secret failure

bringing up an alien child,
who knew what it would turn out to be (*AP*, 10)

The so-called ‘natural’ ability to reproduce is immediately undercut by the adoptive mother’s failure to do so and by the introduction of the ‘test tubes.’ The daughter’s first words refer to a ‘forceps’ birth, reminding us of how culture manages nature and already disrupting the binary.

I was pulled out with forceps
left a gash down my left cheek
four months inside a glass cot
but she came faithful
from Glasgow to Edinburgh
and peered through the glass
I must have felt someone willing me to survive;
she would not pick another baby (*AP*, 10)

We are then introduced to the voice of the birth mother:

I still have the baby photograph
I keep it in my bottom drawer

She is twenty-six today
my hair is grey

The skin around my neck is wrinkling
does she imagine me this way (*AP*, 10)

Kay's synthesis of voices here can be located within feminist work on autobiography produced in the 80s. Texts by critics such as Estelle Jelinek, Shari Benstock, Susan Stanford Friedman and Liz Stanley were all concerned with the inadequacy of theories or approaches that privilege the notion of the individuality of the self constructed in narrative. (13) Although writing from different feminist perspectives they share an interest in the problems involved in accounting for and giving voice to the experience of a changing subjectivity and the ways in which individuals occupy different and contradictory subject positions both simultaneously and at different stages in their lives. They all put forward the thesis that any text which purports to be about the self, raises different issues for a woman than a man. Whereas the white, male, heterosexual 'I' can assert that it is somehow impersonal, universal, that it represents cultural and aesthetic values, the female 'I' reflects instead the instability of the self as the woman occupies the marginal position of 'other.' (14) Feminist auto/biography has also highlighted the notion of the centrality to many women's experience of the ties that connect women to others and particularly to other women. Friedman (15) uses the historical and psychological theories of Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow to argue that the emphasis on the individuality of autobiographical selves constructed in the writing process does not apply to culturally imposed group or gender identities in the case of women and minorities. She argues that women, for both social and psychological reasons, are less separated from others and experience themselves as in community with and bonded to others.

The work of Chodorow and others seems to me very relevant to a reading of Kay's poem sequence both in terms of the thematic and the formalistic.

According to Chodorow the mother-daughter relationship remains central to the ongoing process of female individuation. (16) Building on the work of Melanie Klein, she retains Klein's emphasis on the early pre- oedipal period and on the relationship between mother and infant but locates the psychoanalytic account of mothering not in terms of instinctual life but in terms of the social organisation of gender. She argues that women mother girls and boys differently and they do this mainly as a result of their need to recreate the intimacy they experienced in relation to their own mother. This need is exacerbated by their own subordinate position in society and how this is internalised psychologically. From an early age feminine and masculine identity are differentially constructed around the capacity for human relationship. Because they are mothered by someone of the same sex, girls grow up with more permeable boundaries between themselves and their mothers than do boys. Boys' path to separation is based on difference. Since primacy in patriarchal societies is given to women's caring functions, both inside and outside the family, the girl's capacity for nurturing is directed towards her future role as wife and mother. For boys, the expectation of their role as breadwinner means that their capacities for containment and detachment are developed. Chodorow refutes Freud's claim that girls successfully transfer their attachment to their father at the oedipal stage. Because of the father's lack of emotional availability and the intensity of the mother-daughter bond, girls remain attached emotionally to their mothers and take this attachment into adult relationships. They thus experience heterosexual relationships in a triangular context: a child not only recreates for her the exclusive intense

primary unit, which a heterosexual relationship tends to recreate for men, it also recreates her internalised asymmetrical relational triangle. This is particularly true of lesbian women, for whom she argues the love of women is an extension of their love for their mothers. 'Lesbian relationships,' Chodorow writes, 'do tend to recreate mother-daughter emotions and connections'. (17) Chodorow's work has been criticised for being universalist, idealistic of mother-daughter relations and for playing down the importance of sexuality and in particular unconscious desire. (18) Chodorow herself in her later work (19) and the use of her work by critics such as Benjamin (20) goes some way to addressing these criticisms. However her thesis does provide an interesting way of looking at Kay's sequence and also her other poetry where the focus is on the relational between women, for example 'Photo in the Locket' (*AP*, 46-49) and many of the poems in Kay's second collection: *Other Lovers*.

Despite the charges of both cultural and biological essentialism levelled at Chodorow, the emphasis on the maternal and the fluidity of mother-daughter relations also aligns her work with both lesbian and Afracentric perspectives, and in particular the work of writers such as Audre Lorde. In the Prologue to *Zami*, Lorde writes 'I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the 'I' at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the 'I' moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed.' (21) In 'The Adoption Papers' too the triangle becomes female with the 'I' moving back and forth between the daughter, her birth mother and her adoptive mother. The poems can be read, as Dorothy McMillan notes, as a collection

of love poems to the adoptive mother with the roles of daughter and lover intertwined. (22)

The structure of 'The Adoption Papers' where the voices constantly merge and reflect on the 'm/other' means that we read the text with a constant rethinking and re-constitution of the characters' perspectives and sense of themselves. For example in 'Chapter 2: The Original Birth Certificate' the perspective shifts from the daughter's retrieval as an adult of her birth details from the records office in Edinburgh:

So slow as torture he discloses bit by bit
my mother's name, my original name
the hospital I was born in, the time I came.
Outside Edinburgh is soaked in sunshine
I talk to myself walking past the castle.
So, so, so, I was a midnight baby after all. (*AP*, 12)

to that of the birth mother immediately after having given birth to her:

I am nineteen
my whole life is changing

On the first night
I see her shuttered eyes in my dreams

I cannot pretend she's never been
my stitches pull and threaten to snap

my own body a witness
leaking blood to sheets, milk to shirts

On the second night
I'll suffocate her with a feather pillow

Bury her under a weeping willow
Or take her far out to sea
and watch her tiny eight-pound body
sink to shells and reshape herself.

So much the better than her body
encased in glass like a museum piece. (*AP*, 12-13)

The search by the adult daughter for her birth mother connects her back to her own pre-oedipal. Indeed the first poem in the sequence is called 'The Seed' where Kay as author/creator literally conceives herself in language. The different voices reflect this also. The voice of the birth mother is much more connected to Irigaray's notion of an 'imaginary,' or Kristeva's 'semiotic;' her phrases are musical, her imagery figurative and her language is connected to images of water and nature. The adoptive mother's voice is very different, much more connected to the symbolic. Her thoughts shift and merge but much of her language is prosaic and expressed in the colloquial,

no nonsense dialect of urban Glasgow. The best example of this difference is in the poem called 'Chapter 4: Baby Lazarus.'

November

The social worker phoned,
our baby is a girl but not healthy
she won't pass the doctor's test
until she's well. The adoption papers
can't be signed. I put the phone down.
I felt all hot. Don't get overwrought.
What does she expect? I'm not a mother
until I've signed that piece of paper. (*AP*, 16)

Baby Lazarus merges the two voices of birth mother and adoptive mother both at the point of exchanging roles. The birth mother is on a train journey; although we are not told specifically, there are suggestions that she is returning from giving the baby up finally. 'My name signed on a dotted line.' Her thoughts are interspersed with the voice of the adoptive mother as she goes through the 'journey' to officially becoming the 'mother'. There is a time sequence from November through December to March although the words and verses of the birth mother are presented as a continuous journey or possibly the same journey taken over and over again both physically and metaphorically. Physically as she visits the baby still in her 'glass cot' and metaphorically as she is haunted by her decision and it impinges again and again on her consciousness.

The rhythm of the train carries me
over the frigid earth
the constant chug a comforter
a rocking cradle.

Maybe the words lie
across my forehead
headline in thin ink

MOTHER GIVES BABY AWAY (*AP*, 16-17)

Kay uses pathetic fallacy here to good effect, the voice sees everything in terms of the lost baby; the train becomes a mother and all that she needs and is projecting onto her baby. The imagery connects and merges the mother with her baby. This merger/identification of mother and baby is a key point in object relations theory:

‘Mothering, moreover, involves a double identification for women, both as mother and as child. The whole pre-Oedipal relationship has been internalised and perpetuated in a more ongoing way for women than for men. Women take both parts in it. Women have capacities for primary identification with their child through regression to primary love and empathy... At the same time, women remain in conflict with their internal mother and often their real mother as well. The preoccupation with issues of separation and primary identification, the ability to recall their early relationship to their mother - precisely those capacities which enable mothering - are also those which may lead to over-identification and pseudo-

empathy based on maternal projection rather than any real perception or understanding of their infant's needs.' (23)

This infant/nature projection recalls Ann Sexton's poem 'The Abortion' (24) where the persona is also on a literal and metaphorical journey of coming to terms with her act of abortion. The voice shifts between her external awareness of the mundane details - compare Sexton's 'I changed my shoes and then drove south.' - and her internal consciousness. Although the speaker is at times lost in her thoughts about her baby, the voice returns to the details of the train carriage showing the character's consciousness of being looked at and judged, of having her life visible or 'readable' to the public. Her view of self is influenced by the way she perceives herself as being viewed by others. 'Maybe the words lie/ across my forehead/headline in thin ink/MOTHER GIVES BABY AWAY'.

This awareness of ideologies and the social construction of our subjectivity pervade the sequence and indeed the other poems in the collection. Elsewhere in this poem the adoptive mother comments on the construction of herself as a mother: ' I felt all hot....I'm not a mother/until I've signed that piece of paper.'

I forgot to put sugar in the flask.
The man across the table keeps staring.
I should have brought another book-
all this character does is kiss and say sorry

go and come back,

we are all foolish with trust.

I used to like winter

the empty spaces, the fresh air. (*AP*, 18)

Reference to the narrative reflects her own lost relationships -her loss of lover and child's loss of mother (in psychoanalytic terms both are the loss of 'mother'.) The poem ends with the birth mother having a symbolic funeral for the baby. After burying the clothes she had bought for her: 'A week later I stood at my window/and saw the ground move and swell/the promise of a crop, ...' she gives her a service with rituals but she can never have closure.

In contrast to this rhythmic elegiac language of the birth mother, the voice of the adoptive mother is closer to the symbolic -she is excited and her language and dialogue with herself and her husband reflects this.

Our baby has passed.

We can pick her up in two days.

Two days for Christ's sake,

could they not have given us a bit more notice? (*AP*, 17)

Benstock's study of the relationship between genre and gender in autobiography uses Lacan's split of the 'je' and 'moi' to explore differences in male and female writings of the self. She uses the phrase 'fissures of female discontinuity' to explore through the example of Woolf and other female modernists the different features of female

writing of the self. Gaps, shifting of pronouns, of perspectives she views as female.

In discussing male texts she argues that:

‘The whole thrust of such works is to seal up and cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations and blind spots ... The dissection of self-analysis premises the cohesion of a restructured self. Any hint of the disparate, the disassociated, is overlooked or enfolded into a narrative of synthesis.’ (25)

She sees the white, male, heterosexual ethic underlying the Modernist aesthetic of ‘impersonality,’ the transformation of the textual ‘I’ from the personal to the cultural as challenged by writing which displays fissures of female discontinuity. Drawing on post-structuralist work on narrative strategy she sees such fissures as illustrating a relation between the psychic and the political, the personal and the social, in the linguistic fabric. She argues that the genre needs to redefine itself to accommodate the social and psychic selfhood of women.

Kay’s sequence of poems points up this relationship between the psychic and the political, the personal and the social, through its constant shifts between external dialogue and internal consciousness and dreams. Despite the marginalisation of the male/father in the sequence and the female nature of the relational triangle the law of the father is very much present. The patriarchal state haunts each of the chapters in its dominant ideology of mothering and the family. This is given its fullest expression in ‘Chapter 3: The Waiting Lists.’ This poem concerns itself with the power of ideologies and the ‘agency’ of the state to determine who is a good enough

mother. The voice of the adoptive mother recalls the struggle to adopt a baby, each agency rejecting them as not the right sort of parents: 'we didn't live close enough to a church ... we weren't high enough earners ...'

Just as we were going out the door

I said oh you know we don't mind the colour.

Just like that, the waiting was over. (*AP*, 14)

Note the way colour is introduced as an afterthought. The assumption is that no white parents would want a black baby. The effect of the pause and the low-key 'just like that' makes this poignant and yet dramatic at the same time. If the mother is subject to discourses of motherhood which position her in a particular way, a racist state does not even view a mixed race baby as a baby.

The poem shifts to the daughter's voice, receiving 'official' details about her birth mother's identity from the record office. One sheet of paper- 'Your mother was nineteen when she had you. / You weighed eight pounds four ounces. / She liked hockey ...' What is striking here is the incongruity of the few details which 'create' in language her mother's identity. We then move to 'The Visit' of the social worker to the home of the potential adoptive mother. The style is witty and immediate with a strong use of colloquial Glaswegian and the constant repetition of 'she says', 'I say' inviting us into her narrative.

I thought I'd hid everything

that there wasnie wan

giveaway sign left

I put Marx Engels Lenin (no Trotsky)
in the airing cupboard - she'll no be
checking out the towels surely

All the copies of the *Daily Worker*
I shoved under the sofa
the dove of peace I took down from the loo (*AP*, 14-15)

Again this is concerned with the power of others to define your worth as a mother. The immediacy of the visit and the mother's tension is conveyed through the phrasing and syntax. Punctuation is only used by the social worker. The extract is comic but sharply political in its representation of the woman trying to please- aware of herself as seen and judged by others with regard to personal taste and politics as well as class. She constructs an identity as the 'good potential mother' which involves removing any evidence of personality, or any political ideals.

Gabrielle Griffin argues that Kay's poetry 'speaks among other things of the relationship between individual and state, and investigates the dynamic of desire and constraint which informs that relationship.' (26) The so-called 'natural' and sanctioned desire for women to reproduce is allowed in the context of adoption as long as the parents are deemed suitable but Kay pursues the tolerance of this desire in the sequence 'Severe Gale 8' which makes up the rest of the volume. Here the desire is realised through lesbian parenting by artificial insemination in 'Mummy

and Donor and Deirdre' (*AP*, 54-55) and baby-snatching in 'The Underground Baby Case.' (*AP*, 62-64) Griffin argues that mainstream critics have been able to cope with such desires in the context of adoption but can't handle the context of artificial insemination, which challenges the norm too far and have therefore focused on the sequence of 'The Adoption Papers' rather than the rest of the collection. Certainly the so-called normal family is presented negatively in *The Adoption Papers*. In 'Dressing Up' (*AP*, 57) Kay uses the technique of reversal to show the violence and repression at the heart of family ideology. She depicts a 'real typical working class / Scottish' family where the son is a transvestite. This is seen as the ultimate transgression by the mother who asserts she would rather he 'murdered somebody than that.' In the final verse however we see the real transgression at the heart of the family:

Ma ma didn't touch her turkey
 Finally she said What did I do
 I know what they call you, transvite.
 You look a bloody mess you do.
 She had a black eye, a navy dress.

This strategy of reversal where Kay undermines and diminishes the so-called 'normal' family is a technique used throughout her work. We see it in the mother/daughter relationship explored in 'Bed' (27) and also in the comical 'Maw Broon visits a Therapist.' (*OC*, 46-47) This reversal is similar to the technique of chiasmus identified by Gates (28) as a feature of African writers from Equiano onwards and often used to criticise colonial customs and attitudes by contrasting the

true image with received notions of the same subject and thus undermining and diminishing this image.

The construction of the maternal is explored throughout the poem in the voices of the two mothers, the adoptive mother who is aware of her 'secret failure' in being unable to conceive her own child and the birth mother who feels she 'had no other choice.' This interrogation of nature and nurture is given its fullest voice in Part two; 1967-1971. 'Chapter 6: The Telling Part.' concerns the child learning of her adoption. The child's perspective is mirrored in the use of the colloquial child-like dialect and singsong rhythm:

Ma mammy bot me oot a shop

Ma mammy says I was a luvly baby

Ma mammy picked me (I wiz the best)

your mammy had to take you (she'd no choice)

Ma mammy says she's no really ma mammy

(just kid on) (*AP*, 21)

This is interspersed and merged with the adoptive mother's voice and thoughts. Both are dealing with the attitudes of others: in the child's case her lines are often responses to invisible or internalised other children representing the 'norm,' this comes across in the defensiveness of her declarations about her 'mammy': 'my mammy is the best mammy in the world OK'. In the case of the mother we see the

internalised attitudes and, in the play on the words 'real' and 'mother,' the way language constructs our sense of selves.

I could hear the upset in her voice
I says *I'm not your real mother*,
though Christ knows why I said that,
If I'm not who is, but all my planned speech
went out the window (*AP*, 21)

and later

Now when people say 'ah but
it's not like having your own child though is it',
I say of course it is, what else is it?
she's my child, I have told her stories
wept at her losses, laughed at her pleasures,
she is mine. (*AP*, 23)

Yet there is no word to account for her in language, highlighted in the daughter's
'After mammy telt me she wisnae my real mammy....'

Much feminist work has been devoted to the consideration of motherhood as a social construct or a biological condition. (29) What this sequence highlights is the lack of a differentiating term emphasising how in modern western consciousness the birth and social mother are coupled. In anthropology the term 'genatrix' is used for the

biological mother and the term 'mater' for the person who has the main social relationship with the child, however defined. Yet these terms are not often used precisely because we have a whole set of assumptions about what a mother is which connects the two. In Mike Leigh's 1997 film 'Secrets and Lies' (30) which deals with a young black woman's search for and relationship with her white birth mother, there is a scene where the women talk and the word 'mum' becomes a confusing and problematic word in their emotionally stilted conversation precisely because of this coupling. The maternal constructed in myth and indeed in theory does not allow for this uncoupling.

I was always the first to hear her in the night
all this umbilical knot business is nonsense
- the men can afford deeper sleeps that's all (*AP*, 23)

and in 'Chapter 10: The Meeting Dream' the adoptive mother asserts the primacy of her bond.

...Curiosity. It's natural. Origins.
That kind of thing. See me and her
there is no mother and daughter more similar.
We're on the wavelength so we are.
Right away I know if she's upset.
And vice versa. Closer than blood.
Thicker than water. Me and my daughter. (*AP*, 34)

The sequence doesn't provide a simple answer to the question 'Where do I come from?' rather it points up the complex nature of our subjectivities. In some poems Kay highlights the social and in others she interrogates the biological. The sequence ends with a poem called 'The Meeting Dream' and another poem explores a dream from the perspective of the adoptive mother. This seems to me significant in the recognition of the complex nature of our subjectivities and the part played by the subconscious in shaping who we are. Dreams are given the same narrative status as 'actual' events.

In most of the poems or 'chapters' these aspects merge and interact through the shifts in voices and the subjectivities of the mothers and of the daughter. Shifts in time and place within one poem or 'chapter' add to this effect. The internal structure of the poems expresses this complex and shifting subjectivity -of the mothers as well as the daughter. Does the sequence privilege any particular perspective on Kay's sense of self or her maternal origins? It is interesting that the picture on the front cover of *The Adoption Papers* is of a false-colour light micrograph of human chromosomes obtained by amniocentesis. Is this giving more credence to genetics or heredity over environment or can we read it as an ironic comment on society's concern with the 'natural,' critiqued in this volume and elsewhere in Kay's writing? What is apparent is the symbolic importance of the birth mother and the weight she carries for an individual. The final poem/chapter 'The Meeting Dream' acknowledges this:

she is too many imaginings to be flesh and blood (*AP*, 33)

Despite the linear structure and its containment the final poem is open ended, there is no resolution. The daughter's identity remains in process. The sequence ends with the voice of the daughter still fantasising about a letter the birth mother will write.

Her sister said she'd write me a letter.

In the morning I'm awake with the birds

waiting for the crash of the letter box

then the soft thud of words on the mat.

I lie there, duvet round my shoulders

fantasising the colour of her paper

whether she'll underline First Class

or have a large circle over her 'i's. (AP, 34)

Where do you come from? Home as Colour.

Both the voice of the birth mother and the voice of the adoptive mother are white ones. When she is convincing herself of the strength of the bond between her and her daughter, the adoptive mother says:

I listened to hear her talk,

and when she did I heard my voice under hers

and now some of her mannerisms crack me up (AP, 23)

Quite literally in this poem her 'voice' is under hers but also the daughter is connected to other voices, the rhythmic and lyrical tones of the birth mother and the

voice of the absent father and the part of herself which connects to her black history; in the poem this connection is made through the voices of Black blues singers Pearl Bailey and Bessie Smith who the daughter and her friend listen to instead of the more fashionable 'Donny Osmond or David Cassidy'

Round at her house we put on
the old record player and mime to Pearl Bailey
Tired of the life I lead, tired of the blues I breed
and Bessie Smith I can't do without my kitchen man.
Then we practise ballroom dancing giggling,
everyone thinks we're dead old-fashioned. (*AP*, 23)

Kay grew up hearing black blues singers played in her childhood home and Bessie Smith is a recurring figure in her work. In 'The Red Graveyard' (*OL*, 13) one of the poems from the Bessie Smith sequence the speaker asks herself :

Inside the house where I used to be myself,
her voice claims the rooms. In the best room even,
something has changed the shape of my silence.
Why do I remember her voice and not my own mother's?
Why do I remember the blues?

The voice of Bessie Smith then is the black maternal heritage that is missing from the triangle of the daughter and the two white mothers. The positioning of this childhood memory is significant. It is placed right at the end of 'Chapter 6: The

Telling Part' which deals with the daughter's and the mother's feelings after the daughter has learnt of her adopted status and realised why she is not the same colour as her adoptive mother. The voice then becomes for her a way of beginning to articulate her sense of being black. In a review of Kay's collection *Other Lovers* Rodney Pybus (31) argues that Kay is strongest when least (apparently) autobiographical and more distanced. As an example of her strength he cites the Bessie Smith poems. Conversely he assumes that 'the more personal celebrations of family and homosexual love and loss' are autobiographical. Pybus's assumptions here, although qualified by that (apparently), are problematic for a number of reasons not least his equation of poet with persona. His assumptions also highlight the reductive way in which autobiography is often read in terms of the external 'facts' of the individual's life. Yet the voice of Bessie Smith and what she comes to represent for Kay is part of the construction of her subjectivity and thus her voice may be seen as as significant as the voices of those who were part of her immediate family. Audre Lorde used the term biomythography (32) rather than auto/biography to suggest the way in which our stories about ourselves are always composites of mothers, friends and lovers. Kay herself writes of the feelings of longing and desire for something unnameable that the voice of Bessie Smith evoked. 'I will always associate the dawning of my own realization of being black with the blues, and particularly Bessie's blues ... Bessie's blues still fill me with a strange longing. I don't know exactly what for. Blackness? A culture that will wholly embrace me? Belonging? Who knows.' (33)

Friedman (34) in her work on autobiography uses Rowbotham to explore the construction of woman's selfhood in terms of de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is not born but made:

'A woman cannot, Rowbotham argues, experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as woman that is as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture. Like Lacan, Rowbotham uses the metaphor of mirrors to describe the development of women's consciousness. But her mirror is the reflecting surface of cultural representation into which a woman stares to form her identity.'

That mirror does not reflect back a unique, individual identity; it projects an image of WOMAN, a category. In 'The Adoption Papers' the image of woman projected back is generally a white one. 'Chapter 7: Black Bottom' is the poem in the sequence which most directly deals with issues of race and identity politics. The poem sequence begins with the voice of the adoptive mother. Although hurt by the racism her daughter is encountering at school, she is limited in her empathy and understanding by her own positionality as a white woman.

Maybe that's why I don't like
all this talk about her being black,
I brought her up as my own
as I would any other child
colour matters to the nutters;
but she says my daughter says

it matters to her (*AP*, 24)

The power relations that are built into the process of inclusion and exclusion have been central in understanding the significance of difference within feminist politics. The adoptive mother, however loving, reflects the attitudes of white liberal society. As long as we take the experience of the dominant group as a universal standard or norm then we construct the other as 'deviant' We need to recognise the particularity of our own experience; that it is located historically and culturally and we also need to recognise our own part in the structures of difference and how this affects us materially and psychologically. Many writers have explored the need for white women to recognise how our subjectivities are implicated in the myriad of unconscious and conscious presumptions of the dominant group. (35) Dyer in his study of representations of whiteness argues that in order to dislodge whiteness from its centrality and authority it needs to be 'made strange': 'White power ...reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity.' (36) 'Colour matters' to everyone.

Interspersed with the adoptive mother's reflections is the other narrative thread running through and dominating the poem; that of the daughter's daily experiences of racism, her construction as 'other,' as deviant and her agency in this situation. In the first couple of scenes she is taunted, constructed in words as 'sambo sambo' and 'Dirty Darkie' Instead of taking this passively, she fights back 'I knee him in the balls ... My fist is steel; I punch and punch his gut ...' However it is she who is reported for fighting, labelled again by the adults;

...In a few years time you'll be a juvenile delinquent.

Do you know what that is? Look it up in the dictionary.

She spells each letter with slow pleasure.

Read it out to the class.

Thug. Vandal. Hooligan. Speak up. Have you lost your tongue? (*AP*, 25)

As a child of mixed race she has lost aspects of her 'tongue.' The sequence is in some ways a search for that voice. The narrative shifts to another scene where the children are practising dance for the school show. Significantly one of the dances is called the 'Black Bottom,' and the three verses focus on the teacher's racist stereotyping of the daughter as having rhythm.... 'I thought/you people had it in your blood.' The effect of this on the young girl's subjectivity is cleverly indicated in the following 'My skin is hot as burning coal/ like that time she said Darkies are like coal...' The effect is shown in that she can only describe her discomfort using the same racist simile as has been used by the teacher. Her subjectivity is created through this racist language. The simile also connects her back to her birth mother whose voice in this poem recalls her black lover, the daughter's father:

Olubayo was the colour of peat
when we walked out heads turned
like horses, folk stood like trees
their eyes fixed on us - it made me
burn, that hot glare; my hand
would sweat down to his bone.

Finally, alone, we'd melt
nothing, nothing would matter (*AP*, 26)

The poem also deals with the lack of role models and heroines available to the young black girl. Although this is witty and ironic and displays much that characterises 'Glaswegian' humour, it deals again with the absence of any 'objects' for the young girl to identify with; the search for a sense of identity in a predominantly white community.

...Angela Davis is the only female person
I've seen (except for a nurse on TV)
who looks like me. She had big hair like mine
that grows out instead of down.
My mum says it's called an *Afro*.
If I could be as brave as her when I get older
I'll be OK.
Last night I kissed her goodnight again
and wondered if she could feel the kisses
in prison all the way from Scotland.
Her skin is the same too you know
I can see that my skin is that colour
but most of the time I forget
so sometimes when I look in the mirror
I give myself a bit of a shock
and say to myself *Do you really look like this?*

as if I'm somebody else. I wonder if she does that. (AP, 26-27)

The cultural obliteration of her identity which began with her not even being considered a baby:

...They told us they had no babies at first
and I chanced it didn't matter what colour it was
and they said *oh well are you sure*
in that case we have a baby for you -
to think she wasn't even thought of as a baby,
my baby, my baby (AP, 24)

has led to an alienation from her own body. There is humour and sadness in the poem but what stands out is the connection between the young girl and the 'heroine.' Houston Baker, Jr. (37) refers to the 'life crisis of black identity in a white society' drawing on the work of Richard Wright. It relates to the moment when the black person realises their 'zero image' in the perceptual schemes of the white dominant culture; it often figures in literature as the moment of looking in a mirror or at a photograph. Such a moment is equivalent in Wright's view to other life crisis such as birth, puberty and death. In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* Paul Gilroy demonstrates the importance of culture both to the resilience of racism and to the process of resisting it. He considers the prevalent cultural representations of black people as deviant, as either 'problem' or 'victim.' He argues that representation, including self-presentation, in speech, writing and music of black people outside these categories, as the subjects of history and agents of historical

change, is in itself a weapon against racism. (38) Angela Davis offers resistance to the teacher's construction of her in language as deviant.

Rowbotham's examination of cultural representation in the formation of women's consciousness of self is particularly relevant to black women. She argues that woman can move beyond the racist stereotypes to form new group identities:

'In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands, women project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead this new identity merges the shared and the unique ... the self constructed in women's autobiographical writing is often based in, but not limited to, a group consciousness - an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN for the patterns of women's individual destiny. Alienation is not the result of creating a self in language, as it is for Lacanian and Barthesian critics of autobiography. Instead, alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech.' (39)

Part of the alienation for Kay comes from society's inability to connect both her Scottish and her African heritages. She talks of this issue in an interview in 1990: 'I can't separate one from the other. Other people always try. Like Scottish people will either refuse to recognise my Scottish accent, or my Scottishness, or they'll say, 'Are you American?' And Black people will just hear my accent or think it really

funny and say they've never met such a person before. And so being Black and Scottish is always treated as a kind of anomaly, which I suppose it is.' (40)

Where Do You Come From?: Scotland

In the poem 'Black Bottom' the daughter in response to the teacher's racist comment asks herself '*What Is In My Blood?*' (AP, 25) This question is taken up in the final section of the poem where the daughter is now a young adult and is trying to make contact with her birth mother. In 'Chapter 8: Generations.' the daughter ruminates on her genetic heritage.

I have my parents who are not of the same tree
and you keep trying to make it matter,
the blood, the tie, the passing down
generations.

We all have our contradictions,
the ones with the mother's nose and father's eyes
have them;
the blood does not bind confusion,
yet I confess to my contradiction
I want to know my blood....

...It is the well, the womb, the fucking seed.

Here, I am far enough away to wonder -
what were their faces like
who were my grandmothers

what were their days like
passed in Scotland
the land I come from
the soil in my blood. (*AP*, 29)

The desire 'to know my blood' despite the intellectual awareness of the limitations of such a desire, recalls Boland's 'contrary passion to be whole.' (41) Both poets are in different ways conscious of the fictional nature of such positionings but feel strongly the seductions of such narratives of belonging and 'home'.

This phrase 'the soil in my blood' suggests the importance of her highland heritage as part of her sense of herself, the physical place as a mark of her history.

Contemporary Scotland is a presence throughout Kay's writing and the accents in 'The Adoption Papers' are all Scottish ones. The two mothers voice different Scottish languages: the Highland voice of the birth mother and the Lowland voice of the adoptive mother. The voice of the birth mother is the lyrical, musical one symbolising loss and dispossession. Her language is more traditionally poetic in form possibly signifying her highland roots in a more 'primitive' oral tradition. In 'Baby Lazarus' she travels to Edinburgh, the site of power, of official discourse to give up her rights to her progeny. The voice of the adoptive mother is prosaic, urban Glaswegian. While the adoptive mother is a working class communist, subversive and critical of dominant ideologies of mothering, she is nonetheless a more 'suitable' mother. This is a reminder that Scotland does not talk with one voice. Like 'The Adoption Papers' Scottish literature is polyphonic and includes Gaelic, Doric Scots,

Lallans, and regional varieties of standard English, all representing different regions and cultural influences.

The daughter's 'hybridity' then is not just constructed of black and white but of those different influences, the narratives of place of the two mothers. The language of the Birth mother then can be connected both to the 'primitive' of the imaginary and to the dispossessed voice of the highland woman, connecting both patriarchal and colonial repression. The daughter shifts between them, at times prosaic and humorous like her adoptive mother and at times poetic and wistful, closer to the voice of her birth mother. Just as she shifts between black and white.

These different Scottish heritages are important in recognising the complexity of identity explored in Kay's writing. As a mixed-race writer Kay's writing is often seen in a post-colonial context but the specificity of her Scottish heritage(s) is usually ignored and Kay is seen as a Black British writer. A survey of anthologies illustrates this cultural reductionism. Kay's writing has consistently appeared in several anthologies of black/African writing in Britain (42) but rarely is she even now included in Scottish anthologies, despite recently being awarded a D.Phil. from Stirling University for services to Scottish writing. The Penguin modern poets series which brings out paperback editions consisting of a selection of three poets published both a black collection and a Scottish one in the same year. Kay unsurprisingly appeared again in the black collection. Despite the increasing use of colloquial Scots in her work and in her last volume direct engagement with Scotland as a subject, post-devolution anthologies still exclude her. (43) There are some notable exceptions to this in criticism from women critics, for example Helen Kidd

who locates Kay as a Scottish woman writer because of her insistence on diverse rather than essential identity (44) and in critical anthologies published in Scotland she is beginning to get some recognition. (45) Attention to the Scottish context of her work needs to be paid if we are not to replicate the assumptions of the questioner in 'in my country' or the official discourse of Cail and Kaliloo where to be Afro-Celtic is not allowed.

As Robert Crawford (46) argues, in issues of cultural difference there is a tendency to focus on that which is perceived as most 'other' and smaller provincial cultures, closer geographically to the so-called centre, are ignored. With Kay who is half Nigerian and half-Scottish it is more topical to concentrate on the possible African heritage rather than locate her as a Scottish writer negotiating anglocentricity. This in itself replicates the cultural imperialism that has characterised England's relations with Scotland and its culture. This relationship is a complex and contested one and hinges on the extent to which Scotland can be seen as a colonised country. Certainly nationalist history would construct it so. Yet as Linda Colley (47) and others show, Scotland has an impressive history as a coloniser also. The Act of Union of 1707, which incorporated the Scottish Parliament into Westminster, created a superstructure of Britishness - cultural, imperial and institutional - which remained in place for nearly 300 years. Although in 1997 the large majority of the Scottish people voted in favour of establishing a Scottish Parliament, this was not always the case during earlier periods of Scottish history during which Britishness was a much stronger part of Scots identity.

Why was this? Firstly because for most of the period of the Union being British meant prosperity for the elite in Scotland. The success and economic and cultural dominance of the English meant that many of the Scots gentry in particular made their way through alternative routes provided by the British state. Both Scots and Irish were over-represented in the officer class of the army and among imperial explorers, administrators and imperial merchants. Success in the wars against France, acquisition of the global empire and early industrialisation helped create fabulous political and economic opportunities. The elite of England, Scotland and Wales was bound together in a common project of imperial conquest, administration and trade. (48) Paradoxically then it was Britain's success as a colonising country which helped it consolidate its cultural imperialism over Scotland. Ernst Gellner's account of nation formation is particularly apt here. Gellner sees homogenisation and industrialisation as allied forces in the creation of a nation. '...any state that is undergoing modernisation and develops massive bureaucratic systems must create a homogenising centrally determined mass education system that effectively imposes a single system from above. Minority, folk and peripheral languages and cultures are effectively squeezed out or are actively quashed to create a single, mass culture.'

(49)

In *Other Lovers* Kay explores the loss of language which does not fit into the dominant order or culture.

distance

between one language and another, one

culture and another; one religion
and another. The *little languages*
squashed, stamped upon, cleared out
to make way
for the big one, better tongue.
These things happen
between
time (OL, 20-21)

This could aptly apply to the Scottish language. Crawford (50) illustrates how in 18th century Scotland after the union much attention was paid to the eradication of Scottish linguistic indicators. To fit into the Britain created by the Act of Union meant to become assimilated into English speech patterns. This necessarily contributed to the division between lowland and highland Scots, a division dramatised in the different accents of the mothers in 'The Adoption Papers.' Scots themselves internalised the view of their language as provincial and barbarian.

The teaching and development of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in Scottish universities ironically reinforced this, emphasising as models certain kinds of literary English writing and promoting models for the development of Scottish culture which were Anglocentric. To succeed as 'British' meant the promotion of the study of a canon whose works were by and large the literary embodiment of English metropolitan taste. This promotion of certain types of literature represented an attack on the Scottish vernacular tradition. Scots became the language of the oral, English of the written. At the same time as Scots was gradually being eroded and reduced to an

embarrassing accent, Gaelic was being destroyed as a national language. The defeat of the clans at Culloden in 1746 was hammered home with a disarming act that took away distinctively highland dress and music. Having deprived the Highlanders of their cultural identity they were then deprived of their homes by Scottish and English landlords so that their land could be used for sheep. (51) As well as benefitting from colonialism then Scotland had its own diaspora originating in the Highland clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries. The circumstances of the Clearances illustrate well the complexity of Scotland's history as both colonised and coloniser. As Berthold Schoene-Harwood points out, although the clearances were instigated by the English imperial centre in further attempts to colonise the remoter regions of Britain, 'most of the immediate agents or perpetrators of the evictions were anglicised Lowlanders.' (52) Schoene-Harwood argues that the reason they made such willing accomplices to imperialism was their own sense of dislocated identity brought about by the cultural imperialism of England since the Union. What is particularly ironic here is that the very highland symbols that were banned and constructed as barbarian, namely kilt, tartan and Gaelic language were then appropriated by the lowlanders as a signifier of 'pure, uncontaminated Scottishness' in the nineteenth-century. Harwood refers to this process as 'an expedient assimilation of the native other in order to strengthen one's own culturally emaciated self.' (53) Hence what we think of as traditionally Scottish may in fact be a function of English imperialism.

'Assembled and appropriated under English pressure by the Scottish Lowlanders from – and at the expense of – Highland culture, it reflects the imperial centre's desire to eradicate inconvenient differences amongst its others by collapsing them

into one. A distinctively different, yet in itself homogenous other is far easier to control than someone of many different, potentially subversive faces, or someone whose culture displays more similarities than dissimilarities with one's own. The very moment the Lowlanders donned the Highland kilt and thus allowed Scottishness to become visibly unmistakable, the English colonisation of Scotland – its re-‘fashioning’ into some kind of easily identifiable, slightly quaint tribal (br)other in the north – was complete.’ (54)

The tartan which has become so emblematic of Scottish distinctiveness was in fact reintroduced by Sir Walter Scott who stage-managed the visit of the English king, George 4th to Edinburgh in 1822. It was then taken up by the British Army in its creation of military tartan as battle dress for its Scottish recruits; tartan no longer symbolised barbarity but was now associated with heroic martial prowess. So King and army were the initiators of the creation of tartan as symbol of Scottish rather than Highland identity. This process is similar to that described by Boland in ‘Daughters of Colony’ (55) where the tradition of Irish women lament poets was transmogrified into written romantic ballads, in part by Irish revivalists, in order to counter colonial stereotypes of the Irish as brutish and ignorant and make them safe and acceptable to the colonisers.

Part of the reluctance to locate Kay as a Scottish writer comes from those myths of Scottish culture propagated by both those outside and within the Scottish cultural centre. The cultural reductionism inherent in English canonical studies has often reduced Scottish literature to the romantic and the naive best exemplified by the national poet Burns. In ‘The Adoption Papers’ (*AP*, 14) the prospective mother

leaves out her bust of Burns as a symbol of acceptable conformity. Yet, as Crawford points out, Burns is a prime example of the complexity and contradictions of different myths and identities:

‘He is the often republican libertine who becomes the icon of a respectable Presbyterian monarchy. He is the widely read, socially adept, calculating individual who achieves star status by being welcomed as a naïve peasant. Robert Burns, like Scotland, is where extremes meet.’ (56)

One of the two features (57) of Scottish literature most often identified in histories could equally be useful in looking at Kay’s work. The polyphonic emphasis in her work is often seen as a feature of black writing, yet it fits well with a tradition where to write in a variety of accents became one of the hallmarks of modern Scottish literature. Crawford and Bold argue that Scots writers like Burns and Walter Scott developed ‘Britishness’ in their work by writing in different languages and dialects simultaneously, lowland Scots, standard English etc. The double identity of women fiction writers in the early nineteenth century in terms of different accents is explored by Carol Anderson and Aileen Riddell. (58) Whereas English literature remained relatively unaffected by the creation of Britain, Scottish literature became a fusion of different accents and voices. This has continued into the twentieth century with the synthetic Scots of McDiarmid to the Glasgow patois of poets such as Tom Leonard and the poetry of Kathleen Jamie.

In her most recent poetry collection, *Off Colour*, Kay explores both the racism of Scotland and its difference from England. Of all Kay’s collections of poetry this is

the one that engages most directly with Scotland both as location and theme. It is also the collection where she writes more poems in Scots dialect than any other. As Mcmillan points out while in Scottish poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth century preservers of the vernacular were often women poets, from McDiarmid on mappers of the vernacular have generally been men and it became part of a particular masculinist political agenda. (59) In recent years although poets such as Sheena Blackhall and Ellie McDonald write in the North East vernacular and Alison Kermack in that of the West and more specifically Glasgow, the majority of Scottish female poets like Kay use Scots in a dialogue with standard English. (60) Use of both vernacular Scots and English can be seen in many of the poems in *Off Colour*. The title of the collection *Off Colour* relates to the theme of sickness and decay which runs through the collection and at times becomes a metaphor for racism and intolerance.

The opening poem 'Where It Hurts' (*OC*, 9-12) may easily be read as Alison Lumsden (61) points out as a 'metaphor for Scotland's own particular ailments.' A long poem written in the first person narrative it reads almost like a traditional lament. The voice lists its bodily symptoms of ill health, bitter and complaining, the language and sounds becoming harsher and harsher. Throughout there are references to Scottish history and tradition. In the following lines both Scotland's geography and one of the Scots most often cited characteristics, their inability to enjoy the present and celebrate success, is invoked:

since the rain of the frogs, cats and dogs.

I could throw myself up and never come back.

Chuck myself into the sea, the North Sea.

The black water would gulp me down, whole.

I don't think I'd so much as wave,

I'm that sickened with myself. Sick.

Sick. Sick. Sick to death of being sick.

Always spoiling everybody's fun.

Lying down when people are up and about.

In a dark room, when people are laughing in light.

Scotland's literal sicknesses, poor diet, diabetes and heart disease are there too. The speaker is:

Sick to the back Scotch teeth.

I could spit my teeth out on stone floor –

too many scones, treacle scones, fruit scones,

currant loaf, malt loaf. Crumble. Too much sponge,

light sponge, heavy sponge. Dumpling. Shortbread –

too many rhubarb tarts, custard creams, eclairs.

My blood sugar is soaring. My tongue is so sugary

I flatter my enemies. My healthy, blooming enemies.

I say sweet things when I want to weep and spit.

They tell me I'm looking well; lies – I'm peelie-wally!

Lumsden suggests that the reason for the sickness is Scotland's 'sense of alienation, a rupture from its own communal past', (62) suggested in the lines:

How did I get like this? So far away from myself.

I used to love ballads, folksongs.

I will go I will go when the fighting is over.

But the fighting of the body is never over.

Yet this seems too simplistic particularly given the presentation of Scotland's racist past in the poem 'Christian Sanderson' (OC, 28) and its continuing intolerant present in the Broons sequence. To understand what is wrong with Scotland we have to pay attention to Kay's use of body metaphor. The body here is not identified as either female or male so Kay does not appropriate the female body as motherland. Indeed in its imagery it is suggestive of a male voice: 'My neck is as stiff as a donkey's cock...I've begun to think in obscenities, I can't stop-cunt.' The Scotland exemplified in the ballad 'I will go' and the other songs such as the Skye Boat Song is an important narrative but is no longer connected to either the modern body politic of Scotland or the literal bodies of its people. Scotland needs to move on, to stop living in the past: 'I hoard painful memories;/I nurse grievances; I don't forgive; I take offence easily.' and to look outwards instead of inwards: 'My neck is as stiff as a donkey's cock/I can only turn round this far...' The speaker wants to get rid of the real physical body which doesn't allow escape into a comforting symbolic: 'If I could have a day, an ordinary day,/away from the worry- the body- I would be happy.' I would suggest that the body here is also the black and 'other' bodies which are given voices in the collection. If Scotland cannot incorporate these bodies then the prognosis is not good.

I'll die a weighty, hefty, heaving death ...

A fucking great fucking big death.

Many of the poems deal directly with racism, giving a voice to those previously silenced and objectified such as the 'Hottentot Venus.' (*OC*, 25-26) Scotland's history of racial intolerance is evoked through the poem 'Christian Sanderson' but contemporary prejudice and oppression is brought out brilliantly in a sequence of poems dealing with one Scottish icon of popular culture, The Broons. Published in cartoon form in newspapers and then in annuals by the sectarian publisher D.C. Thomson, The Broons have always represented a humorous but much idolised Scottish family. Kay attacks the sexism, repression and racism of this idealised family. In a four line skipping rhyme she writes:

Scotland is having a heart attack

Scotland is having a heart attack

Scotland is having a heart attack

The Broons' Bairn's Black. (*OC*, 61)

In 'Maw Broon Visits a Therapist' (*OC*, 46-47) she attacks the oppression of women in the traditional family. Using the physical images and the speech from the cartoons Maw finally rebels:

Weel. Am fed up wey ma bun.

It is just a big onion

at the back o' ma heid.

A' canny let ma hair doon.

A'm built like a bothy, hefty.

A'm constantly wabbit an crabbit.

Ma hale faimily taks me for grantit.

A'll aye be the wan tae dae it.

Kay cleverly follows the conventions of therapy with Maw unable to deal with the therapist's silence and take the space to herself:

Jings, Dae A' jist talk on like this?

Michty. This is awfy awkward.

but then getting angry begins to freely associate

There that's whit A' feel like –

a tatty auld rope

nibiddy wuid want tae climb

a' twistit and tangled

an, jings this is exciting

A' could break. A' could jist give in.

In 'Paw Broon on the Starr Report' (*OC*, 57) the humour becomes more savage and disturbing as Paw insists on oral sex from Maw.

Right Maw, hen,
if that man can
get it wey a wuman
that's no his wife,
I'm hauving it wey you.
I've aye been loyal.
There's no use in you
saying 'Naw Paw' again,
Christ, the President
gets it, so so kin I.
Get yir heid doon wuman,
an hae a guid sook.

In these poems Kay again uses the technique of chiasmus or reversal to make the reader rethink these innocent cultural icons so beloved of adults and children. The success of this reversal comes from her skilful adoption of the dialogue, phrasing and tone of the original characters, so that it seems to the reader familiar with the originals as if they are reading the cartoons. The physical characteristics are subtly but faithfully represented such that it would be impossible to read the originals in the same light again. Scotland's cultural iconic family is revealed as both racist and misogynist.

Scotland as victim as well as victimiser is present in the collection. Scotland's relations with England are satirised through the metaphor of teeth (a recurring obsession in the collection) in 'Crown and Country'. (OC, 14) The poem invokes images of the obliteration of difference and the power relations that sustain it through the metaphor of a perfect set of teeth.

at the border your mouth will be opened, flossed
and an elegant silver filling stamped into D10.

Despite the clever punning, there are echoes of the Nazis' plundering of Jewish mouths here and the humour does not erase suggestions of racial purity and the hatred of difference. The denial of the class inequalities and the economic relations which have sustained England's relationship with Scotland are suggested through the difference in the state of their mouths.

....We do not talk much, we say
cheese; pints of creamy gleaming teeth,
pouring out our white grins, our old caps; smirks.
Just across the border, people have hellish holes,
gaping gaps, rotten roots, abscess.

In May 1999 Scotland achieved once again a devolved Parliament and some degree of independence from England. Post-devolutionary politics and the cultural confidence that has come with this has brought about a renewed enthusiasm to define Scottishness in literature and culture. This has led inevitably to some essentialist

notions of identity in the search for Scottish cultural attributes. In an attempt to distance itself from England for example, recent histories and anthologies of poetry have stressed a view of Scotland as European rather than British. (63) Crawford argues that such 'totalising views of Scottish culture' are important in asserting cultural self-definition against the marginalisation of much Scottish literature by the English cultural centre. However he argues that it is now time to explore the plurality of Scottish culture and to speak of 'Scotlands' rather than Scotland. (64) This is a term that has become fashionable intellectually in recent years in critical circles influenced partly by post-colonial and post-modern theorising.

Harwood, however, reminds us that appearances of pluralism hailed by the term Scotlands may be deceptive. She argues that:

'current critical debates about the nature and identity of post-modern Scotland oscillate precariously between welcoming gestures toward potentially subversive counter- or subcultural discourses and an agraphobic need to contain these discourses by dint of a multiculturalist rhetoric in order to maintain at least a vague sense of national unity.' (65)

This is similar to Hall's critique of the way ethnicity was used in embracing multiculturalism in Britain while actually serving to disguise continued racism. (66) She advocates as a strategy for real celebration of diversity, Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*.

‘According to her envisioning of human self –fulfilment as based on continuous communication processes with oneself and one’s others, an authentic Scotland would have to realise itself as the hitherto unidentified live body of its people(s), expressing themselves in a ceaseless process of vibrant intercommunication, constituting simultaneously both a unified whole and a reverberating, everchanging canon of multiple cultural differences: Highland and Lowland, male and female, white and black, bourgeois and working-class, hetero- and homosexual, indigenous and foreign, cosmopolitan and provincial. By becoming its own self and other – that is, its own site of self-identification – Scotland could once and for all discard the totalising, repressive label of ‘Scottishness’ which is essentially an imperial English allocation.’ (67)

This is what I would argue Kay’s poetry begins to do. By giving a voice to a Scottishness which is also black, female and lesbian or male, working class and gay Kay creates new categories of what it means to be Scottish. Identity in Kay’s work is not about a unified ‘I’ but about the multiple possibilities of ‘I and you’ These voices are not incorporated as marginal to a Scottishness which is central, but through the use of the Scottish vernacular, they voice that Scottishness. This is what the body of Scotland needs if it is not to remain sick or die:

A fucking great fucking big death.

Where do you come from? Kay's Poetic Location.

How we read Kay and which poetic identities we privilege depends to a large extent on the reception context. If Kay’s poetry has been absent from mainstream Scottish

anthologies, it has appeared in numerous collections sometimes aligning her with specifically black writers, sometimes with lesbian ones, sometimes with feminist ones. It is possible then to talk of texts/versions of Kay's writing; this is particularly true of Kay's narrative sequences of poems such as the poems which deal with Amelia Rossiter performed as an operatic libretto or the sequence which deals with Bessie Smith performed as a drama. Reviews of the performances of these works will take different aspects from those reviews of the printed text.

'The Adoption Papers,' like much of Kay's work, is a work that is performance orientated and in this section I want to locate Kay as a performance poet. Despite the status of western poetry as a privileged rhetorical discourse, the poetry establishment is logocentric. The written text, particularly the single authored collection, is what tends to be regarded as serious work. As in Western discourse, there is a binary of oral and written -performance poetry is often associated with the 'pop' end of the market and more recently with marginalised forms such as black rap. It is interesting that some of the most impressive performances of recent years have come from writers speaking a voice outside the Metropolitan English centre. Tony Harrison, Tom Leonard, Patience Agbabi, Dorothea Smart and others voice in their work the elitism of the accepted voice of the poetry world and the exclusion and belittlement of those other voices classed as 'barbarians.' (68)

Kay's concern with identity is also necessarily a concern with language and voice. Many of her poems deal with the loss of language and its effects or the need to adopt new voices. For example the accomplished poem 'Gastarbeiter' (*OL*, 22-23) which explores the racism of contemporary Germany through the play on language and

voice or the poem 'sign' (*OL*, 20-21) which explores the cultural obliteration of identity through the loss of one's tongue. In her recent collection, the poem 'Teeth' (*OC*, 15-16) dramatises the gagging and murder of Joy Gardner at the hands of the police. Loss of one's speech can in extreme cases mean death.

There is a concern throughout Kay's work with performance as a theme whether it is the voice of Bessie Smith, her black spiritual mother, or her family and relatives singing Scottish and country and western songs in 'Watching People Sing.' (*OL*, 16-18) Indeed the theme of her novel *Trumpet* (69) is performance. Joss Moody is an accomplished performer on the trumpet however his greatest performance is living his life everyday as a man, husband and father. Gender as performance is a recurring theme in Kay's work. In 'The Adoption Papers' both mothers are aware of how they are supposed to perform. The adoptive mother who carries her 'secret failure' because she can't perform 'that incredible natural thing/that women do' trying to make her house look 'ordinary' for the social worker and the birth mother conscious of how she will be judged, fantasising that the words 'MOTHER GIVES BABY AWAY' lie across her forehead. The daughter also is expected to perform, acting out her constructed racial identity: 'Come on, show/ us what you can do I thought/ you people had it in your blood.' In the poem 'Dressing Up' discussed earlier, the violence of the 'typical working class/Scottish' father is almost an acceptable enactment of working-class masculinity whereas the harmless dressing up of the son is to the mother the ultimate performance of transgression. She would rather he 'murdered somebody than/that.'

The view that gender and sexuality are not fixed in a binary divide has been important in recent theoretical work. Kay's work engages with this particularly in the figure of the transvestite. Marjorie Garber discusses the significance of the transvestite in the context of cultural anxieties around binarity. She argues for the centrality of the transvestite as an index of category destabilisation:

'One of the cultural functions of the transvestite is precisely to mark this kind of displacement, substitution, or slippage: from class to gender, gender to class; or, equally plausibly, from gender to race or religion. The transvestite is both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification. It points towards itself - or rather toward the place where it is not.' (70)

Garber relates this embodied construction of mimetic desire to Freud's concept of the overestimation of the object, as set out in his essay on narcissism and to Lacan's third space: she argues that 'the transvestite is the equivalent of Lacan's third term, not 'having,' or 'being,' the phallus, but 'seeming,' or 'appearing'; the intervention of a 'to seem' that replaces the 'to have,' in order to protect it on the one side, and mask its lack in the other.' (71) Gender as performance and the cultural anxiety evoked by transgressing and violating gender boundaries is explored most fully through the person of Joss Moody, the central enigma of Kay's novel *Trumpet*. The novel is very loosely based on the true story of thirties American jazz pianist Billy Tipton whose biological womanhood became public only after his death. Set in Glasgow the story of Joss Moody, famous Scottish jazz trumpeter who lived as a man but was revealed in death to be a woman, is told in an interweaving narrative of different voices. Dominant among these voices is that of his widow Millie, the only

person who knew his 'secret' and his adopted son Colman whose already confused identity is thrown into crisis by the revelation. A significant change from the Tipton story is Millie's collusion with the secret once she knows and her continued, indeed celebratory, relationship with Joss. This change seems very significant in Kay's exploration and destabilising of cultural categories. In the original story, Billy Tipton's wife claimed never to have known about his biological womanhood. She explained that their marriage never contained sexual intercourse and Tipton had told her he had suffered an injury which required that he wear surgical support bandages across the middle of his body. His masquerade was made sense of in terms of economic and cultural factors. He wanted so badly to succeed as a jazz musician that he cross-dressed in order to fulfil her/his potential. This 'progress narrative' is, as Garber explores, quite common in explaining the transvestite, 'normalising' it by interpreting it in the register of socio-economic society. What is left out of this of course is sexuality. As Garber argues transvestism as progress narrative occludes 'the power of transgressive desire.' (72) In terms of medical discourses of transvestism women have been and are still constructed differently from men. From Freud onwards there has been a denial of erotic transvestism in women, the female transvestite can only be understood as a transexual. The woman is allowed cultural desires-to be a man-but not sexual ones.

It is this, I would argue, that Kay restores with her change: the reinstatement of the transvestite as transgressive desire. The focus on Joss's maintenance of his masquerade even in private and Millie's collusion in it refuses the novel's reading as a progress narrative where he had to become a man to make it in the jazz world.

Millie falls in love and desires Joss, believing him to be a heterosexual man. When

she is told of his secret, nothing significantly changes in her desire and love for him. Indeed their sexual relationship is one of the many celebratory aspects of their marriage. On their wedding night she says: 'We are both drunk and laughing. He starts to undo my green dress and we fall into bed, kissing. We go down into our other world, till we are both drowning in each other, coming up suddenly gasping for air and going back down again.' (p. 31) So the novel not only poses the question of how we define Joss but also asks how we define Millie sexually? She is no longer reducible to the categories of lesbian or heterosexual. The sexual desire between Joss and Millie disrupts the binary of sexuality. Indeed the presentation of the wedding and in particular the scene familiar from many films and books where the new bride gazes at herself in the mirror searching for the signs of her new difference is tellingly ironic: 'My cheeks are all flushed with marriage ... My eyes are the eyes of the newlywed. My heartbeat is too fast; I can feel it under my dress. I am so excited and happy I can't eat any of the food.' (p. 30)

Judith Butler argues that 'The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original ... The parodic repetition of 'the original' reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and original.' (73) In *Gender Trouble* Butler's theory of gender as performative is developed using Austin's linguistic account of how effects are produced through their announcement and naming. Gender is not innate but is produced or brought into being as it is 'announced' through the stylised rituals and repetitions of everyday life. Gender is performative in so far as its signifying acts produce and reiterate the sexed body that it then dissimulates as prior to any description. The most obvious site for this is

'drag' or transvestism but in everyday life also the theatrical acts of imitation or mimesis circle back to the centre to insist that all gender identification is produced through an imitative or mimetic process. Butler uses this argument to push heterosexuality from its pedestal as providing the origins of sexual roles. Pursuing her argument of performativity in terms of psychoanalytic notions of melancholia, she attempts to rewrite the resolution to the Oedipal conflict. Butler refuses Freud's understanding of identification as a singular oedipal process that delimits desire and defines the boundaries of the ego. For Butler a taboo against homosexuality precedes Freud's incest taboo. It is not oedipal prohibition of the mother that is primary but an identificatory love of the same sex parent. Because of this prohibition, the lost object of love, mother for the girl, father for the boy, becomes incorporated as a melancholic other. The resolution of the oedipal complex thus leads to an identification with the same sexed parent where the child in effect becomes the lost loved one (mother or father) by incorporating and preserving the loss within oneself. Butler thus explains how the repudiation of loss and same-sex desire regulates the performance of gendered identity. In Butler's account heterosexuality rather than homosexuality is placed within the more unmediated melancholic space where loss remains unacknowledged and therefore incorporated. Heterosexuality is a more defensive position than homosexuality thus reversing the normative psychoanalytic account of sex/gender.

In her later work Butler makes it clear that we can't simply pick or choose identities. Butler's thesis emphasises the strict limits placed on performativity by the regulatory discourses governing social intelligibility and insists on a sustaining tension between

the performative initiation of one's self through the recitation of norms, and the way one is 'made subject' to those norms as a condition of cultural viability:

'The paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.' (74)

The significant aspect of Butler's work for Kay's text is its denaturalisation and mobilisation of gender categories. In *Trumpet* gender as performance is figured through the trope of dressing up. Millie wears a green dress at her wedding because she is not a virgin. It is bandages and clothes that daily transform Joss from woman to man and even donning a biker helmet gives Colman a new status of masculinity and changes how people react to him. Dress codes simultaneously regulate and critique normative categories. As Lumsden (75) points out, one of the best examples of this is the undertaker's description of a body that seems to shift gender by the simple matter of taking off or putting on clothes. Once the undertaker has undressed Joss, he can see quite clearly that she is a woman but until that final moment he is convinced he is a man. 'He had never had a man turn into a woman before his very eyes. He felt it to be one of those defining moments in his life that he would be compelled to return to again and again.' (p. 111)

The novel asks us to consider what is Joss? Does the unmasking of the female body after death make him a she? Or if he has persuaded everyone while alive that he was

male, is that what he remains? This is emphasised by the pronomial confusion, the crisis in referentiality throughout the book. Millie and indeed most of Joss's friends and acquaintances never refers to Joss by any term other than the masculine pronoun: here is a description of her account of helping him transform himself daily into a woman:

'I wrapped two cream bandages around his breasts every morning, early. I wrapped them round and round, tight. I didn't think about anything except doing it well... I did it without thinking about it. He put a white T-shirt over the top. Over that another T-shirt. Over that, a buttoned shirt. He put on his boxer shorts and I turned away whilst he stuffed them with a pair of socks. He pulled on his trousers, constantly adjusting his shirts and the stuffing. He was always more comfortable once he was dressed. More secure somehow. My handsome tall man. He'd smile at me shyly. He'd say, 'How do I look?' And I'd say, 'Perfect. You look perfect.'" (p. 238)

Such is the power of her voice that we are also drawn into this performance and think of Joss as male.

As well as boundaries of gender and sexuality, boundaries of race are explored. Both Joss and his adopted son are, like Kay, mixed race and through the reminiscences of Colman, the adopted son, Kay explores similar territory to that of 'The Adoption Papers.' The trope of border crossing is invoked by the family's move from Scotland to England. Reminiscing on his move from Glasgow to London at the age of seven, he recalls the prejudice he encountered both because of his colour and also because

of his Scottish accent and his strategies for adapting: 'When we moved down to London I still called an ice-cream a pokey hat when I was with my parents and called it an ice-cream with my mates. There were lots of words like that I used because it cheered them up. I was practically schizophrenic.' (p. 53) His African heritage also is explored in terms of 'passing' or performance:

'Colman doesn't feel as if he has a history. Doesn't feel comfortable with mates of his that go on and on about Africa. It feels false to him, mates that get dressed up in African gear, wank on about being African with a fucking cockney accent, man. Back to Africa is just unreal as far as Colman is concerned. He's never been to Africa, so how can he go back?' (p. 191)

The question of nature versus nurture and origins is also revisited through Colman's desire to know about his adoptive father's heritage and Joss's refusal to tell him: 'My father always told me he and I were related in the way it mattered ...' (p. 58) His father's gift to him which helps him reconcile himself with events is a letter to be opened after his death. The reader and Colman anticipate an explanation /some understanding of his need to live as a man but in an interesting parallel what Colman gets in the letter is the story his father refused to give him in life- the narrative of his own father's journey to Britain as a young boy at the turn of the century- a narrative of diaspora and displacement. Ironically what is passed onto Colman here is a narrative of one individual's crossing from one culture and space to another. It gives Colman an identity, a heritage of sorts, a connection that he needs at this point in his life.

Garber argues persuasively that one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what she calls category crisis, disrupting or calling attention to cultural, social or aesthetic dissonances:

‘By category crisis I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian.... master/slave. The binarism male/female,... is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism, and a transvestite figure, or a transvestite mode, will always function as a sign of overdetermination- a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another.’ (76)

Garber argues that in literature and culture the figure of the transvestite in a text, particularly a text that isn’t primarily about gender difference, indicates a category crisis elsewhere, ‘an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilises comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin.’ (77) Not surprisingly then, Garber argues, there are a remarkable number of transvestite figures in African-American literature and these figures have often been ignored or marginalised in discussions around race and miscegenation.

Garber suggests that although the contextual representation of black male-to-female and female- to- male transvestism differs, they both do similar kinds of cultural work in that they ‘foreground the impossibility of taxonomy, the fatal limit of classification as segregation, the inevitability of miscegenation as misnomer. The

possibility of crossing racial boundaries stirs fear of the possibility of crossing the boundaries of gender and vice-versa.' (78)

I would argue that Kay's novel explores quite deliberately these displacements. In its change of original, its focus on racial and ethnic identity as performance and the trope of border crossing, she explores the concept of the 'third space' and society's anxiety about such excess and such crossing. The story of race and displacement which Joss leaves for Colman is a parallel to the story of his gender crossing and may be the more important crossing for the adopted son who is also mixed race.

The trope of border crossing is also invoked through Kay's use of jazz. Jazz music pervades the novel both in descriptions of Joss's music, snatches of songs and also in its narrative form. Kay states in an interview: 'Jazz is fascinating, because it's always fluid, it has the past in it - work songs, slave songs, blues. Jazz is a process of reinventing itself. And race, too, is less fixed, more fluid, in jazz. There's a sense of jazz being a family.' (79) In a wonderful description of Joss's performance on his trumpet Kay explores the dissolution of boundaries and the experience of 'jouissance' evoked through the loss of self in performance.

'When he gets down, and he doesn't always get down deep enough, he loses his sex, his race, his memory. He strips himself bare, takes everything off, till he's barely human ... All his self collapses - his idiosyncrasies, his personality, his ego, his sexuality, even, finally, his memory. All of it falls away like layers of skin unwrapping. He unwraps himself with his trumpet. Down at the bottom, face to face with the fact that he is nobody. The more he can be nobody the more he can

play that horn. Playing the horn is not about being somebody coming from something. It is about being nobody coming from nothing. The horn ruthlessly strips him bare till he ends up with no body, no past, nothing.' (p. 131)

Jazz offers a potential space in which to escape the binary. Jazz performance functions for Joss as a dissolution of self, a return to a presymbolic space where he is not inscribed by race or gender or sexuality. But as Kristeva (80) argues, to reject wholly the symbolic order which sustains social identity is to leave oneself unprotected and open to the full force of unconscious desire, of which the most powerful is the death drive. To exist in society he must re-enter the symbolic, he must put himself together again:

'So when he takes off he is the whole century galloping to its close. The wide moors. The big mouth. Scotland. Africa. Slavery. Freedom. He is a girl. A man. Everything, nothing. He is sickness, health. The sun. The moon. Black, white. Nothing weighs him down. Not the past or the future. He hangs on to the high C and then he lets go. Screams. Lets it go. Bends his notes and bends his body. His whole body is bent over double. His trumpet pointing down at the floor then up at the sky. He plays another high C. He holds on. He just keeps blowing. He is blowing his story. His story is blowing in the wind. He lets it rip. He tears himself apart. He explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, slowly, piecing himself together.' (p. 136)

The critic Paul Gilroy (81) has written of the need to understand black writers in terms of African and Afro-American culture rather than in terms purely of western ideas. Although there are problems with this in relation to Black British writers with

its suggestion of some primordial and unconscious racial history, jazz as an aesthetic is an interesting way of looking at Kay's technique as a writer. Jazz has long been regarded as a black art form which has its roots in a hybrid tradition. Dick Hebdidge and others (82) write of the origins of such music in the fusion of African rhythms, particularly African drumming traditions brought and maintained by the slaves to the new world where they took aspects of the European music of their owners and created something that was new and was theirs: a fusion of African rhythm and European harmony. Charles Keil (83) sees the general ingredients of any Afro-Western style as 'African rhythm prominent, harmony essentially European, a melodic fusion-but it is important to note that in the blending process the African rhythmic foundation absorbs and transforms the European elements.' Hebdidge (84) argues that African, Afro-American and Caribbean music is based on quite different principles from the European classical tradition. One of the main differences is that the collective voice is given precedence over the individual voice of the artist or the composer.

A key feature of such music is the concept of 'versioning'. A song/piece of music is composed and performed or released on record and several, in the case of reggae literally hundreds, of versions will follow each one modifying and giving a new take on the original through use of a different instrument, tempo, key or chord sequence. This 'versioning' can be applied to The Adoption Papers where we have different perspectives voicing their take of the same event. Keynotes are introduced in the prologue which then recur at different times and in different voices through the text. There is no closure. What there is is a constant circling back on itself, coming back to a key melody or refrain just as in Kay's work there are certain key questions and

phrases that we keep circling around and back to. For example 'What is in my blood?' It can also be seen in poems such as 'Photo in the Locket' (*AP*, 46) and 'Dance of the Cherry Blossom' (*AP*, 50) and is at its most sustained in *Trumpet* where we have different takes on Joss's life but no definitive final version. One of the key features of versioning is its democratic nature-there is no one privileged voice or version, nor is there a final one. This seems to me a more useful way of looking at Kay's texts than to see them as purely dialogic or as Paraskevi Papaleonida does in terms of a model of dialogic synthesis. (85)

Kay points out the fluid nature of race in jazz and this is echoed by writers such as Keil, and Baker, Jr. who argue that jazz and Afro-American music represents not only a variety of mixtures between European and African elements but a series of blendings within itself. Keil states 'The great flexibility or blending capacity of Afro-American musical forms derives primarily from a rhythmic substructure that can incorporate with ease the most diverse melodic and harmonic resources.' (86)

A related music which figures throughout Kay's work is the blues. Kay grew up hearing black blues singers played in her childhood home and Bessie Smith is a recurring figure in her work. In 'The Right Season,' one of the poems from the Bessie Smith sequence, the music creates a feeling of home and belonging for the black audience:

Took them to the sad place. The place they were scared to go.

Took them to the mean place where they knew they'd been low.

Somebody was waiting. And it might have felt like home.

Somebody knew them; somebody could see right into their soul. (*OL*, 11)

In this sequence and in other poems Kay adopts a blues rhythm and tone. The blues have always been a migratory music carried from place to place absorbing influences and effects. It is therefore music which, like Kay's speaker in 'So you think I'm a mule,' 'knows no home'. Indeed as Baker points out the blues singer's signatory coda is always atopic and placeless. Baker argues that 'Afro-American culture is a complex reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix ... a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit.' Baker uses an image of a railway junction to convey the idea of the blues as matrix:

'Polymorphous and multidirectional, scene of arrivals and departures, place betwixt and between (ever entre les deux) the juncture is the way station of the blues ... The singer and his production are always at this intersection, the crossing, codifying force, providing resonance for experience's multiplicities. Singer and song never arrest transience-fix it in 'transcendent form.' Instead they provide expressive equivalence for the juncture's ceaseless flux.' (87)

It is interesting in *Trumpet* that the railway line is also invoked in the sublime moment of performance of Joss on his trumpet. 'When he starts to come back from the small black point, he finds himself running along the old railway line that his mother never trusted ...' (p. 133)

Baker sees fixity as a function of power. 'Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional. The 'placeless' by contrast, are translators of the nontraditional ... Their appropriate mark is a crossing sign at a junction' (88) As Baker argues, the risk of situating oneself at the crossing sign is enormous. But the benefits are beyond price and lead to the relinquishing of a self-certainty that strives to annul 'otherness' by masterfully fixing its own place.

The tension between narrative control and excess feeling in *The Adoption Papers* also echoes the Blues. Keil, (89) invoking Weber's analysis of Western musical evolution, looks at the way the emergent rationality of twentieth century music seems to entail disenchantment, demystification, and a corresponding diminution of expressiveness for the sake of order. Keil argues that many Western composers have carried on in this mode favouring music modelled on algebraic equations. The blues tradition, although it has been affected by this shift, evolved in quite an opposite direction, however, since the music has always had to satisfy strong emotional needs. Kay's narratives where emotion and feeling often exceeds and subverts narrative form invokes this struggle. The emotionally cathartic experience for the audience is a factor in jazz and blues. Tensions are created musically on the spot and then released within the same song. A good example of this technique in Kay's poetry can be seen in 'Dance of the Cherry Blossom' (*AP*, 50-51) where two male lovers with AIDS experience both companionship and comfort but also suspicion and rage at who was responsible for transmitting the infection. The poem is written in 19 couplets whose different rhythms reflect the stages they go through in their feelings of togetherness;

suspicion, resentment and finally coming together in sexual union at the end of the poem. Thus we have the simple rhythm of the first stanza

Both of us are getting worse

Neither knows who had it first

which moves through shifts and parallels, at times creating a feeling of balance 'He thinks...I think,' 'in... out' 'back and forth' 'gave it to him ...gave it to me...' to the tension of

By lunchtime we're fighting over some petty thing

He tells me I've lost my sense of humour

I tell him I'm not Glaswegian

You all think death is a joke

Although the poem moves on in terms of narrative time and more complicated feelings and rhythms, we keep circling back to the keynote 'He thinks I gave it to him / I think he gave it to me.' The tension is sustained until the last three stanzas where the rhythm shifts to the lyrical and fluid final couplets where they come together as one:

He pushes me; we roll on the floor like whirlwind;

When we are done in, our lips find each other

We touch soft as breeze, caress the small parts

Rocking back and forth, his arms become mine

There's nothing outside but the noise of the wind

The cherry blossom's dance through the night.

Performance then is both a central theme in Kay's work and part of her aesthetic.

Kay as Performance Poet.

Kay's work crosses boundaries of genre; she writes poetry, plays and narratives. In her poetry she creates performances, narratives, song sequences, even operatic librettos. It becomes impossible to categorise her work easily. All her work is both poetic and performative and in this one might align her with people like Patience Agbabi, Adeola Martin and Ntozake Shange. This shifting of generic boundaries relates to the exploration of the cultural construction of identities and the need to create new spaces and genres by crossing borders.

The fluidity of performance in not fixing meaning and contesting categories is central to Kay's work. The dynamics of the activity of 'performance' itself, the use of the body and the voice in gesture, eye contact, expression, all create a more fluid text than the fixity of the material text. The meaning of performance poetry is never constant. Like the identities Kay is exploring it is very much located in the specifics of time and space. In this way the poetry is closer to drama and theatre. Sue Ellen Case taking a semiotic approach to theatre and performance argues that 'the importance of the author's intent gives way to the conditions of production and the

composition of the audience in determining the meaning of the theatrical event. This implies that there is no aesthetic closure around the text, separating it from the conditions of its production.' (90) If we apply this to Kay's performances then the audience are as important as the author/speaker in creating meaning and therefore the gender /race of the audience matters. The particular meaning of a text is dependent on many factors but the particular situated location of the reader is a determining factor. While this location will shift for the reader at different junctures in her life, the material text remains relatively constant. With a performance, we do not have this same constancy of text.

Sandra Richards analysing what she refers to as the 'folk' element in African-American literature argues that the critical tradition within African-American literature locates 'authentic' cultural expression in those realms with which literature is most uncomfortable, namely in arenas centred in performance. She argues that in addition to analysis of the written text, we must also consider the latent intertexts likely to be produced in performance, increasing and complicating meaning. She draws on Gennari's work on Jazz and Davis's work on the practices of the black church to argue that:

'a central principle of this aesthetic is the juxtaposition in performance of radical differences oftentimes understood as binary oppositions, that generate deep emotional responses from those assembled, challenging them to imagine some interpretative resolution ... Not only should we analyse what is 'there' on the page ... but we also need to imagine and to write into critical discourse ... contradictory positions that are likely to result from the materiality of theatre, that is from the

semiotics of movement, tones, silences, ... as well as from the reaction of spectators ... It brings the spectator or reader more into the foreground and gestures towards the folk-custom of collaborative artistic production. And it offers a model of community that is significant for non-theatrical activity, for the audience is recognised under this framework as both homogenous and diverse.' (91)

If we apply these ideas to Kay's work then the physical presence of Kay becomes another element in the meaning of the text. For many listeners to Kay's work it is a shock that she is black because of her soft Scottish accent yet her performance of these poems physically through her body and her voice foregrounds these identities, enacts them for us and shifts our perception of what it means to be Scottish and what it means to be black. The sign of her colour and the sign of her voice contradict for many people both assumptions about black Britishness and assumptions about Scottishness. The theatrical composite of Kay's presence, a black woman talking in a soft Scottish voice, is challenging and becomes a factor in the meaning of the poem. Her physical presence combines verbal and non-verbal elements simultaneously so that questions of language and visual representation can be addressed at the same time, through the medium of an actual body.

Kay's physical performance and the importance given to the speaking voice aligns her also with those theories which focus on the 'speaking subject' in feminist theory and in particular the work of Cixous. Central to Cixous' work is her linking of writing and performance with the destabilising of gender and national identities. Cixous' exhortation of women to write the body and thus speak their subjectivity is realised much more vividly in the context of performing poetry than writing it.

Cixous' association of language with voice privileges the pre-oedipal mother/child dyad, a time where sound and rhythm as well as touch are privileged more than the visual: 'The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. The deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation. Within each woman the first nameless love is singing.' (92) The very placement of the female body voicing her own work positions a woman and her sexuality as speaking subject, threatening the patriarchal structure with the revolutionary text of her actual body.

Locating Kay in a performance tradition allows for more fluidity and prevents her from becoming fixed as a black poet or a lesbian poet or any other label which privileges one aspect of her ontological reality. While such strategic location is necessary at specific times and in specific publishing contexts it mustn't become a way of fixing a poet. Kay's use of her body and her voice, her shifting between genres mirror her thematic concern to break through the artificially created boundaries which consign and confine us. To return to the poem I started with, 'In my country', when Kay - in answer to the hostile questioner - asserts 'these parts', she is not just talking about a specific place but all the different 'parts' of her multivalent identity.

Where do you come from?

'Here,' I said, 'Here. These parts.'

Notes.

1. Jackie Kay, 'In my country', *Other Lovers* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 24.

2. Jackie Kay, 'So you think I'm a mule?', *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1998).
3. See for example the tendency to publish Kay in anthologies of black poetry rather than Scottish poetry discussed later in the chapter.
4. Stuart Hall. 'New Ethnicities' in A. Rattansi and J. Donald (eds.) *'Race', Culture and Difference* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 252-259 (255).
5. *ibid.*, p. 258.
6. Jackie Kay, 'Kail and Caliloo', in Shabnam Grewal et al (eds.) *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988), pp.195-197.
7. Liz refers to the Scottish poet Liz Lochhead.
8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1987).
9. Gabrielle Griffin argues that Kay resists 'incorporation' into the mainstream. See Gabrielle Griffin, 'In/Corporation? Jackie Kay's The Adoption Papers' in Vicki Bertram (ed.) *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-century Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 169-177.
10. Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1991); hereafter, *AP*.
All further references to this collection will appear in the text.
11. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 111.
12. 'Living Memory: Meeting Toni Morrison' in Paul Gilroy (ed.) *Small Acts* (London: Serpents Tail, 1994), pp. 175-182 (178).
13. See for example Estelle Jelinek (ed.), *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Shari Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1988); Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical*

- I: Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
14. Shari Benstock, 'Authorising the Autobiographical' in *The Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1988).
 15. Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves' in *The Private Self*.
 16. Nancy Chodorow, *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
 17. *ibid.*, p. 206.
 18. See for example Joanna Ryan, 'Psychoanalysis and Women Loving Women' in Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit (eds.), *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Toril Moi, 'Patriarchal thought and the drive for knowledge' in Teresa Brennan (ed.), *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1989); J. Doane and D. Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva. Psychoanalytic Feminism and the search for the 'Good Enough' mother* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).
 19. Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).
 20. See for example Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
 21. Audre Lorde, *Zami* (London: Pandora, 1982), prologue, p. xvi.
 22. Dorothy McMillan, 'Twentieth – century Poetry 11' in Gifford and McMillan (eds.), *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
 23. Chodorow, *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, p. 201.

24. Ann Sexton, 'The Abortion' in *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 61.
25. Benstock, 'Authorising the Autobiographical' in *The Private Self*, p. 20.
26. Griffin, 'In/Corporation? Jackie Kay's The Adoption Papers', p. 169.
27. Jackie Kay, 'Bed', *Off Colour* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), pp. 43-44; hereafter, OC. All further references to this collection will appear in the text.
28. Cited in Olu Oguibe, *Sojourners: new writings by Africans in Britain* (African Refugee Publishing Collective, 1994), p. xxi.
29. See for example Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976); Roszika Parker, *Torn in Two: the Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London: Virago, 1995); Aminatta Forna, 'Mothers of Africa and the Diaspora' in Kwesi Owusu (ed.), *Black British Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2000).
30. Mike Leigh, *Secrets and Lies* (videorecording) (London: Channel 4, 2001)
31. Rodney Pybus, 'Poetry Chronicle 11' in *Stand* 36, 2 (1995), p. 55.
32. Lorde, *Zami*, p. xxx.
33. Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1997).
34. Susan Stanford Friedman in Benstock, *The Private Self*, p. 38.
35. See for example Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: HarperCollins, 1990).
36. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 10.
37. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 152.

38. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).
39. Friedman in Benstock, *The Private Self*, pp. 40-41.
40. Rebecca E. Wilson and Gilleen Somerville-Arjat (eds.), *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 122.
41. Eavan Boland, 'A Habitable Grief', *The Lost Land* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 29.
42. See for example in recent years Lemn Sissay, *The Fire People* (Edinburgh: Payback, 1998) and Courtia Newland and Kadija Sesay, *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000).
43. See, for example, Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah (eds.), *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000).
44. Helen Kidd, 'Writing Near The Fault Line' in *Kicking Daffodils*, pp. 95-110.
45. See for example Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (eds.), *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) and Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (eds.), *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
46. Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).
47. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
48. Kath Woodward (ed.), *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000).
49. Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1983).
50. Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*.

51. Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London: Longman, 1983).
52. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, 'Emerging as the Other of Our Selves – Scottish Multiculturalism and the Challenge of the Body in Postcolonial Representation' in *Scottish Literary Journal*, 25:1 (May, 1998), p. 54-72 (59).
53. *ibid.*, p. 60.
54. *ibid.*, p. 60.
55. Eavan Boland, 'Daughters of Colony: A Personal Interpretation of the place of Gender Issues in the Postcolonial Interpretation of Irish Literature' in *Eire-Ireland*, 37, 2-3, (1997) pp. 7-20.
56. Robert Crawford, 'Dedefining Scotland' in Susan Bassnett (ed.), *Studying British Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 85.
57. The other feature often regarded as particularly Scottish is the concept of the Caledonian Antisyzygy, a model suggested by the Scottish critic Gregory Smith in *Scottish Literature, Character and Influence* in 1919 and made popular by McDiarmid. It refers to the way extremes of fantasy/realism are often juxtaposed in Scottish writing and focuses on the figures of opposites and doubles. However, I would argue this in itself creates yet another binary.
58. Carol Anderson and Aileen M. Riddell, 'The Other Great Unknowns: Women Fiction Writers of the Early Nineteenth Century' in Gifford and McMillan (eds.), *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
59. Dorothy McMillan, 'Twentieth-century Poetry 11' in Gifford and McMillan.
60. See for example poets such as Kathleen Jamie and Elizabeth Burns.

61. Alison Lumsden, 'Jackie Kay's Poetry and Prose: Constructing Identity' in Christiansen and Lumsden (eds.), *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 85.
62. *ibid.*, p. 85.
63. See, for example, Duncan Glen and Peter France (eds.), *European Poetry in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989) and Derick Thomson (ed.), *European Poetry in Gaelic* (Glasgow: Gairm, 1990).
64. Crawford, 'Dedefining Scotland', p. 93.
65. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, 'Emerging as the Other of Our Selves – Scottish Multiculturalism and the Challenge of the Body in Postcolonial Representation', p. 55.
66. Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities'.
67. Harwood, 'Emerging as the Other of Our Selves – Scottish Multiculturalism and the Challenge of the Body in Postcolonial Representation', p. 69.
68. See for example Tony Harrison, 'Them & [uz]' in *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 123.
69. Jackie Kay, *Trumpet*, (London: Picador, 1998). All further references to this novel will appear in the text.
70. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36-37.
71. *ibid.*, p. 121.
72. *ibid.*, p. 71.
73. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 31.
74. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 15.
75. Lumsden, 'Jackie Kay's Poetry and Prose: Constructing Identity'.
76. Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 16.

77. *ibid.* p. 17.
78. *ibid.* p. 274.
79. Interview with Maya Jaggi, *The Guardian*, Dec. 5, 1998.
80. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).
81. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
82. Dick Hebdidge, *Cut and Mix* (London: Comedia, 1987).
83. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 30.
84. Hebdidge, *Cut and Mix*.
85. Paraskevi Papaleonida, "holding my beads in my hand": Dialogue, Synthesis and Power in the Poetry of Jackie Kay and Grace Nicholls' in Bertram (ed.), *Kicking Daffodils*, pp. 125-137.
86. Keil, *Urban Blues*, pp. 33-34.
87. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 7.
88. *ibid.*, p. 202.
89. Keil, p. 74.
90. Sue Ellen Case, 'Towards a New Poetics' in Lizbeth Goodman (ed.), *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 143-148 (144).
91. Sandra Richards, 'Writing the Absent Potential' in Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (eds.), *Performativity and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 72-73.

92. Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties' in Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (eds.), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), p. 153.

Conclusion.

... I remember my tongue
shedding its skin like a snake, my voice
in the classroom sounding just like the rest. Do I only think
I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space
and the right place? Now, *Where do you come from?*
Strangers ask. *Originally?* And I hesitate. (1)

The three poets considered here explore the varied meanings of home, country and belonging to them as women. They all share as poets an ex-centric identity, bringing to their writing a hybridity which locates them, if not outside then at an angle to the English cultural centre. A gradual internationalising of form and subject has been a feature of British poetry in the period 1970-2000. The influence of different cultures and traditions, the rise of regional literatures and the growth of literature in translation have all contributed to challenging canonical notions of poetic authority. As I stated in Chapter 1, many women poets writing and publishing in the U. K. since 1970 write out of dual or multiple cultural heritages. Why this phenomenon is so marked in women's poetry raises interesting questions beyond the scope of this study, however the three writers considered here can be seen as representative of this phenomenon.

While they explore the meanings of home, country and belonging in different ways, I have shown that there are commonalities in their positioning of themselves and their themes.

In my introduction I stated my belief that each text speaks from its moment of production. The three poets considered here all write as women who engage with the impact of second wave feminism at both a material and an intellectual level. At a material level their work has been published in feminist magazines and by feminist publishers. For both Roberts and Kay such spaces were important in providing an initial space and critical context for their work. For Boland who started publishing in the late 60s with a mainstream publishing house, a feminist press provided a publishing space when her work was deemed too radical for the mainstream. Although articulating their relation to the label of feminist poet differently, their writing engages with the ideas and agendas of the feminist movement in the U.K., Ireland and Europe throughout the period from 1970-2000. In Roberts' work this is most marked in her intertextualising of ideas associated with French feminist psychoanalytic theory. In Kay's work feminist debates around difference and the politics of identity are part of her subject matter. For Boland the need to re-evaluate the private and domestic into a tradition which has excluded it is a central part of her poetic project.

A recurring theme in poetry during this period has been the poet's concern with voice and ownership of language. A concern with who has the permission and status to speak posited language as a site of struggle and ambivalence for many poets who did not speak with a traditional poetic authority. Previously marginalised voices and accents challenged both the canon and the construction of the poet. The individual poetic voice and its relationship to the dominant culture is explored by all three of the poets considered here and is central to Boland's poetry and essays. One of her

concerns is the gap between the perception of womanhood in Ireland and the perception of the poet. A remark made by a young woman poet at a poetry workshop and recalled by Boland illustrates this gap well: 'If I called myself a poet, people would think I didn't wash my windows.' (2)

This concern with claiming the status of poet and finding a voice also manifests itself in the foregrounding of the personal in the work of many women poets of this time. A feature of the critical orthodoxy during this period was the embracing of an aesthetic of depersonalisation and abstraction. This was linked to the theoretical shift from the notion of an authentic self or ground of history 'to the post-modern social constructivism of self and history as a plurality of islands of discourse.' (3) Waugh, Armstrong and others make the point that at the precise moment in the 70s when women on a large scale begin to find a serious and politicised voice within poetry, the novel and other forms, white western male critics start to under mine the category of art and of the author as meaningful. (4) Boland, Roberts and Kay resist this aesthetic. They foreground the personal in their work while at the same time exploring the construction of identity and subjectivity in relation to gender, 'race', nation and sexuality.

Waugh argues that the literature of the period 1960-1990 produced 'an insatiable yearning towards plenitude,' and 'reflected the powerfully desiring nature of the times: haunted by a nostalgia for wholeness yet increasingly and self-defensively sceptical of its attainment.' (5) In the poets considered here this is explored through the interrogation of the equation of the 'mother' with 'home'. In the poetry of Roberts it manifests itself in the desire to return to the imaginary, to a state of fusion

and wholeness associated with the pre-oedipal. For Boland it is the trope of the land as mother that she tries to de- and reconstruct in her poetry. For Kay the mother is always imaginary not only in the sense of the pre-oedipal but constructed always in her imagination, someone who is 'too many imaginings to be flesh and blood'. (6) All three writers explore the heady desire of a myth of return, the way this desire shapes our sense of ourselves as subjects and the impossibility of this return to the originary site.

Themes of dispossession and exile are prevalent in the work of all three poets, both in relation to country and to language. Although all three draw on personal experience here, this sense of dispossession is not individualistic and Boland and Kay connect through their poetry with those who are dispossessed and oppressed in both the present and the past. Language as defence against and compensation for loss and displacement is explored by both Boland and Roberts.

All three challenge a dominant and masculinist construct of home as the space of an authentic and rooted self located in a specific time, place and culture. All are suspicious of narratives of nation that produce a coherent history and identity by exclusion and reductionism. For Boland the narrative of Ireland produced by revivalism colonises women by its reduction of them to simple tropes. Her work considers how nationalist disengagement from the colonial can reiterate colonial structures especially in relation to women. Kay's work challenges those versions of nation whether Scottish or English that assume homogeneity and fail to acknowledge their role in the historical cast of racialised relations. Roberts challenges a model of individual and national identity formation based on the expulsion and projection of

aspects of ourselves to create the 'other', the 'foreigner'. Her writing challenges and subverts dualistic ways of perceiving the world and invites the reader to embrace the stranger in herself.

Opposing the traditional notion of home in terms of roots or origins is the discourse of nomadism developed by Deleuze and Guattari and taken up by Braidotti and others. (7) As the name suggests, nomadism involves forms of lateral resistance to any assertion of hegemonic control through strategies of multiplicity, forms of deterritorialisation and the dissolution of cultural and territorial boundaries.

While such mobile subjectivity is celebrated by postmodernism, it is problematic for many women who have been forced to leave their homes because of colonialism and poverty. Boland and Kay both address this in their poetry. The need for some sense of home as a point of arrival if not departure is there in Boland's writing in particular which is haunted by the history of emigrant Irish women:

Like oil lamps we put them out the back,

of our houses, of our minds. We had lights

better than, newer than and then

a time came, this time and now

we need them. Their dread, makeshift example. (8)

All three writers do however explore home as a place of flux rather than stasis, a point of arrival rather than return. This is particularly the case for Kay who

challenges throughout her writing the notion of home as a myth of return. When she writes in 'Kail and Caliloo'

I'm no forgetting the roads and the miles though
when someone sings Ae fond kiss
I can still tremble
or Will Ye go Lassie go
Aye Actually. I'd love to go to Lagos someday
and I'll aye be back again. (9)

she is articulating the primacy of her Scottish culture as well as embracing the part of herself which is Nigerian.

In articulating a position between rootedness and nomadism, Stuart Hall's ideas expressed in his essay 'Cultural identity and diaspora' are useful. He suggests that one way of thinking about cultural identity is to perceive it as a matter of 'becoming' as well as being:

'Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the pastidentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.' (10)

Hall argues for the recognition of difference but not one which is fixed in the rigidity of binary opposition. He suggests that meaning, while being constructed through difference, is never fixed and makes use of Derrida's notion of difference, where meaning is always deferred, never finished or completed. Hall's position stresses the fluid and strategic nature of identity, identity as positioned in a particular time and space but not fixed and permanent. Those laying claim to identity are not only positioned by identity, they are able to position themselves and are able to reconstruct and transform historical identities.

Rather than a homogenous national culture, the poets here advocate biculturalism and the inheritance of a diversity of fragmented traditions as a source of creativity, a dynamic where there is a constant mixing of heritage and traditions and a constant movement towards their identification and reformulation.

As Cairns Craig writes 'all cultures exist not in themselves – in the autonomy and the autotelic trajectory of their own narratives – but in the relation between themselves and others. Culture is not an organism, nor a totality, nor a unity: it is the site of dialogue, it is a dialectic, a dialect. It is being between.' (11)

Notes.

1. Carol Ann Duffy, 'Originally', *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. 65-66.
2. Nancy Means Wright and Dennis J. Hannan, 'Questions and Answers with Eavan Boland,' *Irish Literary Supplement*, 10, 1 (1991), pp. 10-11, (10).
3. Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1995), p. 38.

4. Isobel Armstrong, 'So what's all this about the mother's body?: The aesthetic, gender and the polis' in *Women: a cultural review* 4, 2 (1993), pp. 172-187.
5. Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*.
6. Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1991), p. 33.
7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine' in *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Athlone Press, 1980) and Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
8. Eavan Boland, 'The Emigrant Irish', *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 129.
9. Jackie Kay, 'Kail and Caliloo', in Shabnam Grewal et al (eds.), *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988), pp.195-197.
10. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: community, culture, difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) pp. 222-237 (225).
11. Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and British Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), pp. 205-206.

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