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Bodies material and immaterial: Daphne Marlatt's Ghost-Writing and Transnationalism in Taken

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BODIES MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL:

Daphne Marlatt's Ghost-Writing
and Transnationalism in *Taken*

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize the 'way it really was.' [...] It means to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'

From the early 1980s, West Coast writer Daphne Marlatt has been a leading practitioner of *écriture au féminin*, or writing in the feminine, in English Canada.¹ In her essay 'Musing with Mother tongue', published in the first issue of the feminist experimental journal *TESSERA*, which she co-founded and co-edited from 1984 to 1992, she rethinks a woman writer's relationship to language, echoing Hélène Cixous's call 'for a language that returns us to the body, a woman's body and the largely un verbalized, presyntactic, postlexical field

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1. A variant of *écriture féminine* (the term associated with Hélène Cixous, first used by her in 'Sorties' in *The Newly Born Woman*), *écriture au féminin*, or writing in the feminine, has been practiced by Québec writers Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and Madelaine Gagnon, and then adopted and transformed by English Canadian writers Gail Scott, Daphne Marlatt, and Lola Lemire Tostevin among others. *Écriture au féminin* has been influenced by French poststructuralist and feminist theory, but also 'localized' in the North American context through the influence of the women's movements in the U.S. and Canada, as well as the specifically Canadian inflections such as the legacy of the British Empire and Québec society's traditional Catholicism. Mutual influences and collaborations between Anglophone and Francophone feminists have been channeled through the journal *TESSERA*, which Marlatt helped to establish together with Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei, and Gail Scott.

it knows' (Marlatt, 1998: 13). In dialogue with Nicole Brossard, Monique Wittig, and Julia Kristeva, who all in different ways view the female body as positioned outside of the patriarchal social contract and symbolic representation, Marlatt describes women's experiences of their bodies as erased from writing, as 'the unsaid, the yet-to-be-spoken, even the unspeakable' of a patriarchal language (1998: 15).

However, from her unique location as a white lesbian feminist writer whose imagination has been shaped by the geography of the Empire, including her Penang childhood in colonial Malaysia, her family's nostalgia for Britain, and her immigration to Canada at the age of nine, she expands the meaning of women's liminality so as to include other forms of marginalization that return as 'ghosts' to haunt hegemonic discourses through which they have been oppressed and repressed. At the same time, she signals that any 'return to the body' at this historical moment must recognize the political meaning of this body's whiteness. In my discussion of Marlatt's 1996 novel *Taken*, I argue that by attending to the hauntings of these material and immaterial liminal bodies in the spaces of representation, she extends the practice of Canadian *écriture au féminin* and feminist discourse beyond the framework of gender and nation, developing a transnational feminist critique that explores the linkages and connections among nations, heteropatriarchies, colonialisms, and militarisms.² While *Taken* continues Marlatt's attempt to politicize the interconnectedness of language, body, place, and memory that she initiated in her long poem 'Month of Hungry Ghosts',³ the novel further complicates

2. I am using here the concept of transnational feminism as elaborated by Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, who insist that the regional and the local must be seen as permeated by national and global political and economic power. The term 'transnational' for them 'signals attention to uneven and dissimilar circuits of culture and capital' (2002: 73) in the globalized world that makes nation-based models no longer sufficient for explaining people's identities and social relations.

3. It first appeared under the title 'In the Month of Hungry Ghosts' in *The Capilano Review* in 1979, and was subsequently included in *Ghost Works*, published in 1993. Like in *Taken*, in the 'Month of Hungry Ghosts'

her struggle to understand the effects of (post)colonial experience, by contemplating it against other 'moments of danger', historical and contemporary, such as the Asia-Pacific War episode of World War II and the Gulf War of 1991. As a result, she produces a strong indictment of masculinist power and militarist domination, of patriarchal systems that impose inequalities and separations in every sphere of life.

For Marlatt, writing is all about embodiment and connectedness, from the body of language in which we are all embedded, to the writing subject's historical body as the terrain of subjectivity and memory, the body of writing, and the reader's body engaging with the text. Following Brosard's and Wittig's formulations, she embraces the idea that the body is the fundamental level where 'sense' originates and that women, lesbians, and other subjects of difference must take their bodies as 'the literal basis for our writing' (1998: 40). According to Marlatt, the scene of writing is always physically grounded, connected to the real and metaphorical bodies 'present at the moment of writing' (1998: 109), bodies that traditional writing and critical practice renders invisible. She dismisses 'the notion of the solitary i in a room writing' because it 'ignores the interplay of all that affects the writing' (109), from the writing room, a view from the window, the animals and objects present, and the invisible addressee, to the entire network of socio-economic and global political relations that situate the writing subject in the contemporary world. The body as a signifier attaches itself also to Marlatt's understanding of intertextuality as the presence of other invisible 'bodies of work' that are dialogically invoked in the text 'as it responds to them' (1998: 111). This process involves intratextual references to her own earlier work.

Marlatt relies on autobiographical experiences derived from her troubled relationship with her mother and revisits Penang after her mother's death in an effort to 'rip out of myself all the colonialisms, the taint of colonial sets of mind' (1993: 92). Already in this early text she offers a sustained critique of white privilege, playing on the semantic resonances of the phrase 'hungry ghosts' (as the word 'ghosts' in Chinese, which is one of the languages spoken in Malaysia, also means white people).

In the rhetorical play of the body in Marlatt's feminist poetics and politics of writing, we can recognize an implicit critique of Western hegemonic narratives of self as bounded, rational, individualistic, a product of multiple demarcations and denials of relationality. She adopts a number of strategies to decenter the primacy and singularity of this disembodied humanist subject, distancing herself from the dominant tradition of writing as an act of singular consciousness. Instead, she foregrounds writing as reading and listening, the modes of interrelatedness and exchange in which the boundaries of the self are dissolved. She symbolically abdicates the ego, primarily through the rejection of 'the phallic signifier', by dropping the upper case in the pronoun 'I' (Marlatt, 1998: 35).⁴ Moreover, she embraces the principles of feminist narratology, recognizing narrative linearity, teleology, and logic as inhospitable to female subjectivity. Consequently, *Taken* exemplifies what Marlatt calls 'a narrative in the feminine' (1998: 61), where the unitary writing subject is diffused into multiple pronouns of discourse: 'i', 'she', and 'you', sometimes coalescing into 'we' ('we' of the lesbian couple, or 'us versus them' of the white family and its colonial servants). It is a loosely-structured, multi-layered text, with several intersecting narrative planes, including a contemporary one, written in the first person 'i', and historical ones, taking place some fifty years back, written in the third- and second-person ('she' and 'you'). These non-linear, lateral narratives focus on two sets of characters: the first-person narrator Suzanne, who is Marlatt's narrative persona, and her American lover Lori on the one hand, and Suzanne's parents Esme and Charles on the other hand. Their stories unfold against the background of the First Gulf War in Iraq and World War II in the Pacific respectively. Heavily relying on flashbacks

4. Marlatt's reflection on the use of the personal pronoun 'i' is inspired by Monique Wittig's rejection of 'je' as unmarked by gender and therefore pretending to be universal, that is, male. Wittig splits it into 'j/e', to dramatize not only this split in the speaking subject who is female, but her exclusion as a lesbian' (Marlatt, 1998: 40). For Marlatt, 'the complex i (fem.)' is a gendered pronoun, 'neither capitalized nor capitalizing on the other' (1998: 137).

and interspersed with epistolary fragments, they are punctuated by a captivity narrative using the anaphoric ‘you’, which describes the fate of white colonial women, like Esme’s friend Peggy, in a Japanese internment camp.⁵ Such a discontinuous narrative structure, full of mirroring, echoes, and refractions, corresponds to the novel’s concern with multiple separations—those between mothers and daughters, between lovers, as well as racialized colonial separations and the ones caused by war and death.

As a ‘semi-autobiographical’ novel (Marlatt, 1998: 215), *Taken* confounds generic boundaries between autobiography and fiction and contests the confinements of writing and life, of truth, artifice, and memory. In ‘Self-Representation and Fictionalysis’, Marlatt’s important statement from 1990 regarding her theory and practice of life writing, she discusses the ontological and ethical difference of autobiography as *écriture au féminin*, looking at the questions of what it is and what it does. She introduces the notion of ‘fictionalysis’, defined as ‘a self-analysis that plays fictively with the primary images of one’s life, a fiction that uncovers analytically that territory where fact and fiction coincide’ (Marlatt, 1998: 124). Fictionalysis differs from male-authored canonical autobiography in that instead of ‘following a singular lifeline, a singular i [...] it drops out of narrative as heroic climax and opts for narrative as the relation of context, of what surrounds us’ (Marlatt, 1998: 127). *Taken* illustrates that one’s life doesn’t comprise only ‘facts’ but also ‘the phantom limb’ of memory as well as what Marlatt calls ‘the imaginary’, which is a residue of the subject’s desires, dreams, imagination, and projections. The reality of the phantom limb is what ‘we cut off from us by cognitive amputation, [what] comes back to haunt us’ (1996: 113). Like the imaginary, it is linked to the reality of the body, of its pleasure and pain,

5. Marlatt used Lavinia Warrner and John Sandilands’s *Women Beyond the Wire* (1982) and Agnes Newton Keith’s *Three Came Home* (1947) as sources for her accounts of imprisonment, explaining her intention to address ‘the women of these camps in the second person [...] But i’m writing to different women of differing ages through the all-encompassing “you” which is sometimes singular & sometimes plural’ (1998: 151).

of hands remembering, of 'a flash, flush of sensation' through the flesh (1996: 43), of 'what gets passed along in body tissue, without words' (1996: 25). For Suzanne, the author's persona, to remember involves 're-listening [...] a puzzling out of intuitions, senses, glimpses of a larger context' (Marlatt, 1996: 42). She self-reflexively questions the elusive borderline between memory and invention, combining anamnesis and imagination to produce a 'strange composition of fiction and memory so interlaced it is difficult to tell the difference' (1996: 30). At the same time, as she reaches out to understand her dead mother and her absent lover, she also confronts the ethical prerogatives of life writing as inseparable from the question 'How do you represent others?' that Marlatt asks in her essay (1998: 13). According to Marlatt, women's analysis of their lives inevitably leads to 'a beginning realization of the whole cloth of ourselves in connection with so many others' (1998: 15). Her ethics of self-representation approximates what Gayatri Spivak calls 'symptomatic reading', which is related to Spivak's ethical concept of translation as 'a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self (1993: 179). Applied to life writing, 'symptomatic reading' enables a rewriting of self through other and a complex foregrounding of the sexual, racial, and cultural specificity of bodies. Against the bias of inherited forms of language and representation, which Marlatt associates with the 'white, heterosexual, middle-class, monological, probably Christian and usually male' subject (1998: 126), she redefines autobiographical *écriture au féminin* as a political and interactive process:

Autobiography has come to be called "life-writing" which i take to mean writing for your life and as such it suggests the way in which the many small real-other-i-zations can bring the unwritten, unrecognized, ahistoric ground of a life into being as a recognizable power or agency. (1998: 127)

As the staging of those 'real-other-i-zations' in *Taken* shows, the use of imagination is crucial to implementing the imperative of relationality, as part of the process of rethinking our attitudes to alterity. Imagination is indispensable not only to flesh out 'the bare bones of facts' (Marlatt, 1998: 125)

and make hidden possibilities real, but also to be able to exercise empathy and reach out for connection. Marlatt's practice of fictionalalysis contributes to feminist narratology by providing a fictional vehicle to bring out the neglected reality that mainstream representation classifies as the 'taboo' of a lesbian relationship, the 'trivial' aspects of domesticity, the 'lesser' predicament of women behind the front lines, the 'unspeakable' truth of white women's collusion with colonial racism, or the 'irrelevant' ecological or anti-militarist conscience.⁶ The innovative and experimental character of this type of writing lies not only in its constant challenging of boundaries, but also in a total re-visioning of life writing as an ethical project of 'self writing life' rather than 'the life of a unified self' (Marlatt, 1998: 125). In *Taken*, autobiographical anamnesis works beyond its surface meaning of recalling to mind individual and collective memories, becoming also, in its clinical sense, a record of particular patriarchal dis-eases.

In Marlatt's novel, the possibility of an ethical model of life writing is embodied by the narrator's reinvention of her mother's subjectivity in fiction. As the writer's persona, Suzanne actually 'mothers' her mother into being, in a double sense of giving a fictional 'birth' to 'Esme' as a character and focalizer of her own story, and showing her as a daughter, in relation to the narrator's grandparents, Aylene and Viktor. As in Marlatt's earlier writing, the mother is a haunting presence, holding a rhetorical power of anacoluthon over the texts written by the daughter.⁷ In fact, there is an almost metaphysical continu-

6. In this respect, Marlatt's theory of fictionalalysis has been influenced by Nicole Brossard's 'fiction theory', which deconstructs the relationship between what is considered 'fiction' and 'reality' in a male-dominated framework of representation. Brossard reverses the established hierarchies and shows that the realities of women's experiences of their bodies, such as maternity, rape, prostitution, chronic fatigue, or abuse, must be articulated against the masculinist 'fictions' of capitalism, militarism, and pornography (Brossard, 1988: 75).

7. Anacoluthon is a rhetorical figure that involves an abrupt change from one syntactic sequence to another (like a transition from mother to daughter), and therefore creates the effect of the unfinished, latent meaning haunting the sentence.

ity of images between the two Penang narratives, as if *Taken* were haunted by 'Month of Hungry Ghosts'. The 'eclipsed' mother of 'Month of Hungry Ghosts', whose presence is 'inter-linear', that is, felt in the blank spaces of the text, or assuming the shape of memory, as in the sequence 'memory, *memor*, mindful mer-mer-os' (Marlatt, 1993: 55), partially materializes as a moth in the last scene of the narrative, leaving a one-syllable trace of her name (the moth in 'mother').⁸ In *Taken*, the moth returns in a line quoted from Shelley—'The desire of the moth for the star'—joining back 'moth' to 'moth-her', mother, Esme: 'She the dull brown moth? No, silver-winged and flecked with sorrow' (1998: 97). That the moth, a night butterfly which in Greek means *psyche* and is thus an analogue for the human soul, should appear in both 'Month of Hungry Ghosts' and *Taken* (just like butterflies that often used to adorn tombstones) is suggestive of writing as a place of return, of the dead, of 'you/I' or ghost selves—'those visitants from previous and other ways of being' (Marlatt, 1993, viii). In fact, 'ghost-writing' is the term Marlatt chooses to define her autobiographical *écriture au féminin* in *Ghost Works*. In her reading of another 'mother-text' written by Marlatt, *How Hug a Stone* (1983), also collected in *Ghost Works*, Lianne Moyes points out that 'ghost-writing' is Marlatt's equivalent of Derrida's *différance*, referring to it as 'the shadow-presence of meanings that will not let [any] pair settle into a tidy opposition' (Moyes, 1991: 209).⁹ Marlatt replaces the binary economy of language that insists on the difference between sense and nonsense,

8. At the end of 'Month of Hungry Ghosts', in a conversation with her sister, Marlatt's persona uses the female pronouns 'she' and 'her' in a way that deliberately blurs the difference between their mother and the moth (1993: 125). Barbara Godard detects in Marlatt's moth a reference to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, suggesting an instance of postcolonial intertextual play (1985: 493). Interestingly, Virginia Woolf's *Waves* was originally to be called *The Moth*.

9. In Derrida's classic formulation, 'every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences' (1982: 11). This definition suggests that every word, through difference and deferral, is haunted by excess of signification, by 'ghosts' of other meanings.

and between self and other, with the 'both/and vision' (1998: 133). In an interview, she comments:

The either/or seems to be actually embedded in the definitional activity of language. As a poet, and [...] a feminist writer, I am mostly having to resist that, to work against it. The question is, how to get to a multivalency of meaning based on equivalency without losing meaning altogether? (Carr, 1991: 104)

Her postmodern stance is consistent with her ideological resistance to the monological voice that suppresses multiplicity and plurality of life and language. It is also related to her fascination with the endless productivity of language and her use of 'word chains' as 'touch points, touch words in the "secret narrative" of the compositional process' (Marlatt, 1998: 55). Working through the process of association that activates multiple meanings can be seen as part of an attack on a patriarchal language, with its repression of the effects of heterogeneity that is forced into a corset of binary oppositions.

The first two words of *Taken* already announce this 'ghostly' excess of signification that will haunt the entire text: 'GHOST LEAVES', hesitating between noun-adjective and noun-verb collocations. The opening pun, as well as Marlatt's dedication to her late parents and the epigraph from Phyllis Webb, intimates that this writing (or all writing as 'already written') is bound up with mourning and presents itself as a ritual of remembering the dead, which is the sentiment also articulated later by the narrator:

Who do i burn incense for? Each descent into memory (poling through murky waters) stirs up the dead. Stirs their words to the surface where they blow like ashes suddenly wind-struck. The words i've heard, the phrases i seem to remember, part of a background that shaped me, take on a glow of meaning i never sensed. (Marlatt, 1996: 29–30)

Marlatt's obsession with history as both personal and communal experience, metaphorized as ghost-writing that performs both her mother's 'return' as Esme and the 'haunting' of colonial history in the space of Canadian

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fiction, connects individual and collective stories of suffering and separation through the idea that 'pain and grief live on, even disembodied' (1996: 31). The word 'ghost' takes on a new meaning here, evoking whiteness as a category through which Esme's identity is constructed in the colony as *mem-sahib*, a European woman. Local ghost stories, told among white colonials, hark back to the repressed 'fascination with what was other, what preceded them, what kind of power [it was] that could evade their rational control' (1996: 30). In another context, the presence of ghosts also conveys a sense of hunger for 'the life un-lived, the knot that draws desire back, something unresolved and ongoing' (1996: 24-5). All those displaced people afflicted with nostalgia are ghosts 'that occupy a place but not in the flesh' (1996: 7). Suzanne's 'phantom limb' of her childhood memories is like a ghost that 'goes on living' (1996: 120). Finally, writing turns 'real' people into ghosts of themselves, into characters such as Lori or Peggy, 'who can't leave the scene of their interrupted loves and intentions' (1996: 38). Another example of a word that sets off a chain of textual play is the title itself. 'Taken' has sexual connotations, suggesting passive femininity, woman's sexuality that has been 'taken from her' rather than 'given' by herself (1996: 11). Esme prays to be 'taken' with Charles, not to be left alone (1996: 12). Taken up with motherhood, she also hears 'take in the way Australians pronounce 'a pretty tyke' (1996: 84). 'Taken' means both to be taken captive, made prisoner, and to be taken with, captivated. Most important, however, 'taken' refers to 'the snapshots we take and are taken by' (1996: 130), thus foregrounding the importance of photographs in the novel.

Photographs are absolutely central to Marlatt's conjuring of the ghosts of history, as well as to her narrative technique and to her preoccupation with framing and reframing of gender, race, and sexuality, so as to bring the liminal to the foreground. Her attraction to the photographic medium goes back to her collaboration with the photographer Robert Minden, first on a documentary history and then on a collection of poems and images of the Japanese Canadian fishing village in her *Ste-*

veston publications (Egan 2005). It was also evident in the first edition of 'In the Month of Hungry Ghosts', where pictures from the family album were reproduced so as to disrupt the unity and continuity of the text. The fascination that photographs hold for a writer may be explained by Susan Sontag's theory of the 'dual powers of photography' that make it a literalized version of literature's unattainable ideal of representation, which is 'both objective record and personal testimony, both faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality' (2003: 26). In Marlatt's case, the more immediate appeal of photography seems to lie in its quick shifts of focus, matching her use of the narrative technique of 'montage, juxtaposition, superimposing disparate and specific images from several times and places' (Marlatt, 1998: 24). Reaffirming both the presence and absence of bodies and places captured in them, photographs are ghostly and have a haunting quality to them.¹⁰ Sontag views photography as an elegiac art, a twilight art: 'All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability' (1977: 15). Marlatt's narrator Suzanne ponders the transience of experience that photographs paradoxically both expose and attempt to arrest: 'What is this urge to fix an image so it won't fade over time? Positives preserved in all their purity as if to evidence what we actually experience—quicksilver, transient' (1996: 95). Photographs function as basic units of memory, its 'freeze-frames' (Sontag, 2003: 22). They 'lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes', crystallizing sentiments around them; they 'help construct—and revise—our sense of a more distant past, with the posthumous [presence]' (Sontag, 2003: 85). Although there are no 'real' pictures in *Taken*, numerous photographs are referenced and described on the pages of the novel. These family snap shots construct moments from the past around which memories cluster, providing points of entry into the past and opening it to new reading and interpretation. By virtue of

10. As Sontag says, "Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else; they haunt us" (2003: 89).

their very absence, these 'told' photographs are less related to memory than to imagination. The pictures give Suzanne imaginary access to history, to the photographed reality she has never known. To quote Susan Sontag again, 'The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond, what the reality must be like if it looks this way"' (1977: 23). Indeed, when Suzanne is unable to recall the events from the past, she spins a story around an image that helps to trigger her imagination.

It is precisely the function of the writer's imagination to undo the freeze-frame. Marlatt's narrative method in *Taken* is an attempt at undoing the frozen frame of photographic (mimetic) representation by infusing 'life' into photographic images, inserting them into the movement of textuality. At the same time, she uses photos and the concept of photography to problematize representation as framing. In fact, (un)framing is one of the themes she has been preoccupied with from her first book, the long poem *Frames of a Story* (Rae, 2008). Photographs are not 'simply a transparency of something that happened' (Sontag, 2003: 46); they involve active selection and framing since to photograph is to manipulate what to include and what to exclude. Family 'snaps' and cine films that we view through the narrator's eyes in *Taken* reveal themselves as powerful tools for constructing gender through repeated performances of 'takes' on white femininity, masculinity, and the heteronormative family. They create the illusion of family continuity and gender coherence through the iteration of reproducible images and patterns that become intelligible as normative scripts, so in the end photos instruct us what we need to remember. They are a quick way of memorializing gender and familial scripts. In her essay 'Self-Representation and Fictionalysis', Marlatt makes an explicit connection between photography and writing, deconstructing the so-called 'fact' as

'the (f)stop of act' as Annie puts it in *Ana Historic*, isolating fact like the still photo as a moment frozen out of context, that context which goes on shifting, acting, changing after the f-stop has closed its recording

eye. The fact a still frame. The self framed she suspects, caught in the ice of representation. (1998: 122)

The imposition of an arbitrary freeze-frame can be seen as a form of epistemic violence as it distorts complex and mobile subjectivities and limits itself to representing only certain 'acts' from multiple and diverse narratives of human lives. In particular, by bracketing off the 'f', Marlatt hints at the bracketed female, reaffirming the claims of *écriture au féminin* regarding women's exclusion from writing and representation, the problem of their objectification, and the need to bring the feminine, as well as other excluded marginalities, the lesbian and the colonial other, back into the picture. Talking about deconstruction of gender in Marlatt's writing, Caroline Rosenthal points out that the recording eye, the camera lens, is the patriarchal gaze that constructs 'a feminine act' as stereotypical domestic, docile, and passive femininity, a foil to 'heroic and active' masculinity (2003: 81). As a specific genre, the family photo album that appears in *Taken* can offer insights into modern Western technologies of domesticity and motherhood, into disciplining male and female bodies into appropriate gender roles: he in an army uniform; their wedding photo; she pregnant; then as a young mother 'leaning against a pillar the baby is perched on' (1996: 84), and so on. In her portrait of Esme, which is an exercise in empathy, Suzanne is trying to understand gender, race, and class constraints and adjustments that have turned an ambitious and rebellious girl into a young colonial wife who gradually 'disappears' into domesticity. Esme's limited choices are compounded by her colonial class privilege preventing her from pursuing a career in nursing. As Suzanne ponders the pictures from her parents' 'Melbourne days', taken soon after she was born, she finds images of modern motherhood inspired by the post-war Western 'culture of experts', such as Dr. Spock, who replaced 'excessive contact' between mother and infant with bottle feeding and instilled in women a lot of insecurities through obsession with hygiene and insistence on 'keeping a regular regimen'; in these pictures, she sees her parents becoming 'contemporary, fluent in the idiom of adverts, news

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photos, film images that surrounded them' (1996: 84-5). Technological rationalization is introduced even into the field of housework: 'Pedometers attached to the heels of British housewives revealed that they walked five miles in an average day' (1996: 94). Suzanne draws a vision of rigid gender binarism, casting constructions of Esme as a house-bound 'dutiful wife' (1996: 20) against images of Charles' absent, duty-bound, heroic masculinity.

However, the presence of the lesbian plot in the novel 'undercuts binary notions of femininity and masculinity' (Rosenthal, 2003: 67) and challenges the frozen scripts of gender and heterosexuality. According to Rosenthal, Marlatt's highlighting of a lesbian relationship 'shows that heterosexuality is a *regulatory fiction*, which "frames" men and women into one story by ruling out more complex constructions of gender and sexual identity' (2003: 67). By showcasing the repressed female desire and scenes of lesbian lovemaking, she destabilizes the heterosexual gender matrix. The lesbian narrative in the feminine differs from the male-scripted conventional narrative, underwritten by compulsory heterosexuality, in that it narrates the selfhood that is not heroic but 'multi-faceted', the one that 'stands in relation to all that composes it [and] undoes oppositions in a multivalent desire for relationship, whether with women or men, children, cats, trees [...]' (Marlatt, 1998: 65-66). Yet, Marlatt's lesbian narrator recognizes the grip of compulsory heterosexuality and the pressure of normative scripts of marriage and family life on lesbian couples. Consequently, Lori is hiding a lesbian relationship from her demanding mother, realizing that she has betrayed her mother's expectations by breaking 'the familial ties we each were meant to perpetuate' (1996: 77). Marlatt contemplates how the daughter's sexuality complicates the relationship between mother and daughter and how the mother, identified with conventional heteronormative scripts, haunts lesbian relationships: 'As daughters of our mothers, and particularly as lesbian daughters of our mothers, we stand in a curious relation to that script because we were raised with it [...]. [Its traces] enfold me still in the culture

at large' (1998: 66). Suzanne's musings echo this quandary: 'We carry marriage stories in our blood, our mothers' stories shadowing the ones we're trying to invent' (1996: 47). The heteronormative expectations are so deeply engrained in our representations that the lesbian narrator is aware of being implicated in them even while refusing them.

Focus on mothering and mother-daughter relationship has been an important aspect of *écriture au féminin* in its attempts to find new ethical models for rethinking relationality. Writing the mother back into the real is a form of ghost-writing bringing back those bodies that have been rendered immaterial, that do not matter in patriarchal scripts. Spanning different times and geographic spaces, from Canada, to colonial Malaysia, Australia, and the United States, *Taken* shows that what daughters inherit is a threat of the patriarchal phallic mother, visible in several parallel mother-daughter relationships involving Esme and Suzanne, Aylene and Esme, and Lori and her 'smothering' mother. In this context, Suzanne's efforts to reconnect to the mother validate the significance of the mother-child, and particularly mother-daughter relationship, as part of a search for an alternative feminist ethic. Here Marlatt's writing brings to mind the work of the contemporary feminist philosopher Bracha Ettinger, whose revisionist psychoanalytic theories can give a new lease on life to *écriture féminine* and *écriture au féminin*, through their shared pursuit of ethical models derived from the specificity of women's embodiment and the simple but culturally repressed fact of each individual's passing through the mother's body. Claiming that 'Several comes before the One', Ettinger introduces the concept of 'matrixial' relations modeled on the late prenatal relationship between the maternal body and the fetus, which envisions the possibility of 'subjectivity-as-encounter' that replaces the dominant, masculinist, individualistic view of human subjectivity as premised on separation (Ettinger, 1992: 200). Her model has wide-reaching philosophical implications for rethinking human inter-dependency in terms of 'compassionate hospitality' (Ettinger, 2006: 61). According to Ettinger, in a matrixial encounter between self and other,

'the private subjectivity of the individual is momentarily unbounded' as it is transformed in a psychic interweaving 'with threads emanating from objects, images, and other subjects' (2006: 62).¹¹ This conception seems to illustrate what I earlier described as Marlatt's relational embodiment. In *Taken*, the importance of such a matrixial relation is introduced right at the beginning, through the description of a photograph showing Charles and Esme on the day she discovered that she was pregnant. Esme's pregnant body symbolizes 'compassionate hospitality', expanding and making room for the other as she contemplates, 'How the tiny being growing deep inside her doesn't know despair. Goes on growing, pushing her waist, happily oblivious inside her flesh' (1996: 18). In pregnancy, as in a matrixial encounter, the woman and the child become an 'interbeing':

Mother and child. That nameless interbeing we began with. Anxiety pushes me out of bed to write her, reach her, bring her bodily out of the nothing, which is not nothing because she is there, leaning against me on the other side of a thin membrane that separates, so thin we communicate, but not in words. (Marlatt, 1996: 21)

In this passage there is a slippage from the membranes of the mother's pregnant body to the page on which the narrator writes to connect to her absent mother. At the same time, the image of the 'interbeing' becomes a metafictional trope of textual invagination, of the text folding in onto itself. Such experimental figurations of pregnancy that articulate different modes of interdependence contrast sharply with a male perspective on pregnancy in Charles's proprietary reac-

11. Ettinger's philosophy of matrixial femininity is offered as a way out of the dichotomy feminine/masculine that belongs to the phallic order of the One: 'Here, "feminine" does not design the opposite of the masculine [...] Feminine is to be understood, matrixially, as a differential potentiality before and beyond this [phallic] dichotomy' (Ettinger, 2006: 68). Susan Knutson, in her feminist narratological reading of *How Hug a Stone*, recognizes what we might call a 'matrixial relation', where the mother is archetypal matrix: 'While acknowledging the mother as matrix, Marlatt disrupts the default operation of binary gender by ensuring that her subjective "we", which comes through the mother, unambiguously includes both men and women' (Knutson, 2000: 47).

tion to Esme's photograph: 'His child in her, a living merger of their two selves' (1996: 44), which reinforce the idea of two distinct, separate subjectivities.

Moving to another level of framing, Marlatt interrogates the connections between patriarchy and imperialism in the gendered and racialized spaces of the British Empire. Suzanne's metaphor of her father as King George and her mother as 'Britannia ruling a turbulent household' (1996: 98–99) signals the collusion of home, nation, and empire. The novel reveals what the critic of British colonial history, Vron Ware, calls 'relational connectedness' in colonial constructions of white femininity through demarcations of race, gender, class, and sexuality, imposed on white colonizer women as different from white men and non-white men and women (Ware, 1992: 119). Ware also points to 'the instrumentality of white women, either active or passive, in different forms of racism' (1992: 127). Who these women were, how their identities as subjects of the British Empire, their power and authority, were constructed through 'their capacity to define those others' (Ware, 1992: 122), can only be understood with the help of a transnational perspective that moves us beyond the domestic and national borders, connecting these two spheres to a larger sphere of the Empire. Yet, perhaps because it recalls her parents' life, Marlatt's analysis of British colonial life in Malaysia, spanning two generations, aims at understanding its privileges and pretensions as well as its fears and alienations. She places Suzanne's parents against racialized colonial hierarchies, social ranking, and prejudice, by inserting the information that Esme's father, Dr. Aloyan, was a Chief M.O. in Penang before the war, 'but his wife's Anglo-Indian lilt and the family name suggested something not quite British' (1996: 22). Suzanne is trying to understand the mentality of the colonial wives of her grandmother's and mother's generations, recognizing that gender subordination complicates colonial power dynamics and that despite white women's complicity with the Empire, 'power remained in the hands of the Doctor, the Sahib, the Tuan' (1996: 108). However, Marlatt's compassionate descriptions of the alienating effects of colonialism on Esme's life, her 'hemmed-in'

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existence (1996: 41), her powerlessness masked by her status as a memsahib, are always contrapuntal, always framed by this other unspoken pain and grief caused by colonial violence. So we also see Esme dismissing a sick servant; Aylene's fear of physical contact with colonial 'others' and her racism; Europeans leaving behind the non-white personnel, betraying 'their Asian business colleagues, their medical and government staff, to the enemy' (1996: 48) during the evacuation of Penang in February 1942. Showing how the gendered and racialized spaces of home and Empire are cut across by the split between the public and domestic worlds, Suzanne experiences a disjunction between her father's, as opposed to her mother's, 'version of empire' (1996: 99). Her father instructs her in the geography of Malaya, 'So she would know where she lived, what she was (always with reservations) part of' (1996: 98), and he introduces her to stamp-collecting—both activities relating to the imperial imposition of a conceptual grid onto the world. But she questions 'the inner geography of home', confusing meaning of 'his world' and 'her world' (1996: 98–99). This domestic split translates into the allegory of the Empire: 'His world' was the world that 'he fractured into names on the globe: Great Britain where King George lived, and the pinker territories of what had been her (this was confusing, why not his?) Empire: Canada with its seal fur, South Africa with its diamonds, India with its tea plantations [...]' (98). Family and nation are conflated in this imperial allegory. Ironically, pink on the map is the color of both white skin and gender—suggesting the imposition of whiteness onto a global space while simultaneously feminizing the colonies, enhancing their passive and submissive position in the gendered hierarchy of the imperial nation, where the King, the father of the nation, rules England, the mother country, and the colonies are 'on the fringe of the mother country's skirts' (1996: 7).

Marlatt's critique of colonial separations finds its topographic equivalent in the proliferation of islands and gulfs in the text: Australia, England, Malaysia, Vancouver Island, or the Persian Gulf function both as geographical and sym-

bolic sites, public and private, all part of a transnational web that connects the local to the global. However, their meaning remains open to ambiguity: besides the obvious sense of isolation and divide, of being sidetracked and marooned, they hint at 'good' separations, such as a deliberate refusal to get back to the mainland/mainstream, especially if being part of 'the main thing' implicates us in 'the human struggle for dominance' (1996: 86). Maps, locations, distances, both inner and outer, figure prominently in Marlatt's attempt to conceptualize the connection between language, place, and power. From the imperial geography of the Straits Settlements in Malaysia, to 'a mapless world' of the camp (1996: 88), and 'the inner geography of home' (1996: 98), knowing 'where one is' is associated with having or losing control. Moreover, all these places are connected through the media that operate transnationally, linking people in one part of the world to the rest of the globe. The media produce news coverage and images for consumption, through their interpretive frames imparting knowledge and imposing identities. Watching different fronts of World War II, Esme and Charles receive information that flows across national borders, connecting London, where the decisions are made about the Pacific theatre of war and where Charles's father struggles with rationing, decisions that affect the lives of people in Australia, Java, Singapore, and Penang. Similarly, Suzanne watches from the safety of her living room in Canada as the high-tech 'war machine gears up across all media' (1996: 15) and the images from the Gulf War flash across the screen. She hears sinister undertones in 'apocalyptic fears' unleashed by President Bush's globalizing pronouncements of "'a new world order" against "pan-Arab jihad"' (1996: 35). She also registers the increasing global control and manipulation of information by governments which are imposing heavy censorship on the media and forcing them to rely on military experts for analysis.

Taken targets specifically imperialist wars as ultimate 'separations' among people, the ultimate failure of imagination confronted with real-life atrocities. Significantly, the theme of war is introduced through the metaphor of photographic

representation: 'war time, black and white time, whole cultures reduced to dirty adjectives under the acrid developer of national will' (1996: 3). According to Sontag, photographs have an established role in what she calls 'the iconography of suffering' (2003: 40). War and photography are intimately linked, since for most people their knowledge of war is inevitably 'camera-mediated' (Sontag, 2003: 24). War not only causes displacement but also generates a crisis of epistemic proportions in the lives of people affected by it. Marlatt's narrative seems to suggest that in a world ravished by war love cannot survive: Esme is doomed to die 'insane in a foreign country' (1996: 12), while Lori and Suzanne separate. Nevertheless, to keep a sense of connection, the characters write letters to each other 'to recoup their membership in a world that is shattering around them' (1996: 16). Faced daily with the madness of the Gulf War and memories of Vietnam and World War II, Suzanne writes her history 'to avoid disappearing into guesswork coloured by fear, loss' (1996: 116). Yet neither she nor Esme, both of whom 'merely live with the news' (1996: 30), can escape the insidious effects of distant events that infiltrate their lives. Suzanne witnesses the daily trauma of death and destruction:

91 children among 288 bodies recovered in rubble, Iraq reports in the wake of American bombing of—what? Language floats. An air raid shelter, Iraq asserts. Military bunker, the U.S. counter-reports. Disputed terms echoing back and forth across communication waves. A CNN print displays painfully small bodies wrapped in blankets, blurred figures bending on the street to fold back a corner, confirm the unthinkable. (Marlatt, 1996: 57)

Marlatt's narrator is aware of the dangers of image manipulation that Sontag warns against in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she reminds us that 'the photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph' that will be received by 'the diverse communities that have use for it' (2003: 39). Moreover, Sontag also cautions that saturation with images showing the suffering of others can turn 'the image as shock' into 'the image as cliché' (2003: 23). What Suzanne observes is that 'Tuned to a consuming serial drama,

we begin to think like them as the space around us fills with controversy' (1996: 38) while the shock of witnessing atrocities gradually wears off.

Without being overly didactic, Marlatt articulates her conviction that we are all caught in the same story 'although we don't meet the same fatality' (1996: 30) and that 'we *are* complicit, yes' (1996: 130). We are all transnationally connected to the events happening elsewhere, citizens of the countries dropping bombs on children in Iraq or in other places, so that the neoliberal discourse of global 'democracy' can be disseminated in order to discipline racialized bodies. Listening to the news, to the sounds of bombs and Baghdad blowing up, Suzanne and Lori are 'appalled for different reasons, historically accountable and furious' (1996: 81). The language of war propaganda, whose rhetoric recognizes no grey areas, illustrates the most sinister aspects of binarism. War time claims language as another battlefield, turning words into weapons. The media demonize the enemy and euphemistically erase the humanity of ordinary people embroiled in the struggle. Censorship, verbal assault, and brutal manipulation of meaning force Marlatt's narrator to express her disgust in one sentence: 'i envy beings without words' (1996: 35). From the perspective of a transnational feminist consciousness, the narrative reveals that constructing such national and ideological separations ultimately serves the neocolonial interests of the oppressive patriarchal and militarist systems. By juxtaposing Suzanne's concerns about 'those who actually live through the "smart bombs"' (1996: 30) and Esme's earlier concerns about the lives of the Tamil beggars and the rickshaw wallahs (1996: 14), Marlatt practices relationality that allows her to link these older histories of colonialism to new forms of global domination.

To recreate the war scenes, Marlatt adapts her narrative composition to the method of cinematic montage of juxtaposed images and abrupt cuts. Since her vision of war is textually mediated, she relies on television coverage and newspaper scrapbooks, incorporating elements of such cinematic clichés as the war melodrama or even the spy thriller.

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Thus, for example, she describes Charles as if ‘he had accidentally stepped into [some adventure flick], caught up in a role already written for him’ (1996: 62). However, these heroic and masculinist generic conventions are persistently undermined not only by the italicized narrative of the underreported experiences of women inmates in Japanese camps that redefine the meaning of heroism, but also by the presence of a larger, transnational feminist perspective that insists that these war crimes must be considered in a wider context of patriarchal violence against women and their bodies:

But why women? Why was it always women whose bodies were found this way? And who were they? What lives had they been living that had been stopped so abruptly—new shoes perhaps, one of them proud of her new shoes that very day. It was never they who were remembered, only their murderers. Dr. Petiot, Dr. Landru, Jack the Ripper. With or without war. (Marlatt, 1996: 92)

By challenging the standard scripts of violence and war heroism, Marlatt’s *écriture au féminin*, to use her own words, ‘turns what has traditionally been considered background into foreground, what has been labeled trivial into the central, what has been belittled as personal and feminine, into the largely human’ (1998: 113). There is a sharp contrast between ‘good old boys’ (1996: 15), whose male comradeship gets ‘memorialized in poems’ (1996: 91), and civilians, including pregnant women and children, who get killed, bombed, lost during evacuation, or locked up in camps. As motherhood, too, is put in the service of militarism – even on the linguistic level, when we hear of ‘This “Mother of Battles”’ (1996: 104), Marlatt’s war exposé gradually incorporates a reflection on the relationship between mothering and the oppressive structure of the nation and the family that lay their claim on women’s bodies. Like other wartime wives, Esme cannot understand why Charles leaves her pregnant while he wants to risk his life for the sake of his country. Her questioning—‘What was a country anyway? She had never had one’ (1996: 58)—mirrors Virginia Woolf’s in *Three Guineas*. We witness Esme’s transformation from an irreverent schoolgirl into a matron, ‘solid,

stamped with public approval' as she begins to understand that as a mother she holds 'the future of the nation in her hands' and that her only redemption as a woman is through maternity (1996: 112). While her story illustrates the process of mother becoming 'mater' becoming 'matter', by contrast, her lesbian daughter Suzanne rewrites the national and familial scripts assigned to women's bodies. Asking a provocative question: 'how does one manage, after all, to remain a person?' (1996: 124), Marlatt's text defies patriarchal discourses that demand of women to be good mothers of the nation.

Finally, a new meaning of transnationality emerges from the novel's attention to the linked ecosystems that we all inhabit. At the same time as she infuses gender stereotypes with subjectivity, Marlatt sublimates the meaning of mothering in relation to ecology:

The eye, unfocused, gazes at water, air, all that envelops us, pre-dates us. Post-dates us, too. Mourning the loss of being before knowing narrowed into the dangerously exclusive we label meaningful, or what counts [...]. And what about all that mothers, has mothered us into existence? Relations beyond number. (1996: 116)

She mourns a life-giving environment threatened by war or exploited for profit, by having Suzanne contemplate the local wildlife and natural beauty of Vancouver Island against the backdrop of repeated images of oil-greased birds in the Gulf. A pacifist-ecological stance is consistent with Marlatt's writing *against* separations, and the entire text is grounded in a desire for connection. It is associated with her philosophy of the body which, rather than seen as a self-contained entity, is experienced as enmeshed in a web of relations, physically passing through the mother and then through the place that is its environment. It is through the continuity and contiguity of bodies that we are connected to the m/other, in a fluid exchange, which Marlatt literalizes by means of the mixed-blood and mother's milk metaphors, thus inscribing the other into her ecological circle of human interconnectedness. The narrator drops a few hints suggesting that her mother Esme might have been Eurasian.

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There is a story handed down, including a fantasy of Chinese or Indian blood somewhere in the family, which is supposed to account for the women's beauty. Suzanne cannot untangle the mystery of whether 'they had spent so long, three generations born in the East, that they themselves began to feel un-English', or whether 'it was easier to make a life, to pass as English, if you erased the mixed part' (1996: 107). Nevertheless, her genealogical fantasy reconnects her to the lost women in her ancestry and enables her to construct a new matrilineal history of interracial marriages, that has been covered up by Anglo-conformity imposed by family patriarchs (1996: 107). Her preoccupation with the question of who it was who had preceded them brings her closer to the recognition that 'what "doesn't matter"', what has been suppressed, returns to haunt us (1996: 113). Nursed by the ayah, like her grandmother and mother before her, Suzanne wonders who that first ayah had been for each of them and what she had 'covertly passed to [them] in her milk, what tastes, what feelings?' (1996: 113). The image of the ayah's milk, apart from its obvious symbolic status in the economy of exploitation and appropriation of the bodies and labor of colonial 'others', is here recoded as a gesture of symbolic acknowledgement of the possibility of mothering across race. The blood and mother's milk mark the traces of return of the other woman, the invisible subaltern absent from the official narratives of history.

What Barbara Godard calls 'the paring away of self to give space to the other' (1985: 481), in Marlatt's writing often takes the form of questioning and identification. These rhetorical questions about the unthinkable, about differences and exclusions, open up the space of interrogation of singular modes of experience, making it possible to leap out of self and to approach what the other must be experiencing. Similarly, imaginative projections and identifications make it 'thinkable' to be someone else's 'other'. In one spectacular flashback, the narrator recalls an encounter with alterity, which provokes a duel of gazes between herself and another girl, the tailor's little daughter—her colonial double. The young narrator begins

to speculate, 'what it might be like to be that girl [...] staring between people and cars at me, outsider in her father's? uncle's? shop, while i, guardian of this gorgeous mother, just as rudely stare back' (1996: 43). Despite their competing 'territorial' claims, here the reversal of the gaze is more than an orientaling fantasy, as it actually helps the white girl to see the other as subject and herself as 'other'. However, Marlatt is aware of power dynamics involved in such encounters with otherness. In her 1989 essay entitled 'Difference (em)bracing', she utters a warning against misuses of relationality. She is critical of what she calls 'getting to know you words', suspecting 'a hidden imperialism in them: making the other the same and therefore plausible, i.e., plausibly me' (1998: 132). Rather, she is trying to get at 'the plausible implausibility of living difference as both other and not-other. Other me besides me' (1998: 133). Her ethics of alterity is reflected in her use of the pronoun 'you' as a conduit of dialogic reciprocity. Additionally, in *Taken*, she uses a corresponding linguistic strategy aimed to safeguard difference against easy domestication as she persistently foregrounds the heterogeneity of language by means of saturating the text with Malay words, which keeps the reader at a respectful distance.

In the final analysis, *Taken* proves to be an epistemologically enabling text, tapping into liminal sources of knowledge that make traditional demarcations of national spaces and identities insufficient. If Marlatt's simplest definition of writing is 'that which moves between self and other' (1998: 215), she is writing here in this in-between space, where in-betweenness can mean both a space of marginality or exclusion from the dominant and a space of connectivity and sharing. She helps us to understand that the meaning of difference depends on how it is used, for connection or for separation. Difference as *différance*, a principle of proliferation of signs and identities, must be celebrated against the prohibition on meaning and heterogeneity, instituted by all empires of the mind. However, difference in the sense of separations due to material inequalities produced by socio-political and historical conditions cannot be ignored either. They both matter.

Marlatt's accomplishment in *Taken* is to give new relevance to *écriture au féminin* by providing a historicized, transnational perspective, which allows us to see the connections between different bodies in the intimate and the global scale while reinforcing the need for relationality in the contemporary conflict-haunted world.

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