

# Feminist Poet-Critics on Sex, Love, and Motherhood

McInnis, Nadine. *Dorothy Livesay's Poetics of Desire*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1994. 114pp.

Brandt, Di. *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1994. 188pp.

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Although feminist literary criticism is almost thirty years old, critics are still struggling to understand the extent to which the conventions of Western literature render female subjectivity unrepresentable. This is where the work of feminist poet-critics has been crucial, for women poets have unique insight into the strategies that women have developed for subverting hostile conventions. It is therefore gratifying to witness the publication of the two books under review here, both by published poets, each of whom examines an aspect of women's experience that has been especially resistant to literary representation. Nadine McInnis's study examines Dorothy Livesay's representations of female sexual desire as central to her quest for poetic identity, while Di Brandt looks at several contemporary women writers who recover maternal subjectivity for a literary tradition from which it has long been absent.

*Dorothy Livesay's Poetics of Desire*, McInnis's study of the love poems, remains within the established academic tradition. As an examination of themes and images from a feminist perspective, it is a corrective to long-standing interpretations that have never entirely captured the complexity of the erotic in Livesay's poetry. McInnis's work is valuable because feminist criticism in Canada emerged almost simultaneously with post-structuralism, with which it has much in common, and feminist critics continue to show only minimal interest in revising the thematic approach for feminist purposes. To be sure, as with all approaches there are limits to this critical methodology, and McInnis does not escape them, but the strength of her work lies in its decentering of the male subject as the measure of all things—a concept of poetic identity seldom questioned by thematic critics.

While the love poems feature prominently in Livesay scholarship, McInnis justifies her "re-visioning" of them by pointing out—correctly, I think—that previous critics have generally regarded them as personal and confessional while, in fact, they "extend beyond the private relationship between man and woman to reveal the forces that determine the relationship between the individual woman artist and her male-dominated culture" (2). McInnis provides an excellent review of Livesay scholarship in which she clears a space for her own study by enumerating the limitations of her critical predecessors. While it is difficult to do justice here to McInnis's careful considerations of Livesay's three most influential critics, the overall impression she leaves is that Peter Steven's work is sometimes more about male sexual expectations than

it is about female sexual subjectivity; that Pamela Banting's psycholinguistic study is more about its own language than it is about Livesay's; and that Lee Thompson's critical biography of Livesay is more biographical than critical. I tend to agree with these assessments: none of these readings really gets at the intersection of sexual and textual politics in Livesay's work.

McInnis equates Livesay's poetic maturity with her sexual maturity, neatly dividing her depictions of sexual experience into three historical periods. In her early work, Livesay's personae exhibit a youthful ambivalence about sexuality: charmingly timid and romantically impulsive by turns, these personae vacillate between autonomy, represented by solitude in nature, and connection, represented by the longing for heterosexual experience. As Livesay matures into middle age her poetry grapples with the problems and possibilities of heterosexuality—specifically, the construction of heterosexual union in terms of male privilege and power versus female invisibility and silence: the extent to which her personae resist silencing and erasure correlates positively with the emergence of an authentic poetic voice. Finally, in old age Livesay comes to redefine desire in broader terms: it now includes such seemingly disparate experiences as love for her grandchildren and sexual intimacy with women. These mature love experiences signify Livesay's poetic maturity and place her in a position to comment authoritatively on the grim consequences of patriarchal sexual politics.

While this chrono-teleological approach to sexual and poetic development allows for the emergence of previously unidentified themes, including the important theme of the relationship between writing and the body, I have two problems with it, both of which relate to the fact that, while poetics and politics are intimately linked, they are not identical. First, the paralleling of sexual and poetic maturity breaks down when we consider the remarkable textual sophistication of Livesay's earliest poems and the relaxing of textual precision in her late work. Secondly, while themes and images can tell us much about the sociology of love-affairs, they say little about a poet's love-affair with language—that is to say, poetics. In the heat of composition what poets desire most is not good sex, but rather, a good poem. Indeed, McInnis quotes Livesay herself as saying that "the poem is not 'an understanding of an event'; it is the event itself. This concept leads to the view that the language in which the poem is clothed is also event" (66). Despite the metaphor that magically separates the poem from the language in which it is "clothed," Livesay's meaning is clear: it is the poem that matters; the experience that occasioned it is to some extent arbitrary.

Indeed, language has always been Livesay's chief muse: for example, when her personae struggle with husbands and lovers, whom McInnis interprets too literally, one has to consider the more immediate struggle of getting the poem down on the page. It is this creative struggle that gets pushed aside by McInnis's insistence that when Livesay uses diction such as "words," "syntaxes," "alphabets," or otherwise alludes to the act of writing, she is merely using language as a metaphor to express sexual desire (50 and 64). Had she turned this around to say that Livesay uses the metaphor of sexual desire to express something about

language/poetry, McClinnis may have limited what she could say about Livesay's sex life, but she would certainly have revealed a lot more about Livesay's poetic—which is, after all, what the title of this book promises.

Livesay's poems of middle age are significant not merely because she has come to an understanding of heterosexual politics but, more important, because she now has a handle on the subject positions from which she can speak. For example, when she writes, "the woman I am / is not what you see," this is hardly "non-threatening simplicity" (67), as McClinnis would have it, since the lines are anything but simple. Indeed, they call upon us to acknowledge the dislocation between the "I" on the page and the poet who puts it there, and not to confuse the two. To state the problem in semiotic parlance, McClinnis's concern for the referent has been at the expense of the sign. But this, I think, has more to do with the limitations of thematic criticism than it does with McClinnis herself, whose work is a convincing argument for the consistency of Livesay's feminist vision.

Negotiating the dislocation between sign and referent is more successful in Di Brandt's study, *Wild Mother Dancing*, which searches for the maternal subjectivity absent from the canon of Western literature and finds it in Canadian female literary multiculturalism. Brandt's tracing of this narrative across several Canadian cultural divides is nothing less than heroic, for in this era of the politics of difference, any search for gender commonalities across racial and ethnic lines is a risky business because it must confront a pernicious gender scepticism that has haunted feminist discourse for roughly a decade. For example, in her article on gender scepticism, Susan Bordo addresses the insistence among many feminists "that race and class each have a 'maternal base' that gender lacks" and points to the work of influential theorist Jean Grimshaw, who advances the proposition that "the differences in various social constructions of reproduction, the vast disparities in women's experiences of child birth, and so forth preclude that the practices of reproduction can meaningfully be interrogated as a source of insight into the difference gender makes" (Bordo 146). In other words, since difference is all there is among mothers, studies of mothering can shed no useful light on the difference between the gender that gives birth and the one that does not. "Why," asks Bordo, "are we so ready to deconstruct what have historically been the most ubiquitous elements of the gender axis, while so willing to defer to the authority and integrity of race and class axes as fundamentally *grounding*?" (Bordo 146). Unlike the feminists who so exasperate Bordo, Brandt, inspired by her own experience of maternity, undertakes what Grimshaw would find meaningless, namely, an examination of maternal narrative "as a source of insight into the difference gender makes"—and, moreover, to examine that narrative tradition across the reputedly "vast disparities in women's experiences of child birth."

As a version of Brandt's doctoral dissertation, *Wild Mother Dancing* calls upon our patience in those places where she is obliged to review the vast scholarly tradition in which she must locate her study. But she does this with remarkable grace, avoiding the traditional trashing of critical predecessors and focusing instead on what is useful and illuminating about their work. Moreover, it is

only in the earliest chapters, which deal with the work of Margaret Laurence and Daphne Marlatt, where a sustained reading of the literary texts is sacrificed to a meticulous review of anything and everything that might have a bearing on her topic. But this review is worth ploughing through because it not only illustrates the complexity and sophistication of feminist critical theory, but also demonstrates the way in which supposedly conflicting theories of reading and writing actually interconnect and support one another. Clearly Brandt's ability to see connections across cultural divides extends to connections across theoretical divides.

Brandt argues that "the mother has been so largely absent in Western narrative, not because she is unnarratable, but because her subjectivity has been violently, and repeatedly, suppressed" (7). In the Laurence and Marlatt chapters, she develops her framework for illuminating maternal presence / subjectivity in women's writing by integrating insights from both French and North American literary theories with feminist interdisciplinary theories of motherhood as institution and social practice. Most useful is her adoption and enlargement of Mary O'Brien's concept of "reproductive consciousness," defined as "an intentional, politicized awareness of our gender differences in relation to childbirth, an act of recognition and acceptance by each gender of its respective role in the reproductive process . . ." (17). What strikes me as true and important about the Laurence and Marlatt chapters is the way in which Brandt demonstrates that their writing lies beyond the reach of dominant theories of discourse which, it seems to me, are no freer of gender myths than traditional approaches to language. Of Laurence she says, "Indeterminacy . . . does not lead in Laurence's vision to the now-familiar postmodernist celebration of the arbitrariness of language as though it were an end in itself but, rather, amazingly, to maternal and (more generally) reproductive consciousness, materially, in the flesh" (41). Similarly, Marlatt's "representation of the body as articulated (rather than erased) by speech and writing" is a corrective to the male tradition in which birthing is trivialized as merely a metaphor for literary composition. Marlatt's creation of an articulate maternal subject also challenges "the male-centered and anti maternal linguistic paradigm" of postmodernist discourse theory, a paradigm originating in Roland Barthes' insistence that every narrative is a staging of the father and that every writer plays with his mother's body "in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it" (66).

Despite its usefulness, it is a relief to exit the theoretical thicket of the Laurence and Marlatt chapters and arrive on the broad and relatively unencumbered plains of Brandt's readings of five novels by Aboriginal, Japanese-Canadian, and Chinese-Canadian women. But it is not just escape from the overbearing weight of secondary sources that I find liberating, but also admittance to a body of work characterized by themes long off limits within the dominant stream of feminist discourse. These themes include investigations into the relationship between women and nature; depictions of alternative communities founded on female values such as empathy and nurturing; speculations on the oneness of the universe and the existence of God/Goddess; and explorations of scientific discourse as a possible source of liberating insight. In our zeal to measure up to the standards imposed on our work by male-dominated theory and

criticism, many feminists have condemned these themes in women's writing as essentialist, utopianist, totalistic, or otherwise beneath contempt. However, since race is at least as salient an issue as gender for Jovette Marchessault, Joy Kogawa, and Sky Lee, their fiction is not subject to these (essentially unfeminist) theoretical prescriptions designed under the intimidating influence of white- and male-dominated postmodernism. Indeed, Brandt's interpretations of these three writers restore to us the lost vision of a woman-centred feminism.

In Marchessault's trilogy, *Like a Child of the Earth*, *Mother of the Grass*, and *White Pebbles in the Dark Forests*, the "narrative of celestial origin, with its grand figures of the Great She-Bear in the sky, and the great cosmic Grandmother behind her, suggest[s] a revival of the Aboriginal shamanic vision, in dialogue with feminism and the 'new science'" (86). Moreover, in its ecological perspective, Marchessault's work resonates with Laurence's in that both imply the crucial relationship between reproductive consciousness and ecological responsibility. Kogawa's *Obasan* is a little like some of Marlatt's work in that it is "firmly rooted in historical fact" and hence is "[u]nlike some postmodernist fictions that cut themselves off from context entirely through extreme self-reflexivity . . ." (110). Laurence's and Marchessault's novels in search of the ancestral are not unlike *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, which traces Lee's maternal desire "to know who her ancestors were, not just in name but in fact, in flesh and blood . . ." (128). Searching out these cross-cultural connections in no way blinds Brandt to the fact that the recovery of the mother is as much a struggle against colonialist discourse as it is against a masculine literary tradition; indeed, her interpretations remind us that colonialism and patriarchy are two sides of the same coin.

Connections across cultural lines open on to connections across generic lines in the final chapter, where Brandt explores "Mennonite Childbirth Stories: Katherine Martens in Conversation with Seven Women," a collection of unpublished interviews translated from the original *plattdeutsch* into English by Heidi Harms. Besides connecting Brandt to her own Mennonite female heritage, these stories "occupy a revolutionary narrative space in Canadian literature" in that they "break open the absence at the heart of the Western narrative tradition, to reveal a powerful body of women's experiences, rendered passionately and articulately in language" (137). Brandt's interpretation of Evelyn Paetkau's narrative of midwife-assisted home birth is, for me, a powerful recovery of utopian vision for feminism:

Paetkau, I think, is imagining a new world scenario, in which the energy of war is converted into 'reproductive consciousness,' so that the labour of childbearing and childrearing can be recognized as central to human life on this planet, along with the caring uses of natural resources. War, on the other hand, will become obsolete as a means of proving male valour, once men can begin to see themselves as supportive companions in this process, along with midwives, instead of as competitors against and controllers of the regenerative birth process.

This is an implicit reminder of where feminism began, namely, in a vision of a better world for men and women across the cultural and social spectrum. We need poet-critics like Nadine McClinnis and Di Brandt to remind us that together women's literature *and* feminist criticism can keep us focused on that vision.

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#### Work Cited

Bordo, Susan. "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism." *Feminism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York and London: Routledge, 1990. 133-56.

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