

# Lesbian Self-Naming in Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*

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Daphne Marlatt has written that to become "aware of th[e] dialogue on the many fringes" of "white, middle-class, heterosexual, Anglo-American/Canadian" culture — to "listen . . . to other women's words/realities" — "is to engage in a delicate balance between recognition of difference and recognition of shared ground," to achieve a "balance between i and we, neither capitalized nor capitalizing on the other" ("Difference (em)bracing" 192).

Marlatt's *Ana Historic: a novel* is in many ways an exploration of this proposition. Almost every female "character" in the text blends into every other one while also retaining a distinct identity, and all are (a)part of/from Ana herself, who concludes the book by simultaneously realizing a lesbian identity and entering a female community. The story of *Ana Historic* is the story of its narrator-author's "process of becoming a self-named lesbian" (Warland 123) called Annie Torrent, and it reaches its narrative and sexual climax in a powerful poem:

we give place, giving words, giving truth, to  
each other — she and me. you. hot skin writing  
skin. fluid edge, wick, wick. she draws me  
out. you she breathes, is where we meet.  
breeze from the window reaching you now, trees  
out there, streets you might walk down, will,  
soon. it isn't dark but the luxury of being  
has woken you, the reach of your desire, reading  
us unto the page ahead.

"You is a conduit, a light beam to larger possibility, so large it fringes on the other without setting her apart from me," writes Marlatt in the essay with which i/we began this article: "in the first or second person i see who you are, feminist, lesbian: your historicity, your meaning-potential is what i grow into" ("Difference (em)bracing" 188). For Marlatt, the use of the connective "you" rather than the distancing "her" among feminists

and lesbians facilitates more than the creation of a female scopoc economy;<sup>1</sup> it heralds a culture centred on the embracing woman and rich with utopian possibilities.<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that the climactic poem in *Ana Historic* must be read if it is to release its deepest resonances.

In the paragraphs preceding the poem, Annie and Zoe step outside the house in which Zoe and her female friends have established a "world of connection" and stand together in "the dark" (151). Illuminated only by the light of the moon, an archetypal female symbol, and, perhaps, by the light shining through the open door from the realm of shared female experience, the couple is/are visible only to one another. Most importantly, they are hidden from "the light of the Look" (82), the male gaze that objectifies and commodifies, dismembering female bodies and simplifying natural shapes.<sup>3</sup> As well as the moon, "there [are] trees" — an extractable resource for patriarchal capitalism (14), but sources of spiritual succour for Annie earlier in the novel (18). Although the scene is an urban garden, it corresponds to the "open air" and uncleared "bushes" (40, 86) into which Annie imagines the historical Ana Richards venturing physically and psychically in her escape from patriarchy towards an unconfused and unrepressed female identity. In the terms of Deleuze and Guattari's *Traité de nomadologie*; *La machine de guerre*, Annie and Zoe have placed themselves in nomad space — the kinetic, unbounded region that lies outside the static enclosures of patriarchal power. Earlier in the novel, Annie had envisaged Ana Richards "locking the door [of her schoolhouse] behind her, locking herself out" of carceral space (40). With "the sound of a door closing," Annie and Zoe are similarly excluded from man-made enclosures in a space whose openness is conducive to the unlocking and expression of repressed desire.

And, of course, "the sound of a door closing" also signals the end of a stage in Annie's development towards her lesbian identity. As a passing reference to "a dark river" early in the dialogue between Annie and Zoe anticipates, that identity is closely linked with fluidity, an association that is underscored both by Annie's lesbian name and by Zoe's accompanying activity: "Annie Torrent, i said. (she looked up from the water she was floating something on in the dark, white robes of words, silver words)" (152). As well as being a rejection of Annie's patriarchal surname, *Torrent* is a matrilineal affirmation, a proper noun derived from a floating signifier which Annie had earlier attached sympathetically to her

mother: "if only i'd seen more of you, found the right question, argued more, provoked you into a torrent of speech, the torrent you dammed up all those later years . . . the torrent you used to release in rushes of fury . . ." (49). By taking as her new name the torrent that flowed from her mother in anger rather than love, Annie discharges her burden of daughterly guilt — unElectrafies herself — and, in so doing, folds her mother into the lesbian relationship that is now imminent. "[S]o — Annie Torrent — what do you want?" (152) asks Zoe in a gesture that is at once affirmative, connective, and encouraging — a hyphenated and hyphenating gesture that arises from a loving listening to another woman's "words/realit[y]."

"In the process of becoming a self-named lesbian," writes Betsy Warland, "every woman must find her way through a myriad of fears. As she does, she becomes less afraid" (123). Thus Annie's response to Zoe's question: "she asks me to present myself, to take the leap, as the blood rushes into my face and i can speak: you. i want you. *and* me. together" (152). At this point of "balance between i and we," Annie's "fluvial movement" (Warland 134) towards her lesbian self takes her into a lesbian community of two. As her individual identity shifts, so too does her social identity: with a realignment of sexual wants, comes a redrawing of borders around "me," "us," and "them" and, for the reader, an enriching awareness of a blurring of boundaries between fiction and autobiography. Nowhere more powerfully than at this juncture in *Ana Historic* does the border between Annie and Daphne Marlatt, Zoe and Betsy Warland, become fluid and permeable. Now a historically contingent vehicle for lesbian self-presentation, the text abandons the pretence of being a novel, a fictional heterocosm in the heterosexual tradition, and becomes instead an autofictional text, a blending of the discourses of fiction and autobiography which (re)presents Annie/Daphne's achievement of a lesbian identity outside the boundaries of "normal" society. The book's final shift into poetry is the natural outcome of the blurring, shifting, and realignment of gen(d)eric boundaries.

"Poetry," writes Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, "ought to have a mother as well as a father" (107). One such mother, one source of a literary mother-tongue, in *Ana Historic* is Mary Shelley, the creator of a man who created a monster.<sup>4</sup> But Annie's reference to Frankenstein in the passage that precedes the concluding poem also recalls in order to reject the patriarchal perception of lesbianism as monstrous and unnatural: "it isn't even Frankenstein," says Annie after her lesbian self-presentation, "but a

nameless part I know. terror has to do with the trembling that takes you out of yourself" (152). Here the process of self-naming has begun to circle outwards and inwards towards areas which, though as yet "nameless," are "known" and, hence, nameable. As the lesbian body breaks out of patriarchal confinement, writes Betsy Warland in "moving parts," "so too the language opens up — revealing not only the patriarchal codes embedded within our most intimate words, but also revealing how these codes can be broken open: how the language can be inclusive — not exclusive" (128). In the beautifully crafted build-up to the book's sexual and poetic climax, this inclusiveness manifests itself in an eroticism that many heterosexuals may find embarrassing: "we go up the stairs, we enter a room that is alive with the smell of her. bleeding and soft. her on my tongue. she trembles violently on my lips" (152). Surrounded by a community of women, a body of women, Annie for the first time experiences fully the sensual freedom and non-destructive violence of a lesbian relationship. As well as affirming aspects of the female ("the smell . . . bleeding . . . ") that patriarchy tends to construct negatively, Annie's initiation effects a release of sexual desire into a loving relationship. More than simply the opening out of Annie's sexuality, the representation of lesbian love in the final paragraph and poem of *Ana Historic* is an authorial and personal affirmation by Marlatt and — for the aim is inclusion — Warland and the "feminist, lesbian" reader.

In a powerful analysis of the effect of lesbian writing on the traditional "division between writer and reader," Warland argues that in lesbian love poetry particularly the patriarchal construction of the reader as a viewer — a voyeuristic spectator for whom the poet describes the activities of lovers — has been "rendered obsolete" (134). As well as being "admitted openly into the text," we-the-writers-and-readers of lesbian texts "must pass through the initial fear of intrusiveness into the pleasure of inclusiveness" (135). In the poem that concludes *Ana Historic*, the blurring of distinctions and fusing of identities that lies at the heart of lesbian experience finds a corollary in the erasure of barriers between and among the lovers, the writer(s), and the reader(s): "we give place, giving words, giving birth, to / each other — she and me. you / hot skin writing / skin. fluid edge, wick, wick. she draws me / out. you she breathes, is where we meet." Here lesbian love is celebrated, not from the voyeuristic or omniscient perspective of patriarchy as the penetration of an "other," but as a merging interface of boundaries between two selves which are distinct and yet alike. Serving "*jouissance*" rather than procreation (Irigaray 24), lovers of the sex that is and is not one "giv[e] birth"

to "place . . . words . . . [and] each other" — to shared places, common texts and the community that inhabits them. "[W]ick, wick": twice the substance between the inside and the outside of a lamp, twice the material between the liquid and the flame of a candle. In the terms of Irigaray and de Beauvoir (but without their heterosexual mind-set): the doubling of the second sex in love, in joy, eradicates hierarchy, dichotomy and closure.

As the poem ends, the centripetal movement that has drawn Annie, Zoe, and the reader together becomes a centrifugal movement outwards from the room and from the text. Now that security within a lesbian identity has been achieved, a "breeze" crossing yet another threshold between outside and inside provides pleasant intimations of public spaces soon to be visited willingly because confidently:

breeze from the window reaching you now, trees  
out there, streets you might walk down, will,  
soon, it isn't dark but the luxury of being  
has woken you, the reach of your desire, reading  
us into the page ahead.

As much an address to the reader as to Annie/Daphne or Zoe/Betsy, these lines speak of potential as well as fulfillment, imminent procedures as well as achieved identity, "reading" forward as well as affirming "being." The passage and, with it, the poem and the body of the novel, ends with a period, but it is the "period that arrives at no full stop," the bleeding period of *l'écriture féminine*<sup>5</sup> which "erupts like a spring, like a wellspring of being, well-being inside . . ." (90). Also working against patriarchal assumptions of closure and completeness, the (non-)concluding reference to "the page ahead" points the reader towards the blank page which, in the Coach House Press edition of the book, appears between the poem and a biographical note on "Daphne Marlatt." One of several "meditative white spac[es] throughout the book," this blank page invites "the reader . . . to enter the text and play an active role in its interpretation" (Warland 131). By means of the "dialect" thus induced, Warland adds, "the text embraces any reader whose life and perspective have been marginalized and oppressed."

Not being a poet, I have scribbled the notes for this article on "the page ahead" of the poem and in the "white space[s]" that follow. And in the space below the poem I have transcribed some notes from Marilyn Frye's *Politics of Reality*: "Lesbian. One of the people of the Isle of Lesbos. It is bizarre that when I try to name

myself and explain myself, my native tongue provides me with a word that is so foreign, so false, so hopelessly inappropriate . . . . *Lesbian* is . . . the only concept I have ever set out to explain, that seemed to be shut out [of the conceptual scheme of patriarchy] in more than one . . . way . . . . The redundancy of the devices of closure which are in place here . . . leads me to say that lesbians are *excluded* from the scheme . . . . The meaning of this erasure and of the totality and conclusiveness of it has to do, I think, with the maintenance of phallogentric reality as a whole, and with the situation of women generally *a propos* that reality" (160-62).

The lesbian naming at the open conclusion of *Ana Historic* challenges "phallogentric reality" in a way that raises complex responses in all readers, be they female or male, homo- or heterosexual. It may arouse or disgust. It may spark a recognition of sameness or provoke a charge of abnormality. It may confirm convictions or suspicions of sexual identity. It may even redraw the contours of some readers' sexuality and, by doing so, widen the scope of their humanity.

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## Notes

My thanks to Michelle Mitelich, Janice Tharby, and, especially Katherine Ewans for many discussions of feminist and lesbian friendships.

1. See Marilyn Frye on "The Loving Eye" (72-76): "The loving eye is a contrary of the arrogant eye [of patriarchy]. The loving eye knows the independence of the other . . . . It is the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one's own will and interests and fears and imagination. One must look at the thing. One must look and listen and check the question. The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention. The attention can require a discipline but *not* a self-denial. The discipline is one of self-knowledge, knowledge of the scope and boundary of the self" (75). [\[back\]](#)
2. Alluding to the "fulfilled romance" pattern — the "happy ending" — within which these utopian possibilities are presented, Lola Lemire Tostevin describes the conclusion of *Ana Historic* as "unexpectedly conventional" (38). Besides ignoring the fact that the novel's happy ending involves an unconventionally lesbian rather than a conventionally

heterosexual couple, Tostevin fails to appreciate the openness of the final poem. [\[back\]](#)

3. See, for instance, the reduction of trees to "a straight line" through the removal of their limbs (14) and the analogous treatment of Ana's mother: "they removed your uterus, they pulled your rotten teeth, they put electrodes on your misbehaving brain" (88). [\[back\]](#)
  4. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is mentioned four times earlier in the novel (10, 16, 46, and 141). [\[back\]](#)
  5. I owe much to Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" and to the text that she wrote in collaboration with Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*. I am also generally indebted to Janice Raymond's *A Passion for Friends: Towards a Philosophy of Female Friendship*, to the essays in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall's *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, and to Daphne Marlatt's own "musing with mothertongue." [\[back\]](#)
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