From the Margins of the Margin

This chapter is an attempt to study the texts of Crate, Maracle and Marchessault from the vantage point of postcolonialism. Since the counter discourse of any marginalised community thrives on subversion of the master narratives of the canonical texts, an exploration of the subversive modes -- the re-statement of nativeness, construction of strong native characters, revising colonialist histories and reversing myths -- is pertinent.

In their attempts to create a discourse that empowers oppressed peoples, postcolonial theorists have employed the oppositional terms--margin and centre--where margin represents disempowerment and centre represents power and control. This division within the system of discourse is apparently not without drawbacks. For, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts theorists utilizing the rhetoric of marginality overlook the ways their references to marginalized and central writers and texts reify existing categories of meanings. Because the centre defines the margin, the margin's "privileged site of cultural critique" (qtd. in Keating 23) is itself authorized by the
dominant hegemonic cultural system. Consequently, the oppositional world view of the marginalized remains locked in a dyadic relationship that inadvertently reinforces existing power structures. Gates also maintains that attempts to overcome this binary construction are ineffective resulting in "breeding new margins within margins... an even renewed process of differentiation, even fragmentation" ("Studies" 298).

The inability of the margin to overcome the binary opposition has further strengthened the centre's hold over it. Sara Suleri makes a related point in her discussion of postcolonial feminist theory where she challenges contemporary feminists to explore "the excesses and limitations" (757) in marginal locations, claiming that "until the participants in marginal discourses learn how best to critique the intellectual errors that inevitably accompany the provisional discursivity of the margin, the monolithic and untheorized identity of the center will always be on them" (757-58).

Like Gates, Suleri emphasizes the constrictive, relational nature of all margin/centre rhetoric. This distinction between the margin and the centre does not offer the former a site of power that intervenes in the hegemonic discourse. Rather, the margin becomes an
appositional position, defined, reified and controlled by the centre.

Yet, over the years, the margin has changed its status. Through a revisioning rather than attacking technique, the margin has come a long way from its demeaning definition as "the space where nothing really happens" (Soderlind 101). The term margin is currently used as a metaphor; it serves as the vehicle for a number of tenors, or descriptive terms—colonized, native, feminist, homosexual, poor, disabled, homeless and so on. This has led to an ironic situation which has witnessed the hegemonic rise of margins as the new sites of resistance. "Everyone is claiming them [margins]" comments Brydon (1) on the mad rush after the margins.

This new status accorded to the margins has also led to a new power-structure where the margin has led to the creation of new margins. The more powerful theories of feminism and heterosexual thought turn oppressive, resulting in the tangential movement of women of colour, immigrants and homosexuals to a new site—the margins of the margin.

Eventhough both feminism and postcolonialism share much in common, the belief that western feminists are eurocentric in their arguments has been a stumbling block
in their relations. The details of the conflicts within feminism with regard to the position of coloured women will be discussed under the subtitle "Decolonization of feminism".

In the counter discourse within Canadian Literature, Joan Crate, Lee Maracle and Jovette Marchessault speak from the fragmented margins of gender, class, race and erotic preference. Their positions are powerful sites characterized by "emergent energies and experiences which stubbornly resist." (Raymond Williams qtd. in Philip 11) the dominant discourse. Thus Maracle's voice from the intersection of racism and sexism and Marchessault's native lesbian voice—all find new meanings in the context of their doubly marginalized positions. Before going into the details of the native feminisms of the authors under discussion, it would be worthwhile to study the relationship between feminism and postcolonialism and between feminism and postcolonial feminism.

Decolonization of Feminism

In her discussion on the need to liberate the feminist movement from its narrow confines, M. Nourbese Philip observes:

The common base for women is a shared history of oppression in all its varieties and forms, as
well as... a shared commitment to establishing communities organized along non-patriarchal, woman centred, non-racist principles. While wishing to avoid reductionist arguments, as well as those body centred theories which become at times tiresome, we must acknowledge that a basic common denominator of female experience... in all cultures and in all classes... has been the fact that our bodies have achieved a universal negative significance; bodies which have become palimpsests upon which men have inscribed and reinscribed their texts. (12)

She goes on to assert the postcolonial feminist view that while feminism could make important and significant contributions to resolve some of the problems, only an analysis of the workings of racism could help to lay the foundations of a strong, all-encompassing feminism. But today while western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the postcolonial feminist is involved in a bitter struggle against not just the remnants of colonial racism and sexism, but also against the forces of neo-colonialism.

The imperialist attitude of western feminism is revealed by Chandra Mohanty in her essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." She
writes that the assumption of women as "an already constituted coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradiction implies a notion of gender universally and cross-culturally" (175-76). It is highly detrimental to the coloured women. Spivak, too is highly critical of such universalizing tendencies which obliterate difference. In her work "In Other Worlds", she draws our attention to the need in any discussion of oppression whether linguistic, social or sexual for the discontinuities and differences between western feminism and women of other cultural identities to be recognized and problematized. "Otherwise the focus remains defined by the investigator as subject" (150). Spivak insists that there has to be "a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss"? (150).

Postcolonial feminism certainly runs the risk of marginalization or ghettoization unless it addresses itself to the two simultaneous projects which, it is believed, would strengthen it. Chandra Mohanty names the two projects as, "the internal critique of hegemonic 'western' feminism and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies" (172).
The first project has involved attempts to decolonize feminism. It involves a process of dismantling and deconstruction of the eurocentric mindset of western feminism. Since the term colonization implies "a relation of structural domination, and a suppression... often violent... of the heterogeneity of the subject(s)" (Mohanty 173), the concerted efforts on the part of white feminists to exercise their hegemony over women of colour could be viewed as attempts at colonization. This neo-colonization could use tactics ranging from demands by the majority that the minority give voice to their painful experiences, "Do not speak in the voice of resistance. Only speak for that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain" (Hooks 23) to appropriation of minority experiences and struggles and reduction of Third world women into monolithic objects.

The second project, according to Chandra Mohanty, which would ensure the positioning of postcolonial feminism within the parameters of power involves reconstruction of pre-colonial history, subjectivity and culture. This project will be discussed in detail under the subtitle "Appropriating Master's Tools".

In spite of all their differences, feminism and postcolonialism do share common ideas. A main issue
which interests both these movements is the one concerning language and writing. The idea that language is a man-made male plot against women or a eurocentric plot against the postcolonial culture exists today. This posits an origin to language, "a kind of non-linguistic transcendental signifier, or a transcendental conspirator a concept which cannot be supported" (Ashcroft 25).

In their placing of accent on the parole rather than on the langue for the re-establishment of the speaking subject, both feminism and postcolonialism engage in an anti-structuralist move. Moreover, language is seen as a process, rather than a system -- something people do, and it is the people's appropriation of it that gives meaning and power to language. Since feminism and postcolonialism speak from the margins of cultures, they appropriate language too from their marginal position. Thus from their position of absence and negativity created by the patriarchal, eurocentric and phallogocentric culture, both seize and refashion the patriarchal language.

The positioning of language as the common ground for the entry of both feminism and postcolonialism is not without reservations. Barbara Christian is one of the few writers who attempts to dissuade coloured women from
engaging in écriture feminine. In her opinion, many of the indigenous languages were invented primarily in relation to women. "Some Native American languages, for example, use female pronouns when speaking about non gender-specific activity.... Further, by positing the body as the source of everything, French feminism returns to the old myth that biology determines everything and ignores the fact that gender is a social rather than a biological construct" (60).

These arguments can be countered by the fact that native women write not in their indigenous languages, but in the highly structured, inherently sexist and racist language. Moreover, the body could be considered to be a metaphor for feminine expression just as the phallus is the figurative focal point in patriarchal language. W.D. Ashcroft in the essay "Intersecting Marginalities" attempts to draw a parallel between postcolonial writing's search for an alternative language to be created from the site of struggle and écriture feminine. The accent the former laid on the re-establishment of the silenced voice is reiterated by the latter with its call to return to the pre-oedipal maternal language of jouissance.

Among the native novelists under discussion, it is pertinent to note that only Jovette Marchessault appropriates the mode of écriture feminine and its
potential for linguistic subversion. Joan Crate and Lee Maracle follow the postcolonial mode of subverting imperial culture.

In her essay, "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter Discourse", Helen Tiffin writes about the processes of artistic and literary decolonization involved in a radical dismantling of European codes and a postcolonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant discourse. The natural correlative of this has been the demand for the creation of a new reality, devoid of all colonial traces. Since it is almost impossible for the colonized to re-create a reality in complete neglect of the European colonial enterprise, "it has been the project of postcolonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within (and between) two worlds; to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in the colonial dominations of much of the rest of the world"

Contemporary native women writers are in a position of full potential. As participants in two cultural traditions, they pattern their art with discursive acts of "mediation"--"the artistic and conceptual stand point, constantly flexible, which uses the epistemological
frameworks of Native American and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other" (Ruppert 3). In this work towards the dismantling of western stereotypes, creation of cultural criticism of the colonizer, they retell the stories of violence of the past and at the same time they also write about the need to effect the emergence of a new cultural and literal activity. In discussing native literature, Paula Gunn Allen directs our attention to the fact that native novels are increasingly concerned with tribal and urban life. Though much of their narrative plotting is western, they "rely on native rather than non-Indian forms, themes and symbols and so are not colonial or exploitative. Rather, they carry on the oral traditions at many levels, furthering and nourishing it and being furthered and nourished by it" (Allen 79).

Some critics believe that the native writers are employing the master's tools against the masters themselves. For example, Simon Ortiz writes about the native appropriation of western literary modes, "They [western modes] are now Indian because of the creative development that the Native people applied to them" (qtd. in Ruppert 5), and Arnold Krupat explains how a committed Native writer" manages successfully to merge forms internal to his [the native writer's] cultural formation with forms external to it, but pressing upon even seeking to
delegitimate it" (qtd. in Ruppert 6). In these "delegitimizing" modes, the autobiography is used to tell not the story of the self, but of the community. The native bildungsroman narrates not the development of the protagonist's mind and character alone, but also the awakening of racial consciousness within a community.

The multiple self identifications of the native women novelists under discussion (coloured, political activist, mixed blood, feminist, lesbian etc) pose a threat to the reconstruction of subjectivity. The multiple tropes of identifications could be regarded as instances of post-structuralist, post-modernist representations of the non-unitary self. This subversive characterization at a time when native women are attempting to discover their self is certainly self-destructive. Moreover, the intersections of these multiple self identities create what is called "border consciousness" (Fast 142) in the speakers. But, even this apparent liability is converted into a favourable argument by Crate, Maracle and Marchessault. Their multiple self conceptions sharpen their awareness that their audiences are also multiple: hence from their shifting border locations, these writers recognize and address different audiences as they seek to influence diverse communities. Thus Maracle in her works addresses both feminists and anti-racists; Marchessault, who
identifies herself as a native lesbian, addresses not only natives and lesbians, but also anti-church audience.

**The Restatement of Nativeness**

Contemporary Native story tellers often choose the novel form for their narrative needs as "the novel is a narrative genre well-suited for examining how the traditional ways of knowing function in a multi-cultural world where the meanings of narrative are often twisted and tangled" (Elaine Johner qtd. in Ruppert 14).

Moreover, the size and scope of the novel allows it the flexibility to juxtapose various narrative forms and then bring readers to a standpoint where they can untangle their responses and misreadings taking them back to their experiential roots. Evident in their novels is a profound spiritualism --usually traditional rather than Christian, an intense reverence and respect for nature, a strong sense of community and a love of life, laughter and harmony as aboriginal people. But these qualities alone wouldn't succeed in realistically portraying native life. The de-stabilization of all the above-mentioned values because of the onslaught of western ideals is an aspect of native life that novelists often present. At the end of it all however, the formation of a strong family feeling or community life is hinted at which certainly assures one that the natives are not all vanquished.
The value of a life of mingling, caring and sharing usually emerges in the portrayal of various characters. In Lee Maracle's *Sundogs* one sees a character, Marianne, who is an excellent example of what Maracle's grandmother called "Crippled two tongue" (Maracle, *Differences* 166). She is a girl marginalized in her own culture as well as in the western culture "At home, I am not Indian enough and at school I am much too Indian", (*Sundogs* 10). This is Marianne's predicament. She speaks from her urban experience and is greatly distanced from the language of her tribal ancestors. *Sundogs* is about Marianne's attempt to create and negotiate relationship with her family and her community.

In Marianne's initial attitude towards her family -- her embarrassment at her mother's ways of talking, dressing etc, her anger towards the concept of extended family, her inability to respond to the needs of her relatives, her failure in recognizing the true reasons behind the gradual increase in violence in her family and her brother's unsuccessful fight against alcoholism and her inability to recognize the real strength of her mother, the soul of the family -- all these prove that she is a victim of the patriarchal and extremely solipsistic western culture. As the novel proceeds, one can sense a change in Marianne's stance. Her relationship with her
sisters improves and she recognizes her mother's true worth. After her return from the Peace Run, she finds a new meaning in her family relations.

My whole family and every Native any of us ever knew gathers at the house. It's a new house... My brothers clutch me like they are sure I have been raised from the dead. Dignified tears leak from Joseph's eyes but Rudy sobs uncontrollably—everyone weeps. I break down too....

Momma's face smiles; tears track down deep lines, fill her crow's feet but her body explodes with pride. Her womb birthed a frail little girl with extraordinary courage.... We began the run for love and we ended on the same note. Now I know this is what my Momma is all about. (204)

Marianne's realization that her problem of having "No roots in the earth and her ways and no roots in family" (190) had kept her from coming to terms with her own self.

Dione in Joan Crate's Breathing Water too has a problem with self which results from her inability to relate her urban self to the native self. The disappearance of her father from the family creates a vacuum which is keenly felt by Dione. Her gradual separation from her family only converts her into a
It is only when she establishes peace with her mother that she finds inner peace. Towards the end of the novel, one finds Dione, the muddling, inexperienced girl metamorphose into a responsible and confident woman.

These novels hold out hope to young Indian readers, many of whom are suffering from the adolescent identity crisis -- living as a native in westernized society. Much in native literature reveal the depth and diversity of the indigenous culture, the beauty of the native world and the wisdom of the elders. In Maracle's and Marchessault's fiction, the symbiotic relationship between the old and the young is highlighted. In the absence of strong mothers, grandmothers wait to teach Indian ways to the young who may be floundering in an alien culture.

The valorization of the grandmother is one of the features in Marchessault's fiction that could be seen in all the three works of her trilogy. Grandmothers, in aboriginal culture, were deemed even more powerful than mothers, since their age signified seniority in wisdom and experience. In portraying the family intergenerationally, "Marchessault is able to give us a sense of the traditional power of the grandmothers, without glossing over the oppression of the mothers in the modern family" (Brandt 99).
In the first volume, Like a Child of the Earth, she introduces her family members and attempts to create the myth of her Grandmother. In "Song Two" she gives us an insight into her family relations:

My parents, my accomplices in this farce, raised a barricade at the entrance to the nest, because they had, of course, the fearful, feeble outlook of the bird who does not venture far from the nest. Until I might attain the age when I could survive on my own and bring down my prey by myself, they hovered over me, encouraging me, helping me stuff my face. When, after numerous vicissitudes, I attained the age where I could look after myself, I cast my parents off, threatening my mother with my beak and whining voice. I wriggled in front of my father. I made plans, constructed a setting for myself, and laughed in my mother's beak when she sang about economy, prudence, modesty, marriage, and children... [yet] I did not remember how to leave the nest. (19)

The protagonist is saved from this narcissistic existence by her grandmother. In the second volume, Mother of the Grass Marchessault draws on her childhood experience in a family of women. Marchessault's mother
and grandmother had knowledge of traditional female healing practices and told her the stories of female culture which is later responsible for her faith in the creation of an all-female family. In seven songs, she relates anecdotes from her childhood spent with her beloved grandmother, "In those days, we lived beside the river. We were my grandmothers, my mother, my father, and my grandmother's second husband. We lived as a tribe, in a great congregation of nerve cells and blood cells" (7).

By presenting an extended family where women provide emotional and practical comfort to each other, where the grandmother passes on worldly knowledge through an osmosis-like process, Jovette Marchessault inverts ideas of family relationships that exist in the western system.

Thus, Crate, Maracle and Marchessault effect a reworking of the native women's role as the bearer of life and nourisher of the family and violently invert the patriarchal attack on native family traditions. Jeannette Armstrong remarks:

It was through the attack on the power of Aboriginal woman that the disempowerment of our people has been achieved, in a de-humanizing process that is one of the cruellest on the face
of this earth. In the attack on the core family system, in the direct attack on the role of Aboriginal woman, the disintegration of our peoples towards genocide has been achieved. (x)

Another important issue discussed by the native women writers is, of course, the intersection of racism and sexism. The contents of the literary works of writers like Maracle and Marchessault often disturb the readers of the mainstream culture, for they often articulate the experience of the rejected other in their own land.

Maracle's *I Am Woman* begins with a discussion of her "personal struggle with womanhood, culture, traditional spiritual beliefs and political sovereignty" (vii). She writes about the humbling of her youthful enthusiasm by racist, sexist and nationalist oppression and expresses shock at the anti-sexist views of native men. She writes at length about the effects of colonization on women:

Colonization for Native women signifies the absence of beauty, the negation of our sexuality. We are the females of the species: 'Native', undesirable, non-sensuous beings that never go away. Our wombs bear fruit but are not sweet. For us intercourse is not marked by white, middle-class, patriarchal dominant-submissive
tenderness. It is more a physical release from the pressure and pain of colonialism--mutual rape. Sex becomes one more of the horrors of enslavement, driving us to celibacy. (20-21)

The response of the native woman towards the native male is marked by anything but tenderness. As Maracle writes, "I am beginning to feel like our own men do not want us. They don't like us. We are just here for them to vent their frustrations, just whipping posts.... Worse, we are with them because they couldn't get a white woman" (51).

Native men, who were better off as "lazy drunken Indians" (17) than native women whose very femininity was negated seldom find common ground in their fight against the common evil of colonialism. Maracle also directs her ire against white feminists who "invite [us] to speak if the issue is racism or Native people. We are there to teach, to sensitize them or to serve them in some way. We are expected to retain our position well below them, as their servants. We are not, as a matter of course, invited as an integral part of 'their movement' -- the women's movement" (18).

The way out of racism and sexism, according to Maracle lies in a heart-to-heart talk amongst themselves.
She writes, "Let us begin by talking to each other about ourselves. Let us cleanse the dirty shack that racism left us. Let us deal with our men-folk and the refuse of patriarchy they borrowed from white men" (139).

Maracle is fully aware of the need to get rid of the internal colonization for, only by reclaiming the essential, independent native self can an Indian woman position herself in the site of counter discourse.

Sundogs could be regarded not just as a story of a native girl's self-realization, but also as a restatement of the events of the Peace Run at Okanagan. Marianne's initial rejection of the very existence of violence in native-white relationship is countered by her first hand experience of it during the Peace Run. It is not that Marianne has not been subjected to racism. While commenting on her sister Lacey's fanatical feminism, Marianne says:

Lacey, you believe in Momma's simple truth ['love one another'] because you never had your blooming tenuous womanhood violated in quite the same way. Lacey, you did not go to my high schools. You worked at home alongside Momma. Lacey, you restricted your world to a coloured one; no white men were allowed in it....
You discussed white men and patriarchy all the time, laughed over its inadequacies, its impotence, and its futile attempt to negate the majority of the world. You emmified them while I was busy dancing to their crazy tunes. I competed with them and in my mind I still do. I had to find partners from among them to study and conduct group seminars. I experienced the humiliation of being chosen last for group after group and only if no one else had a partner because no one wanted to invest his trust in my intellectual potential. (161-62)

She was aware of internal colonization and she considered her mother's belief in the "anti-Native genocidal plot" to be a bit far-flung. In her irritation with her mother's constant talking-back to the television, Marianne comments, "I want relief... from always considering every law, custom and practice of these people as some sort of anti-Native genocidal plot. My mother, I muse, thrives on the plottiness of these people. Without their plottiness, she would have no reason to get up every day. Without their wickedness, she would have very little reason for being" (8).

But, in the end, the overt violence of the white racists against the peace runners makes her realize that
her mother was right all along. The "hate-twisted faces" (183) of the rock-throwers and the wanton whispered epithets of the young white boys who had gathered along the sides of the road awaken the native consciousness within Marianne.

The rampant sexism within native communities too is mentioned in the novel. Judy's violence against his wife and children and her own partner's comment "I never courted any native woman and I have been with plenty" (118) reflects the condition of native women in Canada. Elsewhere, Marianne remarks in passing about native women, "The alternative [to following academics] was to consent to sexual reduction, withdraw or be reduced. Erase yourself or consent to shame. That is the sociology of being native and woman in Canada. It is the result of beseigement, encroachment, small neglect, impoverishment, and mass death" (161).

Marianne becomes a character who is fully aware of the effects of colonization. She realizes that it affects even the way people rate themselves in society. Maracle, from the vantage point of literary resistance, attempts to overturn and transform the colonial discourse. The creation of strong native characters, indeed, weaken the process of victimization. The voicing of their stories
generate personal and political empowerment which is strengthened by the characters' acts of naming violation and refusal to collaborate with oppressors.

Jovette Marchessault's writings are not so anti-racist as they are anti-sexist. In her writings, what emerges is the construction of identity purely on sexist lines; Race becomes a non-entity here yet, on a subtle level, she criticizes a much ignored fact of native life in cities -- that of child abuse.

In *Mother of the Grass* Marchessault attempts a portrayal of child abuse within the family. Directing her ire against "daddies" the protagonist cries:

What was going on in the daddies' pants as they hit, wounded, and mutilated? Lise told me. Once when he was whipping her thighs with her jump-rope, she was maddened with pain and tried to get away from him, breaking the unity of her suffering and entering on another mode of life, but she slipped and he recaptured her up against his pants leg. 'He had a hard-on, for Christ's sake. He had a hard-on!' Lise told me that. So did big Colette. Huguette and Lorraine also noticed it. (93)
The inability of mothers to stall this abuse is decried by the protagonist. "Mama, you should have screamed out loud. Howled! Ho-o-owled and ho-o-o-wld and ho-o-owled!" (83).

The violence within the family was certainly formidable, but even worse was the violence meted out to their ancestors. In Like a Child of the Earth, a novel which is almost surrealistic in its emphasis on feminist archetypalism and which attempts to portray the lost history of the natives, Marchessault writes about the "pillage, thieving, abduction, rape, torture, threats, and blows and baptisms" (41). In an attempt to rework the native history, she writes about the false romanticism of Christopher Columbus who "shot and killed a number of savages with his crossbows in order to teach them respect for the weapons of Castille" (41) and about William Cody who massacred the cattle belonging to the natives. William Cody, appears as "the most bloody killer yet, an assassin designated by the army" (135).

The silencing of a group of people who had been reduced to the status of "semiotic pawns" (Goldie 10) in the colonial power stranglehold is well articulated in this novel.
We spoke feebly, we spoke in whispers. Like convalescents, we were cautious about using the verbs 'to have' and 'to be' in the future tense.... We did not remember the old days very well, or the old words, or the starting point of the discourse or how to support an argument because we had been subjects of the Queen of England for far too long. (84)

Here, the very assumption that the colonizer had taught the aboriginal to talk, that they had civilized the Indian is inverted. But hidden in this statement is the polemic of understatement. The narration of events in the past tense ("spoke feebly", "we did not remember" etc) is juxtaposed with the present ability to voice the past dilemma. By effecting a clever splitting of the subject [I-the powerful speaker talking about I-the weak victim of colonization], Marchessault subverts all the preconceived notions of the colonized.

Though much of Marchessault's anti-sexist views are presented throughout all her texts, it is in her attacks on the church, that she becomes vitriolic. Baptism, in her eyes, is equivalent to abduction and rape. However, much of her attack on Christianity is characterised by satirical remarks.
 Eh, Christ! We are christianized. Eh, Christ! We have fallen in the well of truth with its bleached suns. Eh, Christ! We are picked up, chastized, and impregnated by the great-Vampire-in-Chief of the lunatic asylum. Eh, Christ! We are absolutely enslaved by all our institutions, laws and churches. Eh, Christ! We will perpetuate this deception for millennia. (147)

This tongue in cheek statement is rounded off with yet another inversion: "Eh, Christ, give us the strength to go on, in the name of the father and of the holy mother, amen" (147).

Eventhough she almost never conjures up images of the native religious beliefs, Marchessault is vehement when she treats Catholic religion in her novels. She often quotes scripture in a new context that effectively exposes its misogynistic, even pornographic nature. Marchessault's tremendous anger against the oppressive order of priests bursts out in "A Lesbian Chronicle from Medieval Quebec" and "The Angel Makers" in Lesbian Triptych. These fictions employ the satiric device of inversion, of turning the Church's teaching upside down, in order to denounce the way in which the church has oppressed women's sexuality. The satiric denunciation of papal authority in the "Chronicle", the humorous puns on
bull-Normal School, the bull-dog compulsory heterosexuality, the channel bull, burlesque the religious order, while the inversion of the annunciation in "The Angel Makers" into the blessed arrival of death, instead of birth, travesties it.

The attack on the "Black Robes" (Maracle, Woman 62) or the Christian missionaries who arrive on the native land to 'educate' the people is tinged with a particular brand of humour which is prevalent and vital in aboriginal cultures. The shallowness of western education is pointed out by the Chief in Maracle's essay "Black Robes." In the same book, Maracle also makes a satirical remark on the lateral violence among native people in the poem "Hatred"

If the state won't kill us
We will have to kill ourselves.
It is no longer good etiquette
to head-hunt savages
will just have to do it ourselves.
It's not polite to violate 'squaws'
we'll have to find
an Indian to oblige us.
It's poor form to starve an Indian
we will have to
deprive our young ourselves
Blinded by niceties and polite liberality
we can't see our enemy,
so, we'll just have to kill each other. (1-14)

Appropriating Master's Tools

Picking up the pen and writing a self, a subject
position into existence has been an effective tool for
oppositional tactics. Like any other tool of resistance,
the pen too, is vitriolic in its potential to defend and
attack. The words Resistance, Difference and Multiplicity
have become synonymous with native women's effort to
subvert the master narratives of the western tradition.
In their critiques of multiple systems of domination, many
native women have asserted that their works followed the
interventionist mode, marked by a desire to resist and
resignify western narratives.

The major concept of Resistance is clearly defined by
Selwyn Cudjoe in his *Resistance and Caribbean Literature*
and by Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature*. Literary
Resistance, according to them could be seen as a form of
contractual understanding between the text and the reader,
one which is embedded in an experimental dimension and
buttressed by a political and cultural aesthetic at work
in the culture. To Foucault, resistance is not a
homogenous, fixed phenomenon: "[I]t is pluralized, diverse
in form, heterogeneous, mobile and transitory" (Cousins
and Hussain 242). Native women use several methods to give expression to their literary resistance. The assertion of the self in literary works, the employment of the western narrative forms or their inversions — autobiography, quest narratives, myth — the reworking of western historical interpretations, the creation of strong characters, etc. are but a few modes by which native women posit themselves in the field of discourse.

The assertion of selfhood by the native women writers, their notions of narrative forms and their uncanny ideas of asserting their subjectivity are all inversonal methods.

Jovette Marchessault's definition of herself as a native lesbian writer represents her ceaseless negotiations of a positionality from which she could speak. Her nativeness is characterized by her attack on Christopher Columbus and Buffalo Bill, her association with the rest of the victims in the world is reiterated in her attacks on Hitler and her concern for animals, her feminist approach is revealed in her attacks on patriarchal religion, language, and modes of living and her lesbianism is communicated in her attacks on heterosexuality.
Joan Crate's character Dione has a difference-defined, complexly constructed self. Her sensuousness, her waywardness are all in sharp contrast to the projected values of native women. Crate is involved in presenting the cultural schizophrenia of a half native-half white heroine and for this she makes use of the stereotype of the exotic, erotic female. Lee Maracle's tactical renaming takes different forms, she utilizes her diverse personal experiences to explore complex sets of native, sexual and race-related concerns. She draws on her native ancestry and writes from the perspective of native women. She also voices the concern of other minority groups in various essays in *I Am Woman* -- feminism in "The Women's Movement", racism in "The Rebel", religion in "Black Robes" and lesbianism in "Isn't Love a Given?"

Having looked into the respective aspects of each of the novelists under discussion, it is pertinent here to discuss the creation of subjectivity. For a discourse to be intelligible, it is essential that the subject-position be occupied. It follows from Saussure's theory of language as a system of differences that the world is intelligible only in a discourse which in turn is intelligible only with the assertion of the self. Thus, "as well as being a system of signs related among themselves, language incarnates meaning in the form of the series of positions it offers for the subject from which
to grasp itself and its relation with the real" (Nowell-Smith 26).

The subject is created in language and in discourse and also in ideology "since the symbolic order in its discursive use is closely related to ideology" (Belsey 49). Ideology often suppresses the role of language in the construction of the subject and as a result people recognize themselves in the ways in which ideology interpellates them. As a result, they "work by themselves" (Althusser 169) and they willingly adopt the subject positions necessary to their participation in the social formation.

One of the powerful means to assert the self is certainly the autobiographical mode. The use of the first person narrator in each of the novels under study is the primary tactic, used to create the counter discourse. By providing the illusion of a coherent, non-problematic and unified self, Crate, Maracle and Marchessault have succeeded in working "to suppress the role of language in the construction of the subject and its own role in the interpellation of the subject and to present the individual as a free, unified, autonomous subjectivity" (Belsey 67). The taking up of the autobiographical position thus transports the colonial subject into the
terror of the universal subject and holds promise of a culturally empowered subjectivity. For the colonial subject, the process of coming to writing is an articulation through interrogation, a charting of the conditions that have historically placed her identity under erasure. But this appropriation of the subject position cannot be regarded as a mimetic process -- for the native subject establishes her self by "expos[ing] their [white] gaps and incongruities, wrench[ing] their meaning" (Watson and Smith xx) and thus calling their authority into question.

When one reads native autobiographies (or fictional autobiographies) within the parameters of the western autobiography, one might be led to think that the former is a new genre in production. The centrality of the self to western autobiography has no close parallel in native writing. This does not, however, mean that though the western understanding of the self in its various historical representations is neither prioritized nor valorized in Native Indian autobiography, it does not negate the idea of subjectivity in texts. Some sense of a self -- a collective communal self or perhaps "the reflective, conscious subject of experience, a subject that is not identical with any self of its experiences memories or traits" (Krupat, Ethnocriticism 201) is indeed to be found in Native Indian autobiography.
The 'I' in native autobiographies is thus not an individual with rights and responsibilities before the law, but rather the representative of his ancestors, clan or an actor who merely performed his/her appointed character. Ironically, this is nowhere more clearly discernible than in Maracle's collection of essays *I Am Woman*. This work, according to the author herself, is "a collection of things in my life which shaped me; it's a summation of my life from different angles" (*Differences* 170). Eventhough the author attempts to inscribe the subjective 'I' throughout the book, very often it is the voice of native women that is exposed. It is mostly about assertions like "We are not a violent people, but neither are we fools" (*Woman* 94), "Once we understand what kind of world they have created, then we can figure out what kind of world we can re-create" (90) and so on. *Sundogs* is about a girl's movement from solipsism to a feeling of communal oneness. The narcissistic 'I' in Marianne slowly vanishes as she becomes one with the peace runners.

Ironically, the autobiographical mode is not in keeping with the native way of life where everyone knows everyone else. Thus seldom do we find explicit mention of who-I-am. The native writers appropriate the synecdochic reference of 'I' to mean the tribe. As far as characterizations are concerned, one finds an adherence to
the "metonymic sense of self" (Krupat, Ethnocriticism 212), especially in the work by Joan Crate. Here, the heroine Dione's life in the city and her marital boredom and her sexual adventures prove that the individual's sense of herself predominates as different and separate from other individuals.

Jovette Marchessault's novels are replete with the assertions of not plain subjectivity, but the united subjectivity of an all female community. It is only in the last volume of the trilogy that we get to know the name of the protagonist. The first volume, Like a Child of the Earth, begins with a description of the protagonist's celestial origins. Unfolding within a vast mythico-historical time space which concludes with the cosmic event of her own birth into the human dimension, she journeys like a shaman in a trance-state of expanded consciousness in search of her lost ancestors, both animal and human, who will instruct her in the recovery of the soul in order to promote the healing of a stricken civilization. During the course of her journeys, she identifies herself not just with other natives, but also with Afro-Americans, Jews and the land.

Volume Two of the trilogy, Mother of the Grass, begins with the line "In those days, we lived beside the river" (5). In this novel, she narrates her life on the
terrains of Earth. In seven songs, Marchessault retells anecdotes from her childhood spent in the company of her mother and grandmother. This is the story of a writer's apprenticeship as she first grows to consciousness in the flood of her grandmother's words in a house by the river. In the final song, alone now, the protagonist settles in a house of her own by a river and her writing joins in the flood tide of women's speech. In this novel, it is in her identification with the other victims of child abuse, that we perceive an excellent example of the 'synecdochic self.' "While waiting, we pretended to sleep and sometimes we actually did. We slipped and fell down a mysterious, fog-filled hole where there was nothing to see. There we were, lost! We were upset! We were so desperately lost that we ended up screaming" (90).

And again;

We didn't have the time to do it. The cart before the horse was already in our houses, already with our mommies. We had seen the daddies go by—sad, beaten, angry, tired and contemplating revenge now or later. We didn't know when or where to expect it, we only heard the screams which rose in their chests and throats, such a flood of black blood flowing toward the heart. (91)
White Pebbles in the Dark Forests, Marchessault's experimental third novel, provides an apocalyptic and prophetic gloss to the trilogy. Most of the novel is constructed as dialogue, between Jeanne the narrator and the community of women she lives with in the Appalachian mountains. Doris Cowain calls the book as not entirely successful as "her new dramatic forms of expression take some getting used to" (42). The dialogic structure of the novel allows Marchessault to explore conflicting narratives in different voices, and to discuss polemical issue without targeting individual characters.

Marchessault's work is situated at the intersection of feminist discourses current in the international sphere as well as in Quebec, and the texts collected in Lesbian Triptych are located at the cross roads of the critical and celebratory functions of these discourses. The first narrative "A Lesbian Chronicle from Medieval Quebec", the story of a conforming child, who fulfills patriarchy's destiny for her--death of the self--is opposed by that of the rebel who resists the movement into adult hood, trying to hang on to the natural world as she dances through the seven veils of church doctrine (the seven deadly sins), throws them back in the face of authority, and walks herself right off the world of conformity into a woman-centred world. This is a poetic chronicle of a girl's growing up and coming out as a lesbian. Eventhough the
speaking persona asserts her voice, the lesbian voice is hardly ignorable. "If the minister of immigration at one time agreed that the Christian community might include lesbians, it was only on the condition that we remain anonymous that we remain wholly mute regarding our vicious tastes, and that once and for all we lesbians render ourselves invisible" (31).

The centre piece of the triptych, "The Night Cows", is a monologue which ushers in the utopian vision of a world of women beyond patriarchal constraints. Here, the cow-mother, who is both Mother-Goddess and Mother-Parent embarks upon the ultimate female vision-quest journey to seek the truth about the origins and overthrow of female power. She ritually initiates her lesbian daughter to the female mysteries of the body and the spirit, mothering and nurturing her with desire in ways that are forbidden under patriarchy. The monologue begins with "My mother is a cow! That makes two of us" (73). In a mystic journey meant to displace the heavenly father from his sky kingdom, the Night cows float on the Milky way in ecstasy. In the company of the trickster crow, the docile cows who sweat by the day in the kitchen are transformed at night into creatures of beauty, into sisters whose bodies give delight to each other.
In this story, again, it is the ecstatic voice of the lesbians finding the female jouissance in the company of fellow victims that is heard:

And we are off! We are going elsewhere, jubilation for our bodies, food for our hunger, air for our lungs and veins; we are going elsewhere toward our night of the fleshy cows. And we mount higher and higher through the cycles of the heavens. Next to each other, turning toward each other, bearing the scars of our mutilation, sharing the desire to travel together out of the depths of the time we serve by day in the old kitchens. (75)

Thus, in the autobiographical selves created by native writers, one finds an excellent example of subjectivity as the subject-position within a discourse synonymous with subjection.

Lee Maracle's and Jovette Marchessault's novels constitute what is called "associational literature" by Thomas King (245). It is a body of literature that has been created, for the most part, by contemporary native writers. While no one set of criteria will do to describe it fully, it possesses a series of attributes that help to give it form.
Associational literature often describes a native community while it may also describe a non-native community. However, it avoids centering the story on the non-native community or on the conflict between the two cultures.

Concentrating instead on the daily activities and intricacies of Native life and organizing the elements of plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature. In addition to this flat narrative line, associational literature leans towards the group rather than the single, isolated character, creating a fiction that de-values heroes and villains in favour of the members of the community a fiction which eschews judgments and conclusions. (245-46)

The existence of two cultures side by side in the Canadian social scenario ascertains that some level of conflict would exist between them. But by playing down the conflict and instead laying the stress on community, the novelists under reference have approximated associational literature. Conflicts are found in abundance in Marchessault's works. But a direct white-native conflict (except in a historical rendering of
events) is avoided by Marchessault. The stress on the community life with less accent on the individual has already been explained above. But nowhere is this more evident than in the last volume of the trilogy, White Pebbles in the Dark Forests. This novel is about the protagonist Jeanne's entry into a community of women who lived in the Appalachian mountains who are alternately called the "red cicadas" (30) and "old guard" (41). Much of the novel is a protest against the destructive uses of modern science: the torture of animals in the name of research, and the adaptation of space technology to military ends. Marchessault advocates a return to pre-industrial, pre-technological world "to save the world... our role is to save this world, so old, beautiful, so cruel and so tender" (8).

The role of the Appalachian community becomes prominent as a united group they nurse back to health Noria's dogs, brought to them from experimental labs across the country. The novel though dialogic in structure presents the communal voice of these old guards who are getting ready to save the world.

Joan Crate, through her creation of an almost white character appropriates the mode of "guerilla ethnography" -- a term introduced by Renae Moore Bredin in her essay "Theory in the Mirror".
What happens to the male and female white bodies of the first world when confronted by the female body of the 'Third World' wrapped in the culturally loaded garb of revolution, talking 'like a man' and taking up the gun? Is there a difference between white women taking up a gun and women of color taking up that gun, which is culturally inscribed as a white masculine subject position? I would argue that by taking up the pen and writing the gun into a text, that in turn, turns the gun into white bodies, women of color... engage in what I am calling 'guerilla ethnography'. Such an attack of writing is a surprise attack across the borders of racial demarcation/categorization. (228-29)

Guerilla ethnography is a strategic response to internal colonialism. It overturns prototypical ethnography by operating behind the enemy lines of colonial discourses, writing an informal, non-hierarchical representation of culture, instigating a reversal of ideology. It is "a serious fictional portrait of western (white) cultural practice, a written account of the lives of 'white' people, a picture of what it means to be culturally white by one who is not" (229).
Crate's Dione is certainly a complex character who lives as the exotic wife of a Greek hotelier on the conscious level and as an Indian on the subconscious level. By portraying the boredom she suffers from in the company of whites, the monotony of city life, her sexual escapades and her kleptomaniacal incursions into the shopping malls, Crate attempts a critique of the western society. Moreover, it is only when Dione learns to narrate native stories that she gets to assert herself in life.

Maracle's appropriation of the tactic is more effective in that she positions the shallow face of white society against the rich communal life of natives and nowhere is this more perceptible than in Ravensong. It is the story of Stacey, seventeen and at the brink of adulthood, who balances her family's traditional ways against white society's hollow values. In describing her white classmates' reaction to the suicide of Polly and juxtaposing it against her own, Maracle creates a negative picture of the white society.

In the bathroom between classes the girls uttered mean remarks in low pious tones about Polly's lack of chastity. Stacey felt a tiny scream birth itself inside where healing light lived. She quieted it by focussing on Polly. She
couldn't believe how small and mean they all were. So what if Polly had a little fun last night? Big Deal! There was no use saying anything to these girls. As she watched the girls and listened to their words Stacey realized that the crime Polly committed had nothing to do with virtue. Half the girls condemning her had rolled around in parked cars themselves -- it was getting caught that laid her out for condemnation. (28-29)

Her obsession with Polly's suicide leads her to ruminate over the real power of white women. She knew that Christians used the world "sinful" to qualify lust.

This lie of sin lived in their minds, while lust, the natural passions of heart, pushed up on their bodies. The reality of lust wants expression. The exorcism of it requires dispassionate repression. The conflict between expression/repression must underlie whatever was joggling up their need to condemn Polly. (30)

While Stacey felt terrible at the wanton suicide of Polly and felt the weight of death, her white counterparts are criticized for their snide remarks on Polly's chastity.
The presentation of the negative aspects of white society does not end here. The typical White Canadian family is represented through the portrayal of her friend Carol's family: Carol's mother Mrs. Snowden's dispassionate greeting on her entry to their house makes Stacey think about the lack of emotional intensity between even family members:

The entire table conversation at dinner was made of 'Please Pass' this, that or the other and 'May I be excused', as though the children did not actually belong there.... The children rarely spoke unless spoken to. The house did not belong to them.... It was almost like they could just barely tolerate each other. (34)

The suffocation within Carol's house is contrasted against the playful tenderness within her own family. The fact that "Mrs. S. had no more rank in her own house than the children" (35) lets Stacey realize the positive sides of gynocentric societies.

Marchessault too presents scenes from the western world. But most of them are attacks on the patriarchal religion and the industries which present the seamy side of capitalism. The Church is satirically referred to as "the Catholic Multinational Corporation" (Mother 33) and
Marchessault comments thus about her fellow-workers: "if fatigue was money, they'd be millionaries twice over, if humiliation was time, they'd be a thousand years old" (Mother 130). She writes about the suffocation, electric lights, the sweat, the dirt and the pain.

In these works, one finds a calculated move on the part of the natives to reverse the stereotypes. They are no longer the "semiotic pawns" (Goldie 10) in the field of discourse, they are the subjects who dominate the colonizers and allot them positions within the discourse.

While most of the white characters in native fiction tend to be weak or rootless, one finds very fine instances of strong native characters--people who take decisions and people who really do matter. Marianne may be the narrator in Sundogs, but it is the character Elijah who emerges as the focal point. Elijah Harper was a Representative for the Natives in the House of Commons and his symbolic blockage of the Meech Lake Accord marked a significant change in Canadian politics in 1990. Referring to the historical speech he gave on television, Marianne writes:

I don't know why, but I want to weep. I feel so consumed by the magic of it all, the absolute irony of it, the greatness and simplicity of it, that I just want to roll all over the floor and
wail. The plot. The physical, the murder of our whole people, is being documented by a man who sat in the House of Commons in Manitoba, silent for two years. His frailness disappears in the folds of his steady gaze. He has waited for this moment... He is there and we all watch. Three generations of us glued to the words of a little man whose command of English is connected to some other language.... Graphic and gentle, polite, free of the bull shit hierarchy, he drives on relentlessly, but not noisily. He carefully chooses each word so as to sound as unobnoxious as he possibly can, while he articulates, documents and advances the most obnoxious and despicable thing a Nation can do—attempt genocide on a people. (68)

Elijah's speech could be regarded as the moment of epiphany in Marianne's life, as, for the first time in her life she saw the heroic stature of her mother and other native women. She recognized her mother's struggle to maintain herself and her children, not just physically, but psychically, culturally, with very few tools. This recognition is in turn followed by the awakening of her racial consciousness.
No character in fiction is, perhaps as strong as Marchessault's Grandmother who appears in the two volumes of her trilogy. The figure of her Grandmother looms as magnificently over the world of her childhood as she envisages the Goddess reigning over all creation. For her, Grandmother incarnates the spirit of those great teachers of all time who impart a sacred knowledge through the manifestation of their joyous being. Marchessault's depiction of her Grandmother is almost mythopoeic. Commenting on her Grandmother's performance with the piano, she writes, "When she played, all the listeners felt that she went from paleontological discovery to paleolithic discovery in which even the essence of the primordial rhythms took the skin from the skull. The atmospheric pressure of those remote epochs reached her fingers which seemed less to be striking notes on the keyboard than to be striking the ivory teeth of an antediluvian animal or of the first time warm-blooded mastodon or a great reptile heated by the fires of eternity" (Child 130). The Grandmother is a powerful story teller, mixing catholic superstition with personal fantasy and shamanic lore, and animating the narrator's childhood imagination with vivid, life-affirming images.

The Grandmother is equally at home playing games with the children, running, jumping and skating as when she is speaking her mind about politics. Her revolutionary
spirit makes her rage against the slaughter of people during the war. The men in the house called her crazy for her wanting to change the world. But the revolutionary spirit and the faith in feminine power which she instilled in her granddaughter proves the strength of her character.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon claims that the past of the colonized is often disfigured by the settlers to drive home the point that if they were to leave, the natives would fall back into barbarism, degradation and savagery. "Colonialism is not satisfied merely withholding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (*Wretched* 169).

Distorting history was a form of suppressionary tactic employed by the colonizers all over the world. The belief was that if the field of vision, past as well as present, of the colonized was disturbed, he/she would slavishly conform to the dominant modes of thinking. In Fanon's opinion, successful resistance to colonialism should mean that "the past is given back its value" (170).
Rewriting history is not an easy task, for, official history reproduces the effect of the Real, inscribing its knowledge of history as the best representation of truth. In her essay "Aboriginal Women's Writing and the Cultural Politics of Representation," Julia Emberley writes:

The distinction between hegemonic inscription of history and literature has recently undergone a crisis in interdisciplinry contamination. Under the rubric of a new historicism, a benign exposure to the post-structural critique in literary theory and philosophy has subjected the notion of an unmediated representation of reality to an interpretative turn, or, on another register, a deconstructive turn. (105)

Or, in other words, the idea of objectivity in the representation of history is inverted. In Maracle's view, "there is power in knowing" (Woman 96). And to re-possess the power, histories must be rewritten. To a real rebel, in her opinion, "altering her condition will rewrite her life onto the pages of a new history" (95). She resists the history lessons white teachers imparted to native children at schools, "you taught my child that, here, on the West Coast, we were cannibals. I had to tell my daughters that their great-great-granny, who was almost a hundred years old when I was a child, had never eaten a single soul" (79).
The importance of Maracle's works as revisionary historiography is that they document the struggle of natives today within a history of resistance. As a revisionary history is presented, the narrators also effect "an epistemic break... both with respect to the semiotic field engendering the 'Imaginary Indian' in white writing of the native--she/he is historicized not mythologized--nor is it history as timeless myth as in traditional native 'historical' narratives of mystical orality which reify an 'original source'" (Godard 203). The history which Maracle presents is the history of the twentieth-century Canada.

In Sundogs, the western myth of non-violent existence with the aboriginal people is inverted. The violence meted out to the Okanagan Peace Runners in 1990 is stated in very harsh terms by the author. The real truth behind the blockage of the Meech Lake Accord under the leadership of Elijah Harper and the resultant white rage which was unleashed on the natives is portrayed by Maracle. Even the historical presentation of equality in Canada is reversed. Marianne opines: "Sovereignty--the impossible dream. Equality, solidarity with all creation--a pipe dream" (201).
Marchessault's revisioning of history occurs on two levels—she views history as a timeless dimension as in the traditional mystical native narratives and she also attempts to retell the dark side of native history of the millennium. Her first novel, Like a Child of the Earth is a narrative of her celestial origin. Her vision of a sacred cosmos in which animals and plants preside along with rocks and stars is mythical in a way that is foreign to western thinking. Her interest in "origins" stems from her interest in envisioning a holistic and woman- affirming cosmology. "Two questions torment us—the question of origins and beginning and the question of the final outcome. Everything else is just padding and a way of passing time" (121). This statement could be regarded as a political protest against modernity's sense of alienation from the past and the universe.

The figure of the Woman, Mother and Grandmother, is recognised in traditional aboriginal societies not only as a powerful social figure, but as creator, as mythical source of being in the universe. Since she represents the life-giving spirit of the universe itself, she is deeply connected to the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds, as well as to the stars. Marchessault's genealogy of creation translates the aboriginal myth into modern scientific discourse in order to critique and challenge the way people behave toward the natural world.
in westernized, industrialized countries. By casting this woman's culture into a social form, into a lost historical reality, she opens possibilities for feminist revisioning of knowledge. This historical element of her femininst aesthetic brings to light her interest in feminist archetypalism and it is a concentrated move in reclaiming a native heritage.

Elsewhere too, Marchessault attempts to revisitise history. Her portrayal of Christopher Columbus is an effort to invert all our pre-conceived notions of this explorer. Her Columbus is a tyrant who sent horsemen and dogs after the aborigines -- a man who killed a number of savages with his cross bows in order to teach them respect for the weapons of Castille -- a ruthless murderer.

Christopher Columbus craved gold. Gold and more gold! He was afraid in Spain they were going to say that he had not brought back enough gold. He required that every Indian fourteen years of age and older pay a tribute to him. The Indians preferred to flee to the mountains where they poisoned themselves with manioc sap rather than work as Columbus's slaves....

With his caravels filled with gold, Christopher Columbus decided to return to Cadiz.... The
conquerors had left with their cross and their greed. They returned with gold, slaves, and syphilis. (42)

Marchessault even terms Columbus as a man who attached himself to an erroneous idea with superhuman force. Buffalo Bill or Col. William Cody is presented not as the great hero and showman of the American West. He is shown as "the most bloody killer, an assassin" (135) who organized a systematic massacre of the bison in native lands. American President Thomas Jefferson is referred to as "that progenitor, poppa, momma, and obstetrician who once took on the task of drawing up the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, inspired by the Rights of Man" (141). In the same breath, Marchessault calls him "the same Jefferson who, in beautiful Virginia in the South, never found time to free the two hundred slaves on his estate. Not even the Mulatto Woman who was his mistress for forty years and who gave him seven children and whose existence he kept secret" (141).

The literary works of native women writers inadvertently and self-consciously embody literary processes and genres unlike those of the old canon. Many of them have chosen purposefully to ignore standard rules and forms ill-suited to native story telling. They
strive to introduce new codes and their writings carry a new vision as they refuse to separate the literary and the academic from the sacred and daily thus bringing to the text the unpaginated experiences of contemporary tribal reality.

The Lesbian Voice of Dissent

Lesbian and gay literature, long relegated to the margins or closets of academic discourse, has lately become increasingly visible in the guise of "queer theory", a marriage of lesbian or gay literature and politics with post-modern, post-structuralist theory. Queer theory has been described as "an in-your-face rejection of the proper response to heteronormativity, a version of acting up" (Hennessy 967).

Jovette Marchessault is a native lesbian writer who believes that female bonding is a political weapon that could neutralize the cultural power of hetero-relations. Lesbian writing, as portrayed by dominant thinking, is not just about sex or sexuality. There is a broader cultural definition of sexuality that is at work here. Strong bonds to Earth and her inhabitants serve as a pivotal edge to most lesbian writing. Homophobia as well as racial discrimination wreak havoc in native women's lives and the native lesbian writing of Marchessault names these two evils.
The lesbian novel could be regarded as an outcome of the refusal to accept limitations posed by female novels of development. For in the female novels of development, as analysed by Susan J. Rosowski, the heterosexual protagonist "awakens to the limitations of her role, particularly as wife and mother, escaping through death, passivity or dreams of childhood or passion" (qtd. in Zimmerman 244). This naturally leads to the question as to how the feminist heroine is to grow into freedom. Since the female novels of development suggest the return of the integrated personality (of the protagonist) to the husband, feminists increasingly are choosing an obvious alternative -- relationships with other women.

Jovette Marchessault, in her autobiographical works that describe the awakening of the lesbian consciousness, subverts the normative space of autobiography by turning it to her own radical purposes. She uses the traditionally conservative, masculine mode of sublime writing subversively, thus attempting to inscribe a lesbian sublime that, as Biddy Martin remarks, "works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, not to dissolve them altogether, but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible" (103). This "counter-sublime" inscribes "the disruption of perceived experience, the heightening of perception itself, [and] the conversion of
the mind" in ways similar to the modes of the male sublime, but with an important difference, "the external transformative power is perceived as feminine" with the result that "the sublime transpires without the burden of indebtedness, the necessity for physical defensiveness, or the chill of competition" (Diehl 185-86). In place of the Kantian primacy of reason and repression of the body which constructs the sublime moment, the female sublime rejects the separation of mind and body, insisting on a model of relatedness that is inscribed as the "pre-oedipal sublime" by Patricia Yaegar. She names the Romantic idea of sublime as "oedipal" she elaborates:

If what is repressed in the 'oedipal' sublime is the desire for pre-oedipal bonding with the mother's body (which in most Romantic poems is given an imaginative correlative in the chaos and blissful heterodoxy of the cosmos), in the 'pre-oedipal' sublime, those libidinal moments are not repressed, they break into consciousness and are welcomed as a primary, healthful part of the writer's experience, as part of the motive for metaphor. (205)

Marchessault's lesbian sublime is characterized by a return to pre-oedipal bonding with the mother. The woman's writing which she employs and her epic of origins,
her flight through time and space to the moment of her arrival in an all female family of grandmother, mother and the girl child asserts the return to the pre-oedipal sublime.

And then they were busying themselves with my envelope. They were promising me openings through which the silence of thickness, the silence of the mud would enter into me like a beautiful snake. And now they were installing a womb in my envelope -- how careful they were in making it fit! Oh, what a beautiful pudding mould! A lovely mould with its raised and hollow design.... The stars soothed me by promising me every living species, without exception for my womb. All the same, they imposed another generation on me.... I already felt the urge to make other living things moving in this old womb. (Child 174)

The protagonist relates her birth as the solar "split" (173) when, from the mating of the great she-bear and the polar star, she comes into being as a shooting star. She is a part of the cosmos expelled from the super void.
In the new female language, Marchessault ushers in the matristic myth of origins that would rename all of creation and reinterpret the ancient tales and legends of patriarchy in original gynocentric ways. In her lesbian novels Marchessault exalts the life-giving forces of the Earth, her language reclaims female desire, sexual pleasure and liberates a new-found joy of living. It names the sins of patriarchal religion—its sadomasochistic ritual, its intrusion on woman's space and time, on woman's body and mind and its politics of guilt, exploitation and externalization. Marchessault's radiant images, especially in "The Night Cows" evoke the Promised Land of Female Desire. In this story is introduced the utopian vision of a world of women beyond patriarchal constraints. Here, the lesbians float on the Milky way displacing the heavenly father from his sky kingdom,

And we are off! And we fly to our rendezvous in the Milky Way. How beautiful! The great river of milk, the land of birth, where mothers and daughters are reunited at long last so beautiful! ... All the breasted creatures of the universe come to the meeting place... All breasted creatures are uniting with each other in a wave of scales, of hair, of tenderness.

The milk flows! The milk spurts! The milk comes in floods! ... A snowstorm of milk! Gulps
of milk! Scents of milk! Drifts of milk! Gusts of milk! Hurricanes of milk! Clouds of milk! Milk clotted with images! Rainbows of milk...
And from all sides arise rallying cries, a tumult of emotions stimulated by the milk. (75-76)

Another means to think of the female sublime is through the concept of jouissance, in the Barthesian/French feminist usage of the term as a sexual/textual force that breaks through conventions and limitation to a stage of liberating release. Barthes defines the "texte de jouissance" as, "one that engenders a state of loss, one that discomforts... rocks the historical, cultural and psychological beliefs of the reader, the resistance of his tastes, his values and his memories, brings to crisis his rapport with language" (Pleasure 25).

Marchessault inverts the pre-conceived beliefs of the reader not just by creating a feminine sublime, but also by inverting patriarchal myths of origin. Gloria Orenstein describes Marchessault's birth narrative in Like a Child of the Earth and in "A Lesbian Chronicle from Medieval Quebec" as a feminist-lesbian revisioning of the classic hero myth, in which a male child is imagined to have divine origins, who is abandoned at birth, raised in exile by humble people, and later called to his heroic
destiny as the leader of his people. In Marchessault's version, says Orenstein, "For the first time in its long history... an extra terrestrial heroine makes her appearance in lesbian literature, heralding the advent of a new myth of origins for woman-identified women" (Postface 89).

The protagonist's fall from the sky also re-enacts the Christian myth of the hero's fall from heaven:

Two stars were going to push me. Two stars were going to turn me out of my own home, and dispossess me of my lights and my celestial lands. They were going to pour me out. They were going to reject me in the imperfect tense... That is what it is all about -- it is about rejection. On earth we speak of birth, but the word birth is a word which we have borrowed from the void, from the super-void. (Child 167)

The theme of origins which she introduces is resonant of both the physicality of the universe and its feminine aspect. "The Milky Way", for Marchessault is deeply connotative with the image of a woman, the Grandmother. The moment of her fall is recalled by the protagonist as follows:
Something was being prepared. I heard the music of an ancient dance issuing from the void, or more precisely, coming from the womb of the Grand mother. Her over-flesh, over-earth, over-sea womb was coming towards us, breaking its moorings. (166)

This passage describes not a fall from the father sky to the mother Earth, but rather, "a passage, a birth-giving, from one state of physical/spiritual being into another, through the celestial body of the she-wolf, her ear canal, her mouth, helped along with a swat from the paws of the presiding Great She-Bear of the sky" (Brandt 79). By asserting spiritual as well as physical connections to the cosmos, and its formidable reproductive, regenerative power, Marchessault attempts to redefine our origins.

In Marchessault's mythopoeic universe the figures of mother and daughter create a new image of ecstatic sisterhood.

Hence in "Night Cows" one sees a mythic, celestial, mammalian mother who ritually initiates her lesbian daughter to the mysteries of the spirit and the body and the universe, mothering her with love and desire in ways forbidden under patriarchy. The Cow-Mother, "who is
both Mother-Goddess and Mother-Parent, embarks upon the ultimate female vision-quest journey to seek the truth about the origins and overthrow of female power" (Orenstein 94). Gloria Orenstein further draws our attention to the historical depiction of the Goddess in Anatolia and Crete as a Mother and Daughter pair just as Marchessault depicts her in "Night Cows". In Crete, the Goddess' excavated image was represented by a horned cow with her calf.

The myth of the maternal impulse in the western narrative tradition—as the continually giving, continually sacrificial—with limited choice under patriarchy is inverted in "The Angel Makers". Marchessault presents women, native women, as presented with a choice in all matters. The mother here, is an illegal abortionist (angel-maker). She is related to the "archetype of the Great Mother Goddess, as a weaver and spinner of a heroic new destiny for women" (Orenstein 94). If the three fates in Greek Mythology had control over the lives of human beings, the two "angel-makers" in the story hold the destiny of unborn children in their hands. Moreover, "Abortion is envisaged as a high form of spiritual rebirth in a world where maternity leads to victimization". Orenstein continues that in this story "the Angel-Maker is thus transformed into the
revolutionary new image of the spiritual midwife, assisting women in giving birth to their new identities as autonomous, liberated women, who consciously make a choice in favour of personal freedom and planetary survival" (94).

The title itself is significant for its inversive potential. The Angel-Maker no longer makes angels, no longer aids birth, but will bestow women with the gift of freedom from the future burden of all births. Even though the description of the angel-makers is highly negative: "witches, hysterical women, the bad fucks, old cows, bitches in heat, wild cats, old mares, birds of ill omen, non-virgins, whores, lesbian, unnatural mothers, loose women, crazy ladies, chattering magpies, cock-teasers, the depressed and the sluts" (Triptych 87), the narrator affirms her solidarity with them. She says "My mother exists and that fact makes me ecstatic" (87).

The lesbian child protagonist in "A Lesbian Chronicle from Medieval Quebec" lives out all the motifs of the classic hero myth. She has a celestial origin, like her mythic hero-counterparts, she is exiled—in the patriarchal land where women and especially lesbians were suppressed. In fact she submerges her identity as the daughter of the Mother Goddess as patriarchy demanded that she remain anonymous. Marchessault employs important
reversals in the male mythic pattern to assert her idea of the feminine sublime. The very imposition of God as father is inverted by the protagonist who refers to the church as "the Catholic Multinational Corporation" (33). The girl narrator speaks about her movement from the "sidewalks" to the world outside. In the course of this movement, she roots out patriarchy and moves toward the call of her lost female ancestors. The lesbians in this story are on a mission to reclaim their primordial matristic heritage and these "women heroes... are responding to the same mythical call to a sacred mission that the great heroes of all time have always answered--the call to justice, to freedom, and to spiritual autonomy" (Orenstein 90).

The lesbian vision of an all-female community is finally crystallized in White Pebbles in the Dark Forests. Here, she constructs an alternative genealogy of the universe to the current scientific one, which derives to a large extent from the Judeo-Christian one, with its mind-body split and attitude of male domination over nature. She writes about the violence towards animals in modern age and about how the animals are the "Mothers of humanity". She writes, "the animal reign of the Mothers began, very gently, to imagine us, the human beings, as a possible ideal" (29). By presenting in "Song Three" a
long list of names of women who participated in the invention of aviation, Marchessault drives home the point that technology is not an all-male domain. But modern science and technology in its relentless pursuit of perfection run the risk of destroying nature and animals, our ancestors. The woman community of the Appalachian mountains, with their tenacity and determination to re-live in the world of our ancestors, ushers in a Utopian world of ecstatic sisterhood.

Jovette Marchessault has violated the dominant literary traditions with an unusual toughness and her own brand of outrageously disobedient wit. Yet even as she writes against it, she never loses sight of the past, of the lies tradition has repeatedly told women about themselves and of the secrets they have privately whispered back to one another in restless discontent. It was not in content alone that Marchessault sought to invert patriarchy. The triptych form of Lesbian Triptych is an effective subversive tool. The triptych construction of the work functions as a historical and religious referent, evoking the medieval three paneled carvings and paintings used as altar-pieces to tell the story of the sacred trinity through a visual medium. The stories Marchessault tells in her own tripartite narrative are anything but sacred. Moreover, the attack unleashed on the phallic religiosity of the Judeo-Christian tradition
whose ethical models have encouraged women to remain on the "sidewalks" of culture, consciously works to effect an inversion of the power structures. Her portrayal of the churches are anything but affirmative.

Marchessault has fashioned her literary project as a far reaching political critique of patriarchal thought and of the modes of discourse in which it has been disseminated. In doing so, she challenges both the status of women in the discourse of the dominant culture and the primacy of the patriarchal word.
Works Cited


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