Inez Baranay and Alison Bartlett

TRUCKING IN AND OUT OF UNIVERSITIES: AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN INEZ BARANAY AND ALISON BARTLETT

This interview took place on 14th March, 1993, at Machans Beach, Cairns, as one of a series of interviews with Australian women writers that I undertook as part of my research into the relations between contemporary Australian women writers and French feminist theories of *écriture féminine*. As a researcher, I was interested in the relations between theory and praxis on both a cultural and a subjective level; while I read Baranay's books as theory in practice, I wanted to hear her views on the subject: to listen to her theories of writing.

Many creative writers seem to feel alienated and excluded from the intellectual life of universities, as is evident in this interview with Inez. Academics value the words of theorists and critics but rarely the voice of literary practitioners. I was therefore keen for the interview to be interactive and reciprocal, for us to be sharing knowledges with each other. The traditional dynamics of interviewing "others" make this quite difficult and I felt that Inez was at first understandably suspicious and reluctant to be placed in the position of theorist. As I hadn't then had many opportunities to speak with writers I was in turn awed by the prospect of meeting someone whose writing I admired.

In retrospect, I feel the process was fruitful for us both. I have been able to "use" our interview for my research, and Inez has been able to use me as a resource for texts and articles in which she was interested. She has been able to read and comment on my writing on her texts, and subsequent to this interview she accepted a nine week residency at James Cook University.

I began by asking her what kinds of books she read for pleasure.

Inez: I recently read Colette's *The Vagabond*. It's wonderful. It re-awoke my adolescent passion for Colette so I've been reading a whole bunch of her books again lately which has been wonderful. But a lot of the time I'm restricted by what falls into my lap. I can't afford to buy books lately. I'm interested in books written in English that are not from England.

Alison: And do you read many Australian women writers?

Inez: Um, I really don't like thinking of books like that. I don't go looking for things just because they're by Australian women. I can't relate to the demands I identify as primarily an "Australian" writer (rather then, for one thing, an English-language writer, or a writer who'll fall in love with Colette every couple of decades). I would have said *No*, Puh-leeze, no! to "as an Australian of non-Angle Celtic background" but would have been lying. My piece "You Don't Whinge" [in *The Saddest Pleasure*] was put together for an anthology of "multicultural women's writing" [*Beyond the Echo* (UQP)]. But this thing has now happened: the Multicultural Industry and so on, leave me alone! But writing *Pagan* I was very aware in writing of Nora and Magda that I *know* these people and in writing of migration that what I know is not seen in what I read and that people have talked such bullshit about us migrants all my life and now I'm saying something about it. But finally knowledge comes from imagination always.

Alison: So do you have a lot of contact with other writers?

Inez: Well some of my best friends are writers, I suppose. But, a lot of them aren't. And I'm not a kind of social literary person at all. I have been more isolated, I guess, than that.

Alison: So have you come across any feminist theories in regard to writing?

Inez: Well I probably have but they're put in disguise in novels or something I suppose, or in life itself, or something. A lot of these things are just names to me and they've been on my Must Read This One Day, but haven't fallen into my lap. So, not really. I mean, where do you? You have to go to University don't you, to come across that thing?

Alison: I suppose so, yes. Most people probably do come across it there.

Inez: See, and I don't have any truck with Universities. So, I don't know how you would, because it seems to me it's a real academic thing. Like all the kids — now, teaching creative writing there are a lot of kids who are going through, or are just graduated from University, or often UTS in Sydney where apparently they're big on this kind of thing. And they're all, you know, they've all done their essays. I think they did semiotics in highschool. By the time someone got around to explaining *that* to me I said "But that's all obvious! Everyone knows that."

Alison: One of the things that I was interested by in *Between Careers* was the coda, which seemed to get a lot of ambivalent comments by the reviewers.

Inez: Yeah. I get such extreme responses to things, or else extremely contradictory. Like "that's the best thing in the book" to "that's the worst thing in the book."

Alison: Yes. It seemed to me that what was happening in there was looking for alternative ways to write about "happy endings."

Inez: Yes, oh absolutely.

Alison: Do you want to?

Inez: Talk about that? Okay.

Alison: I'm quite conscious of this in your writing, of ways of avoiding that romantic genre.

Inez: Exactly. What is romance? You could say Violet's encounters as a sex worker were the more "romantic." In *Between Careers* the last words before the coda are "happy ending," and that was a kind of one of those tricks, like I'm going to put in a happy ending but this is how I do it by asking really a question about it. And of course, in life, in everything, there's no such thing as an ending. So that is kind of the ultimate artifice in a way, where you end something, isn't it? Where you end a piece occupied my mind. Because it's the end of the book but it's not the end of it. And also writing about women who are not victims or whose end is not to be a victim poses a question too. Because you don't want a kind of other version of "and then they lived happily ever after" like, you know "and then she went off and did her thing on her own and never had a day's fear again" or something. You know, it's not like that either, but you want something with some sense of triumph about it. Especially writing about experiences that are meant to disempower and degrade women like in *Between Careers*. A lot of people couldn't handle that aspect of it, that it wasn't about being destroyed by those experiences. So you have to kind of write about a sense of something gained, that's, where the something that mightn't be happiness but it's something positive. But it's not an ending either.

Alison: I thought it was interesting that there were lots of links made between creativity and sexuality, and then at the end when Vita is writing she chooses to be celibate.

Inez: Um, I think that's a transition phase to her, because that was also written and set in a time of great re-assessment, I think, the early eighties. After the kind of really liberal seventies, and then, you know, AIDS and the recession all at once. *Between Careers* was set in that era of like, how would you call it, total freedom, question mark? But people are re-assessing that era so I think, in a way, that choice [of being celibate] is a way of being able to distance yourself from one set of circumstances and behaviours, and kind of re-invent another. So it seemed to reflect its time very much. Yes, an eternal question, the relation of sexuality and creativity — the kind of question that doesn't have an answer, only different ways of asking it. The question of is it either/both focussed or/and dissipated. I was thinking also about celibacy not as negation of sexuality, but as another way in which to acknowledge/explore it.

Alison: So did you find it difficult writing about a relationship from a woman's point of view that got out of that romance model? It seemed to me that by having Violet be a prostitute it sort of undermined the whole concept of the romance in the second part of the novel.

Inez: Oh yes, absolutely. I never felt drawn to or dominated by the "romance model." Was it difficult? It was a wonderful challenge to find a way of doing it because there seemed to be almost no models for it. And of course it was difficult. It took a long time to get it the way I wanted. It was my first book. I wrote this massive first draft, of which hardly anything remains, I imagine, but it was like having to say every last little thing. Yeah, see I don't think necessarily that the kind of corny romance is such a dominating thing, about how a relationship has to go.

Alison: And Judith provides that nice counterpoint too, with her creativity invested in her clothes.

Inez: Yes, the virgin. It has been a while since I thought of these things, these issues that seemed most important to me then. *Between Careers* was written 1979-82 though it wasn't published til 89. Judith: the

phantom pregnancy: the virgin who maybe gets "pregnant" whenwatching porn videos. In an era when sex seemed to be talked about in every aspect except as the way babies are made — maybe Judith knew unconsciously about this meaning of sex: the first thing about it (and yet it's not always the first thing learnt, her first thing "known" though not consciously, is the odour of her mother when the men stay). Joe's phantom orgy: in an era of the quest for the perfect fuck — but longing is not stilled by acquiring the object (or experience) which longing creates. So the perfect fuck/orgy could not have been "real"? (I'm trying to remember and tell you the kinds of things I was thinking about when writing that.)

Alison: Is there any particular reference, having Vita and Violet, to Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis?

Inez: I was aware of that connection and it was just a thing to play with. It amused me that it would have that kind of meaning. I thought of Violet first, from Violetta of *La Traviata*. Vita came because of that association. And then it just seemed like they were the right two names. Violet/Vita — one woman or two? — is the question. Who has the "romance," which one of them? Which one does he want? The way women split themselves to have a romance thing with a man; the part of a woman who engages in romance is not the whole woman; the way many women "feel like a whore" with a man.

Alison: I was interested in *Pagan*, because it seems to present an alternative construction of a female outside of the mother-virgin-whore triad and tries to make positive that witch image.

Inez: Yes. It was amazing, that story kind of coming to me at a time when suddenly all this material was available on exactly that, a whole range of really interesting new women's thought, you know, on the spiritual area, looking at our unconscious and archetypes and all that mass psychology level of feminism I guess. I did a lot of research for that one, I enjoyed that. Researching and writing *Pagan* I thought very much about what I termed "the patriarchal colonisation of our spirituality": that feminism/s had looked at the social, the political, the domestic, etc — and not (as far as I could see, not in the mainstream, though a tidal wave of books on goddess spirituality, newage-ish stuff, seemed to start around then) not the spiritual aspect of our lives and culture — which is, in a way, fundamental.

Alison: It reminded me in a way of Kate Grenville's re-working of Bea Miles' life in *Lilian's Story*.

Inez: That's a wonderful book, isn't it? Well —

Alison: You know, taking characters from Sydney's folklore.

Inez: Yeah, and then writing them from the inside so it's the person not the tabloid image. But, of course *Pagan* is different because it has all the different voices. And Nora. I mean, to write that young lover couple and make that believable but, you know, not the corny, "will you marry me darling and live happily ever after," nor the "now that I have found myself I don't need him" kind of ending either. That was a challenge. That was fun to think about.

Alison: In most of the writing I'm working on the form seems to be as important as the content.

Inez: Well, it's one, really, like the body and the mind, isn't it? Yeah. I don't see how it can be otherwise. Do you?

Alison: No. But it seems to be talked about, divided. So do you have any, sort of, relations with the Universities, or academics?

Inez: No no. None. I just don't. When I was in Papua New Guinea I met these two lovely guys who teach at Garoka Teachers College, and because they were academics but absolute darlings and interesting people it really made me think that, you know, maybe this is what's normal. So I'm sure I gave a much kinder reception to your approach than if a young academic a year ago said "I'm writing about you." Apart from, you know, it sounded more interesting. I suppose some writers are University people. At University I got to read all these great books from the eighteenth century. But I had to get over it. It was like, you know, you had to grow up and leave home. But that was, kind of, partly because of when I went to University I think.

Alison: When was that?

Inez: My first year was in '68. So '68 to '72. So this is a time when there was a clash between the old conservatives who were like really — patriarchal is the word we'd use now — and the people who were responding to all those exciting ideas who were around at that time, in the sixties. And I went to University at a time when the English school was extremely conservative.

Alison: Which University was it?

Inez: New South Wales. I was much more interested in the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll of that era. But I didn't see that reflected anywhere in the way the classes were conducted or in what we were reading. Not only what we were reading but how it was talked about. So I was really impatient, I didn't find where I wanted to go in my mind there. And yet it gave me the discipline to read all this stuff, that would have taken me a lot longer: the nineteenth century poets and novelists and Chaucer and a bit of background in Old English and all those things. That was good.

Alison: So are you happy with the ways in which your books have been received?

Inez: Oh, it's something that's not worth really thinking about too much. I'm glad that they get the attention because that gives them credibility, it means I get a contract for my next book and so on. You know, like most people say, at least there's a review in *The Age*, they spelt your name right, it doesn't matter what they said. Of course I'm pleased if I see something that seems to respond to the book, like, what it really is, and what it's really saying. There's a lot of really stupid things said, but it's not for everybody and somebody gets to review it and it's not their kind of thing. That's how it is. I wish they wouldn't criticise a book for being what it is and for not being something else, or assume anything's in there by accident, as if you haven't spent months and years thinking every last thing about it.

Alison: So do you write with any agenda. Do you have particular motivation?

Inez: Why do I write? To make life bearable. That's the best answer I've ever heard. I can't remember who said it but I thought "That's the one!" Talking about how people receive your book, I'll tell you what's really funny is the way people who adored *Between Careers* hated *Pagan*. The reason, I inferred, was because it wasn't *Between Careers* part two. They really enjoyed whatever about that and they wanted more. Now that I've had four books out and I'm working on something completely different again I think that what I do each time is just look for some really new thing to challenge and excite me, about, you know, form and content. I try to find all over again the appropriate voice for each piece. I found the right voice for *Between Careers*. I am interested in the idea of "woman" as a "culture" and, now, while trying to tell as simply as possible the story of my year in PNG, I am coming up against personal and general ideas of what is a story, woman, race, culture, postcolonialism, development/aid, and so on.

Alison: I really like your short stories about women living singly, and enjoying it. There seems to be a general absence of that.

Inez: Yes, it's funny isn't it? I mean, god, if more people knew how good it was they'd be doing it. I do remember now, that I used to often think about how little that was reflected in art, you know in popular art, in movies and popular books and so on, things like that, women living happily alone.

Alison: So what did you want to ask me about my thesis?

Inez: Oh yes, there's something about feminist too. People say to me "Are you a, do you call yourself a feminist"? You use the word, don't you, feminist? And then, it's like, "what do you mean by it"? and, "this thing is about women but it's not feminist" and all that. It's something that I'm thinking of at the moment, in connection with the whole thing of, whether "women's development" in third world countries is feminism or not. It's a whole lot of questions. Is feminist whatever you choose it to be, or what?

Alison: The way I'm using it?

Inez: Yes, the way you are.

Alison: Well I call my approach "feminist" because I use French feminist theories, and I am really interested in women's positions and voices and their agency, especially in cultural productions.

Inez: And do those theorists give voice to how you approach things, in a way? Or do you have any argument with them?

Alison: What I'm trying to do is put the writing Australian women are doing now alongside what the French feminist critics argue that women's writing is about. *Écriture féminine*? That's their theories of how women's writing is, or how women's writing might be, woman-centred rather than male-centred. One of the main things is finding a language in which women can speak, which doesn't necessarily mean another language, but finding the words, or making new words and using them in different ways, to construct different ways of knowing, of knowledge. One of the main things they say needs to be done with words is to be able to describe the female body in our own terms rather then in medical discourse or in a sexual discourse. So one of the

things they say women's writing should be is sourced in the body. Females do things that men don't do with their bodies, they have different perspectives and different positions in society. And ways of describing how it feels to be in a female body, and to experience things in that body. And, I mean, even describing the surfaces and how the body moves. So that's one of the main areas, that's dealing with bodies and how they're written about.

Inez: At this women's writers' workshop somebody wrote this story about this menstruation disaster, so we talked a little bit about what you're saying: how it's not written about. In *Between Careers,* the sponge that sprays in the shower, and things like that. I really want to show these things that you don't usually see. In critical writing about women who write about menstruation, it's always "Oh, really, you know, please!"

Alison: My mum reacts like that too!

Inez: It's funny isn't it? I am sorry when a female critic "playfully" calls for the destruction of books that go on excessively about menstruation and not only because I think she means me. I love to see women's truths in writing, and menstruation fascinates me as I was brought up to deal with it competently and then considerately to ignore it, but I believe our lunar/lunatic cycles must be expressed in order to feminise the world, which is something I also kind of believe in at present. Speak the unspeakable, find words for what is not said. I love it when I see something that does that.

Alison: Yes, but I think it's wonderful. I mean, it's a shared experience and a recognised moment.

Inez: And it's so much a part of our lives. When I read those long nineteenth century books, and nobody ever goes to the toilet. You know, that kind of thing. People say we talk far too much about that kind of thing these days.