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RISKY BUSINESS: WRITING THE PERSONAL

My mother once told me that the world was no place for her stories. I knew from other sources that she could be right: that it is not the way of our culture to inscribe the lives of *ordinary* domesticated women into texts of cultural significance. I have written a biography of my mother Audrey Wearne. It is defiant of what was once thought about biography and women's lives and important matters of (H)istory and (C)ulture. It is a story of culture and its future *becomings*: as Aud *becomes* the subject of my work, the culture in which this story will reside *becomes* a thing it has never been: a place for her story.

My subject, *Aud*, is not, in terms of traditional and conventional biographical practice and criticism, a subject of interest; and it could be said that her life as a cultural and social *non-entity* is of no relevance to any critical reading of the meanings of lived experience within a well established system of value in which biography has had an established place. I am interested, however, in re-locating the story of a single woman's life within systems of meanings and recognition in culture and I offer an argument which refuses that familiar location of women as marginal and outside the centres of meaning in culture and go on to test the security of those absences of women in stories of culture. My mother's story is such a test.

To write the biography of a working-class, fully domesticated woman and to write it from within the unreliable language of personal, idiosyncratic memory and to name it as *cultural history* is to suggest a transformation from within. It is to suggest that culture is created, found and made meaningful in the spaces beyond the governance of the dominant interpretative community; it is to suggest that the stories of the lives of women such as the subject of my work, my mother, are stories which elaborate on the location of culture and on the claims of the language which describe cultural identity.[1] The story of my mother's life is a story which speaks into and of culture and experience.

I am aided in this by certain contemporary discourses which have become crucial to representing the shifting relations and locations of cultural power and knowledge and which can become the basis for fundamental social change, such as I am looking forward to when my own mother's story is told: a shift in the ways in which we may read of cultures and their subjects.

As an academic writer engaged in the risky business of writing from a deeply personal position, writing in the language of memory, of real and symbolic

regret[2] of personal optimism for a better future, I make appearances in this project as my mother's daughter and as a writer and academic whose passion, whose intellectual commitment is to write into the future the past which has yet to exist: the story of a woman's life which exists nowhere but which will, when I have done, add to the sum of what I can say I know of our world. In this way my project *is* autobiographical: in asserting the "I" who claims to have an intimacy of *being* with the subject "she" who is my mother (that I may write of a "she and I"), I am writing into an imagined future self.

This is then a story about my own coming to being: I have carried my mother's story inside me for my whole life waiting for the time when I could allow this inter-subjectivity, this connectedness to her to be something more than my own secret self; waiting for a time when I could legitimately say "she and I" and for that to mean something about myself. Linda Anderson, in her work on autobiography, reminds me of the ways in which women's autobiographical writing is always about coming "into being"[3] and I can see myself so implicated in what she articulates as one of problematics of this sort of writing for the cultural and social location of women's lives:

> Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but must become a story.[4]

My story is this *becoming* of a story and I want to take this even further to suggest that the biography of my mother is a story of a *becoming* of culture itself. I am suggesting that the very act of *writing* this biography in the ways and locations I declare myself as *(be)coming* from, should be seen as a critically engaged story of an encounter between different versions of authority in culture and it is *authority*, in various manifestations, to which I implicitly address the story of my mother's life.

It is my intention: to alter the condition of my mother's story, and the telling of it, in relation to culture: from the "not yet " of her absence to a being-ness which inaugurates a new field of cultural recognition: Audrey Wearne as authorised subject. Thus the cultural *becoming*, the possibility of a future tense in which I can say *she will be* there, is the driving impulse of this paper and the larger text to which it refers.

I am reminded of the poignancy of Christa Wolf's *The Quest for Christa T*[5] and of the ways Wolf's autobiographical fictions "can only begin to release their meanings later; what she beckons into her own writing is the potential or sense of becoming, not the fully realised self who has inscribed her future in the past."[6] The following quote from *The Quest* echoes my own unmistakably autobiographical presence in the biography of my mother:

> Now out she came, calm even in the unfulfillment of her wishes, for she had the strength to say: Not Yet. She carried many lives around her, storing them in herself, and in herself she stored many times as well, times in which she lived partially unknown, as was the case in her "real time"; and what is not possible in one time becomes real in another. But she called all her various times serenely: Our Time.[7]

I am not exactly clear which "she" I am relating to here: the "she" of the emerging subject of a lost story, my mother Aud, or the emerging subject of a once-silent story-teller, me. I can only imagine that it is both and go on with the possible *our time* of writing—for Aud and me.

Two years before my mother died I asked her to begin a series of extended conversations with me: I asked for more than our usual around-the-kitchen-table or weeding-in-the-garden chats. I wanted her to tell me her stories, properly, perhaps, as I feared, finally. I wanted to record them on tape and to write them up in some way. I wanted it to be a gift to her: this acknowledgment that I thought her stories (her life) were important enough, interesting enough that I should want to take them down for the future's sake. She laughed and told me not to be ridiculous, and said that I should know that she "could never do that"; that her life was "too ordinary to mean anything much" for any record that I might make.

It is not the "way" of our culture to inscribe the lives of *ordinary* domesticated women in texts of cultural significance. Women like my mother don't "mean" anything and yet this exchange between Aud and me reminds me of how much I have invested my own sense of being in the world through having listened—sitting on her bed, watching her sweep her hand across its neat tucked-in surface—to Aud's telling of herself and having held on to it "for dear life" because I thought it meant something. This idea comes up against a lifetime of hearing, of "knowing" that such stories are not important, that they cannot tell me what I should know of the world; that I must go outside and beyond this child's world of a mother's kitchen-bound stories and look for meanings elsewhere. I have done all that and found stories and ways of knowing and being which have indeed kept me interested and busy for a lifetime. I am still doing what Aud instructed me to do: read the classics, study literature; listen to the world's "best" music and there you'll find the meanings of your own existence. She could never have admitted that there may be a version of "the world," my world, which included and, in many ways was centred on, and continually returned to, where it all began for me: in a kitchen listening to my mother tell me her stories.

I have wondered, critically, what my attachment to memory is in this and take my direction in some ways from feminist psychoanalysis: Elizabeth Grosz

suggests that Freud's idea about women that "hysterics (see "women") suffer mainly from reminiscence," should properly be understood as women's *refusal*[8] and working from feminist psychoanalysis as Anderson suggests, I am interested in the idea that:

> The hysteric is sick with *(of)*[9] her pathological position within the symbolic order which both defines her through her lack or passivity and cuts her off from her pre-oedipal attachment to her mother. Her sickness is a symptom of a sickness which might be thus more accurately attributed to the symbolic itself. The woman's turning to the past could also be taken, therefore, as a gesture of regret towards the present and towards a symbolic system ... that denies her a place or a home within it.[10]

I would have to say that there is a kind of homesickness (but, I hope, no pathology here) in my project and so the autobiographical impulse is, of course, to write my way back into my mother just as one might feel "*nostalgie*" which, according to Jane Gallop's formulation of the French, is a "haunting regret for one's native land or homesickness."[11]

I miss my mother and the "place" of her in my life and in the cultures I inhabit from which she is absent, where there is no memory of her.

I am homesick.

I follow Luce Irigaray in this who suggests that memory is "the place where identity is formed, the place where each person builds his or her ground territory"[12] and I have little doubt that my writing is about this territory: re-entering it, re-mapping it to suit my desires, re-making it to suit my own story of selfhood. In the writing project I am always projecting a different future and, as Anderson says, it is memory that provides the "ground which allows the imagining of a different time."[13] I am writing of a different time and perhaps a different place, in a very different future: a future which as Anderson suggests, "contains (what) we have yet to gain access to."[14]

By writing the past into the future in the way of the biography of my mother Aud, I am thus, investing my own life ahead with something of what I have come from but which has been absent in the world and from my life as I live it in the public domains of work, of culture and society. I cannot imagine a life ahead that is always void of the story of my mother, as if she never existed, no mark of her days to give her life meaning or significance to a future world of mine. This would leave a gap I see no reason for and I am confident that what Linda Anderson says of the writing of women's lives is true: that "we write towards a future which we do not know but which may eventually know us differently."[15]

So, who cares about Aud?

I was told by a senior academic whose approval I needed to proceed with this project that I couldn't write about my mother for two reasons: the first reason, and one which he was surprised I didn't grasp, was because she was "a nobody." Audrey Wearne does not appear in any of our culture's history books; there are no monuments to her achievements; she has no fame, no heroic status; her photographs adorn no walls of public institutions; she does not, consequently, *occur* within the traditional domains of biography. The fellow said that my "knowledge" of my mother could never be tested or verified; that there were no sources which could provide an authoritative ground for my "research."

Audrey Wearne was, and still is, a nobody.

I was so moved by this idea, both as a academic feminist who taught and worked within the critical field of textual and cultural analysis and criticism and as a daughter whose own life had been so informed, so enlivened and made so busy with thinking and wondering, with questioning and worrying through the influence of my mother, that I began to think that I would find it difficult to accept a professional life as an academic if there was no place, no legitimate scholarly or critical space for the life of my mother and my telling of it. This encounter came to represent for me a crisis for my future self as an academic. What could I be if she were not allowed?

The American writer Marita Sturken argues "within national discourses the stakes of biography are high. The meanings of certain life stories helps to shape the ways in which the nation and its history are defined. Biographies and autobiographies mark the moment when personal stories are imbued with cultural meaning."[16] But as we know "memory, which is a central narrative device in biography, has always been about forgetting and inventing"[17] and it is by now very obvious that Australian national biographies are like memory—they forgot so much and invented so much. Australian biographies enter the world as an extension of the moral codes and practices of an apparently mature society, a society which, of course, finds its reflection in the lives of men—great men, heroic men—the men it produces for itself. Biography becomes the ideal genre for narrating the nation—when we look to a biography of say, John Monash, of Robert Menzies, or of Weary Dunlop, the Anzac heroes and Gough Whitlam—all honourable men—we will know that these biographies, will be over-written with the narratives of *Australia* in mind—the individual figure is employed in the service of defining a national identity: they are supposed tell us who we are in the world.

Such biographies speak to us in the language of a nation fit for heroes. They are the seemingly necessary inventions for a necessary history which charts Australia's development as a civilised, mature society and nation, a nation with a vision of life which begins with actions and narratives of heroic exploration, martial valour and national pride and continues on with an unbroken line connecting the spirit of our national heroes, past and present, with a continuity with the future. As Homi Bhabha[18] and Benedict Anderson[19] remind us, every nation locates its meanings in certain imagined and narrated core texts and for Australia, these men, these heroes of biography, become our national and cultural texts. They are the lives which distinguish us as Australian, a nation separate and identifiable within the larger context of a Western concepts of national identity and the progress of Western culture and civilisation.

But as Sturken again reminds us " the truth of biographical stories is as evasive"[20]—and I would suggest, as unreliable—as memory but their shifting meaning in contemporary cultural formations suggests that there is no original memory, there is no original biography; there is only narrative. And when narrative-as-culture excludes the multiple discourses of gender, of race and other discourses which constitute culture at any given moment, we are provided with the opportunity to argue that "biography is always shaped in a contested and critical field."[21]

The opportunity frees biographical practices to re-shape cultural memory and meanings in such a way as to deny the totalising tendency of those practices in which the individual subject is figured as an emblem of nation.

Emmanual Levinas[22] suggests, happily for us I think, that the subject can and does resist totalisation; that the subject cannot be finally cast into a particular explanatory or descriptive system. The effect of such an idea, when extrapolated from the subject to culture itself, is emancipatory—culture is never a closed text, a finished product. It defies and resists the gaze of totalising practices. I would argue that when Levinas suggests that the subject as *other* is able to transcend the work of defining culture, she invites a larger form of resistance, a resistance against what he suggests is the violence of Western philosophies and practices of power: to assimilate the fragments, the parts and multiplicities of a culture into a single, non-particular totality. The effect being to silence and ignore a fundamental human reality: conversation, the interlocutory dialogues and addresses which, according to Levinas are a feature of the human life.

If, as Levinas suggests, the most fundamental connection we have to others is one which is embodied in dialogue, and in the direct, face-to-face encounter

between people, we can allow then that those biographical practices which attend the lives of domestic women are directed towards important ideas about the authoring and authorising of culture. I am also attracted to the idea of bringing theses stories home, the home of Australian culture and of Australian identity.

I have no desire or intention here to diminish the heroic status of those subjects of what I call "our national biography." What I do want to do is to suggest that the heroic codes and conventions which interpellate very particular subjects into the making of the meanings of nation, is one which refuses the significance of lives and experiences of other lives, within other modes of signification, and which just might tell us a great deal about the value and meanings of those non- heroes for the complexity that *nation is*.

The world of family, its struggles, its language, its dynamic interactedness, is, quite simply, social; there is no binarism of inside/outside. The domestic, woman-centred domain is not an arena of meaning and significance which operates outside the rest of the world. When the biographer of an "inside" woman acts to write the life of a woman in culture, it is to refuse the notion that her subject is not a maker of meaning and writes her back into the dialogic community which is, without her life's story, incomplete. It is a language of memory, of feeling and emotion and it takes me back home into the culture of my belonging.

Endnotes

1. I borrow generally here from Homi Bhabha's "Introduction" to *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.
2. I will note the work of feminist psychoanalytic theorists to elaborate on "symbolic regret" later in the paper.
3. Linda Anderson. *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: remembered futures*, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf: Hemel Hempstead, 1997: 6.
4. ibid. Here Anderson is quoting Shoshana Felman *What Does a Woman Want: reading and Sexual Difference*, John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 1993.
5. Christa Wolf. *The Quest for Christa T*, Virago: London, 1982.
6. Anderson, *op.cit.* 7.
7. Wolf, *op.cit.*.174.
8. quoted by Anderson, *op. cit.*, 9 from Elizabeth Grosz. *Sexual Subversions*, Allen and Unwin: Sydney, 1989: 134.
9. italics added
10. Anderson, *ibid.*.9.
11. paraphrased by Anderson, *ibid.*

12. Luce Iragaray. *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Columbia University Press: New York, 1993: 155.
13. Anderson, *ibid.* 11.
14. *ibid.* 12.
15. *ibid.* 14.
16. Marita Sturken. "Personal Stories and National Meanings: Memory, Reenactment and the Image" in Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (eds.), *The Seductions of Biography* Routledge: New York, 1996: 31.
17. *ibid.*32.
18. Bhabha. 1994 *op. cit.*
19. Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1983.
20. Sturken, *op. cit.* 40.
21. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (eds.) "Introduction: the Seductions of Biography" in *The Seductions of Biography*, Routledge: New York, 1996: 2.
22. Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity* Trans. Alphonso Lingis,Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh, 1969. I am drawing in general terms upon the broad ideas in this work.

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