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NO END TO ROMANCE? SEXUAL ECONOMIES IN INEZ BARANAY'S BETWEEN CAREERS

Inez Baranay's *Between Careers* is innovative in its simultaneous use and interrogation of the romance plot as a device for narrative drive. By exploring firstly Vita's prostitution, then romance and beyond, Baranay maps the ideological operations of those activities and the ways in which their intersections are inscribed in our lives and on our bodies through language and story. More equivocally, Baranay also dares to go beyond the ending of those (hetero)sexual relationships and have Vita writer, in an effort to imagine alternative plots for our life-stories. Recent feminist theories, which consider the part women's bodies can play in the inscription of power relations, and our agency to invent new narratives through writing the body, illuminate the significance of this strategy.

Divided into two parts and a coda, the novel begins as far from romance as possible by charting Vita's career as a call-girl. She works under the pseudonym of Violet in a job which is often slipped between the covers of "legitimate" careers, or, as Vita describes it, "between careers" (59). In a desire to divide her life neatly between night and day, work and home, Vita constructs a separate identity as Violet, but Violet never quite takes the borders between reality and fantasy seriously: "Violet was only an invention but she had her own existence" (3). Vita/Violet's split identity resembles what Irigaray argues is the effect of women's position as exchangeable commodity in patriarchy:

A commodity — a woman — is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. (180)

Vita's conscious act of splitting her identity into Vita and Violet is part of her contract with the patriarchal economy in which she operates. It is a rupture which she is compelled to signify visually: when a call comes for Violet, Vita transforms her body according to the fashion code required to indicate her commodification:

"will I put on something else? Maybe the top needs to look a bit more tarty ..." She took out her high heels and splashed scent over herself. She was already wearing gorgeous underclothes: a personal indulgence learned from Violet and taken up full time. Catherine watched the transformation. (62)

Vita is aware of the inscriptions urged on her as a sexualised woman, and as a sex worker she exaggeratedly mimics patriarchal expectations and fantasies. In this light, prostitution can be seen as a transfer of male fantasies onto real women's bodies. But while the men's fantasies are realised, Vita is left juggling the contradictions involved in being someone else's living fantasy.

She is ambivalent about having to make her own body into an object, one not only to be looked at but also to be bought and (ab)used. She is aware of her "collaboration with the enemy":

... the most reprehensible part of Violet's collaboration was the perpetuation of the lie that there exists a breed of woman whose true vocation is good-time-girl. She never nags; she is never dreary; she never has bad moods; she never demands; she never, seriously, thinks. (14)

While recognising her complicity with those patriarchal myths, however, she enjoys the "indulgences" this license carries. Her high heels are an especially fetishized symbol of her trade and she flaunts them, luxuriating in their symbolism:

Once she steps into them the transformation is complete. The high heels elongate her calves, creating a lovely long curve. They are simply, wickedly beautiful. They symbolise both vulnerability and domination. They make her feel both helpless and powerful. It seems so wrong that they look so lovely and are so crippling, so damaging. (17)

Baranay's account of prostitution from a woman's point of view is filled with these competing motives. The power which Vita and her boss, Pamela, gain in receiving money for her body is weighed up against the lack of that transactory and economic power in conventional heterosexual relationships. There is also an awareness of the illusions involved in any gain which requires providing sexual services for men at their whim. Feminist concerns are neatly woven into conversations with women friends:

Sometimes Vita got the approving verdict: "Make them pay!" Other times she was challenged with the proposition that selling women's bodies is oppressing and degrading. (54)

The questions Vita's friends ask are given slick answers, which often sound as though she is justifying her actions to herself. The omnipotent narrator remarks, "Vita went on thinking she knew all the answers" (55), which effectively leaves the ethical questions open, unanswered.

The idea that sexuality is a commercial and commodifiable product under patriarchy is constantly highlighted by the text. This paradigm is not restricted

to sex-workers, however, but is applied to all women operating within a culture which, as Irigaray argues, "is based upon the exchange of women" (170). The chapter called "Taste and Distaste" documents the trade of women included in business trips, and directly links this commerce to the "advice" invested in women's magazines:

"How do you actually do it"? Vita's friends would ask, the sex part of it, they meant ... Well, you just *do* it; you imitate; you pretend ... Magazine articles on how to please your husband when you have a headache (and he doesn't) will tell you the same thing. (15-16)

This analysis of heterosexual relations has been available since at least 1888 when Mona Caird described marriage and prostitution as "twin systems": "Prostitution is as inseparable from our present marriage customs as the shadow from the substance. They are the two sides of the same shield" (Calder 91). Christine Overall has reiterated that claim in more contemporary political terms:

Like rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and incest, prostitution is inherently gendered, a component and manifestation of the patriarchal institution of heterosexuality. Prostitution is structured in terms of a power imbalance ... [which] ensures both that women's sexuality is constructed very differently from that of men, and yet also, paradoxically, that male sexuality, socially constructed, defines the standards for evaluating human sexual activity. (721)

Male prostitution also works largely within this paradigm as the clients are still, overwhelmingly, men. Sheila Jeffreys has analysed and campaigned against heterosexuality, which she sees as a political institution designed to uphold a social system based on male supremacy, whereby,

each individual woman comes under the control of an individual man. It is more efficient by far than keeping women in ghettos, camps, or even sheds at the bottom of the garden. In the couple, love and sex are used to obscure the realities of oppression, to prevent women identifying with each other in order to revolt, and from identifying "their" man as part of the enemy. (1981: 6)

In line with that perception of the patriarchal model of sexuality, the differences between exchanging sex for money and or through love are dissolved in Baranay's text. The sex workers despise women who "gave it away" (54), and Vita recognises her own "desires" in operation while on the job:

the imitation of arousal can sometimes create an impetus of its own, enough to make some of Violet's couplings as close as Vita's had been to the Real Thing. (16)

Sheila Jeffreys points out that,

Men experience orgasms whilst killing women. Girls and women can have orgasms during rape and sexual abuse and then spend years in guilt and shame for "enjoying" what happened to them. In fact the body is capable of physiological responses quite unconnected with an emotional state of "pleasure." (1990: 305).

While the theorising of desire has been debated by feminists, Sheila Jeffreys maintains it is virtually impossible without "a new language, and a new way of categorising our sexual feelings" (1990: 303). In Baranay's text, these philosophical and theoretical issues are set alongside the slipping and sliding of bodily fluids and flesh, which constitute Violet's life.

Although individual needs differentiate the clients, the men are very much the same — "they were as infinitely variable as they were monotonous" (54). The section, "The Way it Goes," slips from one client to the next as the text moves from one paragraph to the next. The last line of each paragraph is repeated as the first line of the next, emphasising the repetitiveness of Vita's work and men's finite requirements. This montage of scenes has an almost cinematic quality. The next chapter, "The Sex Part," scripts the combinations of roles available, which become predictably limited within the scope of this sexual play:

He moans, she sighs. He yells, she cries out. He doesn't make a sound, she's dead, slowly coming alive. She places her hands to check his heart. He's already quietly finished. He's just starting, building up speed, ready to pound furiously, announce his arrival; a fanfare. (24)

And again, at the end of this routine, the imagined division between "real" and role is questioned: "There's something about it that's rather like the real thing" (25). While Violet's actions are consciously constructed to conform to her character, the text suggests that the "real thing" also needs to be examined in this light.

In Part Two, this imagined separation collapses when "romance" is written into Vita's "real" life. The construction of this romance is invested with the same theatrical discourse as prostitution. Violet is called out to meet an actor named Brian Castles, and it is Brian's recognition that Violet is an actor playing a role which renders him "different" from other clients. Throughout their talk about theatre and film, Violet "sat there, wide-eyed, knowing it was a game" (64), while Brian's "amused and knowing" looks were "like a kind of acknowledgment of herself that included Violet as the façade" (64). This is disturbing: "she felt as if Violet were being given cues meant for another character" (65).

Brian's inclusion of Violet among "people like us" lays bare their complicity as actors, but when in the preceding chapter Vita sees Brian at an artistic party, she must negotiate being both Violet and Vita within the same experiencing body:

"We are pretending we haven't met before," he stated, cottoning on.

Acknowledged by a long pause; then she smiled her teasing, sideways, Violet smile.

"You see, it wasn't me."

"I see," he said, amused. "The secret identity, like a hidden violet." (61)

The next time Brian rings the escort agency to request Violet, in a chapter titled "Other Roles," he insists he is "not confusing the player with the part" (72). In text loaded with theatrical language, however, they both become simultaneously players and audience: "They were together performing and watching a staged romance" (73). Vita has pondered the possibility of combining a romance with her work:

I took a look at all the stories about such unconventional liaisons — they all proved that a man who believed the promises of a whore was a fool and was inevitably had; that an unvirtuous woman who believed she could be both purchased and loved was a sad victim and was inevitably broken. I knew these stories had nothing to do with me. I had already decided to start making up some new stories. (89)

Despite wanting to create new stories for herself, Vita seems to slip into old ones all too easily at this stage. The endearments Brian and Vita exchange on the telephone are clichés propelling an unfolding drama which is a re-run of the same old story, however, when Brian leaves his payment. The formal economy of Violet's work arrangements intrude on her understanding of romance: "This credit card routine hadn't figured in her fantasies" (92). Her romance also intrudes on her work when she rushes one client to get to Brian.

As she lays bare the mechanics of sexuality as they operate in prostitution, Baranay makes it clear that romance cannot succeed within this narrative economy. Part one of the novel charts the "work" of bodies: their movements, shapes, and disabilities, their transactions and roles in the exchange of power and pretence. Deconstructed, power structures in sexual relationships become levers which dislodge the concept of romance — "jamming the theoretical machinery itself," as Irigaray advocates (78). Having done this, Baranay goes on to explore the power of writing to invent alternative storylines for life-narratives, and *Between Careers* becomes one of the "new stories" of which Vita speaks.

One of the primary elements of the romance genre is its resolution — the traditional happy ending in marriage, a social contract which seals women's

position as subordinate labourer (see Pateman). Within Vita's life, however, conventional beginnings and endings are deferred. While chapter eleven describes her getting started in prostitution, chapter ten recounts the finish: "Soon after that Violet was no longer to be found. There is no chronology in my sordid history" (36). Vita's story is thus structured to subvert the closure and resolution of a happy ending, but Baranay is then faced with the problem of how to end her novel. In the title of her book, *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis names this strategy, which she has located in twentieth century women's writing, as an effort to redefine the ideological foundations which operate through the trope of romance:

As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties, incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success ... In short, the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. (5)

By severing the narrative from these conventions, women writers "formulate a critique of heterosexual romance" (Du Plessis xi). Baranay speaks of writing an ending as "a wonderful challenge, to find a way of doing it because there seemed to be almost no models for 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? ... And also writing about women who are not victims or whose end is not to be a victim poses a question too ... 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 mightn't be happiness but it's something positive. But it's not an ending either. (Interview)

Baranay writes the end of her novel as a coda, a strategy which attracted the particular — and frequently hostile — attention of reviewers, presumably because of its deviation from convention. Marion Eldridge wrote that the coda "doesn't have sufficient weight compared with earlier parts to fulfil its purpose adequately. Rosemary O'Grady wrote it off as "eccentric," and Dennis Davison called it "curious," but then confessed that he didn't understand the device:

Frankly I was puzzled, but I did learn one thing: the author's note revealed that she had a half-year Australia Council fellowship to write the coda, which is only 25 pages long. Surely, at the rate of one page a week, Baranay could have been less content simply to skim the surface of contemporary issues. Or is she satirising her trendy types?

The coda is initially disconcerting: it introduces many new characters, has a new setting and a new time frame. Vita is the only apparent link with the previous parts of the novel, and she is now a celibate writer. But it is her desire for new stories and new forms of writing, and the text's enactment of that desire, which makes the coda important. In part two Vita tells us,

One of my new stories was about living life without being obsessed by The Relationship ... What most people settled for was not what I had in mind for myself ... I wanted a way of life that I had not yet seen. (90)

A way of life without The Relationship is described in Baranay's short story, "Living Alone: The New Spinster (Some Notes)." There, the decision to live alone is a personal one: "I am obsessive, moody, self-indulgent. I do not wish to change nor to see anyone put up with that" (16). But it is also political: "Living alone is about not living with men" (16). This new spinster has replaced the negative connotations of spinsterhood with freedom and contentment, with the indulgence of being able to

watch TV at 3am, sleep at 7pm. red wine in the morning and breakfast at night and no-one cares. You don't have to put clothes on, you can cry for no reason and talk out loud to yourself. (15)

In the coda to *Between Careers*, Vita is living alone in order to write. She is minding house for her old friend, Catherine, who is one of those who "travel with their good jobs with the ABC" (103). Catherine's decision to return to work at the ABC was previously discussed as a form of prostitution (66), but Vita finds herself in an even more compromising situation with her writing. She would like to write "a real play," in which she can "make up the future" (111), but is instead employed writing strictly formulaic science fiction dramas. She resents these "obsolescent adolescent futuristic fantasies" (106) and finds their potential for self-fulfilment dangerous:

It's like, that's what the vision is, and if you accept this vision then you support the belief in developing that way. Muscly white men rescuing pretty girls in long dresses. (106)

She finds herself powerless because she "wasn't the one writing the storylines" (107). The prostitution of Vita's writing abilities in constructing obsolete fantasies for male readers is more invasive and offensive to Vita than her enactment of male fantasies as a sex worker had been. Her celibacy indicates her rejection of both prostitution and romance as storylines. Sheila Jeffreys sees what she terms "chastity" as an "honourable choice" in the struggle for liberation:

Such a strategy could only cause disbelief in a male-supremacist society in which sex has been made holy. Sex is holy because of its role as a sacred ritual in the dominant/submissive relationship between men and women. The importance attached to sex defies rationality and can only be explained in this political way. (1990: 315)

The coda discusses sexuality as a form of "personal energy that you can turn into surfing or writing or sex" (104), following up the reference in the preface to Foucault's remark that "the emphasis on sexuality is to silence other desires." It also entertains some "alternative," and "Eastern" concepts of spirituality. Despite this effort to throw off the cloak of Western androcentricity, these discourses still feel inadequate: as Joe says, "I hate saying spiritual. But now no-one has any models" (110).

Joe and Judith are two characters who provide sexual/spiritual models to explore in the coda's time frame. Joe's promiscuous homosexual presence acts as a site of conflict as the 1980s herald the deadly threat of AIDS. While apparently seeking a new way to conceptualise sexuality — to reinscribe himself — Joe is nevertheless guileless in his pursuit of high-risk sex. He implies that this danger is part of the attraction (116). In some ways, Joe is no different from the men who paid Violet: "Want lots, fast and exciting, finishing at the peak" (109). He tells Vita he would "give it all up" if "there was one last time that was perfect, couldn't be topped. I asked him his perfect scenario; it included several people and several drugs, videos and opulence" (116).

Joe is granted his "happy ending" by the text: he retraces his steps to look for the elegant old white building in which his remembered night of sexual exultation took place, but finds that the structure was demolished twenty years ago. In its place stands a red-brick townhouse development. His "experience" was a fantasy, which ended two decades before it began, and Baranay keeps it as such, stored in the mind of the character rather than imposed on "real" bodies. Joe's response to this realisation is to feel cheated, but in recompense he elevates the experience through spiritual language, as ecstasy, exquisite salvation, exultation, reaching eternity's boundaries (125). But Joe's claims are again undercut by the text, and he is left listening to "a rundown of the changing real-estate values of the street" (126). The yoking of economics and fantasy here seems ludicrously inappropriate, even irreverent, in direct contrast to Vita's exchanges as prostitute.

In contrast to his flamboyant fantasies of excess, Joe responds pessimistically to Vita's "perfect scenario," which involves fairly conventional literary desires:

I told him I wanted just one person, but everything. True love and anonymity, security and adventure, stability and variety, vigorous youth and wise age, respect

and ...

"Oh enough," he said. "What do you want most?"

"Love and romance."

"You'll never get it." (116)

Joe is also shocked to find a stash of pornographic videos while he minds Judith's flat. (Minding other people's "houses" is a way to explore other sexual lives/stories in this novel.) Judith is presented as almost asexual. The gowns she wears, which she sketches, paints, prints and sews herself, express her personality, privacy and dignity (113) and seem to offer her a haven of self-protection, covering her body in a cloak of comfort and mystery. Lesley, her boss at the casting agency, calls them nuns' habits (127), while Vita regards Judith as "unsexy — good looking, but sexy — in those robes and drapes" (115). There is a myriad of sexual descriptors operating here. While "drapes" speak of folds of domestic coverings, "gown" has completely different connotations. It especially signifies women as (potential) sexual partners in formalised courting rituals like balls, formals, and weddings. It is also the antithesis of the celibacy implied by nuns' habits. Baranay speaks of Judith's gowns representing a creative alternative to sexuality: "I was thinking also about celibacy not as negation of sexuality, but as another way in which to acknowledge/explore it" (Interview). Watching the x-rated videos, Judith "watches herself watching them, alert for her own reactions. What is this remote, unreal feeling? Is this what people feel" (121)? Immediately afterwards, she approaches the fabric stretched out in her sewing room awaiting transformation into the curtains she has dreamed of in "various greens lit with pale gold and shadowed in purple" (122). She keeps the videos in her sewing cupboard. Side by side: her means of creativity and a commercial production of actors playing out their sexual roles.

Judith's beautifully elaborate gowns contrast directly with the unfastened dressing gown she remembers her mother wearing, after men had stayed the night. Judith was affronted by her mother on those mornings, refusing to "look at those breasts hanging wrinkled and heavy" (119). She was also offended by the smell that "was on her mother and in the bedroom when he stayed" (119). Judith's mother complies to "the lie that there exists a breed of woman whose true vocation is good-time-girl" (14). The mother's advice to Judith corresponds to the pretences Vita acted out as Violet:

Make him feel important. Don't tell him your troubles ... Never say no in bed. Don't be as silent, as secretive as you are, my dear girl. It is more attractive to laugh at jokes. (119-20)

Enduring this advice as well as the sexual banter between her mother and Uncle, Judith "would stare and stare into the intricate designs on the

embroidered cushions, the painted plates" (120). Her creative impulses become centred on artistic production.

When Judith seems to become pregnant, she has difficulty explaining her virginity to the doctor, and so decides to "borrow someone else's story" to explain not her virginity but her pregnancy: "he came back for just one last night then went to South America" (127). She leaves her job and her flat, "takes her grandmother's wedding ring and another borrowed story" and heads for anonymity in a country town as "another deserted wife" (127). Judith borrows from other stories because her experience doesn't fit into any of the prescribed narratives: you can't be both a virgin and a mother, except as the Virgin Mary, but fabricating a lover, a marriage and a desertion, Judith makes her story familiar. In this new setting, she deprecates her skills as a fabric artist by doing alterations and mending. In pre-natal class, a woman "asks her to make a frock, but Judith says only if there's a dress to copy from" (127). She now wants a pattern to guide her constructions both of clothes and of life-stories, but as she constructs her sexuality to conform to social expectations, her creativity is stifled.

Ironically, Judith's handmade gowns are perfect for covering her growing body/ies. They are fantastic costumes themselves and can incorporate Judith's version of her sexuality, which appears contradictory to others: a pregnant virgin, asexual and celibate, watching pornographic fantasy. As fiction, Judith's invention of her own sexuality breaks through those stereotypes by inscribing her body with her fantasy made real. Her creativity includes her own sexuality, so that the borders between the two, usually dichotomised as creation and procreation, merge into one.

Before her time is due, she is taken by an ambulance, drugged, and wakes with flattened stomach. There are women in "stiff white dresses" who tell her to "take these" and "beg her not to talk" (127). This brief episode speaks of her being institutionalised and silenced, losing her power over her body, and being forced to swallow things that make her life fantastical — "she floats and dreams and watches them come and go" (128). The institution effectively flattens her body's creativity, restoring its version of the body's story. Whether it was a phantom pregnancy or a miscarriage, the evidence is erased, as Judith's position in the symbolic order also becomes problematic when she no longer understands their language: "She recognises the words but they do not make sense" (128). Her response is to re-invent her story in a different language that she does understand:

Judith tells the doctor what she knows: how to pour paint onto fabric so it looks like the rain falling on the sea, how to see that each colour contains all colours, how you can tie one piece of cloth into a turban or a veil or a sling to hold a baby. (128)

The multiple uses of Judith's artwork enable it both to accommodate and to suggest a body's stories through a twist or a swirl, a movement around a body. In a similar way, Judith participates in a number of the stories that can constitute women's lives as if she were trying on a gown for size, and, finding none that fit, she makes her own. This last passage, however, is hardly optimistic, despite the creativity and beauty of the writing. The ending to the coda, however, seems to pose questions rather than seek resolutions. As Baranay remarks,

You don't just 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. (Interview)

Baranay's effort to intervene in the stories that constitute women's subjectivity and limit their lives is similar to what Elizabeth Grosz has identified as a need to adequately represent female non-maternal bodies, which requires "women's autonomous self-representations beyond the patriarchal investment in collapsing the feminine into the maternal" (32). The maternal body, she explains, is "both a neutered body (virgin) and a sexually active body (whore)," a triad which operates in Irigaray's discussion in "Women on the Market": "*Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women*" (186) Irigaray argues that while virgins are pure exchange value, and mothers are excluded from exchange so that they may remain private property, enclosed in the father's house, prostitutes are left in circulation indefinitely, without teleological endings to their storylines.

Perhaps this is why Vita is left telling stories in the coda, trying to find a story into which she might write herself between the careers of virgin and mother. If prostitutes are rarely acknowledged or "legitimated," this may be because they have so many stories to tell — stories that will disrupt romance and reveal it to be the same fantasy as prostitution. Despite the potentially disruptive position of prostitutes in Irigaray's argument and Baranay's novel, however, the sexualised non-maternal female body still seems to be left with very few narrative options, except to express a need for new stories.

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