Communications and Culture

In the age of satellite transmission and digital storage, postmodern art works and global art sales, all that is clear amid the confusion of voices is that old cultural assumptions no longer hold. The difficult distinctions now are not only those between high and low cultures but also those between state and market, national and multinational cultures. We can no longer assume clear boundaries between the various media themselves, as entertainment corporations absorb all forms of communication. We can't even refer confidently to specific publics or audiences or markets any more. Cultural consumption now means ever-shifting networks of taste, activity and enjoyment that are not easily correlated with the usual social categories of race or class, age or gender.

The new constituencies for cultural goods are also new constituencies for cultural theory. More than ever before it is possible now for new voices to be heard, for readers to be addressed in new ways, mobilised for new sorts of interest. Our purpose in short, is to develop the **Communications and Culture** series beyond the position cultural theory has currently reached in the academy. Mass culture and subculture, semiotics and psychoanalysis, reception and deconstruction, the familiar terms of communications and culture studies will be used as stepping stones to what is necessary: a reconstruction of popular culture as a public sphere. To this end we will be commissioning multi-disciplinary work on the most pressing issues of cultural policy and practice, namely, *cultural value*, *cultural politics* and *cultural identity*. These are not issues of interest only to the theorist. They concern the everyday lives of us all.

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Female Stories, Female Bodies

Narrative, Identity and
Representation

LIDIA CURTI

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For Iain and for Angela

e alla memoria di mia madre Iolanda e mio padre Silvio

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Preface

To write is to find my own voice, that of the tale-teller where narrativity is stronger than truth. In fact it is truth (though it would not survive the trial of proof): inventive, paradoxical, guided by the internal rhythm of deception that builds and grows on itself. I still remember when Aunt Maria arrived. 'What are you chatting about?' she asked in her Florentine accent. The only 'pure Italian' in a solid Neapolitan-speaking family, and being a 'stranger' she had an unnerving way of arriving at odd times. How could I go on keeping my face and say 'I was speaking of when our family went to Libya and of our adventures there.' She knew only too well that we had never moved, not even gone to Rome, so I chickened out and the abrupt confession followed: 'I was inventing things.' I can still see the astonished and wounded look of my audience, girls and boys my age, 9 or 10 – the first listeners of my tales.

This book is composed of essays that drew their inspiration from diverse occasions and different events. The intersection of cultural studies with critical theory and literary analysis has guided my interest in women's narratives, and the spaces and times that narrative occupies in women's lives.

Fiction flows between life and imagination, and it is one of the most direct links between these two worlds. As de Certeau says, 'Our stories order our world, providing the mimetic and mythical structures for experience.'¹ It began with myth: the bridge between history and everyday life, underlining both the simplicity and importance of its passage. The anthropological and mythical dimensions of tale telling have been with us for a long time, while the novelistic has contributed to the ordering of meanings for the individual in society.

Fables and myth have always had a relation to gender. The narrative function has been associated with the feminine, commencing with Scheherazade. In the active role of story teller, she

provided the means for the continuation of life. Laura Mulvey, in one of her films and also in her writings, has linked the motive of the Sphinx and her riddles to the enigma of sexual difference, indicating the connection between women and the narrative drive:

Curiosity describes a desire to know something secret so strongly that it is experienced like a drive. It is a source of danger and pleasure and knowledge. . . . In the myths of Eve and Pandora, curiosity lay behind the first woman's desire to penetrate a forbidden secret that precipitated the fall of man. These myths associate female curiosity with an active narrative function.²

Mythical stories are fabulations of women, probably not created by women. In those narratives, as in other dominant discourses, they are used as metaphors. Still, contrary to official history, women have been important motors of mythical (hi)stories. History comes from discord, and discord comes from women. Helen, Medea, Europa, Arianna, Io, Pasifae and Phædra were objects of rape, kidnapping, abandonment and betrayal; but they were also subjects of pleasure, of movement, of revenge.

The stories that are the argument of my book invoke movement from theory to fiction, from prose to poetry, from writing to film, from sounds to stories, from an ancestral culture to an acquired one. The movement is complex, never unidirectional, and the culture on either side is neither unaltered nor constant. As Gloria Anzaldúa in her Preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera* puts it: 'Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element.'³ This alien element is never comfortable but is, at the same time, familiar. As Trinh T. Minh-ha, another voice from the border, says, 'Tale-telling brings the impossible within reach. With it, I am who It is, Whom I am seen to be, yet I can only feel myself there where I am not, *vis-à-vis* an elsewhere I do not dwell in.'⁴ Narrative is where woman is and is not at the same time.

Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights* indicated that telling tales marks the dividing line between life and death. Angela Carter reminds us that for Walter Benjamin the narrator borrows her/his authority from death: '. . . the end of all stories, even if the writer forebears to mention it, is death, which is where our time stops short . . . We travel along the thread of narrative like high-

wire artistes. That is our life.⁵ On the other hand, Nicole Ward Jouve, while accepting that a deadly exchange is the essence of storytelling, stresses the joyful character of the bargaining.⁶

Narrative is danger, as Carter's mother warned when she found her reading a novel: 'Never let me catch you doing that again, remember what happened to Emma Bovary'.⁷ In the narratives I examine, other mothers try to keep their daughters from reading. (Does that make them good mothers or bad mothers? This is one of many enigmas that evades ready solution.) But narrative is also healing: stories can be medicines or soul vitamins, 'to guide the way back to *el mundo subterráneo*, the underground world, our psychic home' (Clarissa Pinkola Estés⁸), or 'to chase the demons, to keep them away for good' (Carter). Leslie Marmon Silko, in the epigraph to *Ceremony*, informs us that God is three women, and that they created the world by naming things:

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them
they appeared.

She is sitting in her room
thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story
she is thinking.

Thinking is telling tales, telling tales is creating: the importance of stories is underlined many times in this work and others. 'You don't have anything if you don't have stories', Silko says in another epigraph.⁹

The place that feminist theory has occupied in the development of the recent critical panorama finds a focus in the encounter between feminism and postmodernism on one side, and between Anglo-American feminist thought and continental theories on the other. This is the subject of Chapter 1 and it informs my successive analyses of contemporary women's fictions. In recent strands of female narratives, I have looked for the way in which feminism and postmodernism cross each other's paths, and find a common point of encounter in the search for new ways of narrating; and also how

feminist theories of subjectivity are inscribed and incorporated in the strategies of women's fictions, from popular culture to post-modern novels. The formal paradigms and devices often found both in serial fiction and in more sophisticated narratives can be seen as modes of articulating practices of identification and anxieties around identity.

These encounters have been crucial in my development as a feminist, and to a great extent have shaped my analysis of female narratives in this book, in relation to my specific experience as a woman living and teaching in Southern Italy, and reaching feminism after a long-held Marxist position and a communist militancy that, without needing to, repressed whole areas of my subjectivity. My interest in stories stems from these (for me) new encounters, somewhat antagonistic to my former more socially oriented interests, though not necessarily so: an antagonism as unneeded today as previous exclusions. This book means also to underline the diverse uses of 'the political' that are to be found in feminist theories and practices.

Theories and narratives arise from hybrid voices, standing on the borders between different, sometime multiple, cultures, backgrounds and languages, both within Europe and across continents. This is more evidently true in the writers from the diaspora, for whom the demarcation of the area of influence is rather blurred and nationality cannot be clearly defined.¹⁰ Hybrid selves are translated into hybrid writing, moving on the border between memory and fantasy, fable and history, tradition and innovation: standing between essay and fiction, poetry and prose. This is the case of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Morrison, Louise Aldrich and many others.

These and other fluctuations can also be found in writers with altogether steadier national identities, such as Jane Bowles, Jeanette Winterson, Joanna Russ and Angela Carter, just as it is important to remember that what is called 'French feminism' mostly includes people who are French with a hyphen (French-Québécois, French-Guadeloupean, French-Bulgarian or, mostly, French-Algerian). But, rather than speaking about their hybrid backgrounds, I wish to recall their liminal styles of writing in between the poetical and the political register.

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Two or three fundamental themes recur throughout the book: one is the uncertain dividing line between reality and fiction; another is the concept of hybridity and contamination; yet another is female melancholia. Connected to these themes are the motifs that traverse my writing: the flux from body to writing and vice versa; the parody of female physical stereotypes; the journey of diegetic transgressions (genre, gender, style, languages).

The theme of 'what is real and what is not' emerges in Chapter 1, and comes up again in Chapter 3, but is also present in the 'hybrid fictions' and 'monstrous bodies' of successive chapters. I have thought about the issue of reality and fiction, the concrete and the imaginary, repeatedly, commencing from my original work on television and from a critique of the notion that considered popular texts as realist texts. I have found this issue present in most of the theoretical work I have been inspired by and the narratives I have chosen for my analysis.

The second question – contamination and hybridity – leads to genre. The denial of a rigid gender dichotomy (the move from indifference to difference, and then to differences) is connected to the refusal of a rigid law of genre through displacement, transference, ambiguity and multiplicity. Chapter 2 looks at the connection between gender and genre, at its genesis, and examines diverse examples of postmodern female fiction. In the novels I discuss, the boundaries between popular and elitist culture are hazy, and the connections between genres and genders often ambiguous. From P. D. James, Patricia Highsmith and Sue Grafton to Angela Carter, Leslie Marmon Silko and Jeanette Winterson, there is often an intended evasion of genre and gender specificities.

The third chapter deals with television serial narratives of the kind usually addressed to women (soaps and tele-novelas), but also looks at crime series with their increasingly ambiguous divide between male and female genres. If genres with distinct boundaries are disappearing (in the same way as gender and sexual dichotomies are the ground for theoretical suspicion), there are nevertheless masculine and feminine constructions – whether textual or contextual, rhetorical, linguistic or social – in most narratives. They are never unalloyed or sharply separate. They often intermingle and change within the same text. This important, sometime exclusive, and excluded, space of narration in women's lives can be re-viewed by inserting the televisual text into the rhythms of daily life where

gossip and television, gossip in television, provide sustenance, survival and a focus for living.

I have explored these variegated textualities foregrounding certain figures – bodies, rooms, claustrophobic spaces, romance and paranoia, couples and pairs, for example – and considering such thematics as a deferral of synthesis in favour of multiplicity, fluid ‘irreducible identities’ and lack of narrative closure. As Hélène Cixous says, a female textual body is always endless; it is without limits, it starts on all sides, and when it ends, it starts all over again.

These are recognisable features of the novels I deal with in the successive two chapters. The necessity for women to retrace their way in the literary canon, to re-visit and look at fathers and mothers with different eyes, has brought about the blurring of genres and the transformation of models: metamorphosis and grafting have produced new hybrid forms, monstrous shapes and bodies. Temporal and spatial dislocations, non-corporeal connections, fantastic forms of narration even outside science fiction proper become essential narrative tools in contemporary women’s fiction. Metanarration goes along with the hybridisation of codes, genres and languages and the proliferation of monstrous bodies, as corporeal and sexual metamorphosis underlines the diegetic multiformity. The displacements, ambiguities and pluralism of the female narrative texts lead to genre transgression and contamination. This is how female monstrous bodies have stealthily appeared in a corner, and uncannily made their way into my work, acquiring an important part in its imaginative structure. The monster at the end of it all is women’s writing, writing as the female body, ink and milk and blood.

Chapter 6 on Jane Bowles – a voice from the mid-century who can be seen as a forerunner of the writers that I deal with in the central part of the book – concerns the intersection of sexuality, race and gender, and deals with travel as the encounter with the ‘other’, with a lesbian relationship and the difficulty of writing for women. It is a fluctuating discourse with many focuses, and its methodology lingers at the crossing of literary and film analysis with postcolonial critical theory.

Jane Bowles’s stories – reflections on travel rather than travel stories – follow a metaphorical itinerary through otherness and sexual ambiguity. This is the central theme in her one finished novel, *Two Serious Ladies*, in her short stories, and in the play *In the Summer House*, but above all in her letters. The encounter with a

Moroccan woman that changed her life is narrated in these letters and was anticipated, in a disquieting premonition, in her previous works. Her vision of the other has given me the occasion to attempt to underline the complexities of whiteness, and of the white gaze on the black woman, and to refer to some writings that engage with feminism and postcolonial theory.

The gaze of woman on woman is a constant in this book. But in this particular chapter, though primarily concentrating on this, I deal also with the cinematic vision of her given by the male gaze in two films by Bernardo Bertolucci and David Cronenberg. Diversity, exclusion and monstrosity are the crucial elements of this vision, and link up with the theme of hybridity and monstrosity in former chapters.

Psychoanalysis has inevitably been an important referent in my discourse on theoretical feminisms, and in the two final chapters it achieves a more direct focus in the study of female melancholia. The thread of melancholia starts from Jane Bowles, and her voyage into otherness, towards solitary madness and death. It then takes us to Ophelia and Gertrude, two disquieting female figures who might be interpreted as the counterpoint to the first weak man of modernity. This is the argument of Chapter 7.

Contemporary female criticism has produced work on Shakespeare that occupies an essential place within feminist theory. This chapter draws on that work, and particularly on the many feminist psychoanalytical re-readings of *Hamlet*. My analysis looks at these evanescent female characters, particularly Ophelia, but does this within the more general issue of melancholy in *Hamlet*, referring it to the obsession with the female so central in the drama. The work of Julia Kristeva on depression, *Black Sun*, has been my main inspiration, though she never mentions Shakespeare or Hamlet, but I have also drawn on other important female works about hysteria and women's melancholic sexuality.

These two chapters also have a link with the contamination of genres: a sort of femininisation of the tragic in *Hamlet*, a text that first puts the boundaries of genres in question; the disquieting entwining of the 'genres' of art and life in Bowles. Another link with previous narratives is the monster that reappears in the semblance of Cherifa/Fedela in Jane Bowles's story, or the many ghostly appearances in the novels of Toni Morrison, Jeanette Winterson and Louise Erdrich on the traces of the Shakespearean ghosts.

I wish to return briefly to the diverse occasions and different inspirations I mentioned at the beginning. Chapter 1 partly originated at the conference on 'Cultural Studies Now and in the Future' (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1990). The conference brought me to the task of looking at the past of cultural studies, based on my experience at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, and at the future of a non-discipline facing the institutional dangers of becoming one. It was both a historical look at theory and a personal trajectory. The debate between modernism and postmodernism gave voice to the preoccupation (that emerged mostly within cultural studies) of the abandonment of the real, particularly of the political real. My work on television and on popular culture had already posed that problem, through a series of what seemed to me artificial boundaries (evasion as against commitment, for one).

The issue comes up again in Chapter 3, an analysis of soaps and other series that started with a paper on 'Genre and Gender' at the International Television Studies Conference (British Film Institute, London 1986), and more substantially at the Center for 20th Century Studies (The University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 1988) with the paper 'Fe/male re-presentations', at a conference on 'Television: Representation, Audience, Industry'. In both cases the versions appearing here involve substantial revisions. A recent stay in California provided the opportunity to update my tele-visions.

The chapter on Jane Bowles originated within a research on women's travels with the interdisciplinary women's group (Archivio delle donne) at the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples, and found a framing perspective in the unexpected appearance of Jane and Cherifa on the screen in Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*. It was substantially rewritten to be published in *The Postcolonial Question* (Routledge, 1996). With minor corrections this is the version that appears here.

Other chapters (4, 5 and 7) appear here for the first time but have a history. The chapter I wrote for *Storia della civiltà letteraria inglese* (Turin, UTET, 1996) started me on the analysis of female novels of recent decades. The essay on Ophelia stems from my teaching of Shakespeare and originated in my introduction to *Ombre di un'ombra – Amleto e i suoi fantasmi* (1994), a re-reading of *Hamlet* in the context of psychoanalysis and late modernity. Except for the general frame, this essay departs substantially from the previous version. These three chapters were written into the present form during

periods of research and work in the years 1994–95 at the Center for Cultural Studies in the University of California, Santa Cruz, and later in 1995 at the Humanities Research Institute at Irvine, California.

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Notes

1. M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 87.
2. L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. x.
3. G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1992), p. 2. The alien element is never comfortable but is at the same time familiar, like the Freudian uncanny.
4. Trinh T. M., 'Other than myself/my other self', in G. Robertson *et al.* (eds) *Traveller's Tales – Narratives of Home and Displacement* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 11.
5. A. Carter, *Expletives Deleted* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), p. 2.
6. 'Story-telling is also playing against Death: your life or your story. Your life for a story. But it is many-coloured and fun and proliferating and gameful.' N. Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue – Criticism as Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 187.
7. A. Carter, *Expletives Deleted*, p. 3.
8. C. Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves – Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman* (London: Rider, 1992), p. 20. And she goes on: 'Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down, or up, and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors in previously blank walls, openings that lead to the dreamland, that lead to love and learning, that lead us back to our own real lives as knowing wildish women.'
9. L. Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), respectively, pp. 1 and 2.
10. When speaking of innovation and avant-garde, it is difficult to decide whether their languages are breaking with tradition or not: which and whose tradition? And are Western critical standards applicable anyway? The latter is the most important question to ask nowadays in debates over the boundary between high and popular literature and culture.

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